



# Craving Sin (Touch of Evil #13)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** A buried truth resurfaces, unleashing a chilling reality in the next gripping thriller by 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.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

1

Brooklyn Sloane

January 2011

Sunday — 10:46 am

The casket descended into the cold ground as the winter wind whispered through the barren branches of some nearby trees. Stifled cries of mourning traveled with the freezing air, and not even the blanket of snow covering the cemetery could muffle the loss and anguish of the bereaved. Family members and close friends of Cara Jordan huddled together in unity, their bodies shivering from grief as much as from the frigid weather.

Cara was finally being laid to rest, but her family was far from finding any peace.

Brooklyn Sloane stood a far distance from the gravesite, her presence shielded by a massive tree that had probably stood for centuries. Cara's parents had made it abundantly clear they didn't want Brook anywhere near their daughter's funeral.

Who could blame them?

Brook's brother was the monster who took Cara's life.

Jacob Walsh had guaranteed a closed casket by slicing the flesh off Cara's face. It was a grotesque signature that he had perfected on others...even Brook's best friend

from high school. Sally Pearson's family hadn't wanted Brook at their daughter's funeral, either.

The horrid memories making themselves known were like an infected wound that couldn't heal, and now Jacob had added Cara to his long list of victims. It was impossible to erase the image of Cara lying on the floor in their dorm room, completely unrecognizable.

Blood.

Everywhere.

Cara's blonde hair had been soaked with so much blood that the thick strands had practically been dyed a dark red. The gash in her neck, so much like Sally's, had been deep.

The police initially believed Jacob had fled somewhere far away to evade capture. In the four years since his disappearance, Brook had lowered her guard ever so slightly. She had even allowed herself to construct some semblance of normalcy.

Cara had been part of that normalcy.

And she had paid dearly with her life.

The graphic images didn't fade away. Instead, they receded just enough for Brook to observe Cara's mother fall to her knees. Her husband didn't even attempt to stop her collapse. He chose to join his wife, and their breaths mingled together as they continued to grieve the loss of their daughter.

Brook crossed her arms tightly over her thick winter coat, unable to join them and ask for their forgiveness. She didn't deserve such absolution. She forced herself to

witness Cara's casket gradually disappear as the coffin continued its descent to the bottom of the grave. Not doing so would have been a betrayal of her own conscience.

The sudden crunch of footsteps pressing down on the snow distracted Brook from her own personal hell. She quickly spun to face whoever had come to confront her about her presence, the words of an apology stuck in the back of her throat.

"Is that the funeral for the college girl who was killed in her dorm room?" an older woman asked quietly as she came to a stop next to Brook. She couldn't get her voice to work, so she remained silent as she observed Cara's parents finally manage to stand. They stared down into the dark hole, their grief so palpable that the scene seared itself next to the last memory Brook had of their daughter. "Such a tragedy. It's been all over the news."

Brook would have given anything to be left in solitude, but she wouldn't be rude to the woman when it was obvious she was visiting a loved one's grave. Clutched in her right hand was a bouquet of bright flowers. Her face was lined with age and wisdom, and her eyes held a gentle warmth that exuded empathy.

Brook hesitated with a response, not wanting the woman to believe she was prying in on a family's private moment of grief. It didn't escape her that the stranger might also recognize her from the recent news coverage. Jacob's face had been splashed all over the local and national channels, as well as the internet...and her photograph was usually right alongside his.

"Yes," Brook replied, her voice barely audible above the rustling wind. Her eyes began to water in response to the bitter cold as she stared straight ahead, focusing on Cara's parents walking away from their daughter's grave. "I should be going, too. It's pretty cold out here, and I?—"

"A sad day all around, isn't it?" The woman lifted her left hand and adjusted the

black scarf a little higher around her cheek. The leather glove was a bit worn, and Brook assumed the pair was a favorite. “I’m here visiting my husband. He passed away a year ago today.”

As the woman spoke, the winter wind seemed to pause for a moment. Brook followed her gaze to a standing tombstone, maybe twenty feet away. The large marble square was adorned with a flower holder that held a frozen bouquet from at least a week prior.

“You know, dear,” the older woman murmured in a gentle voice. “Time is our friend. It has a way of dulling the pain. It might not seem like it now, but you’ll be able to look back without feeling so broken.”

Brook stiffened, accepting that the woman had recognized her from the news. A surge of bitterness washed over her. Would it always be like this? Would she forever be known as a serial killer’s sister? Maybe that was how it should be, and she couldn’t prevent a throbbing ache from settling in her chest as the weight of guilt consumed her.

“Some things can’t be fixed.”

Brook wasn’t sure why she even answered the woman. It wasn’t like she had been asked a question, and her words hung heavy in the air.

“I’ve learned a lot in my lifetime,” the woman said with a kind smile. It was impossible to ignore her quiet fortitude. “The only thing time can’t fix is death. We may not like how our wounds heal, but they heal all the same. And as long as you’re breathing, there is hope.”

The words struck a chord deep within Brook. She had truly believed the past couple of weeks had been demonstrating the opposite. Breathing hurt so much, how could

the instinctual and necessary action possibly bring hope?

The woman gave a slight nod of encouragement before stepping back and proceeding toward her husband's gravesite. Her black purse swayed with her even strides. There had been no reservation in her advice. No judgment, either.

"Wait," Brook called out, causing the older woman to pause. She slowly turned with a questioning expression across her elderly features. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"I'm sorry for yours, dear."

The bright flowers she carried stood out against the harsh winter landscape. The vivid colors of the petals suggested there had been some truth to her advice. Maybe time had healed the widow's wounds enough to live life to the fullest. The woman's counsel had stirred something deep inside Brook.

Time.

What she needed was time.

The day she had discovered Cara's body, Brook had vowed to obtain justice for her brother's victims. In the midst of the endless questions from both law enforcement and the media, she had gradually shut herself off emotionally, becoming numb to it all.

Jacob's dark presence in her life had made it impossible for her to visualize anything else but death. He was cunning, manipulative, and utterly ruthless. He had traits that would enable him to elude capture. No one understood that better than Brook.

Staring out over the cemetery and focusing on Cara's final resting place, Brook sensed something shift within her. No longer would she remain a passive bystander in

her own life. She would not allow her brother's actions to dictate her choices. From this moment forward, she controlled her future.

After all, she had nothing but time.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

2

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Tuesday — 1:07 pm

The private jet's engines hummed softly as the pilot skillfully steered the aircraft toward a secluded airstrip in Alaska, three hours southwest of Anchorage. Inside the cabin, a lengthy couch lined one half of the aisle. Across the thin strip of beige carpet, two sets of four leather seats surrounded square tables anchored to the floor. Despite the sunlight streaming through the compact windows, once the jet landed, the dense cloud coverage would block out any traces of sunlight.

"...already touched base with the Anchorage field office. There will be two agents meeting us at the landing strip, and..."

"I've been in contact with Toklo Kalluk, the victim's father. He served as Alaska's governor from 2012 to..."

Though the occasional conversations from those on board could be heard, an unspoken tension hung in the air like a cold, damp washcloth. Even the recycled air seemed too thick to take a deep breath.

Brooklyn Sloane had positioned herself near a window, her focus on the jet's wing. She absently twirled the spinner ring on her right hand while analyzing every



decision she and her team had made up to this point. Every fiber of her being had screamed against taking this trip, but the lengths her brother had gone to ensure their presence in the state of Alaska—during the month of June—held significance.

Unfortunately, she had yet to figure out his motivation.

The extent of Jacob Walsh's sacrifice indicated he needed to be present at a particular location on a specific date. He had given up years of his life to be incarcerated in an attempt to lure his only surviving victim, Sarah Evanston, out of the witness protection program. If he had the patience for something of that magnitude, what awaited them in Alaska?

Jacob had intentionally shifted the FBI's focus to a young woman who had gone missing back in 2014. While he claimed to know the location of Lusa Kalluk's remains, he had not explicitly confessed to killing her.

At least, not in so many words.

The federal prosecutor, Nathaniel Carter, disagreed with Brook's viewpoint.

Unfortunately, Jacob was maneuvering federal government agents around like pieces on a chessboard...and Brook was the queen.

"How is Sarah these days?"

Jacob had always been able to read Brook's thoughts. There was one slight difference between the past and the present, though—she had perfected the ability to school her emotions.

"Thriving, from what I hear," Brook replied casually before turning her focus from the wing of the aircraft to her brother. Jacob sat across the aisle on the couch in an

orange jumpsuit. He was flanked by two federal agents, not that their presence seemed to bother him in the least. “Would you like some more water? The air in the cabin is rather dry, and we wouldn’t want you to suffer from dehydration.”

It was Jacob’s turn to conceal his genuine reaction to her offer. He hadn’t been pleased when one of the federal agents had joined him in the lavatory a couple of hours ago. Urging him to hydrate made it known she was aware of his discomfort.

The seven-hour flight from Cumberland, Maryland was the longest duration Brook had spent in her brother’s company since they were teenagers living under the same roof. In the months leading up to this trip, it had been challenging to suppress the churning acid in her stomach, and she couldn’t deny the weight she had lost over the past few weeks.

The bathroom scale didn’t lie, and neither did the mirror.

It had been difficult for Brook to accept that the death penalty for murdering Stella Bennett, Jacob’s first victim back in 1996, was now off the table due to the plea deal. Giving closure to one family had brutally ripped it from the hands of another. Jacob had promised to lead them to the location of Lusa Kalluk in exchange for his life.

Why?

Nathaniel believed it was a simple trade, yet Brook understood such an offer to be so much more than that.

Brook spotted Theo Neville motioning for her to join him further down the aisle in the small section created for privacy. Without a word, she unfastened her seatbelt and stood, ensuring her movements were fluid and controlled. She wouldn’t give her brother a single ounce of satisfaction that being in his presence was part of her own personal hell.

The protruding tread of her black hiking boots made soft thuds against the plush carpet as she carefully made her way toward Theo, not once glancing back at Jacob. She also didn't bother to give Nathaniel any of her attention as she passed him at the second table, working on his laptop. While she didn't have anything against the federal prosecutor, she wasn't confident that he understood what was at stake with this excursion.

"Brook," Theo greeted softly as she approached. "Sylvie just checked in. She and Bit are driving back to the hotel now. They struck out with Mekhi Hale this morning."

Theo's tall frame and athletic build seemed to occupy more space than most people. The black leather eye patch over his right eye only enhanced his imposing presence. She had thought long and hard about splitting the team on this trip to cover more ground. The wisest decision was to have Theo on board the transport flight. His unwavering loyalty to her had supported her through some of her darkest moments.

"That's fine. Once we debrief, they can drive back to Silverton later this afternoon for another try."

"The second Jacob's name came into the conversation, Mekhi Hale clammed up and ordered them off his property." Theo gestured for Brook to take the seat across from him, but standing eased the tension in her shoulders. "Sylvie described the area as extremely remote. Everyone they spoke to in town said that Mekhi keeps to himself and only goes into town once or twice a month. By the way, Bit wasn't too happy to find there weren't any public security cameras set up in or around town."

Sylvie Deering, Bobby 'Bit' Nowacki, and Arden Hinnish completed the team of S&E Investigations. Brook owned the company with a silent partner, and their private consulting firm primarily investigated cold cases of serial killings. The consulting agreement with the federal government regarding active crimes made such a mission more cumbersome, but the profits were lucrative.

Jacob fell into both categories, as well as checking off a personal objective that had devoured Brook's life. She needed to see this through to the end.

"Do we know anything else about Mekhi Hale?" Brook already had her answer, but she wasn't ready to return to her seat. "That we didn't already know before?"

"No." Theo remained on the small couch, though he leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table. His cell phone was next to his laptop, and an open bottle of water had been pushed off to the side. "Everything we know is in his file. Born and raised in Silverton. Fisherman by trade. Worked with a fishing charter most of the time in Whittier, but he would rent out his MAKO 234 CC to tourists from time to time to make extra money. Hence, the photograph that Bit discovered on social media with Jacob in the background."

Seeing that Sylvie and Bit hadn't been able to get Mekhi Hale to discuss Jacob, it was doubtful they had managed to get a word in edgewise about Jacob's defense attorney. Mitch Norona was somehow connected to the reason her brother needed to be in Alaska, but she couldn't find evidence to link both men to Silverton on the same day.

Separately, yes.

But not together.

Considering how much time had passed, she wasn't sure they would be able to obtain the evidence needed to prove to the judge that Mitch Norona should be removed from the case.

"We know that Mitch rented out Hale's private boat for a day of fishing in 2014," Theo reiterated before tapping his phone in frustration. "If we can get the fisherman to verify that Jacob and Mitch knew one another back around the time when Lusa Kalluk went missing, we could present the evidence to Judge Colletti."

Theo's focus shifted down the aisle toward Jacob.

"Speaking of our guest, he seems relaxed."

"Too relaxed." Brook forced herself to keep her back toward the others. Normally, she would have worn one of her usual business suits. Flying blind into cold terrain and an unknown situation had her opting for a ribbed black turtleneck and a pair of dark jeans. "Mitch Norona, on the other hand, hasn't been able to bring himself to utter a word to his client the entire flight. I noticed that he's taken to biting his nails in the past five months. I'd even go so far as to say that he's scared of Jacob."

"Given what we know, maybe the connection between Norona, Jacob, and Hale is enough to get us a warrant. If we can convince Nathaniel that Jacob is using this excursion to try and escape, he might be willing to go to bat with us. Maybe we should try and get Nathaniel to speak with Hale while we are here."

Mekhi Hale wasn't the only one with a peculiar background when it came to Jacob. Mitch was a criminal attorney out of Baltimore, though he initially started out in financial law. Two trips to Alaska seemed to have changed the course of his career, not that Brook or the team could prove that Norona had any interactions with Jacob during those so-called vacations.

"We have no concrete evidence that Norona and Jacob's paths crossed back then. The picture of Jacob on Hale's boat could have been taken on a different day or even a different month. I don't want the judge rejecting our request based on mere coincidence."

"The fact that Lusa Kalluk went missing in 2014 makes it more than a coincidence, Brook," Theo said wryly as his gaze switched to Mitch Norona. "He was fresh out of law school. We have to assume Jacob has something on him to use the man as a puppet."

“I agree, but I don’t want to play our hand just yet.”

“This will all be over with in twenty-four hours, anyway,” Theo reminded her as he reached forward and slowly closed the lid of his laptop. “I take it that Graham is meeting us at the landing strip?”

“No. I asked him to stay behind and examine the schematics of the hotel. He is also changing our rooms and blocking off a different floor.” Brook gave a slight shrug when Theo raised an eyebrow. “I don’t want anyone making decisions for us, and Graham noted too many unsecured areas in the initial block of rooms. He’ll do another sweep before we arrive.”

“I’ll drop Sylvie a text. She and Bit can meet up with him.”

Brook had complete confidence that Graham Elliott would ensure the hotel was secure for their arrival. As a retired Commanding General of the Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC), no one on the team possessed his level of expertise. He also happened to be her silent partner in S&E Investigations and the man she cared for deeply enough to pursue another attempt at a normal life.

Graham hadn’t left her side since the news of the plea deal broke, and while she wasn’t used to him being underfoot twenty-four-seven, he had proven himself to be an anchor. He also hadn’t coddled her, which had gone a long way in her accepting his constant presence of late.

The pilot's voice crackled over the intercom, bringing Brook’s short reprieve to an end. The breathing room from Jacob’s smothering company had been much needed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we will be landing in fifteen minutes. Please fasten your seatbelts and prepare for descent.”

“Showtime,” Theo muttered as he swiped his laptop off the table. He then reached for the case. “Did I hear Agent Houser say he arranged for two local field agents to meet us at the landing strip?”

“Yes,” Brook replied as Theo reached for his drink. As he secured the cap before tucking the plastic bottle in the outside pocket of the carrier, a thought occurred to her. “Do me a favor. When we land, collect the empty water bottle near Mitch’s seat. We don’t need a warrant for anything found in public.”

“I can do that,” Theo agreed, leaning back against the leather cushion. He stretched his arm out to reach into a pocket usually found on the back of a passenger seat and pulled out an airsick bag. “Improvisation at its finest.”

As Brook returned to her seat, she considered informing Nathaniel about her decision to test Mitch Norona’s DNA. She quickly dismissed the thought. The less he knew about the actions taken by S&E Investigations, the better. She hadn’t even informed him about Sylvie and Bit seeking out Mekhi Hale this morning.

Basically, the federal prosecutor had been kept in the dark about a lot of things.

“I’m curious.” Jacob had waited until after Brook had fastened her seatbelt to speak. She braced herself for another comment about Sarah Evanston or Stella Bennett. Curiously enough, he had yet to bring up Lusa Kalluk. “Does your sidekick take that patch off to sleep? I mean, what exactly is behind that thing? Does his eyelid sink in or?—”

“Do you need to use the lavatory before we land?” Brook asked as she feigned the removal of imaginary lint off her turtleneck. She refused to rise to his bait, and she would never display signs of weakness in front of him. “I’m sure Agent Brall wouldn’t mind accompanying you.”

“He can hold it.”

Jacob never took his gaze off Brook, so she was well aware that he caught the corner lift of her lips. Special Agent Victor Brall was former military, in his early thirties, and he carried out his duties by the book.

She had personally vetted him.

An added bonus of having Victor remain with Jacob throughout the entirety of this trip was that the special agent had experience with the BAU before being assigned to counter-terrorism investigations. The Behavioral Analysis Unit had nothing but good things to say about the man’s work ethic.

“Looks like you’ll have to hold it,” Brook replied, backing up Victor’s directive.

She cleared her throat before turning her attention to the wing of the aircraft. Her jacket and backpack rested in the seat next to her. Although this trip was expected to have a quick turnaround, she had instructed everyone—well, almost everyone—on board to pack enough clothes for a week. If Jacob somehow delayed their return, it was up to Mitch Norona to provide himself with additional clothes and toiletries.

As the wheels finally touched down, the jet jolted slightly before leveling off to glide gracefully down the small runway. Dense forest stretched out to the horizon, with the dark green of the trees contrasting against the slate-grey sky. Although there was no snow on the ground, June marked the beginning of summer in this region.

Before too long, a large hangar that had seen better days came into view with several dark SUVs parked in front, along with two government-issued vehicles. Nathaniel had seen to it that several rental SUVs had been arranged for them.

“Everyone, please remain seated.”



The pilot had given the instruction over the intercom, but that hadn't stopped Special Agent Russell Houser from vacating his seat. He had his phone pressed against his ear, and his concerned gaze caught hers as he walked past her toward the front of the plane.

Something was wrong.

Russell had been the lead agent on Jacob's case for many years now. Even though Jacob had been behind bars for nearly the same duration, Russell had accompanied them at Brook's request.

She didn't need to instruct Theo to follow Russell. He was already making his way toward the exit, where Russell stood listening to whoever was on the other end of the line. After Theo joined him, the two exchanged hushed words about what had caused their departure from the jet to be delayed.

Jacob seemed utterly unfazed by the proceedings, and Brook made sure she mimicked his demeanor. She would delay joining the others just long enough to give the impression that she wasn't concerned about what waited for them on the tarmac.

"Brook?"

Not needing to wait any longer, Brook took her time unfastening her seatbelt. She gave a casual nod toward Victor before making her way to the front of the plane.

"What's wrong?" Brook inquired softly, not wanting her voice to travel.

"Around a hundred and twenty yards from here, give or take, something was dumped on the runway," Russell informed her while keeping his phone against his ear. "For all we know, it could be a tree branch. Maybe a dead animal. I'm having one of the two agents who?"

“No.” Brook had made it a point not to overstep her role up to this point, but the time had come to take over. Jacob had ensured she was part of his plea deal, and she wouldn’t go any further without taking the lead. She certainly wouldn’t put her team at risk for some type of power struggle between the two sides of the judicial system. “Until we know what it is, I want this to stay in-house. Russell, you and Theo should be the ones to approach whatever is out there. Best case scenario, it’s debris.”

Brook didn’t bother to tack on the worst case. Jacob’s non-reaction wasn’t surprising, but she had caught sight of Mitch’s response to Russell’s phone call. She got the sense that the defense attorney wasn’t shocked by the delay.

“What’s going on, Brook?” Nathaniel asked when she reached her seat. He didn’t seem to mind that Jacob was observing them intently. She calmly collected her jacket, slipping her arms in the sleeves before taking hold of a strap on the back of her backpack. “Is there some sort of problem?”

“We’re not sure.” Brook removed her cell phone from the side pocket, studying the lighted screen. She quickly dismissed several messages that would need to be returned later today. Keeping her phone in hand, she slid the strap of the backpack over her shoulder. “Theo and Russell are checking on something, but we should be able to exit the plane shortly.”

Cold air began to seep into the cabin, indicating that Theo and Russell were finally able to descend from the aircraft’s exit. While the month of June brought mild temperatures to Alaska, this afternoon’s high was still only fifty-four degrees.

“Ma’am?”

“Not yet,” Brook murmured in response to Victor’s subtle question. Nathaniel had already made his way to the front of the plane with his briefcase in hand. No doubt, Victor was keen to move things along, as well. His partner on this trip, however,

seemed content to monitor the federal prosecutor's movements. "We'll wait for the all-clear."

Jacob's eyes narrowed slightly upon hearing her statement. She had intentionally not included him in any of the conversations. He didn't get to perceive any more authority on this recovery mission than what was necessary. Her brother believed he was calling the shots, guiding them to the remains of a victim, but she wouldn't give him the impression that she would trip over herself for the information. It was bad enough that she had agreed and even pushed for this trip in the end, though not for the reasons everyone currently on board believed of her.

"I'll be waiting outside," Mitch stated as he stood from his seat. He had chosen to sit near Victor, leaving an open space between them. Jacob's defense attorney didn't even bother to glance in his client's direction. "I need to make a few phone?—"

"Sit down, Mr. Norona," Brook ordered without hesitation. "No one else leaves this plane until we're given permission from my colleague."

Brook maintained eye contact with Mitch until he slowly lowered himself to the cream leather sofa. He rubbed his chin in frustration, which was when she caught sight of the pearl of blood on the side of his thumbnail. Two things made an impression on her—Norona was nervous, and Jacob was curious.

The vibrations of the cell phone diverted her attention. She swiped to accept the call and lifted the phone to her ear while switching her focus back to Jacob. He met her gaze, and she got the distinct impression that he was at war with himself. It was as if he wanted her to believe he was aware of what was taking place outside, but something told her he was just as in the dark as she was right now.

"Brook, we've got ourselves a crime scene," Theo advised, his tone grim under the muted muffling of the wind. "Keep everyone on board for now. You'll want to see

the body yourself before we call in a forensics team.”

Theo’s long pause conveyed there was something more to the crime scene...something worse.

“It’s Jacob’s signature, Brook.”

She didn’t reply to Theo’s depiction of the victim. Unless the woman had any form of identification on her body, it could be days before they had a name. Brook slowly lowered the phone while assessing Jacob’s reaction. He hadn’t personally taken another life, but she wouldn’t put it past him to pull the strings of another. He had done it before, and he would no doubt try again...if not having done so already.

“Nathaniel?” Brook slipped her cell phone into the pocket of her jacket while waiting for the federal prosecutor’s full attention. Keeping her tone casual, she made a request. “I’ve received word we might have a situation on our hands. You and the others are to stay on board until you hear otherwise. I’ll be back shortly.”

“What kind of situation?” Nathaniel asked in frustration. “If it involves this case, then I have a right to?”

“I’ll let you know when I know,” Brook stated firmly as she made her way past him toward the exit. She glanced at Norona’s empty water bottle and made a mental note to collect it later. “Take a seat and make yourself comfortable.”

“Hey, sis?” Jacob called out with a touch of humor. She slid her thumb underneath the strap of her backpack to give herself something to grip. Her brother was enjoying the disruption a bit too much for her liking. “Welcome to Alaska.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

3

Sylvie Deering

June 2025

Tuesday — 1:14 pm

Sylvie had to lower the visor as she sat in the passenger seat of the SUV. Although the sun was obscured by thick clouds, a slight glare still reflected off the screen of her electronic tablet. She couldn't help but groan in frustration. A headache had surfaced after re-reading the statements about Lusa Kalluk's disappearance for what felt like the hundredth time. The annoying brightness on the display didn't help, either.

"Maybe we should have pushed harder," Bit said from the driver's seat. He was going a little too fast for her liking, which was why she had opted to read through some of the documents that had been uploaded to the firm's software program. If she weren't peering out the windshield, she wouldn't worry about any oncoming traffic. "Then again, I didn't like the look of the fisherman's front lawn. Do you think he booby-trapped his porch?"

Given Mekhi Hale's irritable demeanor, she wouldn't bet against such a reaction towards intruders. Not that they had tried to enter the man's home. All they had accomplished was parking in the driveway, where they had been met with the barrel of a shotgun.

Sylvie had managed to hold her credentials up through the window, which succeeded

in getting Mekhi to lower his weapon long enough to hear why they wanted to speak with him. Unfortunately, the moment she mentioned Jacob Walsh, Mekhi ordered them off his property, stating that if he had known the guy had murdered people, he would never have given him part-time work.

“Maybe,” Sylvie answered honestly. “We can always try to talk with him tomorrow. Maybe he’ll have a change of heart overnight.”

Bit, now steering with one hand, took a swig of his energy drink before placing the tall can back into the cupholder. They were about thirty-five minutes from the hotel and were scheduled to meet up with the rest of the team soon.

“Hey, why don't we pretend we're in one of Boss's morning briefings? Come on, Little T. It'll help take your mind off missing Coco.”

At the mention of her precious white cat, Sylvie couldn't help but smile, imagining Coco back at the office being spoiled rotten by Arden. There were times when she was sure Coco would prefer to live with Arden. On the other hand, Sylvie had spent the past five months moving into her new home on the outskirts of Georgetown while preparing for the recovery mission of Lusa Kalluk's remains. Coco loved the additional space she had to run around. The front bay window, where the morning sun streamed in from the East, was her favorite spot of all.

“Alright,” Sylvie agreed before powering down her tablet and storing the device in her tote on the passenger side floor. She then reached into the snack bag and pulled out a small bag of chips. “Let's start with the victim—Lusa Kalluk.”

Sylvie liked the idea of discussing some of the key points in the missing persons investigation. It was part of their investigative process, and Brook's methodical approach to the briefings had always been beneficial to them.

“Lusa went missing on a Friday night in the summer of 2014.” Sylvie tore open the bag of chips. “She had planned to spend the evening with her boyfriend, her best friend, brother, and cousin playing pool at a local bar.”

Sylvie paused to eat a chip.

Then another one.

She hadn’t had time to eat breakfast or lunch, and now she was starving.

“Aputi, Lusa’s brother, was the only one who ended up joining her.” Sylvie reached for her water bottle. “Delilah Swan, the best friend, had to extend her shift serving drinks at the same bar. A coworker was late for her shift. So, while Delilah wasn’t playing pool with Lusa and Aputi, the waitress was still on site.”

“There is no evidence that points to Aputi or Delilah having anything to do with Lusa’s disappearance,” Bit pointed out before holding out his right hand. “Skittles?”

Sylvie finished sipping her water before leaning down to retrieve the small red bag of candy. She tore off the top before handing it over.

Kavik Aningan, Lusa's boyfriend, was stuck at work alongside her cousin, Nanuq. At the time, both were working for a wildlife conservation organization. That night, a fence had been knocked down and required immediate repairs. It was Aputi who informed Nanuq that the sheriff had been called to the bar because Lusa was missing.

“Aputi also called his parents, too. Right?”

“Yes.” Sylvie munched on a few more chips before licking the salt off her fingers. “I spoke with all of those involved via video conference over the past few months, and no one recognized Jacob. Either they are lying, or Jacob never set foot in Blackpeak.”

While Mekhi Hale lived in Silverton, Lusa Kalluk had gone missing from Blackpeak. The two towns were somewhat close, but the sizable mountain in between made the drive at the base take almost a full hour.

“Maybe Jacob didn’t venture into Blackpeak or Whittier,” Sylvie suggested after savoring a few more chips. “Maybe he stayed closer to Silverton due to the town’s almost nonexistent population.”

“What about Slick Mitch?”

“Brook didn’t want us to push the narrative of his involvement in front of Nathaniel. The only time she ever approached him about her unease over Mitch’s association was in January, when the defense attempted to get the evidence recovered from the campsite thrown out. Even though Nathaniel agreed that Mitch replacing the public defender had come out of the blue, it wasn’t against the law.”

“No one from Slick Mitch’s law firm ever paid a visit to the federal prison. Personally, I don’t like either one of them,” Bit said before shaking the bag of Skittles so that several fell into his mouth at once. “The one thing we can all agree on is that Jacob is up to something. I still don’t get why Boss doesn’t just come clean with King P.”

Bit often gave people nicknames, such as calling her ‘Little T’ because of her love for hot tea. The only person he usually referred to by his first name was Jacob, as if Bit didn’t think he was deserving of such effort. As for Nathaniel, Bit had named him King P, in reference to the plea deal made with Mitch Norona.

No one had been happy with the decision to take the death penalty off the table.

Well, no one except the Kalluk family.



Sylvie understood their need for closure, but in her opinion, Jacob's demands were too extreme—he refused to provide an exact location, insisted on being present, and required that the recovery mission occur in June. It screamed a setup, which was why Brook had taken every precaution to ensure they didn't lose control over the situation.

“We can prove that Slick Mitch was in Alaska in 2014.”

“Just because Mitch took a fishing trip doesn't mean that he crossed paths with Jacob.” Sylvie had been about to eat another chip when she held it up to prevent Bit from going down a rabbit hole. “I know that we have proof Jacob worked for Mekhi and that Mitch chartered Mekhi's boat for a day of fishing, but we can't prove that the two occasions occurred simultaneously.”

“It's common sense, Little T.”

“It's Brook's decision, and we need to back her up.”

Sylvie empathized with Bit's frustration. Jacob never said or did anything without considering the future, and it was as if they had stepped into a dark room without flashlights. Mitch's involvement in the trial had come out of nowhere, and every breadcrumb the team found linking the two men to the state of Alaska seemed too convenient. Sylvie understood Brook's reluctance to rush ahead without solid evidence. If they revealed their hand too early, they might never obtain the answers they sought.

Sylvie suddenly lost her appetite.

She tossed the chip back into the bag. It made her nauseous to think Jacob had orchestrated such a recovery mission as a means to escape from federal custody. He had made such attempts before, but those had been contained at the federal prison.

Out here...in the wilderness?

Out here...where he had the advantage?

“Jacob is setting us up,” Sylvie muttered in disgust as she folded the top of the chip bag. “We all know he is going to try to escape, and Nathaniel was foolish to offer up such a chance.”

“Escape...or die trying,” Bit said before throwing her a quick, knowing glance.

“If it’s the latter,” Sylvie murmured, settling back in her seat, “then maybe, just maybe, Brook can finally have some peace.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

4

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Tuesday — 2:11 pm

The Alaskan air, crisp and clean, had a lingering bite that nipped at the skin. It served as a subtle reminder that the wilderness was harsh and unforgiving. Each breath was filled with an earthy scent, accompanied by a hint of the sweet aroma of pine needles, showcasing the raw vitality of the landscape.

In the distance, sporadic calls of birds broke the eerie stillness.

Brook stood at the top of the stairway leading down from the jet, surveying the dense forest surrounding the remote airstrip and hangar. Four SUVs were parked in a row, their dark windows hiding the drivers inside. Two federal agents stood beside a government-issued vehicle, their eyes fixed down the runway toward Theo and Russell.

The two men were nearly a football field's length away.

The fact that the agents hadn't moved from their posts indicated that Russell hadn't yet contacted the supervisory special agent in charge of the closest field office.

Taking a deep breath, she carefully descended the stairs, her black hiking boots

making little noise as their soles connected with the metal steps. She continued to scan the area for any potential threats, but nothing stood out.

The silence only amplified her unease.

Once she was standing on the tarmac, she adjusted her backpack more securely on her shoulder. She had chosen to keep the bag with her. Bit had conducted the background checks on the drivers, but she wasn't comfortable leaving her personal belongings in one of the SUVs.

She set off at a brisk pace, doing her best to contain her thoughts. She resisted the urge to call Graham. Each of them had their designated tasks, and his was ensuring that Jacob's hotel room was equipped with proper surveillance. Bit had even given Graham specific instructions about the system. The last thing she wanted was to pull him away from such an important detail.

Regardless of their current situation, Jacob would inevitably be taken to the hotel.

Theo and Russell remained silent as she approached. Russell held his phone tightly but made no move to use it. She suspected that Theo significantly influenced the agent's restraint. Besides, if the murder was thought to be connected to Jacob, Russell would be the lead agent, anyway.

Drawing closer, she finally came upon the body. Someone had wrapped the woman's body in a black tarp, presumably to keep the wildlife at bay. Theo or Russell must have cut through the duct tape with a pocketknife for a better look inside.

The woman's face had been brutally sliced in several places, making her identity unrecognizable. The lack of blood inside the black tarp from the deep gash across her neck indicated she had been killed elsewhere. Her body had been intentionally dumped at the end of the tarmac. The location was sufficiently distant from the

hangar for the unsub to avoid detection or capture by any security cameras, assuming the hangar even had such a system in place.

Whoever killed this woman wanted to send a message.

“Are we just going to?—”

“Let Brook do her thing,” Theo warned Russell, whose patience was clearly running thin. “Five minutes isn’t going to change the fact that we have a victim who bears the signature of the man we currently have in custody.”

“The media is going to have a field day with this,” Russell muttered in disgust. His gaze flicked toward the hangar. “I’m more concerned with the locals. A lot of these people support Toklo Kalluk. He still has some influence at the...”

Brook tuned out their conversation as she studied the victim's attire, noting the woman's athletic yet petite frame. Her black hair was chin-length and straight. The texture of the strands was thick, and what sheen could be detected without blood suggested meticulous care. Her skin contained a warm undertone, hinting at Asian heritage.

The victim was dressed in a charcoal grey pantsuit, without a winter jacket. Instead of heels, the woman wore black boots with flat soles. Only a handful of professions involved women deliberately choosing that type of footwear. A sense of unease began to take hold, and Brook circled the body once more.

“...not returning to the hangar is already catching the attention of the?—”

“Look at the gash in her neck,” Brook directed, cutting into Russell's concern over the two individuals who had exited the hangar. They were too far away for her to identify, but she assumed they were employees of the privately owned airstrip. “It's

not clean. There are several areas that are somewhat jagged, which indicates hesitation on the part of the unsub. Also, notice how some of the cheek flesh is still intact. It's as if the unsub couldn't stomach such brutality."

"Jesus Christ," Russell muttered, distracted from the curiosity of those near the hangar. "Walsh has been in custody this entire time. No contact with anyone outside the federal prison. Don't think I don't know you are somehow monitoring your brother's?—"

"Mitch Norona." Theo prevented Russell from making an accusation that Brook wouldn't have been able to deny. "As Jacob's defense attorney, he has been to FCI Cumberland once a month since the beginning of the year."

"Norona hasn't left the East Coast." Russell's abrupt statement garnered glances from both Brook and Theo. The man shrugged off their surprise. "You aren't the only ones with half a brain. Norona and his firm took over the case from a public defender without ever having contact with Walsh at the prison. I couldn't find any connection between the two men or between Walsh and anyone else at the firm. Anyway, I've been keeping close tabs on his movements."

Brook didn't need to warn Theo about sharing the alleged link between Norona and Jacob with anyone outside the firm. While she could argue that they had relied solely on social media to place both Norona and Jacob in Alaska, she didn't want attention brought to Bit and the leeway she had given him regarding her brother.

"I hope you ran your suspicions by Nathaniel Carter," Theo replied, steering the discussion toward the federal prosecutor. "We mentioned to him how odd it was that Norona picked up such a high-profile case, but Nathaniel didn't seem interested in pursuing that lead."

"Well, word has it that Carter is thinking of switching sides at some point. He

received a lucrative offer from a firm in New York, and I think he hands in his resignation after this case.” Russell shot each of them a warning glance. “You didn’t hear that from me.”

Brook had been listening to Russell, but she kept most of her focus on the body in front of them. There was something familiar about the victim’s stature that she couldn’t quite place. The unsub had gone to a lot of trouble in transferring the victim to the airstrip.

So much effort that it would have been pointless for him to leave a body without identification. Given the strength it would have taken to carry the body from a location that couldn’t necessarily be seen from the hangar, the profile would indicate a male subject.

Brook slowly set her backpack on the tarmac before kneeling to unzip the main compartment. Sifting through the contents, she didn’t stop until she found the small plastic bag that held her toothbrush. It didn’t take her long to empty the bag and slip her hand inside so she wouldn’t contaminate the crime scene.

Kneeling beside the woman's remains, Brook began to gently pat the victim’s pockets for anything that might give them something to help with identification. In the process of doing so, the right side of the victim’s suit jacket slipped to the side. Attached to the woman’s belt were law enforcement credentials.

Federal credentials.

Bile hit the back of Brook’s throat as her surroundings immediately closed in on her. She couldn’t bring herself to move as déjà vu took hold, memories of discovering her best friend lying in a pool of her own blood in the middle of an Illinois cornfield flooding her mind. An instant later, the cornfield morphed into Brook’s college dorm room, where she found Cara Jordan on the floor in between their beds.

There were other victims who had personally touched Brook's life in some way, but the woman in front of her had once embodied purpose...determination. She had worked for S&E Investigations as a steppingstone to her true calling as a federal agent.

In a way, she had reminded Brook of a young version of herself.

"It's Kate," Brook managed to say as she crushed the clear plastic bag into the palm of her hand. "Theo, it's Kate Lin."



5

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Tuesday — 5:58 pm

The anguished ambiance in the hotel room was suffocating, heavy with unspoken grief. The low hum of the heating system wasn't enough to mask the occasional snuffle and the struggle to remain composed in light of recent circumstances. Not even the warm air that trickled through the vents in the ceiling above could dispel the bone-chilling reality of death.

Although the hotel was old and worn, its layout was adequate for surveillance. The rooms weren't luxurious by any means, but they were the most decent option in Blackpeak. The location also meant they were roughly an hour's hike from the general area Jacob had provided them last week. Unfortunately, he was keeping the exact coordinates to himself to ensure he was included in the trek.

Brook observed Sylvie and Bit at the table in the corner. Despite their best efforts, they couldn't hide the aftermath of their reactions to the news of Kate's death. Sylvie had readjusted the tight bun at the base of her neck several times, giving her hands something to do. The blonde strands were taut enough now to lift the temples on her black-rimmed glasses. She would no doubt have a severe headache by evening, if she didn't already.

