

Chapter 3



Wednesday, August 13, 2014; New York Presbyterian Hospital, NYC

Doctor Stevens stroked his freshly shaved chin as he passed through the hospital corridor. The salt and pepper beard garnered an assumption of wisdom from some patients and suspicion from others. The latter's unspoken question, "Why is someone your age only at the beginning of your career?" He managed to achieve an ageless appearance by maintaining his former military grooming, but Detective Mathias caught on quick enough.

Stevens considered Detective Mathias' question about Jane Doe's physical complaint as he approached her room during his usual early morning rounds. The doctor would have been more surprised if the dislocated shoulder did not include sequela from concomitant muscle tears. Mathias' description of her repetitive response intrigued him more. "Don't belong here," she had said. The mimicking of words heard sounded like semantic anomia, from which she seemed to have recovered.

Stroke. Tumor. Epileptic seizure. Traumatic brain injury. Anything other possibilities? Any of those could cause the form of aphasia the detective had described, but since he had not observed the behavior he could only speculate. Trauma often resulted in amnesia, and clearly she had been traumatized; he only questioned which caused which. If he could rule out a tumor, he felt confident the amnesia would also prove temporary.

When he entered the woman's room, he immediately noted the odd position in which she slept. She lay on her stomach with her head braced against a pillow, her arms stretched toward the headboard, one hand balled up inside the other, wrists snugly together.

The sleeping patient moved several times as if her wrists were tied. Then she groaned and rolled onto her side, drawing her arms in toward her body protectively, hands curled into the claw-like position he associated with cerebral palsy.

Stevens imagined she was dreaming exactly what had happened to her, so it seemed appropriate to relay his hypothesis to the police. He withdrew his cell phone as he stepped out of the room and then called Detective Mathias to share his observations.



“Doctor Stevens reported seeing discoloration on her wrists that suggests deep bruising,” Jack informed Char and Vince to kick off a huddle at the precinct. “He believes she was restrained. Tied up and possibly suspended from above. He has ordered physical therapy in response to the dislocated shoulder.”

“Stress positioning would explain both dislocated shoulder and bruising.” Vince said, becoming more animated with the gruesome nature of his own postulation. “But torture doesn’t rule out a scenario where a seizure interrupted something. Might even have saved her life.”

Jack turned to Char. “Has there been a recent spike in Missing Persons reports?”

“No pattern suggesting serial abductions. If we have a budding psychopath on the loose though, we shouldn’t wait for her to remember to get a handle on this. An MEG guided interview would allow me to direct questions to the active centers of her brain and prompt her according to her responses.”

Char explained to Jack that magnetoencephalography, MEG, along with a functional MRI tracked brain activity in real time. MEG operated like a magnetic resonance imaging scan, MRI, except that instead of the subject lying on a bed that passed under a scanning mechanism, Sage would sit under a device similar in appearance to an oversized commercial hair drier. “The technology isn’t widely available, but New York Presbyterian has it and Doctor Stevens can use the results for diagnosis.”

“The doctor did say a functional MRI can identify a history of seizures,” Jack admitted, giving his consent to the plan.

“One more thing,” Char said. “She’s more likely to remember if she’s surrounded by the familiar. Can we get her into her own clothes again? There’s no evidence on them.”

“They’ll need cleaning,” Jack said, remembering the strong smell of urine.

“I’ll have them washed and bring them with me tomorrow.” Char handed over a completed Evidence Discharge Form for his signature.

“Let’s say we find medical evidence of torture,” Jack prompted Vince as Char departed. “That deserves a felony assault charge, but with no broken bones or lacerations, the physical evidence has to be compelling.”

“Microscopic muscle tears will show up on an MRI. That’s the best medical evidence we’re likely to get of an assault, besides pictures of the bruises. Seems to me it must have happened somewhere at the station. A moving train would cause visible abrasions.”

“I’ll have another look, but I’m not very hopeful.” Jack picked up the handset of his desk phone and dialed.

“Doctor Stevens, this is Detective Mathias. How soon can we do the MEG?”

“Is first thing tomorrow morning soon enough for you?”

“If that’s the best you can do, Doctor.”

“It is. I’ll see you at eight o’clock.”