As for Bit, he had taken the news the hardest. His face seemed gaunter, and the pallor of his skin accentuated the redness of his bloodshot eyes. He had been the one who had consistently remained in close contact with Kate over the past few years, and his lighthearted wit had been noticeably absent since he had learned of her death.

Across the room, Theo stood silently next to the window overlooking the small parking lot. Unlike Bit and Sylvie, Theo had turned inward and hadn't uttered a word that didn't have to do with proper procedure.

"Has someone notified Mr. Lin?" Bit asked before removing his signature grey beanie that had seen better days. The same could be said for his hair. No matter how many times he washed the blond strands, he couldn't get rid of their oily sheen. "He shouldn't hear it from?—"

"Mr. Lin is giving a lecture as a guest speaker at a healthcare conference in New York." Brook held onto the coffee mug that Theo had given her a few minutes ago, not that she could swallow any of the contents at the moment. "I have a local officer there who will call me when Kate's father steps off the stage."

Bit shifted his focus from Brook to the three screens on the table. One displayed Jacob's room, another the adjacent bathroom, and the third the hallway outside. Bit's chair was at an angle so he could view both the monitors and those inside the room, while Sylvie's back was toward the screens.

Kate's death hit home for a completely different reason for Sylvie. She had almost been a victim of one of Jacob's disciples herself over a year ago. It was unfortunate that serial killers could be viewed as misunderstood, and there were sick individuals who would do anything for them. Sylvie had suffered at the hands of such an individual. With Kate's death, there was a possibility they were dealing with the same type of situation.

The one question that kept rising to the surface was why Kate had been in Alaska in the first place. That unanswered inquiry was where they would begin their investigation.

Brook's gaze lingered on the screen that displayed Jacob lying supine on the bed. He had his fingers laced, both hands resting on his abdomen as if he didn't have a care in the world. Only she could detect from the way his index fingers flexed every now and then that he was anything but comfortable.

There was no denying that Kate's death was related to his presence in Alaska, but Brook wasn't confident that he was at the center of her murder. Jacob's own plans had been thrown off, which could give them an open opportunity to get out a step ahead of him.

On the same display, Special Agent Justin Genedet could be seen at a small table across the room, shuffling cards with precision while periodically glancing up to check on his prisoner. Special Agent Victor Brall rested on the other double bed in order to take over the midnight shift. Considering the two agents had been thoroughly vetted, the only concern at this point was her brother's defense attorney.

The other two monitors displayed the connecting bathroom at such an angle that it allowed for privacy while also ensuring that they didn't miss anything of significance and the outer hallway directly in front of Jacob's room.

No one would be able to make contact with him without the team's knowledge.

The click of the door captured everyone's attention. Graham had secured a connecting room, along with three additional ones so each team member could have their privacy. He met her gaze and gave a slight nod of acknowledgment to indicate that everything was okay. Some matters had arisen back home unrelated to their case, and Graham had specifically requested that she keep the news to herself for the time

being.

“Russell just got back from the airstrip,” Graham advised them all as he made his way to the room service tray that held two carafes of coffee, some bottles of water, and an electric tea kettle for Sylvie. “He was able to rearrange the recovery mission to tomorrow morning at eleven o’clock.”

“Wait,” Bit exclaimed as he leaned forward in agitation. “We’re not heading back to D.C. afterward, are we? We can’t just?—”

“I have a call into the Bureau. Normally, we wouldn’t be able to touch the investigation into Kate’s death. Given the publicity, though, I feel I can convince the upper brass that it would be to their benefit to bring us on as consultants.” Brook noticed that while Theo was listening to every word, something or someone had caught his attention in the parking lot. “It comes down to the fallout. If the case goes South, we go along with it.”

“I’m willing to take that chance,” Bit impulsively replied in his need for answers. He peered over at Sylvie for some support. “Little T?”

“Yes.”

Sylvie hadn’t hesitated at all. Her immediate reaction indicated that she wasn’t in the right headspace. Usually analytical and cautious, she didn’t seem to consider the risk of losing their consulting agreement with the Bureau if the situation escalated. Brook, on the other hand, had weighed the pros and cons, and the advantages outweighed the drawbacks.

“Emotions are running high right now,” Brook warned anyway, needing them to understand the consequences. She cleared her throat when it began to restrict in reaction to Kate’s death. “Right now, we wait for clearance.”

Given that the remote area at the far end of the runway had no security cameras or surveillance features, it wasn't like time was of the essence. Russell had already spoken to what staff members had been inside the hangar, and no one had noticed anything out of the ordinary. At least, not until one of the local federal agents who arrived on scene had alerted all those involved about a potential problem.

While such a delay almost certainly came across to Bit and Sylvie like a betrayal to Kate, it was imperative they follow the letter of the law. Fortunately, no one questioned the decision to wait until they received word from the Bureau. They were all too familiar with the favors Brook had collected over the years during her time with the FBI as a criminal profiler.

"You said Russell is back from the airstrip?" Theo asked, steering the discussion back to their current situation.

"Yes," Graham responded as he carried his coffee cup over to the king-sized bed. He took a seat on the end, next to the chair that Brook occupied. "I ran into him in the lobby. He'll be here shortly, but he wanted to touch base with Nathaniel first."

"Toklo Kalluk just arrived at the hotel, and it looks like he has his own personal entourage," Theo murmured, keeping his focus on the parking lot. "Looks like Nathaniel and Russell are going to have their hands full."

"We should be downstairs, as well." Brook set her mug on the nightstand. She had managed to hold herself together this long. She could do so for another hour or so. "If we receive the go-ahead from the Bureau to a joint investigation into Kate's death, I'll profile the unsub. Until then, we focus on locating Lusa Kalluk's remains. I'll join Russell and the others tomorrow for the hike. Theo and Sylvie, I want the two of you to drive to Silverton. Mekhi Hale doesn't want to discuss Jacob, but he'll change his mind if you start asking questions in town. Be loud so everyone can hear. Start at the diner. Trust me, someone will eventually reach out to Mekhi that we aren't letting

this go.”

Given their knowledge of Jacob working with Mekhi under the table all those years ago, the older man would have had to pick up something. Where had Jacob stayed when he helped out on the boat? Had Mekhi ever noticed Jacob talk to anyone in particular, mention anyone specific, or even possibly overhear him on a phone call?

Mekhi might not even know he possessed such vital information.

“I don’t believe Mr. Hale was lying to us.” Sylvie glanced toward Bit for affirmation, who was in the process of blowing his nose. “Hale lives about ten miles outside of Silverton. I highly doubt that a cable or internet company runs lines that far outside of town. Hale is basically off-grid. I’m almost certain he didn’t know who Jacob was until recently.”

“I’m with Little T on this one.” Bit tossed the used tissue into a small wastebasket next to the table. “I think there is a really good chance he is telling the truth about not knowing who Jacob was when he was hired. If Big T and Little T head back to Silverton tomorrow, where do you need me?”

“Here, at the hotel. Mitch will be with the group tomorrow on the hike. Whether or not we’re a part of the investigation into Kate, not even Nathaniel can deny that Mitch is the only avenue Jacob could have used to target?—”

Brook wasn’t able to finish her sentence.

A friend?

A former colleague?

Someone they highly respected?

They shouldn't be in such a horrible position where they had to give Kate a label.

"Nathaniel can convince the judge to sign a warrant to search Mitch's room." Kate's death had changed Brook's mind about bringing the federal prosecutor on board. She also had a backup plan in place should he display any reluctance. "A local agent can conduct the search, but I want you present when it takes place."

"Brook, you don't believe Jacob had anything to do with Kate's death." Theo had finally given the group his full attention. He faced them as he leaned against the wall beside the window. "I don't, either. If anything, he appeared surprised to hear the news. We all know what happens if a judge signs off on such a warrant. A mistrial will be called, charges will need to be refiled, and everything we're doing here comes to a halt."

"Let me worry about how we can keep things on track. Right now, we need to use the situation to our advantage." Brook wasn't going to sugarcoat their situation. "We've had our suspicions about Norona from the beginning. Nathaniel will take this to the judge, but if we time things right, Jacob can still lead us to Lusa Kalluk's remains. Bit, would you please go through the footage taken at the federal prison during the meetings between Jacob and Mitch? Just in case we missed anything."

"I can do that," Bit replied, his eagerness to do something in light of the tragic events evident.

"I take it you're going with Brook tomorrow?" Sylvie asked Graham, who had been silent for the most part. Given what Brook understood about his situation, she couldn't blame him. She had wanted him to head back to D.C. earlier today, but he had been adamant about waiting until things had settled before leaving for the airstrip. "Am I missing something?"

Graham settled his gaze on Brook, waiting for her to take the lead on a response.

There hadn't been one moment between them in the past five months that she could criticize. There was a small part of her that desperately begged for him to say or do something wrong, but even she could rationalize that such an appalling reaction was due to fear.

"I'm flying back to D.C. in the next hour." Graham paused long enough to take a drink of his coffee and allow the full weight of his decision to sink in. "If Kate was targeted, there's nothing to say that others close to us wouldn't be."

There was more to Graham's return to D.C., but he had spared them the details. The team had enough to deal with on their plate. They had absorbed the announcement in rather shocked silence, each processing the implications in their own way.

They each had someone special in their lives.

Theo was dating Mia Williams, and Bit was dating Zoey Collins. Sylvie, on the other hand, had been unusually quiet about her personal life. Well, with everyone except Bit. The two of them were best friends, and they shared everything with one another. But it wasn't just significant others they needed to be concerned about—mothers, fathers, and siblings could be targeted, as well.

"I've already arranged for Zoey and Mia to have surveillance teams in place. Bit, I have someone monitoring your sister's safety." Graham checked the face of his Tag Heuer watch before continuing. "Arden...well, let's just say that he wasn't too happy to find two individuals outside the glass doors of S&E Investigations around an hour ago."

Arden wouldn't appreciate being referred to as an old grandfather clock ticking away in the corner of a room, but that was sometimes how Brook thought of him. He was reliable, steadfast, and so much more. He had taken over for Kate, though no one could replace her. He had brought with him years of experience and wisdom, while



she had been eager and willing to learn.

At sixty-nine years of age, Arden had become a father figure to the team. While he had never met Kate in person, he had spoken to her over video conference several times. He had taken the news of her death hard over the phone. While Graham had been the one to alert Arden of his personal protection detail, Brook couldn't imagine that conversation had gone over well.

"Theo, you should call your parents," Graham directed as he collected Brook's mug. He stood and took both over to the cart. "Considering that your father is the Commissioner of the New York Police Department, it's best that you give him the choice of how to handle his own security and that of your mother's. With that said, is there anyone else we need to include in our security protocols?"

Sylvie claimed that Derek Haze was merely a friend, though Brook suspected there was more to their relationship. As CEO of Haze Innovations Group, Derek was usually front and center in the healthcare industry. There had been no coverage of his personal life in the local papers or news, so no one should think to pay him any attention. Still, they had no idea who they were dealing with at the moment. It was for the best that Sylvie made him aware of what had taken place.

"I'll make a call," Sylvie murmured discreetly as she reached for her cell phone. She had set it on the table next to the monitors, which displayed no change in the room next door. "I'll be right back."

"Brook," Graham said suddenly, his tone serious, "may I speak with you in private, please?"

Theo already had his phone pressed to his ear, while Bit was reaching for another tissue. Brook masked her apprehension as she stood from the chair. She wasn't certain she could handle any demonstrations of compassion or pity. Maybe it was

because she was getting older, or maybe it was because her brother was so near, or perhaps it had to do with how close she had become with her team over the years, but separating her emotions from work was becoming increasingly challenging. There was no time for weakness, and walking into the connecting room took every ounce of strength she had after such an aftermath.

Graham quietly closed the door behind them. The soft click seemed to magnify the painful ache in her heart. A surge of emotions threatened to overwhelm her, and she fought against the tightening of her throat. To prevent a breakdown, she forced herself to stare at the hideous bedside lamp.

It was he whom she should be comforting right now.

“One minute,” Graham murmured as his arms closed around her from behind. She was being selfish. The roles should be reversed. He was going through a difficult time, and she should have had him leave the second she discovered what had taken place back in D.C. “You’re allowed a minute to grieve, Brooklyn.”

His voice was just a gentle murmur against her hair, while his warm embrace offered her the solace she so greatly needed and the safety she so desperately craved.

A solitary tear slipped free, taking her resolve with it.

She instinctively reached up and curled her fingers tightly around his forearms. He had become her stability in the midst of her spiraling emotions. His body heat grounded her as his warmth seeped through the fabric of his dress shirt.

She had been responsible for Kate’s safety.

Others would argue that Brook wasn’t to blame, but no one could alleviate her guilt. Sobs racked her body until her legs began to give out, but Graham held firm. He

wouldn't allow her to fall. He was the anchor that she never had before, and she finally gave herself permission to rely on him. To trust him.

So, she would take the one minute offered to her.

The sixty seconds to grieve.

To mourn.

To say goodbye.

To ask for forgiveness.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

6

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Tuesday — 7:09 pm

The sun remained stubbornly high in the sky, defying the late hour. It was strange to witness such an odd occurrence when the cityscape of Washington, D.C. would be experiencing sunset in less than two hours. The continuous daylight of the Alaskan summer was due to the region's high latitude, and this phenomenon gave a surreal sense of time being suspended. It was natural for one's internal clock to struggle against the prolonged daylight hours.

Brook and Theo walked past the hotel's front entrance toward a spacious room designated for the complimentary breakfast served every morning from six to nine. A long counter stretched along one side of the disorganized space. At the far end was a small beverage area for guests, a pledge of the hotel's hospitality. At some point during the day, a staff member had made an effort to restore order to the area, as all the chairs had been neatly tucked into their designated spots at various tables.

Brook's stomach churned at the lingering smell of grease. It had been over ten hours since the courtesy breakfast had been served, so how was it possible such an odor had hung around for so long?

She had given Graham her word before he left for the airstrip that she would take

time to eat something later, but she wasn't confident that she could follow through with her promise. That one minute she had stolen from the day had drained every shred of energy in her body.

"Brook, I would like to formally introduce you to Alaska's former governor, Toklo Kalluk," Nathaniel said the moment he caught sight of her. Brook had spoken to Toklo through multiple video conferences, though Nathaniel had always been present. "Governor Kalluk, this is Brooklyn Sloane and Theo Neville."

Toklo's expression was cold, and his resentment of her involvement simmered just beneath the surface. She had noticed it during her calls, and it was difficult to miss now. It was clear that anyone associated with Jacob Walsh left a bad taste in his mouth.

She couldn't blame him.

She had always carried the weight of her brother's sins.

"Governor Kalluk," Brook greeted evenly as she shook the man's hand. She could only imagine the shock he and his family must have suffered upon hearing the news earlier in the year that Lusa Kalluk was dead. Jacob's admission had all but cemented the young woman's fate. "I can understand your frustration over delaying today's events. I'm sure Mr. Carter has explained that we rescheduled the recovery operation for tomorrow."

"Does it really surprise you the lengths your brother will go to cause?—"

"Mr. Kalluk," Theo interrupted firmly as he extended his hand. He intentionally omitted the man's former title to make his point clear. While Brook appreciated his effort to intervene and assert some authority, they still needed the man's cooperation. "You're fortunate that Brook will be in attendance tomorrow to help locate your

daughter's remains. Brook's insight into Jacob Walsh has brought the Bureau this far, and I have no doubt she will see the trial through to the end. It is unfortunate that the death penalty has been taken off the table."

Eleven years had passed since Lusa Kalluk's disappearance.

Brook was reminded that time could heal everything...except death.

The damage the Kalluk family carried with them in their day-to-day lives didn't mean they had forgotten the initial pain of losing Lusa, but the scars left behind allowed them to move forward. Had their wounds been fresh, Theo wouldn't have been compelled to come to her defense.

Theo's protectiveness came from the knowledge that Brook hadn't been without suffering of her own. Still, the room itself seemed to hold its breath while waiting for Toklo's response. Everyone's attention was on the former governor.

"I realize that the concessions made for my daughter come at the expense of justice for others," Toklo revealed somewhat grudgingly before dropping his hand. He nodded respectfully toward Theo, indicating that he understood the underlying meaning behind his words. "Lusa deserves a proper burial, though. If there are other victims, then their families deserve to know what happened to their loved ones, as well. With that said, I appreciate the reminder that there are many victims of Jacob Walsh's crimes."

The tension in the room seemed to ease as the occupants began to speak with one another in quiet conversations. Theo had mentioned that the former governor had brought what could be considered an entourage, and he hadn't exaggerated that claim. A quick count revealed nine other individuals present.

"I'd like to reassure you that today's distraction won't divert our attention away from

recovering your daughter's remains." Nathaniel smoothed his tie, just as he was attempting to do with Toklo's slight irritation. Unfortunately, the federal prosecutor had managed to do just the opposite with Brook and Theo. "Tomorrow morning, we will?—"

"What Mr. Carter is trying to convey is that while we are certain Jacob Walsh did not personally take the life of Special Agent Kate Lin, we can't rule out a connection with his case." Brook spoke loud enough for all to hear her. "I've just received word that S&E Investigations will be working alongside the FBI as consultants. Once we retrieve the remains of your daughter, Special Agent Houser and my team will continue to investigate Lin's murder alongside federal agents from the Anchorage field office. Due to the manner in which Special Agent Lin died, we would like to question those individuals who were close to Lusa before her disappearance."

A few protests arose, but Brook held up a hand to signify she wasn't done speaking. She even took a step back to view the occupants of the room. The position adjustment was more for her benefit than theirs, as it was beneficial to observe their reactions to her statements. As for Nathaniel, his face was flushed with annoyance, but she wasn't there to gain political points. He could maneuver the bureaucratic chess pieces around the board another time.

"Special Agent Kate Lin was a cautious agent who never bent the rules," Brook explained after she once again held everyone's attention. "Someone was able to lure her here to Alaska, just as someone was able to entice Lusa to leave a local pub where she was enjoying a night out with family and friends. Jacob Walsh has claimed responsibility for Lusa's disappearance. We will find out tomorrow if there is any truth to his assertion, but it is our responsibility to cover every aspect of this investigation. I ask for your cooperation."

No one could mistake Brook's last statement as singular in intention. She meant every single person in the room, but they all still directed their gazes toward Toklo

Kalluk. He hesitated for a brief moment as he regarded her intently. His slight nod in her direction signified his acceptance and agreement to her request.

“While my daughter has been missing since 2014, that day will forever be carved into our memories, Ms. Sloane. This is my son, Aputi.” Toklo waited patiently for his son to step forward. Aputi was in his late thirties with a stocky build and short-cropped hair. He didn’t smile, but there didn’t seem to be any hostility in his gaze, either. “Aputi was with his sister that night at the bar.”

While Theo guided Aputi to the other side of the room, Brook noticed Sylvie. She had changed into a dark pair of jeans and a navy-blue sweater. The light sheen of lip gloss signaled that she had regained her composure and was ready to get to work. Given her uncanny ability to recall facts and details, Brook wasn’t concerned that anything would be missed during tonight’s interviews.

“My nephew, Nanuq.”

“Nanuq, I read over the interviews taken during the investigation of Lusa’s disappearance.” Brook noted that Nanuq didn’t view his uncle in the same way as the others. While there was a display of outward respect, the man’s body language suggested otherwise. “You were supposed to join Lusa and Aputi that night, is that right?”

Nanuq favored the Kalluk family in physical appearance, though he was slightly taller than his uncle and cousin. The differences ended there. The calluses on his hands and the clothes on his back indicated that he preferred the outdoors to a sterile office position.

“Yes. I worked maintenance at a wildlife conservation at the time. One of the fences partially came down, and I stayed to secure it.” Nanuq gestured over his shoulder. “Kavik, too.”



Kavik Aningan had been Lusa's boyfriend at the time of her disappearance. He stood apart from the others. Given that the local authorities had treated him as a suspect back then, it wasn't surprising that he had distanced himself from the Kalluk family members.

From there, Toklo continued to introduce the other family members.

Lusa's mother, grandmother, and a few other cousins were in attendance. One of Lusa's friends, who had been waitressing at the bar that night, was huddled next to Mrs. Kalluk. It was obvious that Delilah Swan continued to be close to the family.

"We appreciate you taking the time to speak with us tonight. My colleagues and Special Agent Houser will meet with each of you. In the meantime, beverages are on the counter. If you need anything else, please let me know."

It was more than apparent that Russell didn't appreciate being kept in the dark about S&E Investigations' involvement with the inquiry into Kate's death, but the federal agent maintained his composure and led Kavik to an empty table. Meanwhile, Nathaniel had pulled Toklo aside to reassure him that tomorrow would go as planned and that his daughter's remains would finally be brought home to rest.

Brook pulled her phone from the back pocket of her jeans. Bit stayed back in the room to monitor the screens, promising to text her if Mitch stepped into the hallway for any reason. Fortunately, Graham had positioned a camera in the corridor to cover most of the rooms. Unfortunately, with everything that had happened this afternoon, she and Theo hadn't retrieved Mitch's water bottle from the plane.

"Miss Sloane?"

Brook kept hold of her phone while giving Toklo her undivided attention.

“I can only assume that after eleven years, my daughter... well, her bones would be all that remains of her.” Toklo cleared his throat before pulling a picture from the inside of his suit jacket. He stared at it for a moment before handing it to her. “The night Lusa vanished, she was wearing an ivory pendant. It has been passed down through my family for generations. You’ll know if the remains belong to my daughter if this pendant is found at the site.”

Brook refrained from explaining the possibility that Lusa could have been murdered elsewhere. The pendant might have fallen off her blouse or been taken by the unsub. Several scenarios could account for why the pendant might not be with Lusa’s remains.

“Thank you for the information, Governor Kalluk.” Brook glanced in Nathaniel’s direction. He was speaking to someone on the phone, most likely an individual within the Bureau, to confirm her claim that S&E Investigations had been brought onto the investigation as consultants. Russell wasn’t the only one irritated with the news. “May I ask you a question?”

Brook tucked the picture of Lusa wearing the ivory pendant into the back of her phone case. She then flipped her phone over to access the screen. It didn’t take her long to pull up Mitch Norona’s photograph.

“Do you, by chance, recognize this gentleman?”

Toklo took time to study Mitch’s image.

“No. What does he have to do with my daughter?”

Brook, Theo, and Sylvie all agreed that if they had the ability to speak with those who knew Lusa personally, they would ask whether they recognized Mitch Norona. Any solid connection could secure them a warrant for the man’s finances, movements, and

property.

“Well, he is the defense attorney who is representing Jacob Walsh during this trial.” Brook pressed the side button on her phone. With a simple click, the photograph disappeared from the display. “Mr. Norona has joined us on this trip, and he will be accompanying those hiking out to the general location given to us by his defendant.”

“Thank you for sharing that information with me, Miss Sloane.”

“I do have one more question for you.” Brook’s gaze slid over to Kavik sitting with Russell. She had gone through Lusa’s file numerous times since the beginning of the year, and there was something in Toklo’s statement that bothered her. “Why didn’t you like your daughter dating Kavik Aningan back then? I assume something changed between then and now? After all, he has joined the family by being here today.”

“Why would you think?—”

“Mr. Kalluk, I’ve read through your statement multiple times. You weren’t surprised when the local police focused on Kavik. You never once came to his defense.” Brook paused, giving Toklo time to formulate a response. “I understand that you were very mindful of what you said to the police due to your position as governor. Those days have passed, and I’m asking for your honesty.”

“I didn’t believe Kavik was good enough for my daughter,” Toklo replied bluntly as he smoothed out the lapels on his suit jacket. He didn’t appear to have any reservations about his previous judgment. “Kavik was impulsive. He ran with a rough crowd, and he didn’t always think things through back then. I suppose that was why Lusa was attracted to him. She never rebelled in her teens, and by the time she was out of college and twenty-three...well, she wanted to test the waters. She didn’t understand that being in the public eye meant falling in line with public opinion.

Every choice she made reflected on me, my position, and any future beyond being governor. In the days leading up to her disappearance, we fought constantly. It got so bad that I was very close to cutting Lusa off from making any public political appearances on my behalf.”

Toklo adjusted his stance so that his gaze could rest on his wife. His features softened, and he subconsciously tapped two fingers against his heart.

“I left the public eye after my first term. What good is serving the people if I can’t serve my own family? Give them love? Attention?” Toklo turned his focus toward Brook. “I made a mistake with my daughter. I’ve recently made such an admission to Kavik, which is why he joined us this evening.”

“Mr. Kalluk, there was nothing in Lusa’s case files that indicated the two of you had been at odds. What about your family? Friends? Were they aware of your disapproval?”

“Does it matter?” Toklo replied defensively. “My daughter is gone, and your brother claims responsibility.”

“It matters a great deal.”

Brook had several theories regarding Mitch Norona’s connection with her brother. The team had speculated that Mitch could have witnessed Jacob murder Lusa back in 2014. Jacob had been known to threaten loved ones to get others to do his bidding, and there was mounting evidence that he had done the same with Mitch Norona. The problem with that theory was that Lusa would have believed her life was perfect. Toklo was suggesting otherwise.

“Yes, the locals knew of my disappointment in Lusa back then. The investigator was a friend, and he made sure certain details were kept from the press. My family was

going through enough heartache, and I didn't want them to be hounded day in and day out by the national media." Toklo thinned his lips in annoyance. "I don't know why any of that matters now. Jacob Walsh has confessed to killing my daughter, and we are finally going to be able to bring her home."

"Governor Kalluk, I know Jacob Walsh better than anyone else on this planet. I've dedicated my life to profiling serial killers, and it is very rare for any of them to amend their signatures. To change their preferences in victims? I've never encountered it in my career," Brook revealed truthfully. "Jacob only targets women who believe their lives are perfect. Such belief eats at him, and he can't allow them to continue breathing the same air as him. What you've just shared with me makes Lusa the complete opposite of what Jacob looks for in his victims."

"But that would mean..."

"Jacob Walsh didn't kill your daughter."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

7

Sylvie Deering

June 2025

Wednesday — 7:16 am

The SUV's engine hummed smoothly, and the blowing heat from the vents was a welcome respite from the chilly morning air. Yesterday's cloud coverage had dissipated, and despite it having been two hours since sunrise, the bright sun made it seem as if it was mid-afternoon. The sparse nighttime hours made it challenging to get any restful sleep.

Sylvie shifted in the passenger seat as she finished reading the amended draft of Brook's profile regarding the unsub in Lusa Kalluk's disappearance. What Brook had discovered last night from Toklo Kalluk cast doubt on Jacob's involvement in the abduction. The comprehensive criminal profile had been a result of Brook's insomnia, akin to the rest of the team last night.

Theo reached over and turned off the radio when a local news channel began discussing the former governor's daughter. The media had already staked their claim in the hotel parking lot, eager for a scoop on the case. Due to the overeager bunch, Theo had made certain they weren't followed on their drive from Blackpeak to Silverton.

"How are you holding up?"

“Same as you,” Sylvie countered in irritation before powering down her tablet. She grimaced when she noticed the small stain on her jeans from when a few drops of her morning tea had landed on the rough fabric. “Guilty. I feel guilty about a lot of things. And right now? I’m mad that I spilled some of my tea.”

Sylvie closed her eyes and slowly inhaled to maintain her composure.

“I’m alive. I’m breathing, and yet I’m upset because the tea left a stain.” Sylvie lifted her lashes before adjusting herself in the seat. She had worn a brown blazer to cover her firearm, and she was now wishing she had chosen a light sweater instead. “What I’m really upset about is the fact that I should have kept in touch with Kate more. I tried to think of the last time we spoke, and it had to be at least six months ago, around the holidays. And even then, it was only because Bit was on a video call with her.”

“You’ve had a lot going on.” While Theo made a valid point, his words also emphasized the need to stay connected with those in their lives. “That’s life, Sylvie. As hard as that is to accept, you can’t stop the world from moving on around you.”

“Kate doesn’t have a life anymore, does she?”

Sylvie’s throat constricted, and she had difficulty swallowing around the spasming muscles. She coughed to clear her airway. Once she had a grip on some semblance of serenity, she forced some of the tension out of her body by counting to ten. She hadn’t made it to the count of six before her phone chimed with an incoming call.

Derek’s name appeared on the display, and she quickly pressed the side button on her phone to send him to voicemail. She had left him a message about what had happened in Alaska, keeping it brief and direct. They weren’t together like Theo was with Mia, but Sylvie didn’t want to risk not warning him that his life could be at stake because of her.

The two of them had met for coffee twice.

He was...fascinating. Charming, articulate, and intelligent were also adjectives that she would apply to him. He had a way of making her feel seen. And that scared the hell out of her.

“I heard Brook speaking with Mr. Lin last night. She was in the connecting room, and I don’t know how she got through it. I could hear his...” Sylvie couldn’t bring herself to finish her sentence. Needing something to ground her, she focused on the view in front of her. “The sign for Silverton is wrong. The population is closer to two hundred residents instead of three hundred. They survive based on the fishing charters, even though they are two miles away from the water. This is the only road that goes from the fishing pier to a larger city, much like the one connecting Blackpeak to Whittier.”

“Which means if Jacob was in the area back in 2014, he would have driven through Blackpeak.” Theo drummed his thumb on the steering wheel as he guided the SUV into town. There were a handful of storefronts, but the faded green shutters on all of them had seen better days. Almost every building housed family-owned businesses, except for the community bank and post office. “Under normal circumstances, eleven years is a very long time. But I have a feeling that these people don’t forget much.”

Silverton's isolation meant that many of its residents lived miles outside of town, scattered across sprawling properties like Mekhi Hale's. These residents valued their privacy. Theo was right. It would be hard to forget anyone who didn’t fit in.

“We know for a fact that Jacob worked with Mekhi a time or two back then. Mekhi all but admitted it, too.” Sylvie reached down for her purse, taking time to tuck her tablet safely inside. She then stored her purse behind Theo’s seat. With the tinted windows and the fact that the vehicle wouldn’t technically be out of their line of sight, she was comfortable leaving her belongings in the SUV. “We just need to get



him to talk to us.”

Theo guided the SUV to a stop in front of the diner, shifting the gear into park. The display window had a small crack in the top right corner. The sign overhead wasn't vintage so much as simply old and worn against a backdrop of peeling white paint. The hum of the engine faded after Theo turned the key in the ignition.

“According to Brook, Lusa didn't fit Jacob's criteria. If there is another unsub, and Jacob is only using Lusa Kalluk as an excuse to be back in Alaska, then we're left with two separate investigations.”

“With both pointing directly at Mitch Norona.” Theo reached for the door handle. “It all seems wrapped up in a red bow. Too convenient, if you ask me.”

“Agreed,” Sylvie muttered as she opened the passenger side door. She stepped out into the morning sun, though the golden rays weren't enough to take the chill out of the air. She waited for Theo to walk in front of the SUV to join her. “According to Brook's profile, the unsub in Lusa's disappearance is male, impulsive, and likely panicked at some point during the evening. A male subject would have had the physical means to transport and carry Lusa's body somewhere else. The unsub would also have knowledge of the terrain.”

“Or know of someone with knowledge of the area,” Theo pointed out right as Sylvie's phone chimed with an incoming text message. “Maybe Mitch killed Lusa Kalluk, and Jacob helped hide the body in exchange for representation should he ever need it.”

“It's the only working theory we have for now. I'm just grateful that Brook is bringing Nathaniel on board. If she can persuade him that there is sufficient evidence pointing to Mitch Norona's involvement, Nathaniel can finally present a warrant to Judge Colletti. Bit can then investigate Norona's finances. Nathaniel could collect

DNA samples to compare with anything they might discover during today's recovery mission. And who knows, maybe a search of his home back in Baltimore could link him to Jacob and their time in Alaska."

Theo led the way to the front entrance of the diner, but the sound of Sylvie's phone chiming once more brought her up short. She couldn't go an entire day avoiding Derek's call.

"Would you mind getting us a booth? I need to take care of something. It won't take long."

Theo nodded without hesitation. She figured he was aware of who was trying to reach her so early in the morning, especially after their conversation with Graham last night. Anyone dear to them could be in danger, and that was a threat that needed to be taken seriously.

"Hi," Sylvie greeted softly after accepting the call. She monitored Theo as he entered the diner, his absence leaving her standing alone in front of the display window. Facing the street, she noticed the dense forest in the distance. Brook would be hiking in similar terrain later this morning, hoping to locate Lusa Kalluk's remains. "I assume you got my message."

"Is there anything you need from me?" Derek asked, his voice gentle and laced with sympathy. "Anything at all?"

"Listen, Derek, seeing as we only met twice for coffee, I doubt that you need to worry about?—"

"You wouldn't have felt the need to warn me that my life could be in danger if it was only about coffee." Derek's sigh was audible, but it was the most patient exhale she had ever heard. "Truthfully, I'd love to raise the stakes by having dinner with you

upon your return. Damn. That came out wrong, and I didn't mean to minimize?—”

“It’s okay. Really,” Sylvie said as she heard the rumble of an engine. It wasn’t long before a Subaru Outback drove slowly past the diner. An older woman was behind the wheel and met Sylvie’s gaze with genuine curiosity. A stranger standing in front of a local diner was bound to spark some chatter, reinforcing the assumption that someone inside must have encountered Jacob at some point years ago. “I understood what you meant, and...”

Sylvie had intentionally been taking things slow with Derek. Regardless of Bit’s opinion, Derek Haze was way out of her league. He moved in different social circles, and his wealth far exceeded what her father had built and subsequently burned to the ground before his death. Plus, she wasn’t even certain that he liked cats. Somehow, pets hadn’t come up in their conversations.

“Do you like cats?”

“Cats, dogs, and even guinea pigs,” Derek listed, unfazed by her sudden question. “The list goes on, and I’d be happy to share that curated list with you over dinner.”

“Okay,” Sylvie replied with her first smile in twenty-four hours. “Dinner. I’ll let you know when I’m back in town.”

“Please do,” Derek said before following up with something about a grocery run. She had to be mistaken. “Also, you?—”

“Wait,” Sylvie directed as she continued to observe the Subaru Outback fade from view. “Did you say you are cooking me dinner?”

“It pains me that you think so little of my capabilities, Miss Deering.”

Sylvie couldn't prevent her smile from widening, and her chest finally filled with something other than grief.

"I'll touch base with you soon, Mr. Haze."

Sylvie disconnected the call before he could say anything else. He had been on the verge of telling her to be careful, and she didn't want to be distracted by his concern. She would take their newfound friendship one day at a time. Kate would be the first to advise her not to mess things up.

Slipping her phone into the back pocket of her jeans, she turned toward the front entrance of the diner. The moment she opened the door, the enticing aroma of bacon and grease filled her senses. There was no low hum of conversation, which wasn't surprising at all. Although there weren't many vehicles parked out front, those dining in the establishment didn't bother to hide their interest in two strangers who stuck out like sore thumbs.

Theo occupied the booth immediately to her left, directly in front of the display window. The red leather seats were cracked from years of use. A cup of hot coffee sat in front of him, and she could only assume that he had already ordered her a cup of English Breakfast tea.

"I feel like I should whisper," Sylvie murmured as she moved the silverware off the white napkin. She then opened the folded flimsy material and smoothed it over her lap.

"Must be my eye patch," Theo quipped as he reached for his coffee. "The middle guy at the counter. Do you recognize him?"

"Bit and I saw him at the convenience store yesterday."

Three older men sat on red leather, backless stools at the long counter. Two were still eating, while the other was finishing his coffee. The waitress, whose name was Beth according to her nametag, approached the table with a practiced smile. By the time she set a cup of tea in front of Sylvie, it was clear her smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Thank you," Sylvie murmured as she reached for her spoon.

"What can I get the two of you this morning?"

"I'll have today's special," Theo said, glancing at Sylvie. She nodded in agreement, indicating she would have the same, and he made sure the waitress doubled the order. Sylvie noticed that his billfold, which held his credentials, was on the table. She wasn't surprised when he held it up and presented it to Beth. "We were also curious if you know Mekhi Hale. He wasn't very welcoming or open to a conversation yesterday. We have a few questions about someone who assisted him with his fishing charters back in 2014 and 2015."

Sylvie found it very interesting when the man who had been finishing his coffee abruptly set the mug on the counter. He mumbled a few words to the other men before standing and pulling his wallet from his pocket. Taking out what looked to be a twenty-dollar bill, he tossed it on the counter.

"I wouldn't know anything about that," Beth replied, her voice steady but clipped. She once again forced a smile. "Two morning specials, coming up."

While Beth focused on Theo, Sylvie had accessed her phone. With Jacob's picture on the screen, she turned the device so Beth could get a better look.

"Have you ever seen this man?"

"On television," Beth replied bluntly as she tucked her order pad into the pocket of

her black apron. “We don’t get a lot of strangers in these parts. They usually drive straight through from the pier to Blackpeak. I’ll be back with your breakfasts.”

The older gentleman from the counter met Beth’s gaze as they passed one another. He muttered something about seeing her tomorrow before walking out the door, activating the bell overhead.

“Looks like we stirred the hornet’s nest.”

“I have a feeling Mekhi Hale will walk into this diner before we finish our breakfasts,” Theo said with a satisfied smile as he monitored the older gentleman retrieve a flip phone from his pocket. It didn’t take long for him to press a number onto the keypad and hold the phone to his ear as he walked to his truck. “Everyone in here knows Mekhi used to hire a crew for his fishing charters. He won’t want to be the topic of conversation among the townsfolk.”

Sylvie stirred a teaspoon of sugar into her tea until she detected vibrations from Theo’s phone, which was currently face down on the table next to his silverware. She observed him closely as he read the text and braced herself for another round of bad news. She wasn’t so sure the team could take much more.

“Bit figured out why Kate was in Alaska.” Theo grimaced as he pushed his coffee away. “A message was discovered in her private email account requesting that she take a couple of personal days from work to meet us here. The sender’s email address was off by one letter, but she must not have noticed the subtle difference.”

“Who did she think the email was from, Theo?”

“Brook.” Theo set his phone back down on the table with a grimace. “Kate believed the email came from Brook.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

8

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Wednesday — 7:58 am

“I can get a large portable monitor delivered here by this evening.”

Brook shook her head in response to Bit’s offer, having just taken a drink of her coffee. She should have waited for the contents to cool off a bit. Instead, she had practically inhaled a quarter of the amount.

Sleep had been relatively elusive.

The fact that four hours wasn’t enough sleep was evidence of how far she had come in dealing with the emotional trauma of having a brother who just so happened to be a serial killer. There was a time when all she needed was two hours of sleep.

“I’m hoping we won’t need to do that after my conversation with Nathaniel,” Brook replied as she set her coffee back down on the room service tray. She grimaced at the bagels and fruit bowl next to the black carafe. Unfortunately, she was going to need to eat something before hiking up a mountainside. “While having access to our murder board on a larger screen would be beneficial, it would be a pointless expense if our theory pans out.”

Brook really needed their theory to be on point.

Mitch Norona had something to do with Lusa Kalluk's disappearance, and Jacob was somehow using that knowledge to his advantage. It was the only theory that made sense.

Why, then, had Kate been brutally murdered in Jacob's signature style?

"Are you okay, Boss?"

Brook hadn't realized she was rubbing her chest while staring at the cinnamon raisin bagel. Her heartburn had reared its ugly head. She would forgo eating breakfast. A protein bar later would suffice.

"Yes." Brook turned away from the room service cart and made her way over to the table. She stood behind Bit while observing Jacob's room. While there was a free breakfast to be had downstairs, it went unspoken that Jacob wouldn't be leaving his room for anything other than leading the federal authorities to Lusa Kalluk's remains. "Did you alert Theo and Sylvie about Kate's rental car being discovered on the side of the road?"

Brook hated to think of Kate flying to Alaska, driven by her belief that she was joining the investigation. Bit discovered that Kate had responded to the email, to which someone had then replied, instructing her not to reveal any details to her supervisory agent. She hadn't reached out to Brook to confirm any of the details by phone, either.

One simple phone call could have saved her life.

"I did," Bit replied before pointing toward his laptop, ignoring the monitor that displayed Nathaniel strolling down the hallway toward their room. "Unfortunately, if



you look here, you'll see that whoever sent the email bounced the signal through at least six different relays—Tor nodes, VPN tunnels, and even what looks like a compromised IoT device in Singapore.”

Brook barely glanced at Bit's laptop off to the side, which had numerous lines of code she couldn't understand. Some appeared to be IP addresses, and others looked like proxy chains. That was about all she could recognize on the screen. She would leave the technological aspect of the investigation to the pro.

“See?” Bit directed, missing the fact that his previous explanation had gone over her head. “The exit node that I just hit is in Iceland, but that will probably change in the next few minutes. I'll keep trying, but unless the guy screwed up somewhere along the way, there is a chance we might never figure out where the email originated from, Boss.”

There were times when Bit was a realist, other times an optimist. Either way, she had complete faith in him. If the unsub had made a mistake in any way, shape, or form...Bit would be the one to find it.

Like Jacob, Mitch hadn't been the one to kill Kate. Both had alibis that established their presence in Maryland and Baltimore. That wasn't to say they didn't have her blood on their hands.

Still, Brook had detected true surprise in her brother upon hearing the news.

As if on cue, a knock came at the door. Without waiting for an answer, the knob turned, and Nathaniel Carter entered the room. In place of his usual tailored suit, he had opted for a pair of jeans, a long-sleeved black t-shirt, and a matching jacket. She glanced down at his hiking boots, which didn't have a scuff on them. It was a good thing she was going to change his plans today, because he would have regretted not breaking them in within five minutes of the hike.

“Russell already told me about Kate's rental car being found on the side of the road,” Nathaniel shared as he eyed the room service cart. “May I?”

“Of course,” Brook responded as she switched her focus to the surveillance monitors. “Kate Lin isn’t why I asked you here, Nathaniel.”

“Hey, Russell was in charge of the forensics team. From my understanding, they’ll meet us at the rendezvous point with the proper equipment.” Nathaniel had poured himself a cup of coffee before snagging a poppyseed bagel. He took a large bite before setting it on a plate, not even glancing in her direction. “Between the forensics team, Agents Brall and Genedet, Walsh, Houser, Norona, you, and me...that makes for one hell of a group. Add in the chopper that will be keeping track of our positions, and I’d say we have things covered. Oh, and Houser is supplying the backpacks. We shouldn’t need much, considering Walsh gave us a general idea of the site being an hour from the clearing. I don’t want to?—”

Brook was done wasting time.

“You need to ask Judge Colletti to sign search warrants for Mitch Norona’s home, hotel room, office, all vehicles registered in his name, all devices, and financial records,” Brook instructed without hesitation. Normally, she wouldn’t have interrupted him, but they were short on time. Nathaniel had picked up a butter knife to spread some cream cheese on his bagel, but he slowly lowered it to the plate. “You need to do it now, before we leave the hotel.”

Nathaniel slowly turned to face her, searching her gaze for any indication that she was joking. He shouldn’t be too surprised by her request, considering that she had expressed her concerns earlier this year.

“We’ve been over this, Brook.” Nathaniel crossed his arms and widened his stance. She gritted her teeth in annoyance at his defiance. “How Norona got Walsh’s case

isn't our concern."

The silence in the room seemed to thicken as Nathaniel's expression hardened, his eyes narrowing when he realized that Brook wasn't going to back down. He flicked his gaze to Bit, who quietly popped Skittles into his mouth one by one, not masking his interest in the conversation.

"Let me put this another way," Nathaniel said, taking a deep breath to steady himself. "Do you understand how unprecedented such a request would be? I mean, what reason could you possibly have to believe Judge Colletti would approve a search warrant for a defense attorney?"

"It's come to our attention that Mitch Norona was in Alaska in 2014 and 2015."

"Traveling isn't against the law." It had taken a moment for Nathaniel to speak, and even then, his tone was cautious. He was right to assume there was more to her statement. "You said yourself that Jacob would have gone someplace remote. What you're suggesting is that the two of them knew one another for over eleven years, and..."

Nathaniel shook his head at the implication, attempting to keep a level head about this latest development.

"We discovered a photograph of Jacob working on a private fishing charter. Although we aren't certain about the date the picture was taken, Jacob's claim that he can guide us to Lusa Kalluk's remains places him near Silverton in 2014. That same year, Mitch Norona also chartered a private fishing trip. Can you guess which fishing charter out of all of Alaska?"

"I can answer that one for you, King P," Bit said, tapping on his left wrist even though he wasn't wearing a watch. It was his way of telling Brook this request was

taking longer than it should. “A fishing charter out of Silverton, owned and operated by one Mekhi Hale.”

Nathaniel refrained from commenting on the nickname, but his annoyance was evident. Still, he continued to shift his focus between Brook and Bit until he sank onto the edge of the bed. It was clear that he needed time to process the information. He stared at the worn blue carpet while gathering his thoughts. Meanwhile, Brook continued and finished sharing every detail to date regarding their inquiry into Mitch Norona.

“Let me get this straight,” Nathaniel finally said, holding up a hand when Bit would have given it another attempt. “Or better yet, let me see if I can accurately theorize what you believe to be past events—Mitch Norona was on vacation to celebrate his bar exam, chartered a private fishing boat for a day, struck up a friendship with one of the dockhands, and they...what? Kidnapped and murdered a local woman from a bar? Wait, wait, wait.”

Brook had been about to clarify that she wasn’t entirely sure the two men had formed a friendship. It was likely that Mitch had gotten himself into trouble with Lusa, and Jacob helped him out of it. Brook still wasn’t confident they had an accurate read on the potential timeline. However, she remained silent. Nathaniel was having too much trouble accepting the implications as they stood now.

“You’re going to stand there and tell me you believe it’s plausible that Norona and Walsh buried Kulluk’s body, and...what? Kept in touch for eleven years? That a defense attorney knew about the whereabouts of a serial killer for over a decade, but intentionally didn’t say a word to anyone?” Nathaniel’s disbelief was evident, but he was refusing to comprehend the bigger picture. He then zeroed in on Bit. “How many fucking crimes did you commit to get proof that Norona took some fishing trip?”

“Watch where you take this conversation, Prosecutor.” Brook stepped forward to

ensure Nathaniel's attention was fully on her. "My team adhered to every letter of the law to link Norona to Walsh. Everything my colleagues have uncovered was through social media, followed by some phone calls to confirm specific details. I authorized them to do this when you refused to even consider for a moment that Norona showing up out of the blue to replace a public defender wasn't cause for concern."

"The investigation is done, Brook. Don't you get that? We're in the middle of a damned trial," Nathaniel pointed out in exasperation. "Your role is done. The only reason you are here is because your brother wouldn't lead us to Kalluk's remains otherwise."

"Nathaniel, you've seen the photographs of Jacob's victims. You know that he turned himself into the FBI just so Sarah Evanston would think it was safe to come out of witness protection. You've read the reports of his numerous attempted escapes. I stand before you as proof of how cunning and patient he can be in achieving his goals. I have theories about why Mitch Norona began representing Jacob, but Lusa Kalluk does not fit the profile of Jacob's victims. There's a chance DNA remains on whatever is left—maybe some fabric or jewelry. We need Norona's DNA first, so you can either contact Judge Colletti and request a warrant or?"

"Or what, Brook?" Nathaniel asked quietly, his eyes narrowing in response to such an ultimatum. "Are you really going to stand there and threaten a federal pro?"

"Or Chris Donovan revokes his offer for you to join his firm. And yes, I know the amount of money he offered you to switch sides. It's lucrative, and it would certainly set you and your wife up for a really nice retirement when the time comes."

Brook would never have resorted to such a tactic had Kate Lin's body not been dumped at the end of an airstrip runway in the middle of nowhere. Since joining—and leaving—the FBI as a consultant criminal profiler, Brook had made many difficult decisions. Too many, in fact, that almost certainly punched her ticket

to hell.

She had understood a long time ago that she would pay for her brother's actions. She had made her peace with her punishment a long time ago. As long as Jacob ended up in the depths of hell with her, it was worth the price.

Nathaniel's jawline ticked with fury, but he wasn't a man to react without first thinking through the consequences. It was one of the traits that made him a damn good prosecutor. His brief huff of disgust was audible.

"This is low, Brook. Even for you." Nathaniel slowly stood, taking time to readjust his windbreaker. "You realize that by placing this call, the entire plea deal goes to shit. A mistrial will be declared, and I'll have to refile the charges. A year of preparation down the drain."

"I also know that Judge Colletti won't issue a warrant without first taking at least an hour or two to review the legal ramifications. In the meantime, we're moving up the timing of this recovery mission. While you make the call, I'll notify everyone that we'll be leaving within the hour. As long as you present the facts the way I've already outlined them for you, Judge Colletti will sign the warrant. It should come through just as we're about to set out from the clearing. When you get the call, excuse yourself from the hike, supervise the handling of the warrants from here, and ensure DNA samples are collected from Norona's hotel room."

"Is this Hale guy even still alive?"

"Yes. Theo and Sylvie plan to obtain a statement from him today."

"You know that when I get the call, Norona will be getting one, too," Nathaniel advised her, even though she was already aware of the legal procedures. "For God's sake, we're talking about a mistrial, Brook. This recovery operation is over and done

with the second that I?—”

“No, it’s not. Get the warrant, Nathaniel.”

He shot her a look of suspicion, and she couldn’t deny that it was deserved.

“How long have you been sitting on this information?”

“Does it matter?”

There was no need to deny the accusation. Her reasoning for not wanting to tip their hand earlier didn’t matter anyway. Kate’s death had changed everything.

“Fine, I’ll make the call. When this blows up in our face, I expect you to call in whatever chip you have with Chris Donovan, because I sure as hell won’t have a job if this goes sideways.”

Nathaniel waited for her nod of agreement before disappearing through the connecting doorway. He didn’t even bother to close it behind him. The room seemed to expand in Nathaniel’s absence, as if the very walls had been holding their breath alongside her. She slowly exhaled before turning to find Bit staring at her while slowly swallowing what was left of his candy.

“You’re a badass, Boss.”

“You’re not going to think that after I ask you to pay a visit today to those who were with—or supposed to be with—Lusa Kalluk on the night of her disappearance.”

Bit began to jostle his leg up and down with unease. Although she had ensured that he received field training over the past four years, he still preferred being behind his computer. She only ever requested his presence in the field when absolutely

necessary, and this was one of those times.

“I thought you and the others questioned the Kalluk family last night, Boss.” Bit shifted in his chair, but he still didn’t seem any more comfortable than before. “You, Little T, Big T, and the others. You all talked to them, even the friend and boyfriend. What makes you think they’ll tell me something they didn’t tell you?”

“Aputi was at the bar the night his sister disappeared, while Nanuq and Kavik said they were held up fixing a fence on the wildlife conservation. Lusa’s friend, Delilah, was waitressing. All their statements match exactly,” Brook said as she closed the distance to one of the beds. “Word for word. Their stories didn’t change last night, either. They all claim not to recognize Jacob, which is probably true. Blackpeak is fifty-some miles from Silverton. We need to start establishing motives now that everything is in motion.”

Brook picked up her jacket and slipped her arms into the sleeves. She zipped up the warm material, then tucked the right side over her holstered firearm. Underneath her jacket, she wore a long-sleeved thermal shirt that hugged her like a second skin. The lightweight fabric trapped her body heat while letting her skin breathe.

“Boss, we couldn’t find any motive for Lusa Kalluk’s disappearance before,” Bit said cautiously, his tone low enough that it wouldn’t travel through the open door connecting the two rooms. “What makes you think I can find someone with motive?”

Brook glanced down at her hiking boots, ones that she had owned for years. They were broken in, comfortable, and high enough around her ankles to conceal the compact firearm she could rely on if needed.

“You can read people, too, Bit.” Brook picked up her phone, which she had set down to grab her jacket, and secured it in her side pocket. The small leather pouch on the back held her driver's license, credit card, and cash. Everything else she needed for



the day was stored in a backpack near the door. She had packed her own, not wanting to depend on anyone else. “Everything has been laid out in front of us like a breadcrumb trail. That trail was meant to lead us to Mitch Norona. While I do believe he’s somehow involved in all this, I don’t like how we’re being led by the hand. We’ve been deliberately distracted for the past five months.”

Brook walked over to Bit and patted him on the shoulder in reassurance.

“It’s time we veer off course, Bit. You’ve got this.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

9

Theo Neville

June 2025

Wednesday — 8:37 am

The clatter of silverware and the occasional awkward cough from the patrons created a rather tense atmosphere inside the Silverton diner. There was a collective unease, which had only grown as a few more residents trickled in during the last hour. Word had already spread that two individuals linked to law enforcement were inquiring about Mekhi Hale and his possible connection to a serial killer.

It was only a matter of time before the fisherman came out of hiding.

“You would think Beth would have given us our check by now,” Theo murmured behind his mug. He drained the last of the contents. “They all might be curious, but they also all seem to be on edge. I say we give it five more minutes, and then we start questioning them one by one.”

Theo and Sylvie had finished their meals a while ago. Time had dwindled to a point where they couldn’t continue to sit in the booth and twiddle their thumbs. Besides, he preferred not to be idle. Sitting still for too long allowed images of Mia to take Kate’s place on the tarmac, and it was all he could do to keep his breakfast down.

Mia had become a significant part of his life. His grounding force, in a way. She was

untouched by the harsh realities he and the team experienced on a daily basis. Her optimism and innocence were the reasons behind his sense of responsibility for her well-being.

How many times had he emphasized to Brook that she wasn't responsible for her brother's sins? Yesterday, as he stared down at what remained of Kate, he realized just how hollow his words must have sounded.

That level of culpability was utterly soul-crushing.

"It's like they are all waiting for something to happen." Sylvie glanced over at the counter, tucking some blonde strands that had escaped her bun behind her ear. "I genuinely thought Mekhi would take the bait."

Theo finally noticed some movement outside the display window.

The distraction allowed him to push aside his thoughts and focus on a beat-up old truck that had rumbled to a stop in front of the diner. The faded paint and rusted edges were evidence of its hard labor. Although the side window was covered in a film of dust, he could still make out the older gentleman just fine.

"Jackpot," Theo muttered as he monitored the man's movements.

Mekhi Hale took his time getting out of the driver's seat. His weathered skin reflected decades spent in the harsh sun and unforgiving Alaskan waters. A slight limp suggested that his body had endured the toll of such a life. Though the most recent picture they had of Hale was from a few years ago, he was easy to recognize.

A knitted cap protected his silver hair, and his worn work clothes hung loosely on his lean frame. While he clipped his truck keys to his belt loop, he met Theo's stare. Mekhi's eyes narrowed in agitation, but it was the sneer on his thin lips that

expressed the severity.

He wasn't pleased that his dirty laundry was being aired for all to see.

Thinking about Brook all morning had Theo dismissing the fisherman's ire. At some point, Hale had figured out that the man who worked for him years ago was a serial killer. He should have come forward immediately.

Before too long, the bell above the door jingled, causing Mekhi's arrival to stir the room. Though he was one of them, that knowledge didn't stop the whispers and watchful stares as he stood there glaring back at them.

"Mind your own damn business," Mekhi exclaimed gruffly to the other diners before he began to make his way across the tiled floor with annoyance. He didn't speak again until he grabbed a chair from a nearby table and swung it around to face the booth. "Well, you got me here. Ask your damn questions, and then be on your way."

Theo and Sylvie exchanged knowing glances, and her slight nod indicated that she was leaving the approach method to him. She and Bit hadn't gotten far with their strategy yesterday. Theo waited until Mekhi was settled in the seat, then got directly to the point, as requested.

"You hired a murderer to work for you eleven years ago, Mr. Hale. Why?"

Mekhi's jaw tightened at the accusation and follow-up question. His mouth pressed into a thin line of frustration.

"I didn't know at the time that the man had killed someone."

"Multiple someones," Theo corrected somewhat casually. He had made his point, and that was all that was needed in this situation. "When did you know? When Lusa

Kalluk went missing in 2014? A year later? When?"

"Not until a few months ago," Mekhi finally admitted, his voice rather hoarse. His index finger and thumb on his right hand were tinged yellow, indicating he was a heavy smoker. "Look, I like my privacy. I prefer peace and quiet. I get my news either on the radio or when I come into town once or twice a month."

Mekhi gestured toward the counter over his shoulder. Tucked into the corner, a small television set was tuned to a local channel.

"I saw Walsh's face on the news, but it wasn't like I could add anything else that the police didn't already know," Mekhi explained before crossing his arms. "He worked for me on some private fishing charters a couple of summers. I paid him under the table. I haven't thought about the guy since."

Theo subtly tapped the table.

Sylvie would understand his signal that she should take over.

"Mr. Hale," Sylvie said softly, "you're right, in a way. We figured out that Jacob Walsh was here in 2014 and 2015, but there are still many unanswered questions. You may feel as if too much time has passed to recall anything of significance, but you might know more than you realize."

Mekhi's gaze slid toward the display window. He stared out toward the dense forest in the distance before giving a slight nod of concession.

"Ask your questions so that I can be on my way."

"How did Jacob come to work for you? How did he approach you?"

“I used to work for a large fishing charter in Whittier, but I would take the weekends for myself and bring tourists out on my fishing boat for some extra cash.” Mekhi raised his left hand to rub his right shoulder, as if he were recalling the consequences of such strenuous work. “Anyway, I hit a local bar one night. Jacob was there. He asked if anyone knew of some private charters that might pay under the table. A larger company had just folded, and he was out of work. I said that I could use a hand, and that was that.”

Theo was certain that Bit had covered all the large fishing charters. Jacob had clearly lied about being laid off, but it had been a genius way to take advantage of the situation.

“Did you check his references?” Sylvie asked, only to be met with a cynical stare.

“We do things differently around here,” Mekhi finally said as he let his hand drop. “Jacob kept to himself. Did his job, got paid under the table, and didn’t cause any trouble. Hell, I didn’t even know that Walsh was his last name.”

“He had to eat, right?” Theo inquired before Mekhi could shut down any more questions. “Did Jacob come to the diner with you? Make any friends that you know of?”

Theo already had a photograph of Mitch Norona on his phone in anticipation of Mekhi’s arrival. He tapped the screen, entered his password, and then slid the phone across the table.

“Maybe this man?”

Mekhi leaned forward, squinting as he attempted to study the man in the picture.

“Looks familiar, but I can’t place him. He isn’t from around these parts.”

“No, he isn’t,” Theo replied in agreement as he retrieved his phone. “But he rented out your boat for a day in the summer of 2014. He?—”

“...was the only son of a bitch who didn’t pay under the table.” Mekhi was nodding in remembrance. “I remember him now. He showed up with a fishing pole that wasn’t worth shit, too. I made an exception, but only because he was willing to pay double. Can’t recall his name.”

“Mitch.” Theo didn’t bother mentioning a surname. “Did Jacob seem overly friendly with him?”

“Like I said, Jacob kept to himself. He helped out when it was needed, prepared the fishing equipment, kept the boat clean, things like that.” Mekhi shrugged, and it was obvious his patience was running thin. “I answered your questions. I don’t see why?—”

“Where did Jacob stay when he worked for you?” Sylvie asked before Mekhi could stand from the chair. “If he worked weekends, then where did he reside in Silverton?”

“Some cabin off Pines Trail. A fella by the name of Atka owned a large portion of the land to the north of here. He’s passed on some years now. Truth be told, no one has been up in that area for years. The place is probably rubble by now, especially given the elements around these parts.”

Theo managed to refrain from pointing out that Mekhi had been in possession of vital information regarding Jacob, but doing so would only irritate the older man.

“So, no one lives up there now?” Sylvie asked as she pushed away her empty teacup. “Would it be possible for us to contact whoever bought or inherited the land?”

“Atka’s son, but he lives somewhere on the East Coast. Word has it that he plans to

hold onto the land until the value goes up, but that won't be happening anytime soon. The land extends too far into the mountains. No one would ever be granted permits to build a fancy resort or condo community. The land is too unforgiving out here for that."

Mekhi finally stood and pushed the chair back into its place at a nearby table. He ignored those who were still eavesdropping on their conversation. Beth pretended to wipe the counter with a rag.

"I answered your questions. I had nothing to do with the Kalluk girl going missing," Mekhi said defensively. "I would appreciate you leaving my name out of those conversations. I don't want that family in my personal business. Hear me?"

"Is that why no one will acknowledge that Walsh was here that summer? Are they afraid of the Kalluk family?"

"As far as I know, Jacob didn't come into town. He kept to himself."

"He had to eat."

"Convenience store, I guess," Mekhi answered with a shrug. "Are we done here?"

"Not yet, Mr. Hale. Is there any way for us to take a look at the cabin for ourselves?" Theo asked, not willing to leave Silverton without having explored the structure that kept a roof over Jacob's head for two summers, if not the entire two years. "The more information we can take back to the supervisory special agent in charge, the less likely we'll have to bother you again."

Mekhi sneered at the not-so-veiled threat, but it was Sylvie who intervened to soften the warning.



“Please, Mr. Hale.” Sylvie shifted slightly in the booth, making it impossible for Mekhi to avoid her stare. “Eleven years is a long time, and you’re probably right about the cabin’s condition. Still, we need to check it off our list. All we need are a few photos to document our findings, and then we can leave.”

Mekhi considered her request in silence. Theo noticed one of the men at the counter had turned his head at the mention of Atka. If Mekhi decided not to give them directions or help lead them to the cabin, Theo was betting the other man just might.

“Ed, you got a spare four-wheeler these folks could use for the rest of the morning?” Mekhi called out over his shoulder. “They’ll pay you.”

“Sure do,” Ed said before draining his coffee. “One hundred ought to suffice.”

“Hand me one of those napkins,” Mekhi directed with impatience, waving his hand toward the napkin dispenser. “And a pen.”

Theo grabbed his jacket. He always carried a small notebook and a tiny pencil. It was a lesson he had learned from his father. After all, the man hadn’t become the New York Police Commissioner without knowing a thing or two.

“Is there a reason we can’t drive there?” Theo asked as he slid both items to the edge of the table.

“The only way up the side of that mountain is either to hike or to take an ATV. Even then, an ATV will only get you so far.”

Mekhi leaned down and picked up the writing utensil with his callused fingers.

He grimaced at the size of the pencil.

“And how did Jacob get to the cabin?” Sylvie asked as they both examined the sketch being put to paper. “Did he hike or have access to an ATV?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t ask, didn’t care. I already told you that no one asks questions around here. I paid Jacob under the table, and he paid Atka under the table. Simple exchanges that benefited everyone involved.”

Theo was beginning to understand why Jacob had targeted Mekhi Hale in the first place. When Jacob had arrived in Silverton with the fisherman, no one had questioned his arrival. He kept his head down, accomplished what he was paid to do, and didn’t socialize with the residents.

Silverton had been the perfect place to disappear.

Mekhi’s drawing was shaky yet precise. Theo could easily make out certain landmarks as the pencil was slapped down on the table with finality.

“You see this spot? Blocked by downed trees, debris, and basically a lot of undergrowth. Happened many years ago, and I haven’t been up there since then. Before you ask why, I used to hunt a lot. Anyway, there used to be a small path to the left, right about here, wide enough for a four-wheeler. You should be able to navigate through it just fine. You’ll find the cabin about two clicks from that point.” Mekhi gave them both a pointed stare. “I trust I won’t hear from either of you after today.”

Without another word or even a brief glance at the other patrons, Mekhi exited the diner. The piercing noise of the bell overhead accurately conveyed his frustration throughout the establishment.

“Let’s get a move on,” Ed exclaimed, the toothpick in between his thin lips barely moving. He didn’t have a limp like Mekhi, but the older man still seemed to shuffle toward the door. “I keep an ATV in my shed. I live right down the road, so you can

follow me. Remember to park around the side so you're not in my way. If you aren't back by dark, I'll make sure to send someone after you."

"That's comforting," Sylvie murmured as she stood from the booth. "It's a good thing I brought a jacket."

Sylvie might have tossed a jacket into the back of the SUV, but they still weren't fully prepared to take a four-wheeler into the mountains.

"Ed, you don't happen to have a backpack that we can borrow, do you?" Theo asked as they stepped out into the gravel parking area out front. "We're going to need to take some essentials with us, which means we'll need to stop in at the convenience store."

"I might have a spare you can borrow," Ed said with a slow smile.

Once again, the toothpick in the man's mouth barely moved. Theo got the sense that he would be paying more than a hundred dollars for the upcoming excursion.

"Do you know what this means, Theo?" Sylvie had waited to pose the question until Ed was out of earshot. Theo came to a stop in front of the SUV. "We literally just discovered where Jacob stayed during his time here. I get that Mekhi and the other residents want their privacy, but at some point, forensics is going to need access to this place. What if...well, what if he hunted here? Jacob could have buried his victims' remains on that mountain, Theo."

Theo monitored Ed as he settled in behind the steering wheel of his truck, which was in no better shape than the one Mekhi drove around town. The engine purred to life as if the vehicle were brand-new, though.

"Why don't we check out the site before making any decisions?" Theo noticed when

Sylvie got the meaning behind his suggestion. She adjusted her black-rimmed glasses and waited for him to finish his thought. “If Brook believes that Jacob didn’t kill Lusa Kalluk, I trust her judgment. Only that would mean Jacob has ulterior motives, which has been par for the course. I doubt he would bring us here if there was even the slightest chance we could discover more victims. Maybe, just maybe, his reasons are tied to whatever is inside that cabin.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

10

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Wednesday — 10:12 am

As the scent of pine gradually replaced the lingering odor of gasoline, Brook quietly observed the organized chaos surrounding her. Various SUVs, government vehicles, and two forensic vans were parked in a secluded clearing at the base of the mountain just outside the town of Blackpeak. The initial team would include her, Special Agent Russell Houser, Mitch Norona, Jacob, Special Agents Brall and Genedet, and two forensic technicians. Once the location of the remains was confirmed, seven additional forensic technicians would be dispatched to the site.

There was no denying that the atmosphere was charged with anticipation as the small group finished preparing for the hike to the location of Lusa Kalluk's remains. Brook was only half-listening to Russell as he spoke on the phone, his voice tense and urgent. He was engaged in a conversation with a local federal agent who was trying to determine what had happened to Kate Lin after her vehicle had been abandoned on the side of a back road in the dead of night. Security footage showed her arriving at an airport, renting a car, and then driving away to an unknown destination.

Brook had worked on both profiles last night, and she was confident that whoever abducted Lusa Kalluk was also responsible for Kate's death. Unfortunately, the characteristics of the unsub didn't match Jacob in the least. Adjusting her posture,

Brook straightened her shoulders and tilted her head slightly, trying to catch fragments of the conversation.

“...in Kate Lin’s rental car. There were vast amounts of blood near...”

Russell's words faded into the background. Brook had already received the update that Kate had been killed just feet away from her vehicle. Everything following that moment until her body was dumped at the end of the runway was subjective, which led Brook back to Lusa Kalluk.

The first victim usually held all the answers.

Considering that Brook didn’t believe Jacob had anything to do with Lusa’s abduction or Kate’s death, it was best to categorize Lusa as the first victim.

The distant ringing of a cell phone caught her attention. She tensed and cast a quick glance in Nathaniel’s direction. The judge would be reaching out with his decision soon, but it was imperative that such a call didn’t happen now.

The group needed to be farther up the mountain, where Mitch didn’t have reception. Fortunately, the chime hadn’t come from Nathaniel’s phone. The sound, however, prompted Brook to move forward toward Mitch Norona.

The pine trees towered high towards the sky, their extended forms casting lengthy shadows beneath the bright rays of the sun. The clear skies wouldn’t last long, as the meteorologist predicted incoming cloud coverage.

“Brook, what’s this I hear about Carter remaining behind?” Special Agent Victor Brall asked while double-checking the contents of his backpack. He was kneeling on the ground while Justin stood watch over Jacob. “Is there anything we need to know?”

“Doubtful,” Brook replied, stopping a few feet away. Nathaniel had changed their plan without her consent. She figured it was his way of asserting control over a situation he disagreed with. “I heard him mention a deposition for another upcoming trial. Russell is going to take the lead. Once we have confirmation of the remains, he’ll use the satellite radio to alert the rest of the forensics team. No point in everyone going at once in case this recovery mission doesn’t pan out.”

Russell and Nathaniel had close to five months to prepare for this search. Aerial coverage had been secured, even though most of the view would be obscured by tree coverage. Depending on how far and the exact location of where Jacob led them in the next hour or so, there was a possibility that the forensics team could approach the site from an alternate route.

When she didn’t move or engage in further conversation, Victor shifted his focus from the contents of his backpack to her. She nodded discreetly toward the front of the SUV. He picked up on her cue and made sure Justin followed the silent directive.

It wasn’t long before both men stepped away just far enough to give her space while remaining close enough to intervene if necessary. After all, their sole task of this excursion was to monitor the movements of their prisoner.

“Mitch, why don’t you go check in with Russell?” Brook proposed, noticing his defiance right away. “He brought a few additional essentials that might come in handy during our hike.”

“No one speaks with my client during this trip without me being present,” Mitch replied, crossing his arms and widening his stance. “We’ve been over this, Miss Sloane.”

Brook simply averted her gaze from him to Jacob. Although she was technically pressed for time due to the anticipated phone call from Judge Colletti, she gave the

impression that she could delay the hike for as long as necessary.

Her brother's expression was unreadable as he studied her. Victor and Justin had ensured Jacob wore his orange jumpsuit. The bright color made it easy to spot him in the dense foliage should he try to escape. Although Brook didn't doubt that Jacob would attempt to flee at some point, she also believed he had brought them out here for an entirely different reason.

"Mitch, it might be best for you to check in with Special Agent Houser," Jacob replied wryly as he leaned back against the side of the SUV. "I assure you that I will be mindful of my words."

Mitch frowned in displeasure and slowly lowered his arms. For a brief moment, she thought he might ignore the suggestion and stand his ground. Instead, he disappointed her by walking away, leaving her alone with her brother.

"Quite the power move," Brook replied as she maintained some distance between them.

"I am the client, after all."

"No," Brook countered, slipping her hands into the pockets of her jacket. She was about to show some of her cards, and she hoped like hell she wasn't about to play them too soon. "I think it's more than that, Jacob. You see, I've been racking my brain trying to figure out why you left breadcrumbs for me to follow Mitch's past trips to Alaska. The summers of 2014 and 2015, to be exact. Oddly coincidental, don't you think?"

"Very," Jacob said with feigned concern. "Does Special Agent Houser know about this...coincidence? Or the federal prosecutor? One would think a judge wouldn't allow a defense attorney to represent a defendant after such a



discovery...coincidental as it may be.”

Brook didn't like how laid-back Jacob seemed considering the topic.

“Were you expecting a mistrial? The federal government would just refile the charges, and the plea deal would be off the table. So why the breadcrumbs, Jacob?”

The tension between them began to build as Brook shifted her gaze from him to the dense forest. Jacob had spent a lot of time in this area. Theo and Sylvie were currently on their way to the cabin where Jacob had lived back then, unaware of what was unfolding on the other side of the mountain.

The air grew slightly colder as a thin cloud gradually obstructed the sun's rays. She was grateful for the second layer of clothing she had opted to wear before leaving the hotel.

“Tell me, dear sister, wouldn't you be violating your consulting agreement with the FBI by not sharing that information? I must emphasize that I'm extremely disappointed by the accusation that I would be involved in...what did you call it? A breadcrumb trail?”

Brook slowly smiled.

“What's the fun in that, Jacob?”

A slight twitch appeared near the far-right corner of his eye.

“You're in an awfully good mood for someone who just lost a friend,” Jacob replied with a tilt of his head.

The malicious glint in his eyes told of his pleasure at the jab. Her smile threatened to

crack, and she fought to keep the contents of the protein bar she had eaten on the way over in her stomach.

“About that,” Brook said as casually as possible so as not to give him any satisfaction. “I worked on several profiles last night, and I keep coming back to the same conclusion—whoever killed Lusa Kalluk killed Kate Lin.”

Brook noticed movement in her peripheral vision. Mitch had collected a prepared backpack from Russell and was making his way back toward them. Despite her increased nausea at being so close to her brother, she closed the distance between them.

“I know you didn't have anything to do with their deaths,” Brook murmured so that only he could hear her words. She held his gaze, unyielding. “You're losing control of the situation, which is why I'm going to use you as bait. No matter how much you wanted Mitch Norona to take the blame, I'm not falling for a fake trail of breadcrumbs when the entire loaf is but an hour's hike away.”

Jacob studied her intently, but he was unable to respond when the loud roar of several engines pierced the morning air. Nonetheless, it was evident that she had left him somewhat off-balance.

By the time Mitch reached them, she had already turned away from her brother. Both Victor and Justin quickly flanked him as she shifted her focus to the three vehicles stirring up dust while they entered the clearing.

Russell, now off his phone, didn't hold back his expletives towards the unexpected visitors. He also made it clear to the others that a former governor shouldn't receive special privileges. Brook seized the opportunity created by the distraction to speak with Mitch.

“Do you mind if I borrow your cell phone? I left mine in my backpack in the back of the SUV. I need to make a quick call to my colleague back at the hotel.”

She held his gaze, silently urging him to comply.

Mitch hesitated, his reluctance to engage with her evident. Finally, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He unlocked the display before handing it over. Brook couldn't help but notice Jacob observing her intently from the corner of her eye.

“Thanks,” Brook said with forced cordiality before stepping aside to make the call. After dialing Bit's number, she forced herself to exhale slowly. Fortunately, he answered on the first ring. “Remember our earlier conversation about the Kalluk family members and friends? Those of interest have just arrived at the clearing. I assume they want to be the first to know if any remains are found, which means they plan to stay put until we contact the additional forensic techs.”

“I'm on my way, Boss.”

Brook disconnected the call, fully aware of the potential consequences of her actions. She lowered the phone, and its weight seemed to increase as the seconds ticked away. Keeping her back to Mitch and Jacob, she swiped her thumb down in an arc to quickly access the phone settings.

Without hesitation, she toggled the device into airplane mode.

Any incoming calls from this moment on would go straight to voicemail.

In a few minutes, Mitch Norona would be too far away from Nathaniel Carter to receive any information about any warrants. The events of the day could unfold until Brook had the chance to discover why being in Alaska in June was so important to

her brother.

“Thanks,” Brook said, casually handing the phone back to Mitch. “It looks like Nathaniel will take care of the Kalluk family before heading back to the hotel. We should probably get moving.”

From this point forward, there was no room for error.

11

Sylvie Deering

June 2025

Wednesday — 10:49 am

The four-wheeler jolted and bucked over the uneven terrain, its engine growling against the challenge. Sylvie gripped the small side handles tighter, trying to steady herself on the back of the vehicle as Theo expertly navigated the path. The cool day became even colder as they climbed higher, exacerbated by the harsh wind against her face. While she had a thicker jacket in the SUV, she never considered bringing a scarf, not that she had even packed one.

“Are you doing okay back there?” Theo called out over his shoulder, concern evident in his voice. Towering trees surrounded them, their foliage thickening with each passing minute. Their surroundings hinted at the possible challenges they might face ahead. “Do you need me to stop?”

“No,” Sylvie replied before cutting off a groan of frustration when her tailbone took the brunt of another hard bump. She had given up straightening her glasses a while back. “Keep going.”

Theo had tucked Mekhi's crude map, sketched on a napkin, into his pocket. They had managed to follow the rough path without interruption, though she wasn't sure Theo had heard her initial response. He suddenly began to slow down. She peered around

him and realized they had come upon the fallen tree that Mekhi had warned them about.

It presented itself more as a large wall of foliage than as a mere obstacle. So many years had passed since it had fallen that leaves and vines completely covered the trunk. It was a testament to nature's ability to reclaim its domain from any intruders.

“Looks like Mekhi wasn't joking about this trail being unused for decades,” Theo said after bringing the four-wheeler to a stop. He let the engine idle before finally shutting it down. Pulling out the napkin, he studied the drawing. “He said if we cut to the left, we should be able to make our way around it.”

Unfortunately, there was nothing but dense undergrowth to the left.

Sylvie dismounted the four-wheeler, using Theo's back as leverage. Standing next to the off-road vehicle, she surveyed the surrounding area.

“I'll look for a way around to the right.” Sylvie took a moment to stretch her back muscles while Theo swung his leg over the seat. The slight wince he gave suggested he wasn't doing too well with the rough terrain, either. “You double-check the so-called trail that Mekhi mentioned would be to the left.”

“Truthfully, there probably was a way around this mess years ago. Mekhi did say that he hasn't been up here in a while.”

Sylvie figured Theo was probably right about that assumption. She couldn't help but wonder if his limp had something to do with the decision to stop hunting.