By then, more than 72 hours would have elapsed since she had been discovered at Penn Station. His thoughts turned back to his conversation with Vince. Too much time had already passed, the scene had almost certainly been compromised. Still, a location must exist in or near the station where someone could hold a hostage undetected by passengers or station personnel.

How could an act so outrageous occur in a public place without drawing attention? Although he could have delegated the task to any team member, he decided to walk through Penn Station with the facility manager himself and open every door if necessary.



Jack spent much of the day searching Penn Station, and now he had a room, a rope and a backpack containing identification. The HVAC equipment in the room where the items were found

generated a constant thrumming sound that might mask all but the most desperate cries for help. Unshaded overhead lighting reflected harshly off glossy white walls. Despite the cold trail, the rope's presence suggested the scene had not been disturbed, so he called for a team to process the room for prints and trace evidence. In the meantime, he wanted to interview the victim again using his findings to provide context.

At the hospital, his stomach tightened and his face flushed hot when he found Jane Doe's room empty. A hammer-fist against the door jamb did little to vent his frustration. He knew his reaction was irrational; she was not deliberately pushing his buttons, but he was tired and getting impatient. *There's so much more drama with major crime survivors than with homicide cases.*

Don't wish it, Jack. Don't wish this was a homicide case. Nobody deserves that – certainly not just to make your life easier.

Why does she get under my skin?

Because she imposes her will on others, including you, that's why. In his universe, his team followed *his* guidance and direction, and they were the better for it. They caught bad guys, and the world was better for it.

In an effort to feel more charitable toward her, he reminded himself that people deal with trauma in different ways. *She's not letting what happened to her dictate her next move, that's all.*

Two untouched meal trays waited at her bedside; she had been AWOL for quite a while. *All right, Detective, where would a soldier go to cope?*

Despite the size of the hospital, there were not many places worth looking. Since she had recently been to the physical therapy room, Jack started his search there. The door was locked, but he heard noises inside, so he hunted down a security guard with a master key.

After the door opened Jack found Jane Doe standing on the rails of the treadmill looking toward him. He surmised the sound of the key in the lock must have alerted her to his arrival. A series of emotions crossed her face as she reacted to his entrance. After turning the treadmill off and stepping down, she reached for a towel and dabbed the sweat from her face.

"I came by to show you something," Jack said calmly. "I didn't realize I'd need to call out the National Guard to find you first. How did you get in here?"

“It’s amazing what you can do if you just act like you belong,” she responded matter-of-factly as she walked toward him. “I walked in a few times and fussed with the towels and waste baskets, so when the attendant left he would think I was part of the cleaning staff.”

“Hmm. Well, both your lunch and dinner trays are in your room waiting for you. What do you say we walk back there together before someone takes them away?”

She shrugged and walked past him, so he matched her pace.

“You don’t seem angry,” she noted, breaking the silence.

“Why should I be? It’s not my hospital.”

“I wasted your time. I’m not in the habit of wasting people’s time. At least I don’t think I am.”

“You *are* a handful,” he answered honestly, “but I’m trying to put myself in your shoes. We’ve confined you, an otherwise healthy, active person, to a hospital room with nothing to do. It must feel like a prison cell after a while.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been in prison. At least I don’t think I have.”

Jack studied her as they walked. “Is that amnesia humor?”

“I don’t know. Tell me an amnesia joke, and I’ll let you know if I’ve heard it before.”

Jack shook his head and tried to suppress a smile; he had never experienced anyone quite like her. They continued walking in silence until they reached the elevator.

“Why don’t we take the stairs?” Jane Doe suggested.

“*No!*”

Startled by the sharpness of his answer, she looked him in the eye for a fraction of a second. Jack was startled too and did not know whether it was her suggestion or his own knee-jerk response that surprised him more.

“I don’t want to chase you down the stairs when you attempt your Great Escape.” He punched the elevator call button, the doors opened and they stepped aboard.

“Where would I go? I’m barefoot.” They both looked down reflexively at her small pale feet with raised blue veins.

“That didn’t stop you inside the hospital; why would it stop you outside?”

The woman gaped at him for a moment.

“Because I’ve got nowhere else to go,” she answered, visibly crestfallen.

Truth is like that sometimes, an open palm right to the chest. Jack watched her struggle to recover her composure. He secretly wished the woman of a moment before would return, but he might as well wish the pin back into a hand grenade. *I need to hold the spoon in place just a little longer.* Soon, he would push her to the breaking point to make her remember.