She headed east from their location, noticing right away the stillness of the forest. Even the rustling leaves and the sound of her footsteps seemed muffled. She couldn't find a clear path, but there was enough space between the trees for them to possibly

ride through on the four-wheeler. Twenty minutes of exploration later, she made her way back to the rendezvous point.

As she waited for Theo to return from his own search, she tried to figure out what had been bothering her about the statements in Lusa Kalluk's case file. Sylvie glanced at the thick, overgrown tree trunk. The sight of such an obstacle finally reminded her of a specific detail that hadn't been given a full explanation.

The officer had noted that the main road to Whittier had been blocked off from Blackpeak, which led him to assume that Lusa and her abductor had likely still been in the immediate area. Clearly, the search had not yielded any results. Not even the families' pleas on local and national television had produced a solid lead.

What kind of accident had taken place to force the police to shut down the only accessible road in or out of the area?

Sylvie reached into the back pocket of her jeans, pulling out her phone. Unfortunately, she was met with the stark reality that there was no cell service this far away from town.

"Any luck?" Theo called out after he returned from his search.

"Yes, but it certainly isn't a straight path. What about you?"

"A few more trees were knocked down, blocking a significant portion of the woods at least thirty yards in. They were likely loosened years ago when this giant fell," Theo said, gesturing toward the fallen tree. "In any case, we're not getting through on that side."

"Not to get off track here," Sylvie said, catching Theo's smirk at her pun. With everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, it was nice to experience

some levity. “I know you read over Lusa Kalluk’s missing persons file, but did anything odd stick out to you?”

“Not really. There wasn’t much there.” Theo carefully folded the napkin and tucked it securely into his pocket. “Lusa was out at a local bar in Blackpeak on a Friday night, excused herself to use the restroom, and was never seen again. No one at the bar witnessed anything unusual.”

“The main road to Whittier was shut down that night for hours. The officer was convinced Lusa and her abductor couldn’t have gone far from the bar, but the reason for the road closure was never noted in the file.”

“You’re thinking it was some kind of diversion?”

“Maybe,” Sylvie murmured, recalling the details of the report. “If Brook’s right, this entire trip is a diversion. Unfortunately, I have no cell service up here, so I have no way to reach Bit to check it out.”

“We’ll touch base with him as soon as we return to Silverton.” Theo focused on the area that she had just canvassed. “How certain are you that we can get this ATV through that mess?”

“Ninety-nine percent sure.” Sylvie tucked her cell phone into her back pocket and pointed to the left. “There’s probably enough space between the trees for us to get to the other side, but it’s going to be rough terrain. I think we’ll be fine.”

Sylvie waited until Theo had mounted the four-wheeler before settling in behind him. Her tailbone was already protesting the position.

“Our backs might not be,” Sylvie muttered as she attempted to make herself somewhat comfortable. “We should still be able to make good time once we hit the



other side.”

“Alright,” Theo muttered before starting the engine. “Let's give it a try.”

Theo quickly turned the handles in the direction Sylvie had explored, deftly navigating the uneven landscape. They drove forward and upward for a while, and there was a brief moment when she doubted they would make it to the other side of the dirt path.

At one point, they even had to dismount and manually guide the four-wheeler through a dense, wooded area. She breathed a sigh of relief when they finally merged onto the main trail. Although it wasn't completely smooth, considering how many years had passed, it was better than the uneven terrain of the forest.

After another forty-five minutes on the ATV, they finally reached the spot marked with an X on Mekhi's map. He had accurately pinpointed the location, and he was somewhat right about the cabin's condition. Although the exterior wood was weathered and gray, it still stood firm despite years of neglect.

Moss had gradually taken over the sides of the structure, as if attempting to consume the wooden planks. Thick vines had also made persistent efforts to join in the feast. The solitary window to the left of the battered door had shattered at some point, leaving only a jagged corner piece clinging to the frame. A strip of fabric hung from the sharpest edge.

Just a few yards from the cabin stood an old outhouse that leaned noticeably. Its decaying door hung from rusted hinges, offering glimpses into the dark, musty interior. The wood was gray and splintered, while the ground surrounding it was uneven and overrun with weeds.

Theo gradually brought the four-wheeler to a stop. After he cut the engine, Sylvie's

ears continued to ring in protest from the sudden silence. She didn't waste any time dismounting, using the side handle as leverage.

Every muscle in her body was now stiff from the long ride.

Theo followed suit and immediately reached for the strap that had secured a backpack to the back of the ATV. She continued to stretch her legs while giving her hearing time to return to normal.

"Odd."

"What's that?" Theo asked as he unzipped the backpack. He pulled out a water bottle and handed it to her. "Take a drink. I know it doesn't feel like it, but we're at a higher altitude. The air is drier and thinner, which makes it easier to get dehydrated."

As Sylvie drank the water, she couldn't help but wish it were a cup of hot tea. The second layer of clothing hadn't prevented the cold wind from seeping into the fabric. While the temperature had dropped significantly compared to the lower elevation, she figured their situation could be a lot worse.

"Do you hear that?" Sylvie asked quietly as she capped the bottle.

"No." Theo took the water bottle and stored it back into the main part of the pack. He then retrieved two flashlights that they had purchased at the convenience store. "I don't hear anything. Why?"

While Theo scanned their surroundings, Sylvie continued to listen intently to the silence surrounding them. The stillness was unnerving as normal sounds of forest life were conspicuously absent.

"Exactly. There's no sound at all," Sylvie murmured with unease. "Nothing. No

birds, no insects, no rustling in the underbrush by the wildlife.”

“The sound of the engine likely startled them.”

Theo had given her the most logical explanation, and she decided to keep her remaining thoughts to herself. Brook had frequently raised the question of nature versus nurture. She was convinced that Jacob had been born evil, but Sylvie wasn’t certain that such questions truly mattered in the end.

Animals had a natural instinct to steer clear of danger.

The suffocating stillness surrounding them suggested that evil had taken root in the area, causing the wildlife to avoid it at all costs. Sylvie couldn’t help but wonder if they should do the same.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

12

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Wednesday — 11:46 am

“How much farther, Walsh?”

Russell had called out the question, his impatience getting the best of him. Before the group left the clearing, Nathaniel had briefed him about the situation. They had argued that the recovery search was pointless if the defense was going to be removed from the case, yet Nathaniel had kept his promise to Brook. He had stood firm—until he received the warrant, the day’s events would proceed as planned.

“Aren’t you enjoying this nice weather, Special Agent Houser? It is June, after all. Winters can be very harsh here in Alaska.”

Jacob spoke with enough volume that he didn’t need to turn his head. Flanked by Victor and Justin, the three of them had led the group up the mountain for close to an hour and a half. The two agents had removed her brother’s ankle restraints to give him the ability to walk more easily over the uneven ground, though he still sported handcuffs.

“You told us the site was an hour away from the clearing, Walsh.”

“I believe what I said was that Miss Kalluk had been buried about an hour’s walk from the clearing.” Jacob tsked loudly, as if reprimanding Russell. “A lot was going on that night, Agent Houser. Forgive me if I didn’t click my stopwatch before entering the woods to bury a body.”

Brook wouldn’t have termed the past hour and a half a stroll in the woods. While the incline hadn’t been too steep to start out with, this wasn’t the most ideal place to bury Lusa’s remains. While it wasn’t impossible to have carried or dragged a body this far at an angle, it wasn’t convenient. An ATV, on the other hand, would have been invaluable.

Russell shot Mitch a glare as the two of them walked in tandem behind Jacob and the two agents. Their seasoned outdoor experience as they navigated the demanding landscape was another reason they had been chosen for this recovery mission. As for the two forensics techs who had joined them, they were close behind Russell and Mitch.

Brook brought up the rear, but she had deliberately taken that position. She wanted a clear view of everyone in the group and their surroundings. By keeping a respectful distance, she had the advantage if something were to happen.

“Easy terrain up ahead,” Justin called out as the thumping sound of the helicopter’s blades overhead became somewhat clearer. “An open area of about a hundred feet out.”

“Let’s take a break then,” Brook instructed as she came to a complete stop.

She waited for the hum of the chopper to fade as it advanced ahead to survey the area. If the pilot noticed anything unusual, he would alert Russell by satellite radio.

Tilting her head slightly to the side, she strained to pick up any unusual sounds in the

vicinity. Other than the occasional breeze rustling the leaves overhead, nothing unusual stood out.

By the time Brook broke through the tree line, the group had spread out and found places to rest among the scattered boulders and fallen trees. Victor and Justin must have guided Jacob to a broken tree trunk, where they instructed him to sit.

To everyone's surprise, she joined him.

"Victor and Justin, you two take a break. Hydrate." Brook removed her backpack and set it on the ground. "I'll take over for a minute."

The two men exchanged wary glances before picking up their packs. Victor paused to unclip a plastic water bottle from the side of his backpack and handed it to Jacob.

"Thank you, Agent Brall," Jacob replied with a slight smirk as he reached for the water bottle with both hands. The short chain rattled as he lowered his arms. "Such a gentleman."

Victor wisely didn't take the bait. He fell into step beside Justin until they stopped near Russell. The two agents didn't sit down. Instead, they remained alert despite her directive allowing them a five-minute break.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, dear sister?" Jacob said as he pressed the button on the push-top lid. The top flipped backward, allowing him to lift the bottle to his lips. She didn't reply right away as she unhooked her own water bottle from her backpack. "It seems you've gone out of your way to ignore me for the entire trip. Why the sudden change of heart?"

"Ignore is such a strong word, Jacob." Brook leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees. "I had business to conduct on the flight here. And let's be honest with each

other, not even you anticipated that Kate Lin would be murdered and her body left on the tarmac.”

It had taken every ounce of strength Brook possessed to casually mention Kate’s name during the conversation. Her chest tightened, but she succeeded if the stillness of her brother’s hands was any indication.

“Do you remember when we used to watch cartoons together on Sunday mornings?” Brook asked as she averted her gaze. Her tone hinted at a slight vulnerability, but she was careful with the exaggeration. “We used to laugh every time Daffy Duck made his entrance. That lisp of his would have us in stitches.”

Brook sensed the weight of Jacob’s stare as he searched for the meaning behind her words. The last time they had spoken for this long was when they stood in the middle of a cornfield after he had taken Sally Pearson’s life.

“Of course,” Jacob replied, the caution in his voice evident. “Though if we’re reminiscing about the good old days, I preferred Bugs. He always came out on top.”

“I know,” Brook admitted, slowly turning her head so that she could meet his gaze. “You stopped joining me after that day in the kitchen when you walked in with blood on your hands. You made me promise not to tell Mom, and I was so scared that she would find that stain on my shirt. I had instinctively reached out to you, believing you were hurt.”

Jacob's expression remained impassive, but she caught the flicker of recognition in his eyes. She finally had him, and now she just needed to follow through. Given how everyone was seated in the clearing, the others could hear every word exchanged between them. That was probably the reason Mitch hadn’t made an effort to shut down the discussion. Either that or Jacob had already signaled to him to leave well enough alone.

“It took a few weekends for me to realize that you never were that little boy who enjoyed cartoons.” Brook paused to take another sip of her water. “You mimicked me. You observed what made me laugh or cry, and you constructed the ability to follow along so that Mom and Dad wouldn’t suspect that there was something wrong inside of you.”

“Jesus Christ,” Victor muttered in revulsion under his breath.

The topic of conversation was causing everyone some slight discomfort, but that didn’t stop Brook from pushing forward. She had a point to make, and she couldn’t have chosen a better time or place. Jacob, on the other hand, hadn’t taken his focus from her. He seemed to be enjoying the walk down memory lane.

“It was around that time when you simply stopped caring.” Brook raised her left hand to emphasize her naivety regarding the situation. “Mom and Dad made every excuse they could for your change in behavior—puberty, teenage angst, you name it. I won’t lie to you. At first, I missed the big brother who would color with me, tease me...make me laugh.”

The distant hum of the helicopter grew louder as it circled back around, though it was high enough not to interfere too much with their conversation. Everyone else was listening intently, but Jacob didn’t seem to mind the intrusion.

“Do you know when I accepted the truth about what you are?” Brook inquired, not expecting him to answer. She reached down and clipped her water bottle to her backpack. “The day I found that sketchbook in your room.”

Jacob’s half-smile faltered just a bit. Her confirmation of something he hadn’t been certain of until now had sparked a touch of irritation.

“The drawing you made of Pamela Murray was...” Even now, the wave of nausea



was overwhelming. Brook could still recall the texture of the rough paper and the faint scent of graphite. The details of the rendering had been so precise that it could have been a black-and-white photograph. Pamela's skin had been slashed away to reveal raw, bleeding muscles and bone. "I hadn't known you were so talented, not that I was thinking of such a thing after discovering what had to be your souvenir. A lot of serial killers take souvenirs. You draw yours, don't you?"

Brook straightened while giving a humorless laugh.

"It doesn't matter, does it? That morning was a wake-up call for me. Everything before that day had been a ruse. You had faked your way through our childhood, but taking Stella's life had been your wake-up call."

Brook could sense the tension radiating from the others nearby, but they remained silent. Uncharacteristically, so was Jacob.

"When I went to work for the FBI and honed my skills as a profiler, I initially did so to see if I could hunt you down." Brook shot him a forced smile, though she hoped he couldn't ascertain just how hard it was for her to remain nonchalant. "It only took three investigations for me to realize that the families of the victims played a bigger role in my motivations. They needed closure, and I was able to provide them with it."

"You think this day will provide you with closure?" Jacob inquired, unable to help himself.

"I had closure the day I left the FBI." Brook found her admission to be partly true, which likely explained why Jacob believed her. His brief flash of anger was too real to hide. "You're no different from any other killer out there. You think I don't know you stopped hiding your true nature because of me? You followed me that day at camp when I ran into the woods to retrieve the frisbee one of the kids threw too hard. I ended up falling down a steep incline, and that's when Stella found me. She had

been camping nearby with her uncle, but you knew that, too. And she was so mean to me. So, so mean. She thought she was better than every kid at that camp.”

“Is there a point to all this?”

“Yes.” Brook lifted her backpack and swung one of the straps over her right shoulder. Their break was almost over, and it was in their best interest to get this search over and done with. “It wasn’t Stella you wanted to hurt. It was me. I didn’t fight back. I allowed Stella to say those horrible things, because her words didn’t bother me. I was happy. I was at that camp because Mom and Dad knew how much I loved being with my friends, playing games, and singing around the campfire. It was me who believed her life was perfect...not Stella.”

Jacob's silence spoke volumes.

The air grew heavy between them, charged with unspoken understanding.

“Your obsession began to change from the exact moment you acted out your fantasies.” Brook didn’t break their stare. “And every single time you witness a woman believing her world is perfect and full of good, you think of me.”

Jacob ever so slowly shifted his upper body so that he could set the water bottle on a small flat surface of the fallen tree trunk. He then raised his arms and began to clap in applause.

“Do you get an A for such a profile, dear sister?”

“I get something much better than that, Jacob.” Brook waited until he was done putting on a show for the others. Only when he had lowered his arms did she finish her part of their conversation. “I know for certain you didn’t kill Lusa Kalluk or Kate Lin. You might know where Lusa’s body is buried, but you weren’t the one to take

her life. So, whatever it is that you are doing on this little excursion of yours, I'll play along for now."

Brook reached back with her left arm until she was able to hoist the backpack into a more comfortable position. She was almost certain she caught a flicker of defiance in his eyes, but it vanished so quickly that she could have been mistaken.

She was taking a chance by indulging him. Judge Colletti would almost certainly do the right thing by granting the warrant. Mitch Norona would be immediately dismissed as Jacob's defense attorney, and the charges for Stella Bennett's murder would have to be refiled, rendering this entire effort to find Lusa Kalluk's remains pointless.

"I'm truly offended you believe I'm like the other killers you've hunted down throughout your career." Jacob shook his head in disappointment, even covering his heart as if she had broken it. The effort he was putting into distracting her from the reason he needed to be in these woods was enough for her to acknowledge she had made the right decision. "Still, I enjoyed our conversation very much."

The satellite radio that Russell had clipped to his backpack emitted a beep, immediately followed by Nathaniel's voice. Brook grimaced internally at the poor timing of the upcoming notification. Nathaniel had held off as long as possible, and she had to give credit where credit was due. It was Brook's curiosity about Jacob's need to be in Alaska this month that would remain unsatisfied.

Most everyone's attention was now on Russell, though Brook doubted Victor and Justin had taken their focus off their prisoner. Neither had she, and she intended to have the last word. She might never know Jacob's reasoning, but he wouldn't get to finish what he set out to do, either.

"Not as much as I'm about to enjoy the next five minutes, Jacob."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am*

13

Bobby “Bit” Nowacki

June 2025

Wednesday — 12:16 pm

A solitary raven perched on the hood of a vehicle in the clearing. His glossy black feathers shimmered subtly, even though the sun had slipped behind a thick blanket of clouds. He seemed rather intent on his observation of the Kalluk family, who were all currently engaged in a muted conversation behind an SUV.

Bit shifted with unease as he studied the raven. It was as if the bird was delivering a message from the universe. He had engaged in enough role-playing games to know the many superstitions associated with ravens. One stood out the most—a raven appearing alone instead of in pairs was a message that someone would soon die or suffer a great loss.

Hadn’t the Kalluk family suffered enough?

“...let the others know. I’m driving back to the hotel now. I have agents heading to Norona’s residence and place of work in Baltimore to execute the warrants.”

“Copy.”

Special Agent Russell Houser’s voice was clear as it came through the satellite radio.

Bit remained standing next to Nathaniel, predicting that Brook would want an update. There wasn't anything new to report about the case, but Bit also wasn't finished speaking with some of the key players involved in Lusa's disappearance.

What worried him most was that he hadn't heard from either Theo or Sylvie in quite a while.

"This is probably what Walsh wanted all along," Nathaniel muttered in disgust as he reached into his jacket. He pulled out a set of keys. "Are you driving back to the hotel? I assume Brook wants you there when I conduct a search of Norona's room."

Judge Colletti had granted the warrants and subsequently removed Norona and his firm from the trial. While the law firm had already been informed, Nathaniel was responsible for notifying Mitch of the situation due to their current circumstances.

The plea deal was off the table, and a mistrial had been declared.

The federal prosecutor was forced to start from scratch.

"Boss doesn't think Jacob had us come out to Alaska or find out about his connection to Slick Mitch for the judge to declare a mistrial," Bit said as he shifted his weight from side to side. Someone in the Kalluk group had brought coffee and hot chocolate, knowing they faced a long day ahead. He wouldn't mind having something warm to drink right now, either. "I've never really known Boss to be wrong."

Nathaniel followed Bit's gaze to the others before he sighed in irritation.

"I need to ask the Kalluk family some more questions." Bit pulled his phone from his jacket. Still no word from Theo or Sylvie. "I'll meet you back at the hotel soon."

"Look, what Brook said this morning made sense, but she's not the one who has to

deliver the news to the former governor. With this new information about Norona coming to light and Special Agent Kate Lin's murder, I doubt I'll extend another plea deal to Walsh," Nathaniel said with frustration. "That means the Kalluk family won't be able to bring their daughter's remains home. I know Brook thought there would be enough time to see this through, but I had to end it."

"Nathaniel, do you copy?"

Just as Bit suspected, Brook's voice came through the radio.

"I'm here," Nathaniel replied after lifting the radio and pressing the side button. "Bring everyone back, Brook. It's over."

"No, it isn't. Jacob is aware that he no longer has representation, but he is still willing to show us where Lusa's remains are buried."

"Did you not hear me, Sloane?" Nathaniel exclaimed, turning around so that his voice wouldn't travel over the wind. Still, Bit noticed that Toklo was now observing them intently. "Bring the group—and the prisoner—back now."

When Brook didn't immediately respond, Nathaniel lifted the radio to his mouth once more.

"You worked with the FBI for years, Sloane. You know very well that the Fifth and Sixth Amendments will come into play if you don't end this. Walsh needs new counsel before any other deal can be made."

Bit noticed Nathaniel hadn't mentioned that such a plea deal probably wouldn't be offered a second time. He didn't want Jacob overhearing the prosecution's future plans. Given the evidence collected regarding the 1996 murder of Stella Bennett, a conviction was secured. The death penalty, on the other hand, was the only reason

Jacob had offered to provide closure to the Kalluk family.

Considering the political ties, no other family could have pushed for such a plea deal in the first place.

“Jacob has revoked his right to counsel.”

“Damn it, Brook.” Nathaniel raised his voice to the point that he now had the attention of the entire Kalluk family. “No judge will?—”

“My call, Carter.” Russell had taken the satellite radio from Brook. “I brought a pad of paper and a pen in my pack. Walsh is waiving his right to counsel, and I have it in writing, along with several witnesses who can testify that the request was voluntary. According to Walsh, we’re twenty minutes away from the site.”

Nathaniel pressed the radio to his forehead. He had no control over the situation, and it was evident that nothing he said would be considered in the decision.

“Carter, these are our coordinates,” Brook said after having reclaimed the radio. Her voice lowered significantly. “Send in the other agents. Now.”

Nathaniel might have been surprised by Brook’s request, but Bit wasn’t at all shocked that she was taking precautions. She believed Jacob was likely to attempt an escape, and she wanted agents ready for when that attempt happened.

Nathaniel would notify the chopper, and the three agents on board would be lowered to the ground. She or Russell could have made such a request, but by going through Nathaniel, they were alerting the federal prosecutor to a potential situation.

“Consider it done.”

Nathaniel handed Bit the satellite radio a little harder than necessary after notifying the pilot to search for a clearing. The three agents aboard were to hike toward the coordinates that Brook had provided them.

“Since you’re sticking around, keep this close. You have two officers and four other agents at your disposal.” Nathaniel nodded toward the two separate groups that had taken up positions on either side of the clearing. Bit hadn’t planned on staying too long, but then again, he had no idea what Brook thought he could discover that they hadn’t last night. “Don’t mention a damn word to Governor Kalluk about there being a mistrial or that Jacob waived his right to counsel. I have enough on my plate as it is. Contact me if anything changes, and I’ll let you know if the warrants turn up anything useful.”

Bit wasn’t comfortable being left in charge, but at least four federal agents were available to take over if he needed to leave the site. He carried the radio with him as he made his way over to the Kalluk family. Their focus remained on Nathaniel as the federal prosecutor got into one of the SUVs and drove off.

“Has something happened? Is there something we should know?” Toklo asked with concern as those around him stepped to the side so that he could speak with Bit. “Has my daughter’s remains been found?”

“Not yet, Governor Kalluk.” Bit wasn’t sure if he should address the former governor by his title or not, so he played it safe. He held up the satellite radio. “As soon as I have some information, I will pass it along to you. While we wait, I’d like to speak with Aputi. I have some follow-up questions.”

“Of course,” Toklo replied, nodding toward his son that he should step forward. “The temperature has dropped since the clouds moved into the area. Would you like something hot to drink? My wife brought some hot beverages for everyone while we wait to hear from Miss Sloane.”



“I wouldn’t mind a cup of hot chocolate.” Bit thanked Mrs. Kalluk after she handed him a paper cup. The steam rose in the air as he and Aputi began to distance themselves from the group. Nanuq and Kavik weren’t near the rest of the family. They weren’t even in view, but Bit had caught sight of them earlier. “I appreciate your time, Aputi.”

“Sure.” Aputi came to a stop in front of an officer’s patrol vehicle. “I’m not sure what else I can tell you about that night. Everything was in my statement, and I spoke with Mr. Neville at length yesterday.”

“I understand Lusa went to the restroom around an hour into the evening,” Bit said, mentally agreeing with Aputi. This entire morning seemed like a waste of time when there was so much more to be done to figure out who killed Kate. “Can you recall if anything unusual happened beforehand? Was your sister acting strange? Did she receive a phone call or text? Was she preoccupied?”

“No. Everything was fine. We were waiting for Delilah to finish her shift. She was supposed to have gotten off at seven o’clock that night, but a coworker was late. Lusa and I were already on our third game of pool and our second round of drinks when she excused herself to use the restroom.”

Bit lifted the hot chocolate to take a sip, but the steam was still rising into the air. He decided to let the drink cool a little longer. He thought about Delilah serving the drinks at the bar and decided to take a different approach to jog the man’s memory.

“You said that when Lusa didn’t return after fifteen minutes, you became concerned,” Bit recalled from Aputi’s statement. “Did you see Delilah during that time?”

“It was more like twenty or thirty minutes,” Aputi said with a frown, shifting his weight in regret. “And yes, Delilah came by to ask if we wanted another round. The two of us ended up talking about the road closure. It was the reason the bar was so

crowded, because anyone who lived in Whittier couldn't go home until the officers cleared the area."

"Why was the road closed off?"

"Fatal accident. Old man Croc, who owned the hardware store on the east end of town, didn't even make it to the hospital. Of course, we didn't find out about his death until the day after. We spent most of the night searching for Lusa."

"Did you and Delilah talk about anything else?"

"Now that you mention it, Delilah took the opportunity to ask how the conversation went with Lusa and my dad. They had gotten into a huge fight that morning." Aputi's gaze drifted toward his family. A somber expression crossed his features. "Dad threatened to cut Lusa out of his life, but he never would have gone that far."

"What do you think of Kavik?"

"Kavik loved my sister," Aputi admitted as he brought his attention back to Bit. "But I understood at the time why our father wanted her to be with someone more suited for public service life."

Bit finally took a tentative sip of his hot chocolate. His body welcomed the warmth of the beverage, which was now at just the right temperature. Without the sun, the wind was quite cold.

"My father accomplished great things as governor. He was even considered a presidential candidate by some highly influential people, but everything changed after Lusa's disappearance."

"You called Nanuq first?" Bit asked, mentally walking through the events of the

evening. “Is that right?”

“Yes. My cousin thought I was kidding around, but I finally convinced him that Delilah and I couldn’t find Lusa. We had already called the police at that point, but it took an officer some time to get to the bar. I thought that maybe she had reached out to Kavik.”

“And had she?”

“No. As a matter of fact, her phone was still on the table, but I didn’t know that until later.”

“Was the road closure the reason why Delilah’s coworker didn’t arrive on time for her shift?”

“Yes. But once the state trooper arrived, the bar kind of just shut down after that. Everyone was being questioned, my father arrived, and it just got crazier from there.”

“When did Nanuq and Kavik get to the bar?” Bit asked, already knowing the answer. Still, he was testing the waters and inquiring about anything and everything that could trigger a forgotten memory. “Before or after the sheriff arrived?”

“After. Probably an hour later, after the road was finally reopened.” Aputi’s attention was diverted when the radio of one of the officers squawked before a dispatcher requested an update on their assignment. “The state trooper requested that everyone go home after giving their statements, but we didn’t listen. We all hopped into our vehicles and drove around, hoping to find her.”

A surge of frustration welled up inside Bit, but he pressed Aputi with more questions, hoping to catch a break.

“Did you drive around alone?” Bit hadn’t read anything in the missing persons report about what had taken place after the officer took control of the investigation. “Your father? Cousin? Kavik?”

“Delilah rode with me. Mom and Dad drove over to Lusa’s apartment, hoping that she might have felt sick or something and went straight home. Nanuq and Kavik each had their trucks, so you would have to ask them where they looked for Lusa. Like I said, we all drove around town searching for her.” Aputi glanced over Bit’s shoulder before bringing the conversation to an end. “I’d really like to get back to my family. They have waited a very long time for this.”

“I understand,” Bit said, turning and falling into step beside Aputi. “I’d like to speak with Kavik. Maybe something was bothering Lusa in the weeks leading up to her disappearance. I know he has answered that question many times, but I’m not talking about something obvious. I mean, I can always tell when something is bothering my best friend by the way she stirs her tea.”

“If that was the case, Kavik didn’t mention it to me or the others.”

“Do you think he would have mentioned it to Nanuq? I’m assuming that since they worked together, the two of them are friends, I imagine.”

“Truthfully? Not so much anymore. A lot of things have changed since Lusa went missing.”

Bit scanned the group, who were all still near the back of a newer-model SUV. Kavik was nowhere to be found, so he must have returned to his own vehicle. Bit could just make out the backend of his truck.

“Kavik quit his job at the conservation a couple of weeks after everything happened. Technically, the owners let him go because he wasn’t showing up for his shifts. He

was too busy searching for my sister. Nanuq did his best to convince the owners otherwise, but they needed someone reliable. After that, Kavik and Nanuq stopped hanging out." Aputi slowed his steps until he came to a complete stop just out of earshot of his family. "Look, Kavik knew at the time that my parents disapproved of his relationship with Lusa. It took a long time for my mom and dad to realize they could have handled the situation better. Trust me, they would give anything to go back and tell Lusa to be happy."

Bit had been listening intently while searching for Kavik and Nanuq, but neither man was in sight. The summary Aputi had given made sense, yet Bit couldn't wrap his head around the explanation. He and Theo worked together, and he couldn't imagine their friendship fracturing into dust if something happened to Sylvie or Brook.

If anything, their bond would only grow stronger.

It had, too.

Sylvie had nearly died in the hospital after being stabbed, and Brook had been abducted by a deranged woman who believed such horrific acts would make Jacob happy.

Theo, Arden, and Bit had only grown closer during that time.

"Aputi, did you see where Kavik went?" Bit scanned the entire area, but he couldn't locate the man. They had gotten close enough to Kavik's truck for Bit to know that no one was inside the cab. "Or your cousin?"

Aputi's gaze was quickly drawn to Kavik's truck, which had seen better days. Rust covered the back end, along with several other noticeable spots on the tailgate. Bit could have said that he had already checked that direction, but instead, he took the time to search the whole area.

Both Kavik's F150 and Nanuq's Ram 1500 were still parked nearby.

"I'm sure they're around somewhere," Aputi muttered before calling out to his father. "Hey, Dad? Where are Kavik and Nanuq?"

Toklo gestured to his left before realizing that neither of the men was nearby. He stepped outside the group to survey the other side of the truck.

"I don't know, son. They were here a little while ago. They couldn't have gone far."

Bit wasn't inclined to agree, but he also didn't want to sound the alarm without some shred of evidence that Kavik and Nanuq had something to hide.

What would either of them have to gain by killing Lusa?

Bit instructed Aputi to go be with his family, hinting that maybe the men had gone to relieve themselves in the woods. While Aputi appeared to accept that excuse, Bit continued his way across the clearing until he reached two of the four federal agents.

"Listen, we might have a problem," Bit informed them, not missing the way one of the agents scanned him from top to bottom. He wasn't usually one to take the lead in these types of situations. He had a mirror. He was rather scrawny and didn't necessarily have a commanding presence, but his mentality had changed in the years working at S&E Investigations. "I need the two of you to fan out. It's probably nothing, but two of the men who accompanied the Kalluk family have wandered off—Kavik Aningan and Nanuq Kalluk. I need to speak with both of them."

Bit waited ten minutes before deciding to inform Brook about the current events. During that time, he tried to reach Theo and Sylvie, but neither answered their phones. What could they have possibly discovered at the cabin that prevented them from returning close enough to Silverton to have cell phone reception? It didn't help

that Aputi and the rest of his family realized something was very wrong.

Once Bit had Brook on the satellite radio, he didn't waste any more time.

“Boss, we have a problem.”

14

Theo Neville

June 2025

Wednesday — 12:22 pm

Theo surveyed the isolated landscape around the cabin one last time. The only access to the remote location was either by hiking or using an ATV. Even then, it required a minimum of two hours on a four-wheeler.

Jacob had gone out of his way to avoid civilization.

The dirt path had been relatively even initially. However, as he and Sylvie ascended higher, the terrain became progressively more hazardous, with flat surfaces turning into steep inclines. The air also became thinner and cooler.

Jacob's effort wasn't lost on Theo.

He glanced down at his watch. They had missed their check-in with Bit. It had taken longer than it should have to reach their destination, and they still had to make it down the mountain.

All for nothing.

"Sylvie," Theo called out, not wanting to waste any more time.



Brook and those in the group should have already found Lusa Kalluk's remains. Either that, or the search never took place. Judge Colletti might have declared a mistrial, and this entire trip had been for nothing.

Five months of planning down the drain.

"Sylvie, are you about ready? We need to get back to town."

"Can you come in here for a minute?"

Theo already had the keys to the ATV in his hand. He sighed in frustration that another five minutes was about to be wiped from the clock, but he respected Sylvie's determination. Still, nothing changed the fact that the only items inside the cabin were a bed, a small nightstand, a round kitchen table, and two chairs. Everything was covered in dust and cobwebs.

Theo closed the distance to the door that hung precariously on rusted hinges. He carefully stepped around it, not bothering to use his flashlight. There was enough daylight streaming inside that he could mind his steps.

"Give me a hand with this bed," Sylvie requested as she motioned toward the foot of the mattress with her flashlight. Dust motes floated in the beam, causing him to grimace at the thought of inhaling them. "I've been thinking about how Jacob hid Stella's body in 1996. He wrapped her body in a tarp to mask the scent of decomposition, pulled up the floorboards underneath his bed, and stuffed her down inside. What if he did the same with another victim here?"

"Recreating his first kill." Theo swept his gaze over the rusted metal frame holding a stained mattress and worn spring box. "Can't argue with that logic. You might be onto something, Sylvie."

“Admit it,” Sylvie said with a smile as she lowered her flashlight. “You were annoyed when I called you back in here.”

Theo laughed before noting where the bright beam had landed on the floor. She must have moved the nightstand away from the bed to give herself some room. He motioned toward an area of extreme rot in the planks before giving her a warning.

“Watch where you step.”

Sylvie tossed her flashlight on the bed, stirring up a cloud of dust. He instinctively held his breath as he reached down to help shift the frame.

“Toward me,” Theo instructed, not wanting Sylvie to step back on the weak spot in the floor. With a firm grip on the metal frame, he began to walk backward until the entire space underneath the bed was visible. “Anything?”

Sylvie reached for her flashlight and slowly began guiding the beam over each wooden floor plank, starting from the wall. It wasn’t until she reached the second slat in the fourth row that they noticed a discrepancy.

One of the boards was slightly raised on one end.

Theo reached into the front pocket of his jeans for his pocketknife. He flipped it open, mindful of the sharp blade as he handed it off to Sylvie. She leaned down and inserted the tip of the knife in the crevice, but she couldn’t get enough leverage. She handed Theo the flashlight so she could use both hands. It took some maneuvering, but she finally managed to pry it up enough to reveal an inky black void beneath.

“Here goes nothing.” Sylvie held up her hand for the flashlight, taking it from Theo so she could shine the beam into the gap. “Theo, there’s something inside.”

“Wait,” Theo quickly instructed before retracing his steps toward the exit. “We bought those rubber gloves at the convenience store. Let me grab them.”

It didn’t take Theo long to walk to the ATV, collect the backpack, and retrace his steps. Once inside, he set the bag on the bed and searched for the rubber gloves meant for washing dishes.

“They aren’t much, but at least we won’t contaminate any evidence.”

“It’s not a body.” Sylvie once again handed him the flashlight as she donned the yellow gloves. He stepped closer to shine the light into the darkness, allowing her to cautiously reach inside without too much trouble. “It’s solid. I think it’s a book of some sort.”

Theo observed Sylvie twist her wrist enough to pull the book through the thin chasm. Someone—Jacob, presumably—had wrapped the book in plastic. Theo kept the beam trained on the swaddled book while Sylvie carefully removed the protective wrapping.

“Son of a bitch,” Theo muttered when he realized what was in Sylvie’s hands. “That’s a sketchbook.”

“Jacob’s sketchbook,” Sylvie whispered in disbelief as she gently set the plastic aside. She then carefully flipped the front cover to avoid ripping any of the pages. “I remember Brook saying she found it in his bedroom when they were kids. When she went back to get it to show her parents, it was gone.”

A penciled sketch of a woman’s face with the flesh peeled away to reveal the intricate network of muscles and bone beneath stared back at them. The details were painstakingly accurate, as though Jacob had taken time to study an anatomy textbook while sketching.

Unfortunately, they were well aware that Jacob had witnessed such a sight firsthand.

The woman's eyes were wide open in an expression of terror that bore into Theo's soul. A name and year were scrawled in the lower right-hand corner of the page—  
Pamela 1997 .

Sylvie had trouble flipping to the next page, and Theo didn't think it was due to the thick gloves. The tremor in her hands was evident.

Another equally disturbing image stared back at them. The young woman's skin had been flayed away to expose raw muscle and sinew. Teeth were drawn where beautiful lips would normally cover them, and it was as if she were frozen in a silent scream.

"Sally," Sylvie whispered in shock. The year on record was 2007. "Theo, this is Sally Pearson. Do you know what this means? Jacob draws his souvenirs."

Page after page revealed detailed sketches of victims, each more haunting than the last. There were far more than they had accounted for in their investigation, and the realization hit Theo like a punch to the gut.

"God, there are so many," Sylvie breathed, her voice trembling slightly as she turned the pages. "Lusa's name isn't in here. I guess there is a chance he could have killed her and never had time to draw her. Maybe he decided to leave Alaska until the investigation grew cold."

"Eleven years?" Theo shook his head as he monitored Sylvie close the sketchbook. She took her time securing the evidence into the plastic bag to take back with them. "I don't buy it. I don't think Jacob murdered Lusa, and I don't think he meant to stay away so long. He's continued to kill over these past eleven years, which means there are other sketch books hidden in places that he has stayed during that time."

Theo struggled to process the horrifying implications of their discovery. The significance of the sketchbook was apparent, and a sudden realization began to dawn on him.

“This is why Jacob needed to be in Alaska,” Theo murmured in thought. The time between the earlier victims had been at least a year, but the evidence displayed the acceleration throughout Jacob’s life. “He wants the sketchbook.”

“Or needs,” Sylvie said as she handed Theo the plastic-wrapped evidence. “Why now, though? He’s had years to come back to town to collect it.”

“I wish I had the answer, Sylvie.”

She replaced the board so that the area appeared untouched. Granted, if someone were to study the section of boards close enough, it would be easy enough to notice the disruption in the layers of dust.

“I know you’re thinking it’s a waste of time to put the cabin back together, but if there is the slightest chance that Jacob escapes from custody, he’s coming here.” Sylvie used her boots to flatten the board before positioning herself at the top of the bed. “If there is any DNA evidence to be had, it’s going to be on that sketchbook. So, I vote for making it seem like one of the wildlife critters came in here. We can find something to erase our boot prints. Once we get to the bottom of the mountain, we’ll call this in to have people in position. Let’s face it, it would take Jacob hours to reach this place, if not days, given his current location and lack of resources.”

“Jacob isn’t lacking for resources,” Theo pointed out as he clicked off the flashlight. He tossed it on the bed as he wrapped his hands around the metal frame. “Someone killed Kate. Whether or not that was on Jacob’s order, it is still proof that he has someone on the ground. It’s a good idea to try and hide the fact that we were here just in case that individual knows about this place.”

Theo and Sylvie managed to maneuver the bed back in place. Sylvie removed one of the gloves and tossed it his way. The yellow rubber glove landed next to the flashlight. He picked both up, taking the time to shove the flashlight in his pocket.

“Use the glove to smear the dirt on the floor where the legs made lines,” Sylvie advised as she held up her right hand to indicate that she would do the same. “I’ll shift the nightstand back in place before I?—”

A sudden, loud crack cut off her words and echoed around the cabin.

Sylvie screamed just before the rotting planks beneath her gave way, engulfing her entirely as the decayed floorboards splintered violently and crumbled inwards. One moment she was there, and in the blink of an eye, she had vanished into the darkness below.

15

Graham Elliott

June 2025

Wednesday — 12:48 pm

The bright rays of sunshine reflecting off the glass windows of the city's buildings would have been painfully bright if it hadn't been for their protective coating. The weather called for clear skies and warm temperatures, with a high of eighty-four degrees. All that meant to Graham was that the flight should be relatively smooth from D.C. to Alaska.

Although he technically had an office at S&E Investigations, he seldom occupied it. Brook was the true force behind the business, while he had only been a silent investor. Being in her office, though, brought him a sense of closeness to her.

He lifted his left wrist, the crisp white cuff of his sleeve shifting to reveal the face of his watch. Five minutes before he needed to leave for the airport. He would call Bit on the drive there for an update on the recovery mission. Brook and the others should have already arrived at the site.

"I figured I'd find you in here, General." Arden's greeting came as no surprise. The soft rustle of fabric had alerted Graham to the man's presence. Not too far behind him was Coco. Sylvie's cat adored the man, and she followed behind him like a duckling does with her mother. "I thought you should know that I just spoke with Bit. There

has been a mistrial.”

Graham grimaced at the update.

“Please tell me that Brook and the others already made it to the site before the rug got pulled out from under them.”

“Unfortunately, no.” Arden stepped farther into Brook’s office. “Bit did say that Jacob has waived the right to counsel. He has agreed to lead the group the rest of the way with or without the plea deal.”

Graham walked over to the sitting area where he had draped his suit jacket over the back of the chair. Any decision Jacob made always came at a cost.

“Brook already radioed for backup. Three agents were lowered to the ground not far from their location,” Arden advised as he stepped forward and retrieved an empty coffee cup. Graham would have cleaned up after himself, but Arden waved him away. “I’ve got it. You should also know that no one seems able to locate Kavik Aningan and Nanuq Kalluk. They were with the rest of the family this morning, waiting for updates from the group, but now they’re missing. I just thought you should know that I’ll be in Bit’s office using one of his computers to run a more in-depth background check on the two individuals.”

Graham didn’t need to be told that Bit was out of his comfort zone. His unease had been in his tone when they spoke on the phone earlier, and now the roles were reversed. He needed Arden to retrieve information that may have been overlooked the first time around.

“If you need additional help, you can ask one of the two gentlemen guarding the front entrance for assistance.” Graham switched his gaze to the two agents within view while slipping his arms into the sleeves of his suit jacket. One was posted on the



outside of the glass entrance, and the other was inside the foyer. “They have been briefed on the situation, and they have worked investigations like this before.”

Graham didn’t need to elaborate on the men’s past experiences. They both worked for Alex DeSilva, a former military man and a remarkable private operator. Anyone under his employ was solid.

“I’ll keep that in mind, but it was just a press of a button. Bit is very efficient when it comes to his programs,” Arden said with a half-smile. His salt and pepper mustache tilted to the right. “I should be able to forward the results in the next few minutes.”

“If anything stands out, please keep me informed,” Graham requested as he took time to fasten the button on his jacket. “I don’t like that Jacob is leading Brook and the others higher into the mountain. What about Sylvie and Theo? Have you heard from them?”

“No, and neither has Bit. He is concerned, but they did mention they might have trouble reaching the cabin.” Arden cleared his throat, and Graham sensed that the unspoken inquiry about his true reason for returning to D.C. was about to be raised. “I have to ask, General. Why did you really leave Alaska? Brook needs you, and I am competent enough to have been the liaison between Mr. DeSilva and the firm.”

“Arden, do you really think that I don’t know you’re the glue that holds this place together?” Graham slipped his hands into the pockets of his pants. The reason for his absence from the case was bound to come out sooner or later. “My mother has been experiencing some health issues. Yesterday, her cardiologist conducted some tests. You can imagine her shock when he informed her that an immediate bypass was necessary. She called me just as Brook discovered the identity of the body left on the tarmac. My mother was admitted to the hospital by midafternoon yesterday, and she was scheduled to have surgery at zero six hundred today. By ten hundred, she was in recovery. Her first words to me coming out from under sedation? She wanted to

know why I was still there and not on a flight back to Alaska.”

“General, I am?—”

“It’s fine, Arden. You were looking out for Brook, and I admire how you care for her.” Graham wasn’t comfortable sharing too much about his personal life with others, but in this case, he would make an exception. “When you’re with a woman whose entire life is focused on not trusting anyone, you learn to do everything possible to give her what she needs. If my mother hadn’t made it through surgery while I was in Alaska with Brook, the guilt would have been too much for her. She already carries the burden of her brother’s sins. I wasn’t going to add more weight.”

“Is there anything I can do for you? Elizabeth?”

“My mother came through the surgery with flying colors. She can be rather...well, let’s just say that she has a reputation to uphold. She wouldn’t want someone witnessing her in such a vulnerable state.”

“You let me handle your mother,” Arden assured Graham with a decisive nod. No one handled Elizabeth Elliott. Before he could impart such wisdom to Arden, the man leaned down and scooped up Coco with his free hand. “You were in quite the bind, General. Two strong women, each asking you for something completely opposite.”

“Well, with age comes wisdom,” Graham explained, still believing it was in Arden’s best interest to stay far away from Elizabeth Elliott. “Two guards have been posted outside my mother’s room. We also have a family friend who is sitting by her bedside, so please don’t feel the need to?—”

“Nonsense. I’m assuming Gus is downstairs, waiting to take you to the airport.” Arden turned and began to walk toward the doorway. “I’ve got things covered here. I think we all know that there is something else at play with Jacob. Otherwise, he

wouldn't be willing to continue today without the plea deal. Brook is more than capable of handling herself up there, but it's important you be there for her when all is said and done."

Graham had helped Brook plan for every contingency. Should something else take place that they had not anticipated, she would improvise, adapt, and overcome. He had full faith in her abilities.

Regardless, he needed to be near her tonight.

The chime of Graham's phone alerted him to an incoming message. He reached into the interior pocket of his suit jacket to retrieve his phone. Gus was waiting for him downstairs.

"The hospital staff is probably giving you hourly updates, but I'll make sure to do the same."

"I truly appreciate your offer, Arden." Graham stepped out of Brook's office. Arden rounded his desk in the reception area, gently placing the empty coffee mug and Coco down on the hard surface. She immediately jumped off and sauntered across the marble tiles to rub up against the leg of Paul Render, one of Arden's protective detail agents. "It's my understanding that my mother will be released in around five days. I'll be back before then. Please don't take offense should my mother order you out. She can be...difficult."

"I'll finish up here and be at the hospital within the hour. I just need to upload the additional information to Bit. Coco seems to have a crush on Paul over there, so she'll be just fine until visiting hours are over."

Arden wasn't listening to Graham's advice in the least. The formidable Elizabeth Elliott wouldn't tolerate anyone but her son witnessing her in such a fragile state. She

could be quite candid, overly abrasive, and downright pretentious at times. With Arden's tendency to take things to heart, his well-meaning intentions would likely have the opposite effect. Unfortunately, Graham didn't have time to stay and change the man's mind.

Graham kept his phone in hand, intending to place several calls once he was in the car. One in particular to his mother. Or in this case, the family friend who was currently sitting by his mother's bedside. Afterward, he planned to get in touch with Bit, Sylvie, or Theo.

Jacob would never offer anything for free.

Brook was aware of that more than anyone, and Graham hated being so far away from her when the situation was reaching a critical level.

"General?"

Graham came to a stop, his other hand already wrapped around the silver handle. He turned back, raising his eyebrows in wordless inquiry.

"I realize it's not my place to say, but you should know...she loves you."

Graham was a guarded man.

Hell, maybe he was more like his mother than he cared to admit, because his first instinct was to instruct Arden to keep his opinions to himself. His relationship with Brook was private. Their pasts made it extremely difficult for either of them to move forward, yet they had managed to do just that.

Still, no one had the right to speak on their behalf.

“Brook touches the glass outside of your office as she walks by every morning,” Arden shared before Graham could verbalize his disapproval. “Briefly, when she thinks no one is looking. You’re good for her, General. I guess I just wanted you to know in case the situation in Alaska somehow doesn’t have the result we’re hoping for. She’ll need you by her side.”

Arden made it rather challenging for Graham to find fault for such interference after hearing the second half of his response. He had taken on a paternal role at the firm and clearly wanted what was best for Brook. The man shouldn’t be judged or criticized for extending such good will.

With a simple nod, Graham pushed open the glass door.

There was a moment when eliminating Jacob Walsh would have been as easy as making a single phone call. Technically, that opportunity was still there, but Graham had respected Brook’s wishes. She had spent her entire life seeking justice for her brother’s victims, and Graham would never deny her such victory.

He had walked through hell after the loss of his wife and daughter. Brook had been the one to serve him justice and deliver him peace.

Should Jacob dare to take Brook’s life, there would be no mercy.

No hesitation.

No phone call.

Graham would unleash his fury and tear the bastard apart with his own bare hands, driven by a rage that had already scorched his very soul.

16

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Wednesday — 1:06 pm

A damp sensation lingered on Brook's skin beneath her second layer of clothing. Despite the absence of any forecast for rain, the altitude gave the impression of it. As she ascended higher, her body exerted effort to preserve some warmth.

Even as the group ahead widened the gap between them, she hung back for a better view of their surroundings. The trees towered on all sides, their branches intertwining overhead to cast a shifting pattern across the open areas. It would have been peaceful, even beautiful, if not for the circumstances that had brought her here.

A twig snapped beneath her boot, the sound sharp in the heavy silence. She jogged almost every day and considered herself fit, but that didn't stop her muscles from complaining as the slope became steeper.

It would have been all but impossible for anyone to bring a body up this far.

The steady thrum of the helicopter blades could be heard as it maintained its watchful presence above the treeline. The rhythmic sound was interrupted when the satellite radio in her hand crackled to life. She lifted it immediately, thumbing the button to confirm communication, not worried that Jacob or Mitch would hear the exchange.

They were far enough ahead that she could transmit freely.

“We have visual.”

Brook slowed her pace even further, letting the distance between her and the group grow. She wasn't comfortable with how closed in the area was rapidly becoming, and she was convinced Jacob was leading them into some type of trap.

Jacob had come to a complete stop, causing the others to do the same.

“Copy,” Brook replied into the radio. “Hold your position for now.”

The two forensic techs were in the process of removing their backpacks. Each of them also carried a case containing tools necessary for starting the excavation of the remains. Most of their equipment would be delivered by helicopter once the rest of the forensic team was informed to start their trek. Their gazes were currently fixed on an opening of some sort on the steepest slope in the area.

Brook studied what resembled a jagged wound in the mountainside as she continued to climb closer. The small black slit seemed to swallow the light. It was hardly more than a crack, the opening just wide enough for a person to squeeze through sideways.

Russell had remained close to Mitch since the news of a mistrial had been handed down. The defense attorney had initially verbally attacked Jacob but stopped short of any admission. It was during that point that Jacob had voluntarily offered to continue their journey, which was when Russell explained what it would take to continue the recovery mission.

The fact that Jacob hadn't flinched at signing away his right to counsel spoke volumes, and Brook had imparted to Russell how important it was for this day to play out.

“I’d like to go on record that I had nothing to do with Lusa Kalluk’s death,” Mitch called out as she walked past him. She hadn’t planned to even glance in his direction, but his next words brought her to a complete halt. “Kate Lin’s death isn’t on me, either.”

“Mr. Norona, you and I both know that everything that has happened since 2014 lands on your shoulders.” Brook should have had Victor or Justin escort Mitch back down the mountain, but she wasn’t comfortable being short one agent. “I don’t know what you did back then to be in Jacob’s debt, but everyone has a choice. You made yours a long time ago.”

Brook broke their stare as she advanced toward her brother. Jacob had already pivoted around to witness her exchange with Mitch, but she paid him little attention. Her focus was fixed on the narrow entrance leading to what she now believed to be an ice cave. The rock appeared different just inside the edges, exposing a bluish-white hue that shimmered subtly in the thin stream of daylight.

The air around the opening was unnaturally still, as if even the breeze feared to enter. No sound came from within, no drip of water or echo of wind. It was as if the cave was holding its breath, waiting.

Jacob advanced forward until he was able to lean against some rock formation next to the dark opening. He inhaled deeply in satisfaction, as if he had waited a very long time to visit the area.

“Let me guess. Whoever killed Lusa Kalluk brought her remains up here because you gave your word that her body would never be found,” Brook said before he could speak. She was talking about the mountain in general. Not the ice cave. “You want me to believe that Lusa’s remains are inside this ice cave. I suppose it could be. Every shred of DNA evidence passed from the killer to his victim would be preserved for your prosperity.”



“I already told you that—” Mitch’s words were cut off quickly.

Russell must have stopped the man from interrupting her. She didn’t turn around to confirm her suspicions. Instead, she continued with her theory while monitoring Jacob’s reaction. He hadn’t really uttered a word since their previous conversation.

“I believe Mitch’s claim of innocence, but you still managed to find something to hold over him.” Brook shrugged, as if it didn’t make a difference. Whatever it was, it literally didn’t change anything, past or future. “What I can’t wrap my mind around is what it is you could possibly hope to gain from this? You wanted to be here. Specifically, this month. You’ve accomplished that. So, we’re here. Why?”

“Do you know how ice caves are formed?” Jacob asked casually. He didn’t bother answering her question, so intent on his own agenda. The others shifted behind her with unease. “It starts with the smallest of cracks. Tiny fissures in the rock, hardly wider than a finger. But over time, water seeps in, freezing and expanding, widening the cracks bit by bit.”

Jacob turned his head to stare at the opening with what she could only describe as admiration. He shifted to lift his hands, extending both arms due to the handcuffs, and traced his fingers along the edge of the opening.

“With each freeze and thaw cycle, the cracks grow deeper, longer. Meltwater flows down, pooling in hidden chambers and freezing solid. Passages form through the year, twisting and turning through the heart of the mountain. Can you imagine what lies waiting in those depths? Secrets frozen in time, preserved for eternity in the ice.”

“Lusa’s remains, for one?” Brook had posed an inquiry instead of a statement. He wanted inside this cave for a reason, and she needed to make sure that didn’t happen. Not until the interior was searched by her. “You sound like you’re very familiar with this ice cave, Jacob.”

“Indeed, I am,” Jacob murmured with a smile that was razor-thin. “But which passage, which chamber could Miss Kalluk’s remains be in...well, that’s for us to discover together, isn’t it?”

“You’ll tell us,” Brook replied, her voice flat and unyielding. “And if not, we’ll find it on our own. Either way, this is the end of the line for you. Victor and Justin, you can take Jacob back down to the clearing.”

“Ah, but where’s the fun in that?” Jacob’s eyes held a hint of dark amusement. “I’m disappointed, little sis. I’ll tell you what. You go on inside and take a look for yourself. If you discover that locating Lusa’s remains is as simple as finding the right passageway, then send me on my way. On the other hand...”

Brook studied her brother for a moment before turning away. She instructed everyone to make themselves comfortable as she took time removing her backpack. While she had dressed appropriately, an ice cave hadn’t been taken into account. Still, she had stuffed an additional shirt inside her backpack.

“Brook, think about what it is you are doing,” Russell murmured as he came to stand beside her. She began to remove her jacket while giving him a chance to speak. “We have a location. We should all head back down the mountain. Another forensics team can come back tomorrow with a plan in place. The techs who are with us don’t have access to the appropriate equipment, anyway.”

“You’re missing the bigger picture, Russell.” Brook pulled the thicker shirt over her head before adjusting it in place. She continued speaking after picking up her jacket. “Jacob wants inside that ice cave. Why?”

“Does it even matter?” Russell turned so that his back was toward Jacob. “Brook, your brother is in federal custody. Has been for years. I know that he has tried several times to either manipulate the system or plan an escape, but we’re in the final stretch.

Whoever takes over Jacob's defense will be thoroughly vetted by Judge Colletti himself. With the waiver signed and in my possession, the death penalty is back on the table. We've won."

Brook understood Russell's rationale. Even her team would be in complete agreement that they had achieved what they had set out to do on this trip.

Only the end result wasn't cut and dry.

"Mitch didn't abduct or kill Lusa Kalluk. He also didn't kill Kate." Brook zipped her jacket before leaning down to retrieve a flashlight from her backpack. She then handed Russell the satellite radio. "You heard Bit. Kavik Aningan and Nanuq Kalluk are missing, and no one seems to be able to find either of them. I'm not sure if that's by chance or intentional, but if there's any possibility that one or both of them might be involved, they could have found another way inside that ice cave. I'm not leaving this mountain until I know the truth. Kate deserves at least that, Russell."

17

Sylvie Deering

June 2025

Wednesday — 1:09 pm

The beam from the flashlight Theo had thrown down to Sylvie sliced through the glacial darkness, illuminating a cavern of ice stalactites and stalagmites. Frigid air pressed in from all sides, immediately soaking into her jacket. She stared at the rotted boards that had given way beneath her feet over half an hour ago. During that time, Theo had been searching for something to haul her up to solid ground.

“Anything?” Sylvie called out, using her boot to move aside one of the decayed boards. The sketchbook in her hand had gone flying the moment the planks had given way. It had to be nearby, and she wasn’t leaving until it was in her possession. “What about the bed frame?”

“Not long enough.”

Theo’s voice was muffled, indicating he wasn’t near the perforated boards. She had been fortunate to escape any serious injury. Had she been incapacitated, nothing Theo could have found would have helped to excavate her. The shattered wood jutted up at jagged angles, some even spiked with rusted nails. What spoke volumes about her luck was the surrounding ice formations, which could have easily broken her back had she landed on one.

Her breath misted in the harsh beam of her flashlight as she swept it slowly over the debris field around her. She hadn't wanted to stray too far from her spot, but it was clear after searching for so long that the sketchbook wasn't among the rotted boards. The plastic on the ice must have carried it farther from the impact zone.

Theo had carefully examined what remained of the wood above her. Upon closer inspection, he had discovered corroded hinges on the backside. What they had thought were merely rotted planks had turned out to be remnants of a cleverly disguised trapdoor.

Self-recrimination filled her as she moaned in frustration.

She should have been more careful. Theo had warned her twice about the weak area in the floor, but she had been so caught up in wanting the cabin to appear untouched that it didn't even cross her mind when she walked toward the nightstand.

She tipped her head back, squinting into the blackness.

"Theo, I need to spread out a little. I can't find the sketchbook."

"Don't go far."

Considering she had been stuck in an ice cave for the past half hour, she had given a lot of thought to the trapdoor. Jacob was highly intelligent, so it didn't surprise her that he would want another means of escape.

Could such an assumption point to the presence of another exit nearby?

Sylvie was about to say the same to Theo when a sudden scraping noise echoed nearby. She stiffened, the hair on her neck prickling at the realization that she might not be alone down here. Gripping her flashlight tighter, she swung its beam toward

the source of the sound. The light sliced through the shadows, exposing the jagged walls in all their wonder.

“Theo?” Sylvie tried her best to keep the unease from her voice. “Are there any animals that live in ice caves? Anything big enough to pose a threat?”

“Ice worms, maybe?” A moment of silence followed, which did nothing to lessen her anxiety. “I mean, bears might find shelter in caves during winter, but I don’t think it would be an ice cave.”

Theo’s tone lacked conviction, and she thought she heard him mumbling something about being glad it was summer. While she wasn’t thrilled to learn that ice worms existed, she assumed any larger wildlife was likely more afraid of her than she was of them.

“Okay,” Sylvie said to herself before measuring her breaths to steady her heart rate. “Just worms. Small ones. I probably can’t even see them.”

She angled her flashlight downward as she continued searching the sketchbook. By repositioning the beam, she floodlit the larger of the two passageways. Given the slight slope, the outer plastic of the evidence likely allowed the sketchbook to slide in that direction.

“Sylvie, I’m going outside for a minute. The only things long enough to reach you are the boards from the outhouse. I’ll lower some down, and we can rig something for you to climb up.”

“Sounds good.”

It wasn’t as if she had any other ideas to escape this place. She strained to catch any hint of the scraping sound, but all she could hear was her uneven breathing. Oddly

enough, focusing on her breath calmed her just enough to move toward the left passageway.

“Got you,” Sylvie whispered to herself as a subtle glint reflected off something near a stalagmite about ten feet away. She cautiously made her way forward until she was able to drop to one knee. Ignoring the cold bite of the cave floor through her denim, she picked up the sketchbook, relieved that it was still tucked inside the protective plastic.

Sylvie stood while tucking the evidence under her arm. She was getting colder by the minute, and her fingertips were practically numb. Not that such a natural phenomenon wasn’t beautiful—it certainly was—but she would prefer the experience of an ice cave to be intentional rather than accidental.

The walls shimmered with a captivating blend of ethereal blues and pristine whites. Each surface displayed the intricate handiwork of time and the elements. A delicate lattice of frosted patterns appeared with every sweep of the flashlight’s beam. The patterns weaved through the walls like the finest lace, shifting with every motion. It was utterly beautiful.

Sylvie hadn’t heard Theo return from outside, so she found herself curious now that she had ventured a bit from where she had fallen through the floor of the cabin.

If Jacob had been the one to discover the ice cave and create another way out of the cabin, how deep into one of these passageways would the exit be located?

It couldn’t hurt to explore a bit deeper. She would be careful not to stray down any other tunnel. The ice cave was like a corn maze, and as confusing as a hall of mirrors.

Had Jacob investigated all the passageways?

She wondered how deep the corridors extended inside the mountain and recalled her geology class. If she remembered correctly, some ice caves spanned an entire mountain. If that were the case with this particular ice cave, could that explain why Jacob had led Brook and the others to the opposite side of the mountain? Such a trek would take at least eight to ten hours, depending on the curvature of the cave.

The longer she considered such a theory, the more uneasy she grew about the idea. If Jacob knew those passages thoroughly, he might use that knowledge to escape custody. She pressed her arm tighter against the sketchbook. Was he trying to return to retrieve it? He would have had eleven years to do so, unless he somehow got word that the owner of the land was considering a sale. Maybe Mekhi was wrong about the landowner not selling anytime soon.

Theo really needed to hurry with those long planks from the outhouse. A few of those boards had to be sturdy enough to hold her weight.

Just as Sylvie turned around, the beam of her flashlight swept through the darkness, catching a vague shadow that flickered about twenty feet away. She refocused the light, trying to discern the oddly shaped object.

It took a moment for her mind to process what was in front of her.

She parted her lips, but her voice couldn't produce any sound. She stood there, temporarily frozen, just like the human head that had been perched atop a stalagmite.

The face was mutilated beyond recognition by the assault of a sharp blade. Beneath the damaged flesh, bone was exposed, and the hair, clumped with congealed blood, offered no clue to its natural color. The mouth, contorted in a silent scream, was only evident because the jaw dangled limply from one side.

This was the final piece of the puzzle.



She was the reason Jacob wanted to return to Alaska. The anniversary of her death was in June. She was the one victim whose death had changed Brook's life forever. The final piece of his shattered psyche, hidden away in this glacial vault, and he couldn't wait to share it with his sister.

Jacob had even carved the young girl's name into the rock and ice above the shrine—Sally Pearson.

18

Bobby 'Bit' Nowacki

June 2025

Wednesday — 1:16 pm

Several voices echoed through the dense Alaskan pines, bouncing back hollow and distorted.

“Kavik!”

“Nanuq!”

Bit instinctively jerked to the side when a branch of leaves brushed against his face. A smaller twig snagged on his knitted hat, and he reached up just in time before it was yanked off his head. He was far more comfortable in front of a computer and couldn't fathom why anyone would choose to be out in the wild among blood-sucking insects and animals that might consider humans a main course in their daily meal.

Making his way back to the clearing, he figured the others could continue their search. He checked his phone for the fourth time in fifteen minutes. Theo and Sylvie still hadn't contacted him, and every call Bit initiated went directly to voicemail on both their phones. He would give them one more hour before he raised his concerns and requested that the chopper make a detour to the other side of the mountain.

As for Nathaniel, he had been gone for over an hour. It was understandable that the search warrants being carried out in Baltimore would take more time, but one hotel room in Blackpeak?

Bit pulled his beanie down further to shield his ears from the biting cold. The overcast sky made the fifties feel much colder than it had been earlier. Most of the Kalluk family had joined the search effort, but standing at the back of the open SUV was Lusa's grandmother. She wore a thick coat and had her arms crossed over her midsection as she anxiously gazed in the direction where her son and daughter-in-law were helping search for Nanuq.

Brook and the others knew that the two men were missing, and it was reasonable to suspect that one or both of them had a role in Lusa's disappearance and Kate's death. They had been each other's alibi on the night in question, and no one had questioned their whereabouts two nights before when Kate had been killed.

The more time that passed without a word from them, Bit became increasingly concerned that they had left the area to pursue Brook and the others. Were Kavik and Nanuq trying to assist Jacob in escaping federal custody?

Bit's phone rang as he walked toward the rental SUV.

Unfortunately, the call wasn't from Sylvie or Theo.

"Reach out to Brook and Houser," Nathaniel directed, forgoing any type of greeting. His voice was just as irritating over the phone as it was in person. "I want Norona to be read his rights and officially arrested."

"You found something?"

"You might say that. We discovered a burner phone tucked beneath the mattress and

box spring in his hotel room. While nothing has been found at his Baltimore residence or law office yet, the series of text messages on the burner clearly indicate he was in contact with the person who murdered Kate Lin.”

Bit wasn’t used to experiencing such intense anger. The strong emotion surged within him, making it difficult for him to respond to Nathaniel’s request. Since yesterday, Bit has struggled most with his resentment toward Kate for not calling him to verify whether Brook’s email had been genuine. Kate had put her faith in a source and believed in the authenticity of the words.

He was mostly upset with himself for not anticipating such a terrible tactic.

It would have taken less than a minute to create a program that allowed email recipients to verify authenticity. A simple code could have prevented Kate’s death. As soon as they returned to D.C., his first stop would be the office. He planned to implement a program on each team member’s devices—a plugin designed to analyze every received message for signs of forgery or tampering. The algorithm would consider multiple factors and ultimately display a small tree icon to confirm credibility.

Bit had overheard Nathaniel mention that the unsub might have a lot of experience in technology, but that wasn’t the case. Anyone with access to the Internet could find directions on how to create an email address without revealing one’s location. Unfortunately, the instructions for the one used in Kate’s case had been shared to the public by someone very, very gifted.

“Did you try and trace the number associated with the text messages?”

“I’m not an amateur, Mr. Nowacki.”

“What was discussed between Slick Mitch and this other person?” Bit asked, ignoring

the federal prosecutor's irritation at being questioned about the chain of evidence. Bit could run circles around those working for the federal government when it came to anything tech-related. "Was Kate's name literally mentioned in the messages?"

"Let's just say that Norona wasn't on board with the murder, but that decision had been taken out of his hands. He asked why the other party had escalated the situation by killing a federal agent. Norona then instructed the other party to make sure that nothing could lead back to them, and to also make sure everything else was in place. It's the reason we need to get Brook and the others off that mountain. It's clear that this is some type of ambush."

"Bring me the phone." Bit didn't care if Nathaniel thought he was overstepping his bounds. Brook had put Bit in charge of their side of things while she was busy with Jacob. "I think I might know who has the other burner. It's a fifty-fifty toss-up between Kavik and Nanuq. There is even a chance they are in it together."

"What are you talking about? What makes you say that?"

"We can't locate either of them," Bit explained, his gaze sweeping over the area once more. He probably should have notified Nathaniel earlier, but he had gotten caught up in the search after touching base with Brook. "They have both up and disappeared."

"I'm heading back there now," Nathaniel said as his voice became somewhat more urgent. "In the meantime, alert Houser to place Norona officially under arrest. I want that man's rights read to him."

The satellite radio in his other hand came to life, prompting Bit to end his call with Nathaniel. Russell repeated the broadcast when Bit wasn't sure he had heard the transmission correctly.

“The remains of Lusa Kalluk are inside an ice cave,” Russell disclosed again, his voice tight with concern. “Brook and Victor have gone inside, but Walsh is refusing to give the exact location. He wants to be the one to escort them the rest of the way.”

An ice cave with Jacob Walsh was about the last place Brook should be, and Bit was certain the team would agree. The three agents who had joined the group on the ground wouldn’t have visual, and there could be extreme dangers associated with unexplored natural ecosystems.

Brook is requesting immediate research on the ice cave formation. She needs to know how far it extends into the mountain, any documented passageways, and information about its structural stability—anything that might give them an advantage inside.

“Copy.” Bit released the side button before pressing it again to relay Nathaniel’s message. “Something turned up in Slick Mitch’s hotel room. He knew about Kate, and there is evidence that someone else is involved. You need to read him his rights and place him under arrest.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Bit switched from the radio to his cell phone. He attempted to reach Sylvie and Theo again, but neither of them answered his calls. How was he supposed to question the Kalluk family, search for two missing people, and dig up information on some ice cave in the middle of Alaska?

It didn’t help that his emotions were getting the best of him.

Bit pocketed his phone as he walked toward where he had parked the SUV. His sneakers were caked in mud from a damp area in the underbrush. The troopers and agents would continue combing the dense area while he did his best to multitask.

He was already creating a mental checklist of geological databases and topographical mapping system sites that he could access without any issues. Cave systems could be complex, featuring narrow passageways and dead ends. If Jacob planned to lead them into a trap, Brook needed to know all possible escape routes.

Nanuq's truck caught Bit's attention as he passed it. Something about the bed of the pickup seemed off. Bit paused, circling back for a closer look. The truck's paint job was weathered, the blue faded to a grayish shade in places, with rust claiming the wheel wells. However, it wasn't the truck's condition that made him stop.

In the truck bed, barely visible, were distinctive tire marks—the kind made by ATV wheels. They formed parallel lines in the fine layer of dirt coating the metal, evidence that something had been loaded and then removed.

If Nanuq had brought an all-terrain vehicle, he could have offloaded it before the clearing. No one would have heard the engine if the four-wheeler had been hidden far enough away. He could then easily have caught up with the group covering the territory on foot. Granted, he would have had to ditch the ATV at some point due to the incline, but the possibility still existed.

“Agent Houser?” Bit waited for Russell to confirm receipt of his transmission. “We still haven't located Kavik and Nanuq, but I've come across evidence that suggests they might have had access to an ATV.”

“I'll alert the agents surrounding the area.”

Bit didn't like putting off collecting his laptop from the SUV to research the ice cave for Brook, but he needed to speak with one of the state troopers or federal agents searching for the two men. The ATV theory could prove to be true, which would mean that Nanuq would have dropped off the four-wheeler somewhere along the dirt road where there was an easier access point.

Bit was able to locate one of the federal agents.

They spent a few minutes discussing the possibility that the men might already be out of the area and heading up the mountain. Bit suggested allowing the family members to continue searching to avoid upsetting them, while also involving other state troopers and federal agents. They couldn't search Kavik or Nanuq's vehicle without a warrant, which meant they needed proof that one or both men had been working with Norona or Walsh.

Until someone or something gave them cause to search the vehicles, they were at a standstill. Bit informed the agent that Nathaniel should be arriving soon. He would be able to give more insight into any possible warrants being granted with what little evidence they currently had on hand. Technically, two men going for a walk while waiting around for word from the recovery mission wasn't a crime.

As Bit rounded the back of his rental vehicle, something caught his attention—a splash of darker color against the tall grass and weeds at the edge of the clearing. He squinted, trying to make out if it was a piece of trash.

It was a boot.

A heavy work boot, partially obscured by the weeds, pointed at an odd angle.

Instead of extending his hand to open the SUV's hatch, he slowly lowered his arm. He lifted his gaze to scan the wooded area behind the underbrush. When nothing else unusual made itself known, he lifted the radio and switched the dial to a local channel. Once he had alerted the troopers and federal agents to his location and the reason for his request, he slowly approached the body.

Each stride revealed more and more of the male subject.



A leg.

A torso.

An arm flung outward.

Finally, Bit found himself standing over Kavik Aningan, the man's eyes staring unsightly up at the sky. A dark stain had spread across his chest, the fabric of his jacket torn and soaked through.

Not a gunshot—the wound was too ragged, too broad.

A knife, or something similar, had been driven with enough force to penetrate the heavy outdoor clothing.

Bit could only guess as to the reason for Kavik's death. Any speculation didn't matter at this point. What mattered now was that Nanuq was unraveling, and there was no predicting his next move.

Unless...

Bit spun around to find two federal agents walking toward him. With a few instructions to wait for Nathaniel to arrive at the scene, as well as instructing the forensic techs in the vicinity that they had an active crime scene, Bit radioed the others to locate Aputi Kalluk.

“Did you find them?” Aputi asked as he materialized from the opposite side of the clearing. He was actively searching the area behind Bit. “An agent said that you needed me. Are they okay? What were they doing that they couldn't?”

“I'm sorry, Aputi. Kavik is dead.” There was a lot of pressure on Bit to manage this

situation. He normally would have taken time to be empathetic, having just experienced such an announcement himself regarding a friend. Unfortunately, there was no time to allow the man a moment to absorb the news. “This is now a crime scene, and federal agents are rounding up your family members. You’ve already been through something like this before. We’ll need statements, timelines...you know how this is going to go. Please, help me.”

“I—I don’t know what else I can tell you,” Aputi said, clearly in shock. He had even reached out to a vehicle to help balance himself as he tried to come to terms with the situation. “Nanuq and Kavik were with us this morning, drinking coffee and hot chocolate. We had all taken the day off work to?”

“I’m not talking about now.” Bit could hear the engine of a vehicle approaching, but he didn’t bother to glance in that direction. He stayed focused on Aputi. “Nanuq and Kavik gave each other alibis. The owners of the wildlife conservation confirmed that part of a fence had come down. I pulled those photographs, and the work was done. Only I think that Kavik did the work himself, and Nanuq made his way into town.”

“Nanuq would never...” A spark of anger had Aputi stepping forward. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. I was at the bar that night. The road was closed off. You can ask anyone. Even if Kavik and Nanuq had wanted to come into town, they couldn’t until the road closure was lifted.”

“Not if Nanuq used his ATV to get around the debris of the accident.” Bit held up the radio to make his point. “Nanuq might very well be headed up that mountain to try and stop my boss from discovering Lusa’s remains. I don’t know how or why, but Nanuq is somehow involved in your sister’s death.”

“First, it wasn’t that type of accident that closed the road. It was a hit-and-run. Old man Croc was walking his usual route to the bar that night and got hit by a car,” Aputi amended, his anger still simmering at the surface. “And Nanuq is more like a

brother than a cousin. He would never?—”

“Kavik is dead,” Bit stated bluntly, refusing to revert to his usual laid-back demeanor. Kate deserved justice, too. “Nanuq was the last one with him. There is mud in the bed of Nanuq’s truck that suggests he transported an ATV recently. I think Nanuq got Kavik to cover for him that night based on some senseless lie, and Kavik finally came to his senses. I’ve seen this before, Aputi. Your cousin is spiraling out of control, and more people are getting hurt. Think back. Why would Nanuq have killed your sister?”

Sometime during Bit’s spiel, Aputi had come to some sort of realization.

The man’s gaze had veered toward the ground in stunned skepticism, and he was shaking his head at an internal thought that literally had him bending over at the waist. He rested his hands on his knees, but Bit didn’t push this time around.

There was no need.

“Lusa...she...” Aputi straightened before wiping a hand over his mouth. He was struggling to get the words out. “It was nothing.”

“It was obviously something,” Bit countered.

“I mean, I have to be grasping at straws,” Aputi said, attempting to convince himself that his cousin wasn’t a murderer. While Bit waited for more information, he noticed that Nathaniel had finally returned from the hotel. “A—a few days prior, my sister mentioned Nanuq’s fundraiser for the wildlife conservation. He used my father’s influence to raise a quarter of a million dollars. Lusa thought...well, she thought that figure was low.”

“Are you saying that Lusa believed Nanuq was skimming from?—”

“No,” Aputi exclaimed, holding up his hand to ward off the accusation. “I mean, it was a misunderstanding. Nanuq cleared up the misconception. He explained that some of the high-net-worth individuals didn’t donate as much as originally thought. He...”

Bit wasn’t sure where the hit and run came into play.

Or Jacob, for that matter.

Nanuq was now their prime suspect, and Nathaniel was going to have to take over the crime scene so that Bit could concentrate on gathering information regarding the ice cave, as well as figuring out why Sylvie and Theo were still MIA.

“All you had to do was share this information with the police back in 2014,” Bit said with disappointment. No one wanted to believe that a family member could resort to stealing, let alone murder. Brook was a prime example. “Not only would...never mind. A federal agent will take your statement. Again. This time, try telling the truth.”

Bit walked away, noticing Nathaniel standing near Kavik’s body. Two of the forensic techs were already taking photographs and processing the scene. Before Bit joined them, he needed to warn those in harm’s way. He raised the radio to his lips after turning the small dial on top of it to the correct frequency.

“Agent Houser, there’s been another development.”

19

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Wednesday — 1:39 pm

Ice reflected Brook's flashlight beam in a sharp burst of refracted color before settling into a ghostly blue transparency. She adjusted the light as she advanced deeper into the cave. Victor followed closely behind, his flashlight joining hers in an attempt to chase the darkness away from them. The air was crisp and cold, reminding her that the team didn't have the necessary equipment and proper apparel to venture too deep into the passageways.