“We’ll work on that. My team has cooked up a course of action we want to run by you.”

“Great! I love courses of action. At least I think I do.”

Jack laughed out loud. *That was too easy. She’s grasping for ways to cope. She might be closer to the edge than I thought.*

When they arrived at her room, Jack made an ‘after you’ gesture and then followed her through the door. Just as he had said, two trays sat on the table. He pulled out the nearest chair as though seating her at a fine restaurant.

“Only if you sit and eat something too,” she said. “I must be keeping you from your own dinner.”

“You aren’t exactly in a negotiating position, my friend,” Jack answered, surprised by her thoughtfulness.

“I’m not? And when did we become friends?”

“We’re going to have to work together, you know,” he cautioned her by lowering the register of his voice.

“I’m sorry. I guess that was uncalled for. Why don’t you call me Sage?”

“I’m holding out for your real name. Tell me what Sage Femme is all about.” The satchel dropped to the floor as he took a seat.

“Distance hikers give themselves nicknames. Years ago, I dreamt up a business plan to guide women’s groups into the wilderness. I don’t know why I didn’t follow through. Sometime after that, when I started hiking in earnest, I began signing the trail registers with that name.”

“So why does someone dressed in hiking cloths travel to The City?”

She shrugged.

“You don’t remember why?”

She shook her head ‘No.’

“Suppose we could help you remember? Char outlined a guided interview to you?”

“Yes.” Sage lifted the cover over each plate and then pushed the trays aside.

“I support the strategy. We’ll try it first thing tomorrow.”

Sage nodded but said nothing, so Jack reached into the satchel, pulled out a clear plastic bag stenciled with the word ‘EVIDENCE’ in red letters and placed it on the table. The bag contained the length of white rope he had found, about a half inch thick, with a noose-like knot at one end. She pulled the bag toward her and rolled the braid between her fingers through the plastic. Wound with multiple strands like a standard hemp or nylon cable, the rope was pliable, compressing under pressure as hemp could not.

“Okay?”

“That doesn’t look familiar to you?”

“Should it?” She looked at it again.

“We speculate that you were bound with it.”

The muscles of her face tightened and her skin flushed as she processed what he said.

“It’s just a rope . . . the kind you might use as a mooring line on a boat. Doesn’t make me see bogeymen or anything.”

Jack knew he’d have to press harder.

“After you told us you were in pain, I asked Doctor Stevens’ opinion.”

“Yes, I met him this morning.”

“You were asleep when he arrived – dreaming actually. He claims you were reliving an assault. What he saw gave me a clue what to look for. Do you remember any of that dream?”

“Only that it was unpleasant.”

Jack stood. When she followed his lead, he reached for her hands, bringing them together in front of her; she offered no resistance. “What do you see here?”

“They look . . . a little yellow . . . jaundiced.”

“Right. Deep bruises. They weren’t visible when we found you. When your hands are together,” he joined her wrists in demonstration, “the bruises appear to have been made by that rope.”

She remained silent.

“If the knot was here at your thumb, and you were raised off your feet,” he explained raising her arms above her head.

“*Son-of-a-bitch*,” she hissed through clenched teeth as she winced and pulled her arms down and into her chest protectively. Stepping away from Jack, she fell back into her chair with a thump and coughed before taking in a sharp breath. “You did that on purpose!”

“Did it hurt?” He wanted to apologize, but he needed her right there – remembering the pain.

Gaze dropping to the table, her eyes darted from left to right as she took inventory. “Not as much as I expected.” After that admission, she seemed less angry.

In a firm voice, Jack said, “tell me what you remember about your dream.”

“A sneering, threatening face that turned into a bear . . . I couldn’t run . . . couldn’t see anywhere *to* run. Blinding white everywhere I turned, like a blizzard, a whiteout.”

“Describe the face before it turned into a bear.”

“A wide face, with little eyes, and a scruffy beard. He looked like a bear even before he turned into a bear. You know how dreams are.”

“What else?”

“Nothing else,” her voice grew tight with anxiety. “Detective Daniels said a seizure . . . that there was no evidence I’d been violated.”

“This is the first contradictory evidence we have,” Jack gestured toward the rope. “I hoped you could confirm the theory . . . put a context around it.”