A persistent drip created an offbeat rhythm to her steady heartbeat. When the main passage eventually divided into three separate tunnels, she paused to assess the situation. The chilled air carried a faint mineral tang—a subtle scent that hinted at the purity of such a wonder.

Instead, all she could imagine was Lusa Kalluk's body frozen in time. Yet her mind couldn't process that Jacob or anyone else had been able to carry her body up the steep incline. She thought back to their trek, and she was confident that Lusa's body hadn't been preserved in this ice cave.

Why, then, was this place so important to Jacob?

“We’ll cover more ground if we separate.”

“No.” Brook wasn’t going to allow anyone to stray without backup. “We stick together. I don’t plan on exploring too much of this place, anyway. Just enough to get a sense of what we can expect if we decide to bring Jacob inside.”

Brook had no intention of allowing Jacob to enter the cave, but she was leaving herself an opening to change her mind, just in case.

“We’re going to need supplies if he takes us too deep.”

“Let’s start with the tunnel on the left and work to the right,” Brook said, intentionally not replying to his statement. She was already doing what she could to stem the coldness from seeping into her layers. “Looks like a steep decline, so tread carefully.”

They moved ahead with careful slowness. Every minor descent, curve, and corner appeared to deepen their confusion. They pressed on until the passageway branched again, the space becoming increasingly constricted.

It didn’t take them long to return to the initial fork. This time, Victor took the lead down the middle passageway. The corridor was narrow, with walls practically pressing in on them from either side. A buildup of ice covered the floor, slick enough to threaten sending her sprawling with each step.

She kept one hand on the wall for balance.

“We need to turn back unless we want to end up on our hands and knees,” Victor finally said with unease.

She carefully turned and started to make her way back to the previous spot that would

lead them to the third passageway. All the while, she continued to reflect on their hiking route, Jacob's reactions to certain areas, and his comments about Lusa Kalluk.

Brook led Victor down the passageway on the far right.

Surprisingly, they hadn't traveled more than six or seven yards before the beam of her flashlight illuminated a vast chamber, with the ceiling soaring overhead in a glittering vault of ice. Columns of frozen water rose from floor to ceiling, some as thick as tree trunks and others as delicate as spun glass.

On the other side were two additional passageways.

"For all we know, this ice cave takes up half the mountainside," Brook stated quietly, her voice still reverberating against the icy walls.

Victor's expression was thoughtful, and something about his hesitation implied he had more on his mind than he was willing to say. Brook finally continued, her words carefully measured.

"You're concerned about bringing Jacob in here."

"I never said that," Victor countered, though his tone indicated otherwise. His voice carried a slight edge, amplified by the acoustics of the cave. "I just think we might want to regroup, is all."

"Look, I wasn't exactly in favor of this plea deal myself."

"I'm only here to ensure that Jacob doesn't try to pull anything. My opinion about the plea deal doesn't matter."

"And what would that opinion be?" Brook inquired with interest as she began to

make her way back to the cave's entrance.

“Initially, I was fully supportive of giving the Kalluk family some closure. A day's trip, totaling three days when you include the preparation and the flight back home. That's a lot of overtime. I get it. I have two little girls, and I can't imagine what Governor Kalluk and his family went through eleven years ago. But everything changed the moment we landed.”

Brook didn't need Victor to go into detail about the moment everything changed, because discovering Kate's body had thrown off her and the entire team—emotionally, physically, and mentally.

“You knew about Mitch Norona, didn't you?” Victor asked, though it seemed as if he was reserving judgment. “I can't imagine Carter was too keen on the potential mistrial, but a defense attorney with his hands as dirty as his client's? That makes this entire recovery mission feel like a trap.”

“Unfortunately, you aren't wrong.”

The admission hung between them as they stopped a few feet from the large crevice. Both turned off their flashlights due to the daylight streaming through the entrance, and it was clear that Victor was waiting for her to exit first.

She considered his words carefully, weighing her options.

“We can break the group in half. Restructure the dynamics.”

“Isn't this something you should be discussing with Houser?”

One of the things she appreciated about Victor was his tendency to adhere to the rules. Over the years, Russell had come to understand the lengths to which Jacob



would go to achieve his goals. Russell even admitted yesterday that he knew she kept tabs on Jacob and recognized that something was off with Mitch Norona.

Still, Russell hadn't hesitated to participate in this recovery mission.

"Nothing wrong with another opinion," Brook said before turning somewhat so as not to snag her jacket.

Those outside the cave resembled stranded mountaineers waiting for rescue. They were mainly spread out in groups of two. Russell had remained near Mitch, Justin was with Jacob, and the two forensic techs had settled comfortably against a couple of trees.

Interestingly enough, Mitch was handcuffed and none too happy with the recent development. She quickly assessed that the search warrant had yielded evidence of his involvement with Jacob...maybe even Kate's murder.

Brook created enough distance from the entrance for Victor to exit.

"I think restructuring the dynamics of this recovery mission might be for the best," Victor muttered after obtaining a visual of the group.

He joined his partner while Brook closed the distance to Russell's location.

"We should speak in private," Russell murmured pensively once Brook was within earshot. Something else besides word from Nathaniel had clearly happened in her absence. Russell guided her away from the group, though not so far that they couldn't respond if needed. "Carter has instructed us to head back down."

"No. We've been over this," Brook countered, hoping the chill from the ice cave that had settled into the fabric of her clothes would dissipate soon. She was on the verge

of shivering, but she managed to stave off the post-reaction. “Victor and I explored three tunnels inside that ice cave. It’s dark, cold, and quite simply a very confusing maze. Some of the passageways are too thin to squeeze through, while others open into voids with sudden drop-offs into other sections of the cave. I’m not entertaining the idea of taking Jacob inside, but I need him here for the time being. It’s that simple.”

“Cut the crap, Brook.” Russell gestured toward the others. “This search has nothing to do with Lusa Kalluk. You want to know why your brother needs to be here. I get it. I do, but we have proof that Norona knew about Kate. It doesn’t seem that he ordered the hit, but he knew about it all the same. The search warrant turned up a burner phone with a string of text messages, and we’re pretty sure we know who was on the other end of it. Norona has been read his rights, but we need to get him back down this mountain. Now.”

“Who killed Kate? Kavik? Nanuq?” Brook figured that with the two men missing, the odds were in her favor. No wonder there had been hesitation marks on Kate’s neck. “Both?”

“Kavik is dead.”

Brook maintained her composure until she could turn away from the others so they wouldn’t witness her frustration. She slowly curled her fingers, digging her nails into the palms of her hands. Being separated from her team meant relying on them to make the necessary calls in her absence. As far as she was aware, Theo and Sylvie were still on the other side of the mountain. This meant Nathaniel was in a position to try to undermine Bit’s position.

“Has Nanuq been detained?”

“The assumption is that Nanuq has access to an ATV. He is either headed our way or

has gotten a head start on the manhunt that Carter is about to launch with the Anchorage field office.” Russell sighed in frustration as he leaned against a tree. “Your tech guy is holding his own down there, but we need to call it. It’s over.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Russell.” Brook turned back around, her gaze swinging over the others. While they were somewhat scattered, they were still in a relatively tight space. “I won’t let Kate’s death be in vain. Do I want to know why Jacob went to so much trouble to be here? Yes, but my reasons behind that have changed, and this opportunity will never be available to us again. Radio, please.”

Russell stared back at her for a good twenty seconds before he silently handed her the satellite radio. She lifted the device while observing her brother. His focus was on Mitch, who was currently sitting on the cold ground in defeat.

“I take it the agent standing over Norona is from the chopper?” Brook waited to press the button on the radio until Nathaniel had confirmed her suspicions. “Bit, do you copy?”

“We copy, Sloane.” It wasn’t Bit’s voice that came over the radio. “It’s time to?—”

Brook intentionally pressed the button to cut off Nathaniel’s transmission.

As far as she was concerned, S&E investigations had been given full authority to lead the investigation into Kate’s death. While the plea deal might be off the table, Jacob’s involvement with an ongoing investigation was still relevant.

“A little over an hour ago, a mistrial was declared by Judge Colletti,” Brook reiterated from their previous conversation once Nathaniel had given up on his end. “Your involvement technically ended the moment Jacob signed a waiver regarding relinquishing his right to representation. Russell is the lead agent on this recovery mission now, and S&E Investigations has been brought on as consultants regarding

Special Agent Kate Lin's case. Step back, Nathaniel, and let us do our jobs."

Russell ran a hand over his face in irritation. She was putting him in a difficult position that he hadn't asked for, yet they had known each other long enough for her to be certain of his actions.

He would back her all the way.

"Boss?" Bit's voice finally came through the radio loud and clear. "Kavik is dead, Nanuq is most likely headed your way, and that ice cave goes all the way through the mountain. There are probably several entry and exit points along the way. I pulled up some surveys online, but I'm not sure how much help they'll be since they focus on the main entry points. The one you're at right now isn't even listed."

Before Brook could respond, Bit transmitted again.

"I have Slick Mitch's burner, and I'm doing what I can remotely to find out who was on the receiving end of the messages. I believe he tried to delete some, as well. I'll try to recover what I can."

"What pushed Nanuq to abduct and kill Lusa?" Brook inquired, wondering if Mitch would turn on his so-called partner. She couldn't figure out where Jacob came into play, though. "What motive could he possibly have to do that to a family member?"

"Money. When I was speaking with Aputi, he claimed that Lusa thought maybe their cousin was skimming some money off the top of donations. The only thing that makes sense is that Kavik covered for Nanuq back then, believing that the man would never hurt Lusa. Get this—the reason there was a road closure that night was due to a hit-and-run. The man died on impact. I don't know what that has to do with everything, but it's connected somehow."

“You’ll need a search warrant for Nanuq’s financials.”

“Already on it.”

“Have you heard from Theo and Sylvie?” Brook asked while attempting to figure out where the hit-and-run came into play, but she didn’t have enough information on hand. Sylvie might be able to discern the link between the two. “They’ve had plenty of time to return to Silverton.”

Brook had been talking quietly, and she didn’t believe that her voice had carried to the position of the others. Still, the split second that she had mentioned the town, Jacob’s gaze had swung to meet hers with interest.

“No. I’m getting worried, Boss.”

“Just to clarify, you said that the ice cave goes all the way through the mountain? Does that mean there are some entry points near Silverton?”

“Yes.”

“Give me a minute.”

Brook lowered the radio. She considered every scenario available to them, even taking into account Nathaniel’s desire to call everything off. There was a strong possibility that Jacob had spent months, if not years, studying the passageways. Jacob held the upper hand, regardless of how this scenario unfolded.

Unfortunately, there was only one choice to make.

“Bit, I’m going to have the chopper lower us down some supplies—additional coats, headlamps, and some safety gear. After that, I’m sending the pilot to fly over the

coordinates that Theo and Sylvie gave you earlier. In the meantime, tell Nathaniel that I'll have Justin and one of the other agents from the chopper escort Mitch down the mountain."

"And Nanuq?" Bit asked with full confidence in her decision. Russell, on the other hand, had a rather disappointed expression on his face. "What if he's headed your way?"

"That's why I'm keeping the other two agents within a safe distance to cover the nearby area. Nanuq has no idea that we have this terrain so closely surveilled with other agents. I do need a favor, though."

"Name it, Boss."

While Brook could drag out the afternoon hours to force Jacob into believing he stood a chance to enter the hidden tunnels, she had no intention of doing so after considering the disadvantages.

No one else was going to die.

"Radio us in about fifteen minutes," Brook advised as she met Russell's stare. She had his full attention now. "When you do, I want you to tell me that an earthquake in the region sometime last year caused part of the ice cave to collapse in on itself. And I need you to say it with the utmost confidence, Bit."

20

Bobby 'Bit' Nowacki

June 2025

Wednesday — 2:12 pm

Bit shifted in the driver's seat of the rental SUV, stretching his legs into the footwell with the seat pushed all the way back. He had rolled down the window in case anyone needed him. A few minutes earlier, the supervisory special agent of the Anchorage field office had arrived on the scene, allowing Bit some time to gather vital intel that could be useful to Brook.

Seven minutes remained before Bit was scheduled to radio her with false information regarding the ice cave.

He squinted at the screen in concentration while Mitch's burner phone lay connected by a thin black cable. The extraction program he had written was running in parallel—one reconstructing the deleted call history, another recovering text messages, and a third scanning for location data cached by various apps. Burner phones were becoming more sophisticated, and this one—which was relatively basic—still contained enough older components to leave behind evidence.

The screen was currently filled with strings of code as his program parsed through the physical memory addresses, rebuilding the digital traces that would provide him with cell phone tower locations.

Bit entered a new set of commands to circumvent another security layer just as a shadow appeared over the dashboard. Nathaniel had been glued to his phone since getting off the radio with Brook, but it seemed he was done. His mood was clearly still sour.

“I requested two agents take some ATVs up to where the incline gets too steep,” Nathaniel informed him as he came to a stop near the window. “That will cut the time it takes to get Norona down here and on his way to being officially charged for his involvement in Special Agent Kate Lin’s murder.”

“Before you make any type of deal, give me a few days.” Bit wasn’t used to making such requests. Brook or the other team members were usually in such positions of negotiation, which meant that he had to step up to the plate. “I can give you something to work with by then.”

It was obvious that Nathaniel’s first instinct was to defend his position, but he thought through his choices before responding.

“Fine. We’ll reassess if Norona will give us the name of his accomplice, though.”

Nathaniel could reassess as much as he wanted, but there was a chance he could charge both men. Bit didn’t want to get ahead of himself, just in case his theory didn’t pan out. He would keep his suspicions to himself until he received confirmation.

“The chopper dropped the requested items near their position. The pilot is now headed around the mountain to search for Theo and Sylvie.”

Bit appreciated the update, but he had heard the transmissions himself.

One of the federal agents had given Nathaniel another satellite radio, leaving Bit with one to follow through with Brook’s request. That meant Nathaniel had only made his



way to the vehicle to determine how much progress Bit had made extracting information from Mitch's burner.

A phone rang—not the burner he was dissecting, but Bit's own. He glanced at the screen, recognizing the Alaska area code. He answered without hesitation.

“Mr. Nowacki? This is Natalie, returning your call regarding the vehicle rented by Mr. Norona back in 2014.”

“Thank you for getting back to me so quickly,” Bit replied as he maintained his focus on his laptop. The program he was running on the burner was finally producing reliable intel. “I realize that the rental was over eleven years ago. As I mentioned in our earlier call, we have a federal warrant for the information, and the forms have already been forwarded to you in an email.”

“You are in luck, Mr. Nowacki. We usually only keep records for seven years, but those with damage tend to stay in our system longer.”

“Damage?” Bit shifted in his seat, mindful of his laptop.

“Yes, there was slight damage to the front bumper on the right side. Nothing major—a small dent and some scratched paint. Mr. Norona had purchased our additional insurance coverage, so it wasn't a financial issue. We noted it in our system and processed the return normally.”

“Would you please forward that report to me?” Bit asked, waiting for confirmation. Once Natalie assured him that she would forward the documents to the email address on record from receipt of the federal warrant, he thanked Natalie for her assistance before ending the call. “You have leverage to cut a deal with Norona. He'll probably give you the name of the individual who killed Kate in return for a lenient sentence, but you've got him on another murder—Chester Bernard. The residents of Blackpeak

called him ‘Old Man Croc’. He was killed in a hit-and-run back in 2014. The rental car had front-end damage. Right side of the bumper, exactly where you'd expect to see damage if someone clipped a person or object while driving.”

“You think Norona killed that man on the night of Lusa Kalluk’s disappearance?” Nathaniel asked, his interest clearly piqued. “That’s circumstantial evidence at best, Nowacki.”

“Maybe, but Norona doesn’t know that.” Bit turned back to his laptop, where one of his programs had finished collecting information regarding nearby cell towers. “The number used by the other individual pinged off one cell phone tower—the one in Blackpeak.”

“So, your theory is that Mitch Norona and Nanuq Kalluk worked together to kill a man named Chester Bernard, join forces with Jacob Walsh to kidnap and kill Lusa Kalluk, and then somehow have the wherewithal to lure a federal agent to Alaska to kill her?”

“I don’t know how everything ties together, but those three people are connected to these crimes.” The wind picked up, rustling through the nearby pines and sending a chill through the open window. Bit pulled his beanie lower over his ears. “At least the connections are becoming clearer. We can?—”

Bit's phone alarm cut off his sentence.

He had set it precisely for when Brook had requested that he provide her with unfounded information about the ice cave. He set his phone in the cup holder before reaching for the satellite radio on the passenger seat.

He met Nathaniel’s gaze. The false narrative regarding the earthquake needed to sound authentic. After a brief hesitation to organize his thoughts, he pressed the

button.

“Boss, you copy?”

“Go ahead, Bit.” Brook's voice came through, clear and composed as always.

“I looked into the ice cave, accessing several resources. The USGS archives indicate there was some seismic activity about twelve months ago. The NEIC records also verify a significant seismic event, which apparently led the state to conduct a survey on the mountain's southwest side. From their documentation, it looks as if some of the passageways collapsed, cutting off access at several locations. I'm not sure how far inside you'll be able to go, but you'll need to keep in mind the instability of the cave.”

“Any surveys completed from our location?”

“No, but the main tunnel that spanned horizontally from your position no longer exists. If you give me an estimated region, I can try to figure out if that area is accessible.”

Now that the main part of their discussion was over, the lies flowed more easily. There was a brief silence from the other end.

“Understood. Thanks for the info.”

“Boss? There is one more thing, and it's regarding Slick Mitch.”

Bit had forewarned Brook on the subject in case she needed to step away from the group. He wasn't certain what she wanted Jacob to overhear and what should be kept secret for the time being.

“Go ahead.”

“That hit-and-run on the night of Lusa Kalluk’s abduction? A man named Chester Bernard died on impact. I thought it would be wise to check the vehicles of everyone involved in the case. It turns out Slick Mitch’s rental car was returned with a dent in the front bumper on the right-hand side.”

“Bit, you just solved half the equation.”

Nathaniel quickly lifted his own radio, clearly intending to ask Brook to elaborate on her response. However, Bit reached out and snatched the device from his hand, surprising even himself.

He quickly muttered an apology, but they both understood it wasn’t sincere.

“When we get back to D.C., you can go ahead and order that fingerprint analysis device you’ve been wanting—the one that connects directly to the FBI database.”

Bit couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face, invisible to Brook but warming him nonetheless. It wasn’t just the permission to get a new toy, though that was certainly part of it. It was Brook’s way of conveying that she valued his contributions and trusted his judgment.

Her response was practically a bear hug.

“Back at ya, Boss.”

Nathaniel rubbed his face with both of his hands in frustration, but no one was going to ruin this moment for Bit. He placed his radio on the passenger seat, mentally configuring the specifications for the fingerprint analyzer that he had been eyeing for months. He would have enjoyed the idea of such an expensive convenience, but he

realized he couldn't do so until Theo and Sylvie were found safe and sound.

“Do you not realize that Brook is doing more harm than?—”

A distinctive chime emanated from Bit's laptop.

A program of his had detected something of significance. He swiftly changed screens, reducing the burner phone extraction tool to display a background application he had been using on financial records.

The window expanded to fill the screen.

Nathaniel rested his forearms on the window frame of the door for a better visual, but Bit still had to verbally point out the significance of the dollar figures.

“Once you told me about the search warrants for Nanuk Kalluk, I started pulling his financials.”

“Jesus Christ, Nowacki,” Nathaniel exclaimed in irritation. He reached inside the SUV and snatched back the other radio that Bit had rested in his lap. “I said I was putting in for them. Not that we were granted yet. Do you realize?—”

“My bad.” No one could prove that Bit had known exactly what Nathaniel had said after arriving back on scene. What mattered was that his hunch had paid off. He pointed to the highlighted transactions. “Nanuq's mother—the former governor's sister—has a checking account at First Alaskan Regional. If you look here, there is a pattern of large deposits over the past twelve years. Twice a year, like clockwork—May and November. Would you like to know what those dates have in common?”

“The same months as the fundraisers for the wildlife conservation,” Nathaniel

muttered in disgust. “Lusa was right. Nanuq has been skimming the donations. We now have motive.”

“You’re welcome.” Bit flashed a smile, figuring his contribution was enough for the federal prosecutor to ignore his jumping the gun on the warrant. “Do you want to reach out to Boss? Or should I?”

“You do it,” Nathaniel instructed as he hooked the radio to his belt. He pulled out his cell phone and held it up. “I’ll be too busy making sure those warrants come through.”

Bit expected Nathaniel to walk away, but he tapped the door’s window frame instead. It took a moment for the federal prosecutor to form the right words, but Bit was confident he was two for two.

“The fact that you’ve gotten all this information from a laptop in a rental SUV in the middle of nowhere speaks volumes about your abilities, Mr. Nowacki,” Nathaniel said with respect. “I sure as hell hope she is paying you what you’re worth.”

21

Theo Neville

June 2025

Wednesday — 2:26 pm

Theo scrolled through the countless pictures on Sylvie's phone, doing his best to keep his nausea in check. The haunting images of Sally Pearson's severed head resting atop a jagged stalagmite were utterly sickening—the act was inhumane. The sheer brutality defied comprehension and would undoubtedly leave another mutilated scar on Brook's soul.

"We need to get back down the mountain," Theo said without addressing the photos. Sylvie had taken them during the hour he had spent rigging a way for her to climb out of the ice cave. "You need a chance to warm up, and we need to touch base with Bit."

Theo had managed to pry loose some of the outhouse's longer boards that hadn't collapsed from rot. Fortunately, there were two planks, though weathered, that had been sturdy enough to support Sylvie's weight. It had taken some manipulation and careful balancing, but she had finally been able to climb out of the cold environment.

Her teeth were still chattering as her body struggled to fend off the deep chill from spending nearly two hours underground. The ride back down the mountain, with the cool wind and uneven terrain, wasn't going to be pleasant for her.

Theo resisted the urge to adjust his eye patch. There were times when he experienced phantom pain, although in his case, it was usually just a sensation that made him want to rub the area free of irritation.

“I hate to leave the scene unsecured,” Sylvie said reluctantly, managing to get through an entire sentence without her teeth chattering. Theo had removed his jacket and tied the sleeves around her in an effort to help contain her body heat. “I guess it’s pointless to try to cover up our visit.”

“Do we really think Jacob would trust anyone with Sally Pearson’s head?” Theo asked with skepticism. “Not for a moment do I buy that plan.”

“Maybe,” Sylvie murmured as she used her shoulder to push up her glasses. It was obvious from her tone that she had her doubts. “I keep trying to process the logistics. How does someone transport a human head from Illinois to Alaska without detection?”

“Cooler with ice, most likely.” Theo finally finished studying all the images on Sylvie’s phone. He pressed the small button on the right-hand side before handing it back to her. “Constantly refreshed, of course. He would have needed to avoid commercial flights, though TSA has missed worse.”

The area surrounding the cabin remained unnaturally quiet.

Occasionally, Theo could make out the distant call of a few birds, their notes sharp against the stillness. Very distant. Sylvie had been right about this place—the land contained a palpable sense of evil.

“According to Brook’s profile, Jacob meticulously plans each move. Nothing is spontaneous. He would have worked out transportation well in advance. He was young, Theo. Really young.” Sylvie suppressed a shiver as her body fought for



warmth. “He killed Sally seven years before we can pin him to Alaska.”

“Youth is irrelevant when interacting with someone of Jacob’s intelligence. His IQ is exceptionally high,” Theo pointed out as he shifted his stance to study the deteriorating cabin. “For all we know, he was here in 2007, living off the land. There were several summers unaccounted for in his timeline.”

“I honestly don't think this is about his 'work,' as he calls it.” Sylvie brushed a strand of blonde hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. She had lost the hair tie that usually kept the strands contained at the base of her neck. “This is about Brook.”

“How do you mean?”

“I think Jacob took Sally’s head as a keepsake. Not of the murder itself, but because of Brook's reaction to discovering her best friend bleeding out in a cornfield while her brother held the knife. He wants her to relive that moment.”

“I guess that tracks with the fact he used to leave her those Harry Potter books when he would pass through the city. It's not about the books themselves—it's about reminding her of their shared childhood, then perverting it.”

“Exactly. Everything he does is designed to torture Brook specifically. The murders are just the means, not the end.” Sylvie finally gestured to the ATV. “We should head back to civilization. Contact Bit, and then call in a forensics team.”

Sylvie untied the sleeves of his jacket.

“Put it back on,” Theo directed when she would have handed it over to him. “I’ll be fine. I worked up a sweat taking apart that outhouse anyway.”

“Don’t you find it odd that the sketchbook wasn’t displayed with Sally?” Sylvie

asked as Theo walked to the back of the ATV. He took his time securing the contents and ensuring the sketchbook, still wrapped in its plastic, was safely tucked inside. “I mean, it was hidden under a loose floorboard. Why?”

“My guess? The sketchbook is more personal...to him. More intimate.” Theo cleared his throat. “The display of Sally's head was a shrine—something he could show to Brook if he ever brought her here. Hell, maybe that was his intent with this trip all along.”

“It is the month of June,” Sylvie pointed out, both of them understanding the significance of the month...the same month that Jacob had murdered Sally and left behind their childhood town. Sylvie glanced at the cabin with interest. “How far do you think those passages go into the mountain?”

“I skipped geology in high school.”

“You did not,” Sylvie countered with a small smile. Theo figured he hadn’t eased her concerns, but it had been worth a try. “I’m just saying it’s possible the cave runs through the entire mountain.”

Theo walked to the side of the ATV, mentally calculating the time it would take with the various passageways—tunnels that Jacob would have had to know like the back of his hand.

“It could take around eight to ten hours, more or less,” Theo speculated as he swung a leg over the leather seat. “Jacob mentioned that Lusa’s remains were buried, right? Likely, Brook has already summoned the full forensics team and has been on site for some time now. Still, we should inform them about the potential of an ice cave entrance.”

Theo made himself comfortable before gesturing over his shoulder.

“Hop on, and let’s get you some hot tea. It will take a while to make the calls and get a team up here with the right equipment.”

Sylvie rested a hand on Theo’s shoulder, but she didn’t immediately join him on the four-wheeler. She was staring at him with both disbelief and understanding.

“You think Jacob gets some kind of sexual gratification from looking at the sketchbook,” Sylvie exclaimed, preventing Theo from starting the ATV. “The drawings aren’t just a souvenir. They are for his private enjoyment.”

“We can talk more once we get you checked out,” Theo said, urging her to settle in behind him. He hadn’t mentioned it before, because she would have waved off any concern. The fall she had taken hadn’t been a light one by any means, and he had caught her wincing a couple of times, which suggested she had a headache. “You going to be okay on the ride back?”

“Just sore muscles and bruised pride,” Sylvie muttered with a single glare. She grimaced while zippering his jacket to contain more of her body heat. “I’m not looking forward to bouncing around on the back of this thing, but Bit is probably ready to send in the National Guard.”

“We’ll take it slow on the rough patches,” Theo promised, though they both knew the entire mountain qualified as a ‘rough patch’. “Let’s go.”

He waited until she had made herself comfortable behind him, remaining silent about how long it had taken her to swing her leg over. Her muscles were definitely sore after that fall, but he was more concerned about the possibility of a concussion. He would eventually suggest that someone drive her to the hotel in Blackpeak, but not until they returned to Silverton. She would have only argued with him had he mentioned it now.

As Theo prepared to start the engine, something caught his attention. A distant sound, faint but growing steadily louder. Theo tilted his head, straining his right ear to identify it.

“Do you hear that?”

Sylvie went still behind him, her hands resting on his back.

“Is that a helicopter?”

The rhythmic thump-thump-thump became unmistakable, echoing off the surrounding terrain and growing louder with each passing second. They both looked up simultaneously, scanning the gray sky for the source.

“There,” Theo said, raising his arm to indicate the helicopter's location. The clearing around the cabin allowed them to observe the chopper as it approached above the towering trees. “It seems Bit did arrange a rescue, although the helicopter won't find a suitable landing spot. At least the pilot can communicate that we're safe.”

Both Theo and Sylvie raised their hands to signal that they were unharmed. As he lowered his arm, a flicker of motion just inside the dense tree line snagged his attention. He tensed, ready to start the ATV's engine if the local wildlife deemed that they had overstayed their welcome. Before he could utter a single warning to Sylvie, the sharp crack of a gunshot could be heard over the rhythmic sound of the helicopter overhead.

22

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Wednesday — 2:31 pm

The zippers of all three black nylon duffel bags were pulled back for inspection. Inside, tactical equipment and apparel were organized with military precision. Headlamps, battery packs, climbing gear, thicker jackets, and gloves were all included as requested.

Brook had planned for many contingencies, but an ice cave had never been on her list. She pulled one of the zippers farther back, revealing coils of safety rope, carabiners, and harnesses. The items were standard protocols for cave exploration, even one as improvised as this.

Not that such an exploration would actually take place.

The second bag contained other equipment, such as portable oxygen monitors and first aid supplies. A thermal imaging camera caught her eye—expensive equipment that could detect heat signatures through layers of ice. Someone at the Bureau had been generous with their budget allocation.

The third duffel bag contained thick down jackets in various sizes, insulated gloves, and thermal face masks. The temperature inside the ice cave was well below freezing.

She ran a hand over the nearest jacket, pondering whether these would be enough to convince Jacob that they were truly committed to having him lead them into the ice cave.

“Let’s head back,” Brook said as she zipped the duffel bags closed. Once they were ready for transport, she straightened and gripped the handle of the first bag. “If you could grab those two, we can get moving.”

The chopper had to drop the bags a short distance from the cave’s entrance because of the dense tree coverage, necessitating a brief walk. The pilot aimed to prevent the bags from snagging on branches, despite their weight being sufficient to break some.

“Care to clue me in on what you have planned, Sloane?” Russell said wryly as he leaned down to pick up the other two bags. “I would think working with me over the past few years would have given you some indication that I don’t like working in the dark.”

“I’ve already said I’m going to improvise.” Brook almost stumbled on the slope but managed to steady herself with the weight of the bag. “You heard what Bit had to say about the hit-and-run. Jacob probably discovered that Mitch was a lawyer during their fishing trip. If Mitch had been drinking and was part of a hit-and-run, he would have understood that his career was over. In fact, his whole life would have been ruined because he would have been staring down the possibility of vehicular manslaughter.”

“And what? Jacob held it over Norona’s head all these years?”

“Do you have any idea how many favors I culled during my time at the FBI?” Brook countered, only slowing down when the terrain made it necessary for her to. While Victor was more than capable of handling himself, she still wasn’t sure why being near this ice cave was so important to Jacob. “I have one from my first year that I’m saving for when it’s truly needed, Russell.”

Brook hated comparing herself to Jacob. It made her physically ill to think they had anything in common. She had assured herself time and again that the favors she had gathered over the years had been quid pro quo. Jacob's version of those types of benefits was returned only under the threat of blackmail.

The bottom line was that she had been trying to prove a point.

Brook hefted her bag a little more as she continued to mind her step over some thick roots sticking out of the ground. Once she was on somewhat of an even plane, she turned her focus to where Victor stood near the mouth of the cave. Jacob's attention was fixated on her, though she and Russell were still far enough away that their voices wouldn't carry.

"There is one thing I've picked up on that Jacob undoubtedly noticed, as well." Russell's observation brought Brook to a standstill. Since he had been a few steps behind her, it wasn't until he came to a stop beside her that he revealed said observation. "You're too relaxed not to have a failsafe. Nanuq Kalluk being in the wind should have had you calling this whole thing off."

Russell wasn't wrong, but Brook and her team had agreed to keep their strategic plans in-house. One safeguard tactic was to have a team of private contractors ready in case something or someone got past the federal agents on the ground. The challenging part was managing their locations to ensure no one overlapped or risked being in each other's crosshairs.

"You mentioned how we have known each other for years," Brook reiterated as she casually studied her surroundings. "Did you really believe I would jeopardize everything we've worked for by allowing Jacob to lead us into a place with no additional coverage?"

Once Brook was assured that nothing had changed in the surrounding area since she

and Russell had left to collect the equipment, she refocused her attention on Jacob. Her brother's posture was relaxed, almost bored, which was his intent.

Behind his calm exterior, however, his mind worked continuously, analyzing possibilities and planning contingencies. Unfortunately, that was one of the traits they shared—the constant calculation of odds and outcomes.

“I need Jacob to believe we're entering the ice cave until everyone is in custody. Once that happens, we'll escort him back down the mountain.”

“You could have just shared all this with me.”

“I needed your reactions to be genuine.”

“You were hellbent on figuring out why Jacob needed to be in Alaska this month,” Russell pointed out, still holding both bags. “You'll never know if we head down now.”

“Weren't you pushing to bring this all to an end anyway?”

Russell studied her for a long moment before nodding, a gesture of understanding rather than agreement. He wanted answers, too. The difference between them was that he was willing to settle for less. She, on the other hand, had to force herself to live without answers.

The satellite radio at Brook's hip emitted a crackling sound before Bit's voice cut through with clarity. She unclipped the device after setting her bag on the ground, her gaze leaving Jacob. They were still out of earshot from the others. The distance allowed for a final exchange of information before she played her hand.

“Go ahead, Bit.”



“We found the connection,” Bit stated with eagerness. “I’ve been digging through Nanuq’s financials. One of his accounts just happened to be connected to his mother’s savings account. Get this— regular deposits have been going into her account twice a year for the past twelve years. All the deposits coincide with the dates of the wildlife conservation fundraisers.”

“So, Lusa was right all along.”

“And it got her killed, not that I know how her death connects to Jacob or Slick Mitch.” Bit didn’t release the button, so she could still hear the tapping of the keys on his laptop. “Speaking of Slick Mitch, it looks as if he deleted some older messages on the burner phone. I’m running some programs now and should be able to retrieve them shortly.”

“Thanks, Bit.”

Brook ended the transmission, lowering the radio slowly as she processed another piece of the puzzle. She was confident she had enough edge pieces in place to bluff Jacob into making a couple of admissions.

“You need to follow my lead,” Brook murmured, meeting his gaze with a significance that conveyed more than her words. “Please.”

Russell slowly nodded once again, and she didn’t hesitate to pick up the duffel bag. She noticed Jacob’s subtle shift in posture as he monitored the reason for their delay. She sensed that he was relieved to see the necessary items to enter the ice cave.

His expression was very familiar.

It was the same one he had worn as a teenager when he had convinced their parents that Ben Pearson was the last person to be seen with Pamela Murray. The same

satisfied angle of his jaw, the similar shadows that played at the corners of his mouth. He believed she would escort him into the ice cave due to her need for closure.

“Bit just reached out,” Brook announced as they finally approached Jacob. She kept her tone conversational, dropping the duffel bag next to the ones Russell had already placed on the ground. The soft impact sent up a small puff of dirt, causing the contents to shuffle around inside. “Nanuq has been taken into custody.”

To his credit, Russell didn't display any surprise at her lie. He maintained a neutral expression, with his stance relaxed yet alert as he positioned himself slightly to her right. He was close enough to intervene if necessary, yet far enough away to give her room to work.

“Fortunately for us,” Brook continued, making no move to retrieve the equipment from the duffel bags, “Nanuq didn't take long to start talking.”

Brook continued to study Jacob's expression as she spoke, noting the slight shifts in his expression. Most people wouldn't have noticed the subtle tightening around his eyes, the almost imperceptible flex of his jaw.

Brook had spent most of her teenage years learning to read them.

“Nanuq admitted to murdering Lusa because she figured out that he was skimming off the donations to the wildlife center.” The words flowed easily, a blend of fact and fabrication woven together. “He is even hinting at killing Kate, but he wants to know what he'll get in exchange for turning on you.”

Jacob remained silent, his gaze steady on hers.

“This is my theory—Mitch alerted Nanuq to the recovery mission. No amount of reassurance could ease his fear that you were going to throw him under the bus.

Nanuq wanted to create a distraction from the recovery mission. He lured Kate to Alaska, attempted to kill her using your signature method, and then left her body at the end of the tarmac. He believed that would be enough cause for us to call off the recovery mission. You had no idea he would go that far, did you?”

Brook tsked her disappointment. Victor maintained his position beside Jacob and Justin while resting his hand casually near his holstered weapon. She had also caught the way Jacob shifted away from the mountain wall.

“Kavik probably figured out that Nanuq has been lying all along after we started re-questioning everyone. Kavik never thought Nanuq would murder his own cousin, so he provided an alibi for his friend. Kavik fixed that fence alone. Nanuq was already in Blackpeak before Mitch’s hit-and-run, wasn’t he? Nanuq abducted Lusa, and you were in the right place and time to notice. As for Mitch, he reached out to you at some point, believing that you could help him.”

Brook waved her hand dismissively. She was already taking chances by making too many assumptions. If she were mistaken about the specifics, the overall framework of her plan wouldn’t hold.

“We’ll figure it out, I’m sure. Between Nanuq and Mitch, we’ll get our answers.” Brook lifted a hand and signaled that everyone should start packing up. “But this is the end of the road, Jacob. We don’t need your help anymore.”

Not once had she broken script.

Her delivery had remained measured, her posture comfortable but alert, and her gaze direct. She had learned long ago that the best lies contained kernels of truth, and the reality here was that Jacob had manipulated everyone around him.

“Why would Nanuq Kalluk admit to killing someone whose murder I already took

credit for, dear sister?” Jacob tilted his head in curiosity. Brook had anticipated his attempt to trip her up. Her brother always deflected when cornered, redirecting attention to weaknesses in others' arguments rather than addressing the flaws in his own position. “Does that make sense to you, Special Agent Houser?”

“Both men were mere puppets,” Brook said before Russell could reply to Jacob’s question. “You made sure they owed you favors, and they knew you could destroy their lives if they didn't help when the time came.”

Brook decided it was time to play her ace.

She turned slightly and called out to the two forensic technicians who remained nearby. They sat with their backs against a cluster of wind-stunted pines, fully engaged in conversation.

“Do you recall the last place we took a break?” Brook asked, her voice carrying clearly across the space between them. “The area with the large boulders and some fallen trees?”

“Yes.” Both techs stood, brushing the debris from their pants as they responded with synchronized nods. “Yes, ma'am.”

Brook's eyes shifted back to Jacob, recognizing the faint tension in his posture after her request. She had reviewed each moment of their hike in her mind, analyzing Jacob’s body language. He had maintained a steady pace without faltering—until they arrived at that small clearing.

The way he had used the soles of his boots to brush away debris on the ground while sitting on the rough bark of the fallen log hadn’t gone unnoticed, either. The action had resembled the tender way a man stroked a woman’s hair.

“Go ahead and start back to that area,” Brook instructed with a small smile. Jacob’s carefully controlled expression cracked, and he could no longer contain his hatred for her. “That’s where you’ll discover Lusa Kalluk’s remains.”

23

Sylvie Deering

June 2025

Wednesday — 2:47 pm

“I 'm sorry. Like I said before, I didn't mean to upset you folks,” the hunter repeated, his rifle now pointed safely toward the ground. “That shot was meant to scare away a cow moose with her calf about fifty yards back. Those mamas can be more dangerous than most people realize.”

Sylvie's pulse had only just begun to steady.

At least ten minutes had passed since the gunshot rang out, and adrenaline still flowed through her system. From where she stood, Tim Lofton appeared harmless enough. He had immediately called out to identify himself after Sylvie and Theo had drawn their weapons. He emerged from the tree line with his arms raised high, the rifle vertical and pointing toward the sky.

“No harm done,” Sylvie replied, doing her best to give the man a reassuring smile. Once they had determined that Tim Lofton wasn't a threat, Theo had made his way a good eighty yards up the slight incline behind the cabin. He was using hand gestures to communicate with the pilot of the chopper, hopefully indicating their need for a satellite radio. She wouldn't mind delaying the ride down the mountain. “I'll be honest, Mr. Lofton. I don't know a lot about Alaskan wildlife. We're grateful for?—”

“Most tourists think bears are the big danger up here, but moose injure more people in Alaska than bears do. Especially cow moose with calves—they're incredibly protective.” Tim shifted his weight, his hiking boots sinking slightly into the soft ground. He was oblivious to her attempt to send him on his way. “They can weigh up to fourteen hundred pounds and stand nearly seven feet tall at the shoulder.”

Introductions had already been made, and Tim was informed that the cabin was now a crime scene. The man's curiosity had clearly gotten the best of him, but it was his incessant chatter that prolonged their conversation.

“When moose charge, they can hit thirty-five miles per hour in seconds. And those hooves?” Tim gave a long, low whistle. “Sharp as knives when they're coming down on you.”

“I didn't know that,” Sylvie murmured as she observed a large black bag being lowered down by the chopper on a thick cable. The bag swayed gently in the breeze, but it eventually made its way steadily down towards the ground. “Well, Mr. Lofton, we really need to?—”

“What most people don't know is how they use the landscape to their advantage. In spring and early summer, the calves are vulnerable to predators—wolves, black bears, grizzlies. When a moose feels threatened, they'll sometimes move into rougher terrain. Seems counterintuitive, but the uneven ground slows down the predators more than it does the moose. They've got these long legs, see? Can navigate through fallen logs and deep snow better than a wolf pack or a bear.”

Tim patted his rifle.

“That's why I fired the warning shot. Moose have poor eyesight but excellent hearing. The sound scares them off, sends them looking for safer ground. Better than having her charge you because you surprised her. They'll trample you without a second

thought if they think you're threatening their calf.”

Tim stood about six feet tall. His beard was neatly trimmed, and he wouldn't have given Sylvie a hunter's vibe. There didn't seem to be any calluses on the palms of his hands, either. He wore a bright orange hunting vest over layers of practical outdoor clothing—sensible for June in Alaska, where the temperature could drop unexpectedly even during the endless daylight hours.

“While we're here, we'll be more vigilant,” Sylvie assured him.

“And you really think that the serial killer leading the authorities to Lusa Kalluk's body stayed in that cabin there?” Tim asked with skepticism. “I mean, nothing ever happens around here. I moved here a few years back. Met my wife at a medical conference, fell head over heels in love, and uprooted my life from the East Coast. Crazy, huh? Anyway, it took a while for me to get used to all this wilderness. It's quiet, but my wife loves nature. I couldn't ask her to leave. Now? The East Coast is looking pretty damn good. I'm not so sure she's going to feel safe knowing that a serial killer was practically in our backyard.”

“Jacob Walsh has been in federal custody for several years,” Sylvie explained patiently, having already taken time to clarify the situation to Tim. “You and your wife have nothing to fear from him.”

“It's not him we're worried about, ma'am. We heard about that federal agent being murdered yesterday.” Tim removed his focus from Theo to concentrate on her. “We might live an hour away from Blackpeak, but something of that magnitude affects everyone around these parts. If that Walsh guy is in custody, then who killed that woman?”

“The investigation is being handled by the local FBI field office, Mr. Lofton.” Sylvie noticed that the man's interest was the kind of morbid fascination that high-profile



cases often generated in the public. Unfortunately, until they could apprehend the individual who killed Kate, Sylvie couldn't give Tim any assurances. It also didn't serve her in any capacity to inform him of S&E Investigations' involvement with the case. "Again, we appreciate your assistance with the...moose. It appears that my colleague has secured a satellite radio. You might want to steer clear of the area for a while."

"Did you find the remains of Lusa Kalluk yet? I wasn't in Alaska at the time, but my wife told me all about how she disappeared one night from a bar in Blackpeak," Tim shared as he made no effort to leave. His gaze drifted back to Theo, who had secured the bag that had been lowered from the helicopter. "I heard on the news this morning that the feds were crawling all over the mountain in that area. Why aren't you on the other side? Was that just a ruse to get the media off your back?"

A flicker of wariness passed through Sylvie. His questions seemed innocuous enough, but in her experience, specific questions about locations in an active investigation rarely were.

"I'm afraid I can't disclose that information," Sylvie replied, her tone cooling several degrees. "All I can say is that the cabin is now a crime scene. Thank you for?—"

"Did you find a body in there?" Tim was a little too enthusiastic, but Sylvie relaxed when she understood the reason behind his demeanor. "Wait until my wife hears about this. Not to move back to the East Coast, mind you. But a serial killer's hideout in our backyard? What are the odds of that?"

"As I said, I can't discuss details of the case." Sylvie motioned in the direction they had originally spotted him. "We appreciate your help with the moose situation. We'll keep better vigilance of our surroundings. In the meantime, we would appreciate your discretion on this matter."

Tim finally registered her dismissal, his expression shifting as understanding dawned. He then frowned in displeasure.

“You mean, I can’t even tell my wife?”

“You can discuss this with your wife, but I would still ask for discretion from both of you.”

The absolute last thing they wanted was for the couple to speak with the media, whether local or national. Tim’s earlier comment made it clear that the press had already discovered where Jacob had taken the group. A checkpoint would likely have been established a mile or two from the entry point.

Unfortunately, such recourse would only divert resources that could be better utilized elsewhere.

“You have my word, Agent Deering.” Tim held out a hand, which she took with a small smile of appreciation. “Good luck to you.”

With a final curious glance at the helicopter, which appeared to be flying in the direction from which it came, Tim reentered the forest and eventually disappeared from sight.

Theo was still making his way back to her. He retraced his path while keeping an eye on Tim’s departure. The rhythmic thrum of the helicopter rotors had finally faded, and the previous quiet began to settle in once again.

“Did you know that a female moose is called a cow moose?” Sylvie asked as she leaned back against the leather seat of the ATV. She crossed her arms, but the action had more to do with her displeasure than the chill she was still fighting off. “Next time, you take the statement. And please tell me there is a protein bar in that bag.”

“Protein bars, water, and some warmer jackets,” Theo replied as he lowered the bag in front of her. She quickly removed the jacket he had lent her and exchanged it for a heavier one. “Are those hand warmers?”

Theo tossed her a pack, which she immediately opened and began to air out so that she could accelerate the chemical reaction. While she was busy trying to warm up, he pulled out a satellite radio and immediately pressed the PTT button.

“Bit, do you copy?”

“Big T? Are you and Little T alright?”

“We’re fine.” Theo grimaced before announcing his request. “I need to speak with Brook. We found something at the?—”

Theo’s transmission was cut off suddenly due to a click, followed by a long period of static. Sylvie met Theo’s gaze, both of them comprehending Bit’s intentional interruption.

“Switch to a private channel, Big T.”

“What’s going on with your end, Bit?” Theo asked once he had followed through with the request. “Was the recovery mission a success?”

“No.” Bit’s blunt answer meant that Sylvie and Theo weren’t the only ones having a bad day. “Boss is still up in the mountains. Kavik was found dead, Nanuq has disappeared, and Slick Mitch is officially in federal custody. A burner phone was discovered in his hotel room, linking his knowledge to Kate’s death.”

The radio fell silent for a moment, as if Bit needed to gather his composure after saying Kate’s name. Sylvie tilted her head back and peered up at the sky. She

couldn't even recall what his nickname for Kate had been, and the fact that he hadn't used it to reference her spoke volumes about his grief.

"The working theory is that Nanuq killed Lusa. Kavik must have recently figured out that he covered for a murderer, and he paid the price. We also believe Nanuq has been the person receiving text messages from Slick Mitch."

"The two men knew each other?" Theo asked with a slight shake of his head. "That is quite the theory. Why isn't Brook on her way down with Jacob then?"

"Jacob led the group to the entrance of an ice cave," Bit explained, taking both Sylvie and Theo by surprise. "I think Boss is trying to figure out why."

Sylvie raised her hand to stop Theo from making another transmission. Brook's answer was right below the cabin. They needed to warn her.

"Go ahead," Theo said as he handed Sylvie the radio. He had witnessed just how much Jacob's shrine had shaken her. "Make sure to request a forensic team and some federal agents."

"Bit, it's me," Sylvie said after pressing the PTT button. The warmer jacket was more efficient at maintaining her body heat. "We know why Jacob led Brook to an ice cave. Can you request that she join this transmission? Away from Jacob?"

"Hold on." A long pause took place, allowing Theo to search through the rest of the bag's contents. "Little T? Give Boss a second to step away from Jacob. She just gave me coordinates where the rest of the forensics team should meet the two techs already up on the mountain. She thinks that they passed the area where Lusa was buried on the way up the mountain. From what I pulled up on my laptop, the location is about a half-hour hike away from Boss' position. Are you and Big T about to head back to Silverton? The pilot of the chopper said you were still near the cabin. The only one

who knows that you and Big T went to speak with Mekhi Hale is King P. Tell Big T that I didn't mean to cut him off."

"No worries, Bit."

Sylvie lowered the radio.

"This is going to kill her, Theo."

"No, it isn't." Theo sighed and leaned back to sit on the cold ground. He had already put on the jacket she had given back, though he hadn't bothered to zip the front. He rested his forearm over one knee before reassuring her that she wasn't about to destroy all Brook had built over the last several years. "Brook spent most of her childhood suspecting there was something seriously wrong with her brother. The barriers that she put into place were for her own mental protection. She is strong, Sylvie—the strongest individual I know, and she became the profiler she is today based on her brother's crimes."

"Brook accepts Jacob's sins as her own. You know that, Theo."

"I also know that she has worked to make room in her life for someone other than Jacob. She allowed us in, Sylvie. We won't allow her to slip away. I promise."

After what felt like an eternity but was likely only a minute, the radio crackled back to life.

"Theo? Sylvie?" Brook's voice came through, steady and controlled as always, though Sylvie could detect the faint undercurrent of tension that had been present since their arrival in Alaska. "I'm glad to hear your voices. Are you both safe?"

"We're fine," Sylvie replied before closing her eyes. She took a deep breath, still

unsure of how to proceed. “I’m sure Bit has already filled you in on our morning. We met with Mekhi Hale, discovered that Jacob stayed at a cabin about an hour or two from Silverton on some land owned by Atka Iverson. The property passed to his son. We were able to borrow an ATV from one of the residents in town. We...”

Theo stood, brushing the debris from his jeans. He then joined her so that they were side by side, leaning against the four-wheeler. His support had her lifting the radio back to her lips.

“The cabin is pretty broken down, but we found Jacob’s sketchbook. I don’t know if it’s the same one you discovered in his bedroom when you were teenagers. There are...a lot of victims. Pages and pages of detailed sketches with names. Victims who we never connected to him. I’m assuming their remains have never been found.” Sylvie paused, giving herself some time to mentally compose her thoughts. “We found something else, Brook.”

This time, Sylvie delayed giving Brook time to process the information.

“Some boards gave way beneath me. I fell into what turned out to be an ice cave.” The memory of that moment—the sudden drop, the shock of cold, the disorienting darkness—rushed back with vivid clarity. Sylvie pushed it aside, focusing on the facts. “We don’t know how, but Jacob somehow dug up Sally Pearson’s grave. He took her head, Brook. He transported it from Illinois to Alaska and created a shrine.”

The silence that followed was absolute, as if even the static had been shocked into submission. Sylvie would have given anything not to relay this information over a damned radio, but these were the cards that they had been dealt.

“June.” Brook’s voice had come through the radio. Not soft. Not with disbelief. Just...a factual word. “I guess we know why Jacob wanted me here in the month of June.”

Sylvie turned her head and met Theo's gaze, understanding passing between them. June had been the month Sally Pearson was killed in the middle of a cornfield. It was the month Jacob had first destroyed Brook's world, setting in motion the chain of events that led them all here, to this remote mountainside in Alaska, unraveling a horror that spanned thousands of miles.

“Coordinate things with Bit. He'll get you a team up there as soon as possible. We'll need to keep this from the media until I've had a chance to speak with the Pearsons,” Brook directed without hesitation. Only then did she soften her tone. “Keep her safe for me until I can take her home.”

Sylvie had known Brook during her tenure with the FBI. That version had been cold and distant. Theo had been right. Brook wasn't going to revert back to that person, whose sole purpose was to sacrifice herself for her brother's sins.

Jacob's power had just been stripped down to a mere icicle.

Brook was now armed, and her brother had just lost his last advantage.

24

Bobby 'Bit' Nowacki

June 2025

Wednesday — 3:09 pm

Bit shifted his weight from one foot to the other, acutely aware of the small stones grinding beneath his running shoes. Unlike the others, who had come equipped with sturdy boots, he hadn't anticipated finding himself in a place where traction would be essential. He was lucky to have grabbed his hoodie before leaving the hotel.

Nathaniel stood in front of Bit, the man's features practically frozen in disbelief. His eyebrows had arched extremely high upon hearing what Sylvie and Theo had discovered at the cabin on the other side of the mountain. It was obviously taking him a while to comprehend the situation.

Bit tugged at his beanie, pulling it lower over his ears.

It wasn't the chill that bothered him, but rather his concern for Brook. The head of her best friend in high school had been transported through several states and kept in an ice cave for years. That was disturbing on an entirely different level.

A flurry of movement drew Bit's attention skyward. Three ravens burst from a nearby spruce before spreading their wings wide and gliding on the wind that had picked up speed since earlier this morning. Higher up, a solitary hawk circled with predatory



patience, riding the invisible currents.

“I need time to process this,” Nathaniel muttered before turning away. He rubbed his hands down his face, as if he wanted to erase everything that had happened since leaving D.C. “Shit.”

Bit glanced to his left, noticing that the Kalluk family had clustered together near the edge of the clearing. They were literally a tight knot of shared grief.

Former Governor Kalluk stood with his arm around his wife, while another family member consoled the grandmother. No one needed to reinforce home that one of their own was a murderer.

They no longer spoke amongst themselves.

Their attention had fixed on the pair of forensic technicians crouched over Kavik Aningan's body, their blue-gloved hands moving with clinical precision over what remained of the man who had once loved their daughter.

State troopers milled around the perimeter.

Their numbers had doubled in the past hour as more had arrived, eager to aid the federal agents in whatever capacity necessary. Meanwhile, the remaining forensic techs had departed for their hike to the coordinates Brook had provided—the suspected resting place of Lusa Kalluk's remains.

If Brook was right, and she usually was, this day would bring closure to a family but open wounds for an entire community.

“I’m going to need you to say that again.” Nathaniel's voice carried the strained quality of a man trying to sound reasonable while his worldview shifted. That was

saying something, considering his occupation. “Because it sure as hell sounded like you said Jacob Walsh somehow transported a human head from Illinois to Alaska.”

“That about sums up the situation.” Bit turned slightly so that he could still keep an eye on the rental SUV. He had left his laptop open with programs running in the background. “I already spoke with the supervisory special agent at the Anchorage office. They're pulling agents from two satellite offices and sending another forensics team to Silverton.”

“Do you ever have good news?” Nathaniel muttered in agitation as he unclipped his satellite radio from his belt.

“Yes. The good news is the team processing the scene can reach the cabin by ATV. No hiking is required. Boss said she and the others are about to escort Jacob down the mountain. If all goes well with their descent, their ETA to return should be around five o'clock.”

“Not soon enough,” Nathaniel said more to himself than Bit. “I can't wait to get Walsh back to Maryland and in his cell where he belongs.”

“This plea deal was your idea, King P.”

Nathaniel shot him a sharp look.

“I'm well aware of what I negotiated, Mr. Nowacki. And yes, finding Lusa Kalluk's remains will bring closure to her family.” Nathaniel palmed the radio, not giving any specific directives just yet. “And not even your boss anticipated that Walsh would use this opportunity to reveal yet another crime scene that may implicate someone else entirely.”

“Well, technically...” Bit figured he had pushed the federal prosecutor far enough.

“I’m going to go and check on those programs that I have running on Slick Mitch’s burner phone. There was a string of deleted texts that?—”

Bit’s explanation of what he had discovered before Sylvie and Theo had made contact was cut short. Their radios crackled to life. Justin Genedet’s voice came through loud and clear.

“Base, we have a...situation.” Justin’s tone contained an edge. He and another agent had been escorting Mitch down the mountain. Had he been foolish enough to try to make a run for it? “I have Nanuq Kalluk in custody.”

That announcement had been out of left field, but they would gladly take a win at this point.

“Something is going our way for once,” Nathaniel muttered before lifting the radio and pressing the PTT button. “Genedet, make sure you read the man his rights. I don’t want anything slipping through the cracks.”

“That has already been accomplished. Nanuq clammed up, and it’s doubtful that he’ll say another word. We spotted him carrying a shovel before he attempted to dispose of it and flee. He—” The transmission cut out, but only for a brief moment. “He’s looking pretty pleased with himself. You might want to check if we’ve missed something.”

“Continue down the mountain,” Nathaniel instructed grimly, his previous satisfaction having been wiped away. “Maintain separation between Norona and Kalluk. We’ll sort this out when you reach base.”

“Copy that,” Justin confirmed. “Our position is approximately eighty minutes from your location.”

The radio went silent. It didn't take long for Nathaniel to retrieve his cell phone from his pocket. Bit left him to take care of business. As far as Bit was concerned, Sylvie and Theo had the crime scene in Silverton locked down. All that was needed to happen was for Brook to return to base so that they could escort Jacob back to federal prison.

Bit retraced the path back to the rental. The laptop he had left running on the passenger seat had hopefully spit out some results while he had been gone. In contrast to smartphones, which utilize advanced encryption and remote wipe features, basic burner models kept their data in a more straightforward, accessible format.

He didn't bother to settle into the driver's seat.

Instead, he opened the door and reached for his laptop. Pulling it close so he could remain standing, he reviewed the results of his custom recovery program. The screen currently displayed a grid of hexadecimal characters, which was basically the phone's raw memory laid bare.

Deletion was rarely as permanent as people believed.

When a text message was deleted, the phone typically just marked that space as available for new data rather than overwriting it immediately. Until new information replaced it, the ghost of that message lingered in the device's memory. The software was designed to recognize those digital specters, piecing them together like a puzzle.

The progress bar had filled completely.

His program had found something, and he confirmed that the hotspot connection was stable before he opened the data. A string of recovered text messages populated the screen, arranged in chronological order. Most were fragments, incomplete sentences, and half-words where parts of the data had already been overwritten.

But some remained intact, preserved in the phone's memory.

The messages dated back approximately three months. The other participant wasn't identified by name—only the same phone number with an Alaska area code that Bit had identified before.

The first coherent message from the unknown number read: Need access to site before feds. Too much evidence.

Mitch had responded: Willing to give location. Need proof and guarantee of distraction.

Bit didn't like the direction of the discussion, but he kept reading while trying to piece together what the other individual meant by distraction . The topic couldn't have been about Kate, because those messages had already been discovered.

Had Kavik's death been the distraction?

Again, there wouldn't have been proof of that back then. Bit was also certain that murdering Kavik hadn't been a planned event.

The messages became more specific as the plan took shape, although there were still some messages missing that Bit tried to fill in. These texts served merely as additional confirmation that Mitch had definitely been the middleman between Walsh and Nanuq.

The reply from the other individual came two days later: How?

Mitch's response sent a jolt of panic through Bit's body— all attention must be focused elsewhere. Win-win situation.

If their theory was right, Nanuq had killed Lusa.

But Jacob had been the one to bury the young woman's remains without Nanuq present. Jacob had kept that ace in his back pocket all these years, and he had blackmailed Nanuq through Mitch for...

What?

Mitch had sent another message three days later— schedule distraction for 6/12. Approx 3:30 pm.

There were coordinates included that Bit identified.

Today's date.

And the time in the right-hand corner of Bit's laptop showed 3:29 pm.

Nanuq was in custody, but it sounded as if a diversion had been set well in advance. What form would that distraction take?

"Shit," Bit muttered, his fingers fumbling for the radio clipped to his belt. "Boss? Boss, you have to get out of there."

Bit waited for confirmation, but Brook didn't respond.

"Boss?" Bit released the button as he turned to search for Nathaniel. "Boss, do you copy? Something bad is going to happen, and you?—"

A distant, low rumble gradually turned into a thunderous blast, followed by a very sharp crack that traveled down the mountain.

Bit's warning had come too late.

25

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Wednesday — 3:27 pm

Brook measured her breathing, counting to ten. She hadn't had to utilize such an exercise in quite some time. Her therapist had taught her the technique many years ago. While she had been hesitant to believe such a method could work, it had proven a useful emotional tool over the years.

She relied heavily on it today.

The overwhelming guilt and rage battling within her were almost too much to bear. She couldn't allow Jacob to believe that anything had changed in the past half hour. He had no idea that the team had spoken to Mekhi Hale, which had led to the discovery of the old cabin...and then something else entirely.

Sally hadn't been resting in peace at all. Part of her had been here all along, at Jacob's disposal, stored like a trophy in a natural freezer. Brook rested a hand over her stomach, willing the nausea away.

"Ma'am?"

"Let me grab the bags," Brook managed to say without her composure crumbling.



She had been discussing the route down the mountain with the lead agent of the team that had been lowered from the chopper. They had agreed to maintain some distance should any intervention be necessary, as well as to carry the equipment bags that were no longer needed. “I’ll be back momentarily.”

The agent glanced toward Jacob, who stood between Victor and Russell, handcuffed but somehow still managing to look as if he were exactly where he wanted to be. She rejoined them, forcing herself to meet Jacob’s gaze directly. His eyes—the same shape as their father’s but lacking any of the warmth she remembered from their childhood—tracked her movements with interest.

“This is what I love about you, dear sister. Such a challenge.”

Brook reached for the nearest bag, its weatherproof canvas rough against her fingers. She hefted its weight while nodding toward Russell to grab the remaining two.

“This hasn’t really been a challenge,” Brook responded to Jacob while waiting for Russell to help collect the equipment. “Oh, and I misspoke before. Nanuq wasn’t in custody, but he is now. Nathaniel just informed me of the arrest. Apparently, while Justin and another agent were escorting your defense attorney down the mountain, Nanuq thought the clearing would be free of prying eyes while he dug up Lusa’s remains. It looks as if the Kalluk family will get their closure, after all.”

Jacob simply tilted his head, another gesture reminiscent of their father’s mannerisms. He remained leaning against the mountainside, his prison jumpsuit a stark contrast to the gray stone behind him.

“See? The day hasn’t been wasted, after all.” Jacob’s tone held a conversational quality that suggested Brook may have overlooked something. He glanced at the bag she was holding. “I must have a faulty memory. I genuinely believed the young girl’s remains were in this ice cave. Do you think Nanuq moved them during the years I

was...well, otherwise occupied?"

Russell hefted the two bags in his hands and stepped forward, his movements deliberately placing his body between Brook and Jacob. She would have nodded her appreciation, but Jacob continued speaking as if there had never been an interruption.

"Aren't you curious?"

"No." Brook waited for Russell to stand beside her before turning to face the other federal agent. "Victor, make sure he's ready to go."

"Really?" Jacob asked once more, though this time a little less casually. "You're no fun, sis."

Brook halted, a sigh escaping her lips before she could trap it. She could sense Russell watching her. When she met his gaze, his expression was carefully neutral. Still, there was enough concern that he didn't proceed without her.

She turned back, adjusting her stance to appear unconcerned.

"I was wondering something, actually. Did you ever ask yourself why my colleagues didn't join me on this little hike of ours?"

A flicker of something—not quite uncertainty, but a recalibration—passed through his expression. His gaze once again dropped briefly to the bag in her hand before returning to her face.

"Perhaps they finally realized that being associated with you isn't in their best interests," Jacob offered, his tone suggesting he was merely continuing a friendly conversation. "Professional hazard, I imagine. How many careers have you derailed over the years, Brooklyn?"

“Being in prison must have really solidified your place in fantasyland.” Brook noted the slight narrowing of Jacob's eyes in response. “You see, we've known about Mekhi Hale for months. Turns out, he's been a wealth of information.”

“And what pearls of wisdom did the old fisherman share with them?” Jacob asked after a long pause.

“I'll catch you up on the flight back to D.C.,” Brook said, turning again to leave.

“Why not tell me now?” Jacob called after her. “We have such a lovely view up here. Perfect setting for the end of a story, wouldn't you agree?”

Brook paused and shifted her stance once again. She studied her brother with renewed interest. His posture remained comfortable against the rock face, but there was a new intensity in his focus. Not just on her, but on the conversation itself.

He was stalling.

The question was why.

“It's over, Jacob,” Brook replied quietly, the words carrying in the still mountain air. “Whatever you had planned, whatever you thought would happen up here...it's done. We found Lusa. We figured out who killed Kate. Our objectives are complete.”

Jacob's gaze dropped again, but she realized that he wasn't interested in the bag. His attention was slightly above the handle. She followed his line of sight to her wrist, where her watch displayed the time—3:29 pm.

A cold dread settled in her stomach.

He had been tracking the time.

“Is it over, Brooklyn?”

“Boss?” Bit's voice came through the radio before she could respond to Jacob's taunt.

“Boss, you have to get out of there.”

Russell muttered a harsh expletive while Victor took a step closer to Jacob, his hand moving to the restraints as if to verify they were still secure.

Brook swept her gaze across their surroundings. The ridge where they stood, the steep slopes falling away on either side, the narrow trail leading down...nothing seemed immediately amiss. Still, years of working with Bit had taught her to trust his warnings.

“Boss?” Bit's voice had taken on an edge of panic now, the sound distorting slightly through the small speaker. “Boss, do you copy? Something bad is?—”

A thunderous boom cut through the air, the sound rolling across the mountain peak like a physical wave. She quickly scanned the incline above them, where a cloud of dust and debris was already billowing outward from a point several hundred yards higher.

“Go, go, go!”

Brook was already moving, lunging toward the entrance of the cave as the first rocks began to tumble down the mountainside. They gained mass and momentum, causing Brook to duck instinctively as pebbles and rock fragments pelted her. Victor disappeared into the crevice behind Jacob. Russell, on the other hand, had lifted one of the bags to protect them, all but pushing her through the crevice first.

She didn't waste time, somehow managing to slip through the thin entrance at a rapid pace. She hadn't released the bag, so she dragged it in behind her as jagged edges of

the wall cut into her cheek. The severe vibration of the explosion made it so she didn't feel any pain, but that could have also been due to her adrenaline.

Time seemed to compress and expand simultaneously.

She was acutely aware of each individual heartbeat pounding in her chest, each labored breath as the air grew thick with particles. The sound was overwhelming, a continuous roar punctuated by sharp cracks as boulders collided violently with the trees outside the entrance.

She finally managed to push herself all the way through the narrow gap, though she couldn't avoid stumbling over something in the darkness. Unfortunately, she had dragged the bulky bag behind her, leaving her no cushion to soften her fall. The impact was jarring as she tumbled onto the hard, unyielding, cold floor of the cave.

Suddenly, there was a deafening silence.

Two thoughts registered in Brook's mind—the mountain had come crashing down around them, and Jacob was exactly where he wanted to be.

26

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Wednesday — 3:32 pm

Darkness.

Complete and absolute.

It pressed against her skin like a living thing.

The explosion still reverberated through Brook's body, though the actual sound had long since died away. She remained perfectly still, her muscles locked in place. As the seconds ticked by, she began to pick up the others' ragged breathing.

She took stock of her own body. Her right palm throbbed. Probably a cut, but not too deep. Same with her cheek. Her left shoulder ached from when she had hit the ground.

Otherwise, intact.

Functional.

She began cataloging the details of their current situation. Victor, Jacob, and Russell

were trapped inside the ice cave with her. The temperature had already dropped sharply in the short time since the silence had taken over. She had a good idea of what would happen to them if they couldn't find another way out.

It was doubtful the team of agents in the surrounding area had been able to seek cover in time.

Her memory of the moments before the explosion flashed before her. Jacob's expression hadn't registered surprise or fear. If anything, the corner of his mouth had twitched upward in that familiar, terrible way.

He had known.

Of course, he had known.

This had been his contingency plan all along. His way of ensuring they couldn't hike back down the mountain. They were exactly where Jacob wanted them to be—trapped, dependent, and vulnerable.

“That was fun, wasn't it?” Jacob's voice sliced through the darkness. It was his light laugh that finally had her shifting into a sitting position.

“Jesus Christ.” Russell's strained voice came from somewhere to her right. “Brook? Victor? You two alright?”

“Fine.” Victor's tone was edged with fury. There was some slight movement to her left. “You move another fucking inch, and I swear to God that I'll shoot you right here, right now.”

Jacob chuckled loud enough that the irritating sound bounced off the cave's walls.

“Fine here, too.” Brook deliberately ignored Jacob's taunt. “Give me a minute.”

With her uninjured hand, she managed to grab the thick nylon material of the bag. She located the zipper by touch. Once the bag was open, she identified the objects and items by shape and texture. She eventually found the headlamp.

Brook carefully removed it and turned it on. Light slashed through the darkness, momentarily blinding her. Brook squinted as she raised it to adjust the strap around her head.

As her vision adapted, the first thing she noticed was that the explosion had sealed their entry point. Jagged stalactites of ice hung from the ceiling like frozen daggers. The cave extended back farther than her light could reach. Unfortunately, she and Victor had already examined the tunnels. There wasn't a way out close by.

Brook swept the beam across their small group.

Victor was sitting rigidly beside Jacob, one hand clutched in the fabric of the bright orange jumpsuit that marked her brother as federal property. The agent's face was streaked with blood on the left side from several cuts across his left cheek, likely from his desperate scramble into the cave.

Somehow, Jacob had managed to get through the thin entrance with only a single scratch. It was as if the universe itself conspired to preserve him. His wavy brown hair fell across his forehead, while his expression was one of mild amusement.

Russell was closest to the collapsed entrance.

In the stark beam of the headlamp, Brook can see a deep gash across his temple. Blood had seeped down the right side of his face. His breath formed in small clouds that dissipated into the air while he took time to catch his breath.



He had pushed her through first, even though he had practically been in front of her. After Victor had shoved Jacob ahead, Russell had intentionally put himself in harm's way to make sure she had been able to seek safety.

Russell had been prepared to sacrifice himself for her.

The thought caused her throat to tighten in a way that had nothing to do with the dust or cold.

"I lost the second bag." Russell held up his left hand, which didn't appear to be in good shape. "Couldn't pull it through in time."

"It's fine, Russell. We'll make do with what we have."

"Always the pragmatist," Jacob murmured wryly.

"Shut up," Victor muttered as he used his sleeve to wipe away the blood from his cheek.

"Or what, Agent Brall? I think we're a bit beyond standard protocol now, don't you?"

"Which is why you should be very careful about what you say and do right now," Brook warned, admonishing herself for not getting them off this mountain sooner. She shifted until she could drag her bag closer to Russell. "I don't have the first aid kit. Let me see if it's in this one."

Brook ignored Jacob as she searched the contents of the second duffel bag. Fortunately, a first aid kit was front and center. It didn't take her long to pull it out and open the lid. There were a couple of ace bandages, and she chose the smaller one to wrap some gauze around the cut in her hand. Once she had stemmed the blood flow, she concentrated on Russell's hand.

“I’m not a doctor, but I’d guess it’s broken in at least two places,” Brook said gently before taking the time to toss Victor a headlamp. He leaned down to retrieve it. “Victor, don’t put that on just yet. We need to clean those cuts on your face.”

“It’s fine. Hand me a piece of gauze.”

Brook fished out a second piece of gauze and held it out to him. She then grabbed one for Russell’s head. He motioned for a headlamp of his own, and together, they secured the strap over the injury. The pressure would stem any remaining blood flow.

“Once we outfit ourselves with those warmer jackets, we’ll figure out a plan on how to get us out of here.” Brook motioned for Russell to rotate his hand a little more for a better angle so as not to cause him additional pain. “Let me know if I’m wrapping this too tight.”

Brook gently and carefully swaddled Russell’s hand with an ace bandage to keep the broken bones in place. The cold seeped deeper into them with every passing minute. By the time she had pressed the velcro end to its partner, the cut on her palm had begun to throb in time with her heartbeat, not that she would ever complain to a man who was clearly in a lot of pain.

“That should hold until we can get you some medical attention.”

Russell reached out with his good hand, holding onto hers. She nodded slightly, guessing as to what he was trying to get across to her. She made no move to stand, conserving energy while she thought over their current problem.

Jacob wouldn’t have planned all this if he didn’t have an exit strategy.

She reached for the satellite radio clipped to her belt, its plastic casing as cold as the walls around them. She pressed the transmit button.

“Bit, do you copy?” Brook waited three beats, then tried again. “Bit, we have a situation. Please respond.”

“The radios won't work in here,” Russell said, his breath clouding in front of his face. He gestured vaguely upward. “Signal can't penetrate.”

“I know, but it was still worth a shot.” Brook clipped the radio to her belt. “Alright. Let's take stock.”

Her headlamp cast shadows across Jacob's face as he observed her. He was enjoying himself. He had succeeded in getting them into the tunnels that almost certainly led to the other side of the mountain. He had studied the interior maze for years, which meant that he had the advantage.

She needed to take that from him.

“I might as well lay all my cards on the table, Jacob.” Brook began to remove items from the bag. She handed Russell a thicker jacket. “Mekhi gave us coordinates to the cabin you stayed at while you were here.”

Brook quickly realized that only three heavy-duty Arctic survival jackets were rated for temperatures far below freezing. More had been in the other bag, which was currently crushed under a mountain of rock.

There were a few thermal emergency blankets folded into packets the size of her palm. She set one aside while taking stock of a few thermal water bottles, a package of high-calorie emergency rations, a spool of paracord, a multi-tool, chemical heat packs, and a spare flashlight with extra batteries.

There weren't enough supplies for four people for an extended period, but she hoped like hell they would be out of this cave sooner rather than later.

Jacob hadn't responded to her claim about Mekhi. She figured her brother was waiting for more confirmation. He wouldn't play his own hand until he was certain of hers.

"Your sketchbook was discovered underneath some wooden planks." Brook paused to meet Jacob's intense gaze. "We also found Sally. She's already on her way back home."

It was obvious that Russell and Victor would have appreciated more details, but she wouldn't give Jacob the satisfaction of hearing them from her. She also wouldn't inform him that what was left of Sally would fly back with them on their private plane.

Jacob's expression didn't change, but there was a shift in his demeanor.

"There's nothing waiting for you. There's nothing to show me." Brook slipped her arms into the sleeves of the insulated jacket. She zipped the front shut before adjusting the collar. "This elaborate scheme to get me here for some imaginary anniversary has resulted in absolutely nothing."

"An anniversary is an anniversary, dear sister. There is nothing imaginary about the day you and I stood over Sally Pearson's body as she bled out in old man Herring's cornfield." Jacob shifted on the ground, causing Victor to stiffen in response. Brook realized that her brother was attempting to stand. The cold was getting to him. "Do you remember what I told you that day?"

"You mean how I don't get to be the normal one?" There hadn't been a day that had gone by that his words hadn't reverberated through her mind. "And there it is. The difference between us, Jacob. One that you haven't accepted yet, so I'll clue you in. I learned throughout my career and life that no one is normal. Everything you've done for my sake has been a waste of time."

Brook forced her lips to curve upward, though the effort to smile made it feel as if it were cracking her face. Could her brother witness what was underneath? She imagined fault lines spreading across her skin, years of carefully maintained composure finally giving way.

Jacob was like battery acid, eating away at her core, slowly dissolving her into nothing. Every interaction had come at a cost, but she was now in control.

“Sally is going home today, where she belongs. Your so-called shrine is currently being processed by a forensics team. You’re done.”

“Am I? I got you here, didn’t I?”

Victor stepped forward, placing himself between her and Jacob.

“As Victor already pointed out, he won’t hesitate to fire his weapon should he believe you’re attempting to flee.” Brook handed Victor one of the thermal blankets. “Tie this around his neck, but make sure the opening is in the back.”

Whatever Jacob imagined could occur over the next few hours, or possibly even longer if they couldn’t locate an exit from the ice cave, Brook was determined not to let him escape their custody. She was intent on keeping his hands covered for the duration.

“We need to make a decision,” Brook stated as she started repacking the bags. She was certain that Jacob had knowledge of another exit, possibly nearby. It was also highly likely that he had planned to navigate the passageways to reach the other side. After all, he had wanted her to witness his so-called shrine. “The explosion was heard by those at the base of the mountain. I figure we have two choices—stay here and hope a rescue team can clear the rock debris outside, or search for another exit close by.”

“We should stay here,” Russell advised, gesturing toward one of the bags. “Those heat packs are usually good for eight hours. We break some open, remain in place, and give the rescue team a chance to get us out of here.”

“There is another option.” Victor turned so that the light on his headlamp was aimed down the main passageway. “I leave you three here and do some exploring. If I can locate a?—”

“We stick together.” Brook’s response was adamant, and Victor eventually nodded his understanding. There were too many drawbacks to separating. “The problem with waiting in place is that we have no idea how bad it is out there. If they can’t reach us, we could be wasting hours. Jacob, you planned for me to be in here at some point. You intended to lead me to the other side of the mountain. You must know of other exits.”

“Was that a statement or a question?” Jacob inquired with a wide smile. The thermal blanket was now bunched around his neck, but he didn’t seem to mind. “Go ahead, sis. Ask me to lead you out of this mountain.”