Jack returned to his seat and put the evidence bag back in the satchel. He was not as dismissive as she was of the images in her dream. The HVAC room was real, and it had blinding white walls. If her mind could turn that into a snowstorm, then her attacker probably did have a wide face and small eyes.

“There’s one more thing.”

Sage sighed in resignation and approximated eye contact.

Jack drew a small clear plastic sleeve from the satchel, pushed it across the table to her, and held his breath. *This is where I become either the hero who helps her remember or the villain who brings the painful memories back.*

She picked up the New York State driver’s license and studied it. Then she walked to the bathroom door, held it up and looked in the mirror.

“This is me?” she asked and received a nod in response. Brow furrowed, she walked back to the table.

Granted, the woman in the driver’s license photo was younger, and more polished, with carefully sculpted short hair, but there was no doubt of her identity. Jack had not run a background report since finding her ID and bank card, so he still knew little more than he had deduced. The organization of maps and trail notes, also found inside the backpack, suggested The City was her start point just as Char theorized.

“I don’t understand. Why doesn’t this mean anything to me?” Grace Bennett tossed the ID onto the table so that it slid to a stop in front of him, and then she crossed her arms defensively.

Jack watched a blank stare replace her puzzled expression as she retreated into herself. This was not the reaction he had anticipated. *I mis-managed her*, he thought, wondering how he could have done it differently. *No, her self-preservation instincts are just too strong.*

“If I had to guess, I’d say what happened to you wasn’t a random act. Possibly, it’s so tied to who you are that to bury what happened, you’ve had to forget who you are.” As he spoke, his chest tightened with empathy.

Silence.

“We’ll locate your family and let them know where you are,” he said as he replaced the driver’s license in his satchel.

She leaned back against the bed and pressed the heels of her palms against her eyes.

“Ms. Bennett, are you in pain? Should I call the nurse?”

She shook her head ‘no’. Straightening, she clutched at the linens of the bed behind her instead. “Please don’t call me that,” she whispered.

“Are you in danger from someone back home? A family member?” A scenario sprang into Jack’s head of a woman on the run taking only what she could carry with her.

“No, I don’t think so.” Eyes, head and shoulders all conveyed the inward focus of her effort to remember. After several moments of silence, she re-crossed her arms. “It just seems to me I should call. It’s my life after all. If . . . after we’ve tried everything else and I still can’t . . . maybe you could feed me a name and a phone number so I can make the call myself.”

“I’ll hold off on the next of kin for now,” he assured her, “but I need to get this evidence to the lab.”

She cleared her throat, an action that shook her from her protective shell.

“Here, take this with you. The bread’s a little stale, but it’ll tide you over till you can get to something more . . . edible.” She wrapped the dry turkey breast sandwich in a paper napkin and handed it to him. “You aren’t taking food out of my mouth. . . . I have this whole dinner thing still.”

“Thank you,” he said, taking the sandwich. Once again, her recovery seemed too quick, but he thought he was beginning to understand her. Grace Bennett would not be bullied. Neither was she so proud that she could not laugh at herself nor so self-centered that she did not think about the needs of others.

Jack’s team would have a complete background workup on his desk by morning using the name and address on her driver’s license as a starting point. With the guided interview scheduled for first thing, he hoped she would to provide answers herself. If not, the workup would include an emergency contact or next of kin, and he would have to thrust this problem onto some unsuspecting family member’s lap.



Alone again, Sage headed to the chapel, though if she had thought to take the hymnal back to her room last night, she would not have bothered. The place was acoustically disappointing, she had discovered that on her first visit, and lacking stained glass – any glass at all, in fact – its bland interior evoked no strong emotion. *There are sacred spaces designed to worship and uplift, she supposed, and spaces designed to comfort and console.*

With this evening’s revelation, the hymn *Blessed Be the Tie That Binds* sprang to mind, and she wished it had not. She searched the hymnal’s index for familiar songs, starting and abandoning several before she found one that matched the lament written on her heart:

“I am weak, but Thou art strong.” She sang through to the refrain, “Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.”

I'm hollow and empty. Not just empty, but alone. If I falter, Lord, who cares? I'll do whatever You need me to do . . . Just don't leave me alone like this.

Something stirred in her and her eyes welled with tears, sensing she was not so empty or alone after all.