27

Graham Elliott

June 2025

Wednesday — 11:43 pm

Graham brought the rental car to a stop in front of the temporary command center. Despite the late hour, the Alaskan sky remained in an eerie twilight, with clouds starting to clear just before the fleeting summer night was set to arrive. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel tightly, but he soon relaxed his hold, making sure to appear calm before turning off the engine.

Brook was trapped somewhere in that mountain.

Every minute that passed without action was another minute she might not have.

He stepped out of the sedan, searching for a specific individual. The temperature had dropped to the forties, and a slight breeze carried the scent of wet earth and pine from the dense forest that bordered the mountain base.

Fortunately, there was no rain in the forecast that could dampen the rescue efforts.

Several LED work lights and high-intensity floodlights were arranged around a small perimeter. Although their use would be brief due to the limited hours of darkness during this season, the bright light assisted in illuminating a portable table where

individuals were scrutinizing multiple maps.

The person he was searching for wasn't amidst the commotion.

The sight ahead was a structured frenzy, with groups of uniformed personnel gathered around maps, while gear was being meticulously sorted and checked. Graham identified the familiar motions of a rescue operation.

On his drive in from the main road to the clearing, Graham had passed a roadblock where state troopers were turning away news vans and curious locals. A female trooper with a stern expression had waved him through only after he had identified himself and shown his ID.

The media containment was necessary. The last thing a complex rescue needed was for reporters to trample the area and broadcast speculation that more agents had been killed today.

Graham spotted the Forest Service rangers clad in olive green uniforms, Alaska State Troopers in blue, and members of the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group wearing their recognizable red jackets. A team from the technical rescue unit of the National Park Service was also present. Among the crowd were FBI agents, who didn't require the iconic yellow letters to make their presence known.

He shifted his gaze from cluster to cluster, searching for a particular lanky frame and perpetual beanie. If anyone had reliable information on Brook's situation, it would be Bit. The kid's ability to gather information surpassed that of anyone Graham had the privilege of working with throughout his military career, and that was saying something.

After a second scan confirmed that Bit wasn't among the planning groups, Graham approached an FBI agent who stood slightly apart, talking on his cell phone. The man



ended his call just as Graham reached him.

“I’m looking for Bit Nowacki,” Graham stated, doing his best to keep his voice level despite the urgency thrumming through his veins. “From S&E Investigations.”

“The tech guy? With the grey beanie?” The agent pointed across the field to where a few black SUVs were parked at an angle. “Over there. He’s been working in his vehicle since I arrived.”

Graham nodded his thanks before striding across the trampled grass of the clearing. His heavy boots, hastily pulled on during the flight, compressed the soft ground beneath him. Fortunately, he still had his original bag packed from yesterday.

The private jet had afforded him the convenience of landing at a small airstrip, located thirty miles from the mountain, instead of losing valuable time dealing with commercial connections. He received Bit’s message about this afternoon’s events while in the air.

Graham had been in situations like this one before. He understood that the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group would be the primary coordinators, working alongside the FBI. They would bring in specialists from the National Cave Rescue Commission, as well.

Ice caves presented unique challenges.

The explosion had complicated things exponentially, and structural integrity would be their first concern. Rescuers would need to determine if additional collapses were likely, and they would work with glaciologists to map potential routes and identify hazards.

An assessment team with specialized equipment would need to be sent in, but only if

another entrance could be found. From Bit's message, there was one on the other side of the mountain. Ground-penetrating radar would be needed to map the cave system, thermal imaging to detect body heat, and acoustic devices to listen for survivors.

Brook was a survivor.

Graham wouldn't contemplate any other scenario.

Only after the situation was assessed would they send in the actual rescue team, equipped with ice climbing gear, medical supplies, and communication equipment designed to function in the depths of the glacier.

But all of that would take time. Hours, possibly days.

That was time that Brook and the others might not have. As Graham neared Bit's SUV, he clenched his jaw at the thought. The driver's door was ajar, and the interior light illuminated the young man's slumped figure. So engrossed in the content on his laptop, he failed to notice Graham coming closer.

"Bit."

No response.

Bit's fingers continued to enter commands on the keyboard, his oblong face bathed in the blue glow of the screen. An energy drink was in the center console beside him, and crumpled candy wrappers littered the passenger seat.

"Bit," Graham repeated, louder this time.

Bit's head snapped up, his eyes wide and bloodshot. Recognition flooded his face, followed immediately by a relief so profound it transformed his features. He quickly

set the laptop aside on the dashboard. What he did next left Graham speechless.

“General.” Bit’s voice cracked slightly as he scrambled out of the vehicle. “Am I glad to see you.”

Bit wrapped his long arms around Graham's torso in a tight embrace.

The unexpected physical contact froze him momentarily.

Graham gradually lowered his arms and awkwardly patted Bit on the back. He was concerned about Brook and had been alone today after being part of a team for the last three to four years. Although tough decisions had to be made, he managed the situation effectively.

“We'll get her out,” Graham said, his voice firm with a confidence he willed himself to feel. “It looks as if the rescue operation is already forming. They know what they're doing.”

Bit pulled back, using the sleeve of his hoodie to wipe his face.

“What if she didn't survive the?—”

“Don't,” Graham interrupted abruptly, refusing to let the idea take shape into words. “I'd sense it if something like that occurred. Our focus should be on what we know, not on our fears. Brook is resourceful and has encountered tougher challenges than this.”

“If I’m right, Jacob has had years to plan this. He knows those tunnels like the back of his hand,” Bit said as he lifted his laptop and settled back into the driver’s seat of the SUV. The screen was filled with topographical maps and what appeared to be thermal imaging data. “I’ve pulled up some diagrams that he might have had access

to back in 2014. These ice caves are known to shift over time, but the main tunnels should still be the same.”

“Then it’s a good thing Brook knows how he thinks.” Graham grabbed the side of the door. “You mentioned in your message that the ice cave goes through the mountain. Sylvie and Theo are still on the other side, right?”

“A team reached the cabin hours ago. Forensics finished about thirty minutes ago, collecting...well, you know. They are in the process of transporting the evidence down the mountain now.”

“But Sylvie and Theo are still on site?”

“Little T radioed me about five minutes ago. They were getting ready to head down the mountain themselves. I figure they’ll be here within the next couple of hours.”

Graham gestured toward the satellite radio on the dashboard.

“Ask them to stay.”

Bit studied Graham for a moment before reaching for the device.

“What are you thinking, General?”

“The teams nearby are determining the safest way into the ice cave, considering Brook and the others' current positions. Standard rescue protocols aim to reduce risks for both the victims and the rescuers. Hours have passed without a consensus on a method.” Graham cast Bit a challenging look. “They aren’t thinking the way Brook is.”

“Because Boss’ first instinct is to rely on the profile. Keeping Jacob contained in one

spot for that many hours gives him too much of an advantage, doesn't it?" Bit quickly turned back to his laptop. He shifted it so that Graham could get a better visual of the screen. "And if we're assuming that Jacob knows those passageways, then Boss isn't on this side of the mountain anymore. Depending on the tunnel system, it would take them seven to ten hours, which means that she and the others are probably already closing in on the other exit."

"That's right, Bit." Graham motioned for Bit to get out of the SUV. "You contact Sylvie and Theo while I drive. We'll let the assessment team continue with their plans just in case we're wrong."

Bit closed his laptop and scrambled out of the driver's seat. He made his way around the front of the SUV while Graham slid in behind the wheel. He closed the driver's door firmly before starting the engine. Fortunately, the vehicle's dash displayed a full tank of gas.

"While you're on the radio, make sure there are two ATVs ready for us in Silverton. With the forensics team already on the way down the mountain, that shouldn't be a problem."

Graham maneuvered the SUV around the perimeter of the command area, steering clear of the central activity. A state trooper at the edge of the clearing shot them a questioning glance but did not attempt to stop them. As they finally pulled onto the main road and passed the media vans, Graham allowed his thoughts to shift to Brook.

She was smart, resourceful, and knew Jacob better than anyone else on earth.

It wasn't the treacherous landscape of the ice cave that would pose a difficulty for Brook. It was the duplicitous psychological terrain of her brother's mind. She would need to use his narcissism against him if she were to reach both finish lines.

28

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Thursday — 12:28 am

After eight hours of trudging through the ice cave, following hours of hiking up a mountain, Brook's muscles felt as heavy as lead. Deep exhaustion weighed her down, threatening to blur her thoughts. Yet, intermittently, an infuriating whistle echoed against the icy walls. That sound scraped at her nerves, reminiscent of fingernails on a chalkboard. Though she couldn't identify the tune, the hollow notes reverberating through the ice made her skin crawl.

It was Victor who broke first.

"I swear to God, if you don't stop?—"

"Just passing the time," Jacob responded almost gleefully before coming to a stop. He had been whistling the same tuneless melody at irregular intervals throughout their excursion. She certainly didn't view their journey as an exploration. After all, she had been right about her brother's knowledge of the tunnels. "What do you think, Agent Brall. Left or right?"

The cave's passageways curved and branched like the interior of some massive, crystalline organism. The temperature had dropped precipitously the deeper they had

ventured into the mountain. While their breath still hung in clouds before their faces, it wasn't as cold as it had been a few hours ago. That had to be a sign that they were nearing the other side of the mountain.

Still, Brook had lost sensation in her toes hours ago. Her thick hiking boots had proved somewhat inadequate against the relentless cold. She flexed the soles of her feet, willing the circulation back while coming to a stop behind Victor.

"Walk," Victor directed Jacob, his patience at the snapping point.

"Stress is a silent killer, Agent Brall. Isn't that right, dear sister?"

Victor once again instructed Jacob to keep walking, practically forcing him to select one of the two passageways. Brook had tried multiple times to figure out their route, but the cave's complex network of tunnels had made it challenging. Despite her brother's remarkable intelligence, memorizing all the passageways during his stay in Alaska would have been nearly impossible.

While Victor and Jacob entered the tunnel on the right, Brook intentionally hung back. Something about Jacob's whistling had been nagging at her for hours. She had gotten rather adept at learning to recognize behavioral patterns. There were tiny threads of consistency that even the most chaotic personalities couldn't help but weave into their actions.

She mentally retraced their journey, replaying each instance of Jacob's whistling. The first time had been right before they had encountered a fork in the cave system. The second had occurred about thirty seconds before another junction. The third...

The whistling hadn't been random.

Jacob had deliberately been distracting them this entire time.

Brook's gaze fixed on her brother's back. He hadn't memorized the route from exploring the cave. He had marked them. As if sensing a shift in the air, Jacob glanced back at her, his eyes reflecting the light of her headlamp with an almost animal luminescence.

Brook forced herself to move forward, with Russell trailing behind, carrying one of the bags. She held the other, leaving Victor to focus solely on Jacob.

They continued in silence for another twenty minutes. The only sounds were their labored breathing and the crunch of their boots on the icy floor. Brook kept careful count of their turns—left, right, right, left—trying to build a mental map of their progress.

She felt fairly confident that Jacob was steering them clear of the mountain's deepest center. This path was safe for them, considering the risks posed by the frigid temperatures.

Then, like clockwork, Jacob began to whistle again.

Victor's patience snapped.

“Jesus Christ,” Victor muttered in irritation. “Not another sound.”

Jacob obliged, falling silent with that same enigmatic smile. Sure enough, within a minute, they approached another junction—this time a choice between two identical-looking tunnels.

“You really should take up meditation, Agent Brall. I've recently applied the practice of mindfulness in my daily routine. Given my current living conditions, you can imagine how useful the technique is for my mental health.” Jacob came to a complete stop, tilting his head to the right as he appeared to consider both passages. “The



tunnel on the left, or the tunnel on the right?”

Jacob made a soft tsking sound with his tongue.

“Let’s try the right passageway, shall we?”

Jacob began advancing in the direction he had chosen, with Victor remaining close to his side. Russell, who had been bringing up the rear of their small party, moved to follow. When she stayed still, he frowned at her until she held up a finger to her lips. He hesitated briefly before nodding almost imperceptibly.

“Go ahead,” Brook mouthed, gesturing for him to follow Victor and Jacob so they didn’t question why there weren’t footsteps following in their wake.

As Russell reluctantly moved forward, Brook remained rooted in place, her headlamp trained in the area where Jacob had made his decision. Something wasn't right, and she needed just a moment to figure out what her brother had been doing for the past nine hours without their knowledge.

The beam of her light played across the ice, revealing nothing but smooth, glassy surfaces and the occasional crystalline outcropping. Jacob had been so certain in some cases—first wrong, then right—as if reading from a script only he could see.

Brook examined the walls a little more carefully.

What was he observing that they weren’t?

She finally had to relent this time around when she noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Propelling herself forward, she hurried to catch up before the distance between them grew too great. The sound of her brother's voice echoed back to her through the tunnel, casual and conversational, as if they were taking a stroll through a

park rather than navigating an ice cave in an Alaskan mountain.

“Did you know,” Jacob was saying to Victor by the time she was able to close the distance, “that ice has memory? Scientists say that if you heat it up and then refreeze it, it remembers its previous crystalline structure.”

“Fascinating,” Victor murmured dryly.

Jacob began to whistle, and soon, they were once again given a choice of two passageways. The ritual wasn’t in her imagination. She motioned for Russell to proceed her a second time, waiting for Jacob and Victor to enter one of the passageways.

Brook quickly began to study the open chamber. Fortunately, this one was smaller than the previous one. Her headlamp sliced through the darkness as she examined every inch of the junction where Jacob had made his decision. She even ran her gloved fingers along the crystalline walls where the passages diverged, looking for any disturbance in the ice.

Nothing.

The surface was smooth. Unblemished save for the natural formations that had developed over centuries of freezing and thawing.

As intelligent as Jacob was, there were too many twists, turns, and identical-looking passages for anyone to memorize a single route. The task would be nearly impossible.

“So, how are you doing it?” Brook whispered aloud, her breath clouding before her face.

She crouched down, examining the ice floor.

Brook had learned long ago that crime scenes often held their secrets in plain sight. People tended to look straight ahead or down, but rarely up. She tilted her head back to inspect the ceiling of the junction. At first, she thought there was nothing to find.

It wasn't until she straightened and went to take a step forward that the white beam caught a slight irregularity in the smooth ice overhead near a stalactite.

She narrowed her eyes, focusing on the spot.

The mark was barely visible unless one was specifically looking for it. It was a small notch in the ceiling. A deliberate groove gouged into the ice, pointing toward the right passage.

Directing her light more carefully, she examined the ceiling at the entrance to the left tunnel. No mark.

"Son of a bitch," Brook breathed out as realization clicked into place.

Jacob had marked the route through the ice caves by creating small, easily overlooked grooves in the ceiling at each junction. The whistling was Jacob's way of distracting them so that they wouldn't notice the marks.

It was ingenious in its simplicity.

No one looked up in a cave like this one. They were all too busy watching where they stepped.

Jacob's patience in identifying an escape route didn't surprise her in the least. The profile that she had spent years drafting on her brother had highlighted such resilience.

“Brook!” Russell called out, letting her know that Jacob had noticed her absence.

She hurried down the right passage after intentionally pulling the fabric of one leg up over her boot. The tunnel narrowed briefly before opening into another chamber where Russell, Victor, and Jacob waited for her. Jacob’s gaze fixed on her immediately, studying her with that penetrating stare that had always made her feel like a specimen under glass.

“Problem?” Jacob asked, his voice deceptively casual.

“My boot lace came untied,” Brook replied, adjusting the bag in her hand. Jacob’s gaze lowered slowly.

“Seems that your jeans are caught on the top of your boot,” Jacob pointed out, though she wasn’t sure he had bought her excuse.

Brook took her time leaning down and tugging the fabric free of her boot, using the time to compose her expression. A faint sound reached her ears that had nothing to do with the three men. She could only describe it as a subtle crack, like the click of a glass being set down too hard on a table. At first, she thought she had imagined the sound, but then it came again, slightly louder.

“Shall we continue?”

“Don’t move,” Brook directed as she slowly stood. She kept her voice measured to avoid startling anyone into sudden movement. “Everyone, stay perfectly still.”

Victor had already taken a few steps ahead of Jacob after her brother had nodded toward the left passageway. He had come to a complete stop when Jacob hadn’t directly followed behind. Her brother’s curious gaze was on her.

“Do you not trust me, dear sister?”

“Listen,” Brook murmured as she tilted her head to hear better.

In the ensuing silence, the sound became unmistakable—a creaking, groaning noise emanating from beneath their feet. The ice was under stress.

“What the hell?” Russell muttered as he stared down at his boots.

“We need to back up,” Brook said, taking her own advice with three steps. “Russell, come toward me. Victor, try to walk around, and bring Jacob this way, slowly.”

“We shouldn’t retreat,” Jacob advised, his voice unnaturally calm. He studied the ground with interest. “Allow me to slowly join Agent Brall near the entrance of the passageway. Doing so will relieve some of the pressure. We must be standing over a vertical shaft where the ceiling has thinned out over the years.”

Between the weight of the two men and the bag in Russell’s hand, it was no wonder that the weakness in the floor of the cave had begun to give way. She slowly took another step back in hopes that her weight wouldn’t add additional pressure, and she noticed that Victor had done the same.

“We can’t be sure about the size of the vertical shaft's opening,” Jacob persisted, ignoring her instruction. In contrast, Russell made a tentative move toward her. “Stay where you are, Agent Houser.”

Before either Brook or Russell could respond, a sharp crack split the air.

The piercing sound became a loud roar as the ice beneath Jacob and Russell began to quickly splinter. She could only stand and observe in horror as a web of fractures rapidly spread outward from where the two stood. The solid floor had transformed

into a network of breaking ice in seconds.

The final collapse happened with a ghastly swiftness. One second, Jacob and Russell were standing between Victor and her, and the next...they vanished into a gaping hole in the cave floor.

It was as if they had never existed at all.

29

Brooklyn Sloane

June 2025

Thursday — 1:17 am

The weight of uncertainty pressed against Brook's chest with each labored breath. Russell and Jacob had disappeared through the fractured floor of the ice cave—swallowed by darkness with a sound that would haunt her dreams for years to come. That sickening crack, followed by Russell's startled shout, cut short as both men plummeted into the unknown depths of the mountain.

She and Victor had spent close to thirty minutes searching for a viable path down the vertical shaft. They had inched along the rim of the jagged hole, flashlights aimed into the void, calling out for Russell until their voices had grown hoarse. The beams had illuminated nothing but slick, gleaming walls of ice descending into impenetrable blackness. No rope in their packs could reach that far, and no foothold or ledge had presented itself as a potential route.

Brook and Victor had done the mental calculations. Even if they had the tools necessary to lower themselves, they hadn't been able to get a sense of the depth. Any improvised line could have fallen catastrophically short. And the structural integrity of the remaining ice—the very ground beneath their feet—had remained suspect.

One wrong move, one misplaced step, and they could have easily joined the two men

in the depths of the darkness.

They had both agreed that a proper rescue team was needed, and they were just wasting time. After explaining that Jacob had marked the correct passageways, Victor now walked a few paces ahead of her. His stride was long, and his steps were quick. The faster they reached their destination, the quicker a rescue team could be sent in to locate Russell and Jacob.

“It should have been me standing next to him.” Victor had muttered the words aloud, but they still bounced off the icy walls. “If I had?—”

“Hypothetical scenarios won't help Russell or get us out of here.”

Victor stopped, turning around abruptly to meet her gaze.

“Jacob was my responsibility.”

“And he is my brother.” The words emerged sharper than Brook had intended. “Victor, I knew from the moment Jacob made the plea deal that he had something planned. I might have been reluctant at first, but it was me who ended up pushing for this.”

Brook swallowed hard as Kate's beautiful face emerged in her mind.

“Every single detail that I put into place led to the death of a very good...” Brook paused, the word 'agent' hovering on her lips before truth demanded its due. “Friend.”

Brook stopped talking when an array of emotions surged up her throat, threatening to escape in a sound she couldn't afford to make.

Not here.



Not now.

The bag in her hand had gotten incredibly heavy. She forced her fingers to release the nylon handle. The thud as the bag hit the ground was oddly distant to her ears.

She pressed her gloved hands against her face, pushing firmly against her eyes in a futile attempt to hold back the overwhelming flood of grief. The gloves, made of synthetic material, were cold and rigid against her skin. The irritating sensation suited her just fine. Comfort wasn't her goal. What she craved right now was control.

Brook sensed more than heard Victor reach for her.

"Don't." She heard him back up a few steps, following her directive. "I'm fine. Just...give me a minute."

Brook forced herself to breathe deeply, methodically, as she had done countless times under the direction of Dr. Swift. In through the nose, count to four. Hold for seven. Out through the mouth for eight.

Mercifully, the rhythm brought her a semblance of order.

Regrettably, clearing her emotions brought to the surface unanswered questions.

Was Russell still alive down there, injured and waiting for rescue? Or had the fall claimed his life instantly, his last act in this world the attempted containment of a killer?

If Russell were here with her at this very moment, she had no doubt he would have assured her that he had understood the stakes involved with this trip. He would have reminded her that he had accepted those risks the day that he had joined the academy. He would have emphasized that taking Jacob off the board had been his final play,

and there were far worse ways to close out a career.

She wouldn't mourn her brother's death.

That grief had been processed long ago, when she had firsthand knowledge of the evil that pumped through his veins. When he stood near Sally's body in the middle of the cornfield with blood still dripping from the blade of his knife.

No, Jacob's death wouldn't register as a loss. But his survival—that was a terror she could barely contemplate. Russell's sacrifice would be in vain, leaving Jacob to once again be free in the world. His presence, near or far, would be a cancer spreading through her life, metastasizing into every relationship, every moment of peace...just like before.

Brook lowered her hands from her face, flexing her fingers that had grown stiff within the gloves.

Time.

It always came down to time.

Tick-tock.

Like a metronome, measuring out the distance between events.

Between choices.

Between who she had been and who she was becoming.

Brook had spent the majority of her life trying to fix things—to make amends for her brother's actions, to prevent others from suffering as his victims had. Time had been

her ally in that endeavor, giving her the opportunity to build a life dedicated to justice. To establish S&E Investigations. To create a team that had become family.

But time was also merciless.

It eroded certainties, revealed new threats, and opened old wounds.

If Jacob survived that fall, he would use whatever time remained to him to continue his perverse mission. And Brook would use hers to stop him—but in a different way now.

There would be no more sacrifices. No more putting herself in harm's way out of some misplaced sense of responsibility for Jacob's actions. Kate, Russell, all the other victims—they deserved a fighter who valued her own life enough to battle effectively.

She would honor the dead by living purposefully, not by joining them in martyrdom.

“I’m ready,” Brook called out to Victor.

She bent down and retrieved the bag, adjusting the weight in her grip. The physical burden seemed lighter now, counterbalanced by her decision to take a different mindset.

It was either adapt or go truly insane.

Another five minutes passed before Victor slowed his pace. He came to a complete stop in front of her, so she had to shift to the side to determine what had caught his attention. There was a distinct glow of artificial light bleeding around the corner ahead, cutting through the primal darkness that had been their only companion for hours.

“This is where Jacob wanted to bring me,” Brook murmured, grateful that her team had taken care of Sally in her absence. “Lead the way.”

Victor didn’t hesitate, and he advanced forward with the intention of securing a rescue team for Russell. As they rounded the corner, powerful floodlights on tripods could be observed in the distance. They bathed the expanded chamber in clinical brightness, highlighting silhouettes of those she assumed to still be processing the scene.

In the distance, she heard someone shout a notification of movement. Adrenaline spiked in her system, allowing for a temporary reprieve from the exhaustion, upon the realization that those silhouettes didn’t belong to a forensics team.

Her team was waiting for them.

Theo, Sylvie, and Bit moved all at once, but it was Graham who covered the remaining ground between them with long, purposeful strides. The passageway narrowed to his approaching figure, everything else receding into a peripheral blur.

He didn't slow as he reached her, didn't stop to assess or question.

Instead, his arms enfolded her in a single fluid motion, pulling her against the solid warmth of his chest. She dropped the bag and yielded to his embrace while circling her arms around his waist. Her forehead pressed against his shoulder, and she inhaled the familiar scent of him—a trace of the sandalwood soap he favored in the morning.

The contact grounded her, anchoring her to the present moment in a way nothing else could. He didn't speak immediately, didn't pepper her with the questions that must have been crowding his mind. He simply held her, his breathing steady against her cheek.

In the background, she was dimly aware of Victor briefing the others on the situation. No one would be leaving this mountain anytime soon.

“...fell into a vertical shaft. No way to determine the depth or if either survived the fall. We tried to...”

The rest of Victor’s explanation faded beneath the sound of Graham's heartbeat against her ear, steady and reassuring.

He was life.

He was safety.

He was the future she had promised herself she would fight for.

Gradually, Graham loosened his hold, pulling back just enough to examine her face. His gaze took her in with methodical care, cataloging every scratch, every smudge of dirt, every line of exhaustion. She understood how his mind worked in times like these.

His hands, warm even through her cold-stiffened clothes, shifted up her arms to cradle her face. He stared into her eyes with an intensity that stole her breath.

“I'm fine,” Brook exclaimed automatically, her reflexive response causing him to shake his head. She tried to reassure him again. “I?—”

“I don't doubt that for a second.”

Graham’s reply confused her.

If he believed her assurance, why the continued scrutiny?

“Your mom? Is she okay? Did the surgery go as?—”

“I left my mother in Arden’s capable hands.” Graham lifted the corner of his lip in amusement. “I’m sure I’ll hear about that when we arrive home. Right now, let’s assemble a rescue team for Russell. We’ll get you warmed up, and then?—”

“Graham, I’m the one who asked Russell to go ahead of me.” Brook would have loved to stay in his warm embrace longer than those few seconds, but they had a job to do. She also needed to follow her own advice and avoid going down the ‘what-if’ rabbit hole. Doing so wouldn’t help their situation. “We need to alert Nathaniel and the Bureau that there is a possibility Jacob has escaped federal custody. Until we know what we’re dealing with down there, we need to assume the worst.”

“We had some members of the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group join us on this side of the mountain.”

Graham shifted to give her a better view of the chamber behind him. A ladder led up to what Brook assumed was the log cabin where Jacob had stayed many years ago. Theo was conversing with someone over satellite radio from the third rung, though he remained visible.

Victor was discussing specific details about the collapse of the ice floor with Sylvie, Bit, and two other men in red jackets. As much as it pained Brook to admit, the best thing she and the others could do for Russell was to allow the experts to do their jobs.

“Bit and I had a feeling that you would choose movement over staying in place, especially given that Jacob wanted you in this ice cave in the first place.”

“He marked the passageways, Graham.”

Brook wasn’t surprised in the least by Jacob’s forethought all those years ago. He

planned for every single contingency. He thrived on it.

“We’ll join the others. I’m sure Victor has already informed the others of the markings, but that will help the?—”

“Wait.” Brook reached for his hand, tightened her grip, and pulled him back before he could put too much distance between them. Something was still bothering her. “What were you...”

Graham brought both hands up to cradle her face just like before. His thumbs brushed across her cheekbones with exquisite gentleness, as if she were made of something infinitely precious and fragile.

He only ever touched her in this manner in private.

“I was searching for something. I needed to see if it was still there after today.”

“What was that?” Brook whispered, suddenly acutely aware of how exposed they were to the others.

“Our future,” Graham replied with sincere warmth. “Whenever I gaze into your beautiful blue eyes, Brooklyn, I see our future. And yes, it remains bright.”

His words struck her with unexpected force.

He looked at her and saw possibility, not just the weight of her past. Graham's faith in their future wasn't naive. He had seen the worst that humanity could offer, not just in his career, but also in his personal life.

He understood darkness.

He understood loss.

And still, he chose hope.

Time would allow her the ability to do so, as well.



30

Jacob Walsh

October 2025

Tuesday — 7:44 am

The music from the oldies station gradually faded as a news reporter began to update listeners on the months-long search for Jacob Walsh. The announcer's deep, resonant voice echoed through the chilly wind, reminding listeners of the rampant rumors surrounding Walsh's presumed death, as his remains had not yet been found. The report addressed the harsh, unforgiving conditions that experts indicated would make survival impossible for anyone seriously injured.

Jacob allowed himself a thin smile despite the lingering pain in his right leg. There was something delicious about listening to one's own obituary, about the world thinking he was gone while he continued to breathe...to plan.

He shifted his weight on the makeshift cane—just a thick branch stripped of bark—and continued his awkward progress around the side of Mekhi Hale's weathered house.

“—four months have passed since the remains of former Governor Kalluk's daughter were found and laid to rest,” the announcer shared, his voice crackling through what sounded like cheap speakers. "Special Agent Russell Houser was finally released from the hospital last month after suffering a significant setback due to a blood clot in

his lungs, but doctors expect him to make a full recovery.”

Jacob’s leg ached as he limped gracelessly around the rundown house. His broken leg hadn’t healed as it should have. With each strained step, the stick cracked the frost covering the blades of grass, creating irregular impressions next to his uneven footprints. After four months, he still struggled to walk without the sensation of nails driving into his femur.

Four months of agony...of hiding...of waiting.

He had survived worse.

The shed came into view around the corner of the house—a squat, gray structure with peeling paint and a door that hung slightly ajar. The radio inside blared at a volume that told him the old man's hearing was failing.

Perfect.

Jacob had learned to exploit other people's weaknesses, slipping into the gaps their deficiencies created. He paused, leaning heavily on the stick as a particularly vicious spasm gripped his leg. His mind flashed back to the moment everything changed—when the ice beneath his feet had gone from solid to nothing in an instant.

There had been a deep, resonant crack that seemed to come from the very heart of the mountain. Brook had alerted them that something wasn’t right. He remembered the brief moment of suspension, when his eyes had locked with hers—both of them understanding what was about to happen but powerless to stop it.

The world had fallen away.

The descent had been both endless and instantaneous. Gravity had claimed him, his arms underneath the blanket tied around his neck. There had been no purchase to be

found, nothing for him to grab onto—only a vertical shaft of ancient ice. Houser's shout had bounced off the walls of the narrow chute until the impact had driven the air from his lungs and destroyed the light in the man's headlamp.

Jacob recalled landing half on ice, half on the federal agent, a tangle of limbs and sharp pain. Something in his leg had snapped with an audible crack, and his ribs had flared with agony as they connected with Houser's service weapon. They had tumbled and skidded across an ice shelf, finally coming to rest in perfect darkness.

Jacob had lain there, struggling to breathe through the pain, waiting until he could stem the nausea to move. The man underneath him hadn't moved at all. At first, he thought that Houser was dead. It hadn't been until Jacob dragged himself off the agent and pulled the blanket aside that he could determine a faint pulse.

Not that it had mattered.

Houser had landed on the bag of supplies that he carried with him, so it was only a matter of rolling the agent off the duffel to search the contents. The mere idea of freedom gave Jacob enough adrenaline to retrieve a headlamp and seek the handcuff keys on Houser's belt.

The memory of dragging himself away from the unconscious agent still made him grimace. Each movement had been a study in controlled agony. His leg had been bent at an unnatural angle, and every breath had sent daggers through his ribcage. But he had persevered, pulling himself along the ice with the bag of supplies.

Fortunately, he had explored the tunnels extensively over the years. Though the vertical shaft had dumped him into unknown territory, he still had a faint idea of the direction needed to gain access to an exit.

Splinting his own leg had been an exercise in torture.

He had bitten through his bottom lip to keep from screaming as he had manipulated the broken bone back into approximate alignment. The taste of blood had filled his mouth, metallic and warm, as he had secured the splint with shaking hands. He had wrapped his ribs as best he could with an elastic bandage, the simple act of raising his arms nearly causing him to black out. The cuts and abrasions that covered his body had seemed trivial by comparison.

It had taken him hours to gather the strength to move again. He had eventually left Houser behind, not caring about the man's fate. The search team would eventually discover the agent, but by that time, Jacob would be far enough away to evade capture.

He had finally managed to crawl out of the cave.

“—local residents remain unsettled despite federal authorities' assurances that...”

Jacob blinked, returning to the present as the radio announcer's voice rose slightly. The fact that he had been forced to crawl made his gut churn. He tugged the worn jacket he had stolen tighter around his body.

The weeks following his escape had been a haze of pain and careful planning. He had managed to reach an emergency cache he had established years before in a small outbuilding on the edge of the conservation where Nanuq Kalluk had previously been employed. Most of the structure had rotted away in that time, but it still provided a roof over his head and was serviceable enough for him to heal and lie low until the authorities became lax in their duties.

“—S&E Investigations, the private firm founded by Brooklyn Sloane, Walsh's sister, has reportedly taken on several new cases in recent months. Sources close to Sloane indicate that she will continue to search for...”

Jacob came to a stop at the shed's entrance. The sound of hammering interrupted the

radio's announcement, and Mekhi's distraction gave Jacob time to recover from such a long walk. The mention of his sister brought back the moment the ice had shattered from beneath his weight.

He had experienced a peculiar sense of acceptance.

He didn't believe in God or divine intervention. Such notions were for people who needed comfort against the void. Yet something about that precise moment had felt like an intervention of Fate, if such a thing existed. He had spent his life creating perfect plans, controlling every variable—and then the earth itself had opened beneath him, a reminder that some things remained beyond his control.

Funny how that thought brought him comfort now.

Jacob wasn't big on spiritual stuff, either. Never had been, but there was something almost elegant about the collapse of his surroundings. Although the so-called experts were making rounds and assuring the people of his demise, his sister would never believe he was dead, not without a body. The thought of Brook constantly looking over her shoulder should have pleased him, should have warmed the cold places inside him, yet he was strangely hollow.

During their final confrontation, something had changed in Brook's eyes. The torment that had always lingered there—that delectable question of whether she might be like him—had diminished. She had stared at him with clarity instead of confusion, with determination instead of doubt.

Her little speeches during their time together had wormed their way into his mind like parasites.

"You're no different from any other killer out there."

The words shouldn't have mattered—she had always been so predictably self-

righteous—but they echoed in the silence of his hideout, competing with the constant throb of his injuries.

“Every single time you witness a woman believing her world is perfect and full of good, you think of me.”

His fingers itched to hold a knife and slice the blade through the flesh on her face. And what had truly sustained him through the physical pain, what had really driven him to force his broken body to heal, wasn't the thought of Brook's fear.

It was rage, pure and clarifying, that his sister no longer seemed to focus solely on him. Her life had expanded. She had that investigation firm, that team of hers, that boyfriend.

The twisted bond between brother and sister, hunter and hunted, of matching darkness...had been diluted.

Selfish on his part?

Perhaps.

But that was their dynamic.

She was his opposite and his reflection, and no one was going to take that away from him. Not her new friends, not that FBI agent who had fallen with him, not even the mountain that had tried to claim him.

Jacob's lips twitched into a small smile.

For now, he would allow Brook and those currently in her life to become comfortable in their bubbles of safety and normalcy. He needed time, anyway—time to finish recuperating, time to plan.

His leg still wasn't right. The break had been complex, and his amateur medical skills had been insufficient for a perfect repair. He still couldn't put full weight on it without feeling like the bone might snap again.

Alaska had served its purpose, but now it had become a trap.

The authorities might believe him dead, but their presence remained, a lingering reminder of the massive manhunt that had scoured these mountains for months. He needed to disappear completely, and for that, he needed help.

Approaching the shed's entrance, Jacob realized that he appeared quite different from the man who had faced off with his sister months ago. His face was gaunt, and a new scar cut across his forehead and disappeared into his hairline. His once-precise movements had been replaced by the halting gait of a man still in constant pain.

Nevertheless, Mekhi Hale would recognize him instantly.

Just inside the opening, Jacob found the small space cluttered with fishing gear and tools. The floor was stained with decades of oil and bait. The radio sat on a workbench close to the entrance, its volume disproportionate to its size. On the other side of the shed stood Mekhi, his back to the door as he focused on some small repair job, utterly unaware that someone had just entered his sanctuary.

The old fisherman was Jacob's ticket out. He was a man with a boat, with knowledge of the coastline, with routes that avoided official channels. A man who, wittingly or not, had aided him before with transportation and information.

And he was also a man whose fear could be leveraged.

Jacob had monitored the police presence around Silverton and noted how it gradually diminished as weeks turned into months, though they still maintained regular patrols. The officer stationed near Mekhi's property had become somewhat of a permanent

fixture. Fortunately, the locals had taken control and were quite rigid in their schedules...and breaks.

Another officer would be parked out front in about thirty minutes.

Mekhi continued his work, oblivious to the predator behind him.

Jacob limped forward, each step measured to minimize the sound, until he was standing next to the radio. He reached out and clicked the radio off with a decisive snap.

The sudden silence fell like a physical weight.

Mekhi turned, a question already forming on his lips, but then he froze as the color drained from his weathered face. Recognition dawned well before his emotions shifted from confusion to shock to fear.

The old fisherman's eyes darted to the opening behind Jacob, seeking the police cruiser that had been his silent guardian for months. The hope in his eyes dimmed as he registered its absence. His apprehensive gaze returned to Jacob, taking in the changes—the gauntness, the new scar, the makeshift cane.

“Hi, old man,” Jacob said with a smile, savoring the moment. “It's been a while.”

~ The End ~

A killer's calling card resurfaces in the chilling next installment of the Touch of Evil series by USA Today Bestselling Author Kennedy Layne...

Click [HERE](#)

When the family of Lila Hartman turns to S&E Investigations, they're convinced



their daughter was the fourth victim of a murderer who was supposed to be long gone. More than a decade ago, the Photograph Killer terrorized Ohio, sending two Polaroids to local newspapers: one capturing his victim alive, the other showing her strangled with a yellow scarf just twenty-four hours later.

Three murders were officially linked to him—until Lila’s body surfaced after the killing spree had seemingly ended. Her case went cold. Forgotten.

Until now.

Hidden among a box of undelivered mail from a shuttered newspaper, a Polaroid of Lila surfaces—proof that the Photograph Killer had claimed at least one more victim. With new evidence in hand, Brooklyn Sloane and her team trace the killer’s dark path back to a small Ohio town where his reign of terror first began. But the town guards its secrets—and its sinners—closely. No one welcomes outsiders, especially those digging into a past they’ve tried to bury.

As Brook unearths the truth, she’s haunted by a deeper, personal mystery: the disappearance of her brother, Jacob Walsh. His body was never recovered. His fate remains unknown. And sometimes, in the quietest moments, she can still feel him watching.