

Chapter 2



Tuesday, August 12, 2014; Midtown South Police Precinct, NYC

The sun had risen by the time Jack left the hospital so he saw no point in going home. He showered in the locker room and put on the spare shirt he kept there. No one would have guessed he had slept in a chair but for the circles under his eyes.

He flagged Char down the instant she arrived on the floor. “Where are we with our Jane Doe?”

“Nothing unusual about her clothing if she’s the outdoor type. Straight out of an LL Bean catalog. The only odd bit was a rag she wore as a bandana.”

Jack pictured the dark green triangle of cloth, its edges unfinished and frayed. “That’s not a rag. It’s military issue, used as a sling or wadding for a pressure bandage. Soldiers use them as bandanas after they’ve served their purpose. What else?”

“No useful trace on the clothes. There are various mud and clay stains on the pant legs, but none of them fresh. The epithelials under her fingernails are her own. Soy-based ink stain on her right thumb.”

“A newspaper?”

“More likely a book. Newspaper ink would be on both hands if she read it open like this, or on her fingers as well, if she folded it, like so.”

“Speculation?”

“I see her coming into The City by train, reading a book, holding it open, like this. With her own skin cells under her nails, she probably scratched at her scalp as she read.”

The inventory of evidence collected at the scene did not include a book. *I'm not sure I can call for a sweep of all recent Penn Station arrivals in this case.*

“Why would an outdoors woman travel to The City?”

“The Appalachian Trail passes close enough to see the skyline. I’d guess she intended to hike nearby. If she planned to start here, we shouldn’t expect a Missing Person’s report for a while.”

“No backpack, no wallet, no ID. Robbery?”

“She could have shipped her backpack ahead. That doesn’t seem plausible, though, if that’s where she kept her ID.”

“No unclaimed baggage? Lost and Found?”

Char shook her head to both questions.

“That bandana . . . the military collects DNA samples. If she’s military, we might get an ID through a sample match. See if you can find someone at Military Personnel Records Center to talk to you. What else?”

“The hospital blood work indicates she’s clean. Neither recreational and prescription drugs. If she’s epileptic, per Vince’s theory, then she’s been off her meds for a long time. Protein test for recent heart event and enzyme test for head trauma both show no elevated levels.”

“Who plans to hike the Appalachian Trail alone with epilepsy?”

“Only a fool, but I don’t think she was foolish or epileptic,” Char replied. “I read her as a seasoned, self-confident hiker, but something went wrong.”

“Whenever you’re ready, let’s head back to the hospital. She might have recovered enough to talk to us.”



The sound of shouting echoed through the corridor as Jack and Char approached the private room. A nurse and a “crash cart” blocked the entrance. Beyond her, Jack saw an empty bed and an orderly trying to force open the bathroom door. The nurse said they had responded when the vital sign monitors flat-lined only to discover their Jane Doe had disconnected herself from the sensors.

“Let’s deescalate this,” Jack shouted to Char over the chaos. Pushing his way past the nurse, he addressed the orderly. “We’ll take it from here.”

When the orderly relaxed, the bathroom door began to close, so Jack put his shoulder into it to maintain the slight opening while the other man stepped away.

Char saw the woman's shoulder through the gap. Jane Doe sat on the floor with her back braced against the door, but her weight alone was insufficient to resist the force of grown men. Something had to be aiding her. Char put her back to the door jamb and slid to the floor, matching Jane Doe's position. As the commotion quieted, she heard the woman's ragged breathing and intermittent sobs on the other side.

"Darlin', my name is Char Daniels." She spoke softly, in her soothing southern drawl. "I'm an NYPD detective. You might remember meeting me yesterday. The nurse is gone. It's just us now."

"Go away!" Jane Doe demanded.

"We can't leave you, Honey, but we aren't going to hurt you either."

"I don't belong here. I have to go."

"Go where?"

Jane Doe sniffed loudly and silence followed.

"You don't know?"

"How . . . how can I not remember?"

"Oh, Darlin', no wonder you're upset. We can help you."

"I don't even know my name."

"We have ways of finding out. Until then, you need to stay here in the hospital."

"They won't leave me alone."

"We can work on that too."

The woman gave no answer, but Char recognized the quiet of reasserted calm. "Will you come out now?"

Again, no answer was given.

"I'm sorry, Darlin', I didn't hear you."

"No."

"Why not?" Char asked almost in a whisper, inviting her to confide.

"I have no clothes."

"If I can get you something else to wear, will you open the door and talk to us?"

"Proper clothes, not *this*."

"Proper clothes, okay?"

Char waited and then barely discerned a whispered ‘Okay.’

“You need to move away from the door so Detective Mathias can make that happen.” Char turned to Jack for his agreement to the terms she offered, and he nodded in assent.

“Just let it close.”

“We’re negotiating here, Darlin’. If you won’t let me see you and know you’re safe, then Detective Mathias can’t leave to get you some clothes.”

There was a pause followed by a slight shift as Jane Doe eased her weight off the door. The opening widened, but an IV pole blocked the door’s range of motion: one end wedged between the wall and the toilet, the other end behind the door. Jack backed away, waved down the nurse at the end of the hall, whispered to her, then hovered in the hallway as she hurried away.

Char saw Jane Doe in profile on the floor leaning against the toilet bowl, the slack of the hospital gown tucked tight under her to protect her modesty. Blood flecked the floor and the gown where the woman cradled her wrist to her chest. A crusty red line ran from the stent site to her elbow.

“There’s quite a bit of blood in there,” Char observed calmly. She imagined the woman had removed the IV needle.

“I stopped it.” Jane Doe rubbed at the trail of dried blood. “They had no right.”

“You are refusing the IV?”

“I don’t need it.”

“Can we get a doctor’s opinion?”

“I don’t need it,” she repeated.

“Will you humor me? If he agrees with you, you’ll have an ally. If he doesn’t, we’ll get you a lawyer instead!”

Jane Doe’s shoulder rose and fell in a shrug.

The nurse returned with a cotton sweatsuit and undergarments.

“Here you are, Darlin’.” Char passed the bundle through the gap in the door. With a look and a quick jerk of the head she signaled to Jack. *You need to find Doctor Stevens to modify the standing orders while I stay here with her.*

Jack escorted the nurse back to her station updating her as they walked.

The woman did her best to compose herself. She could not muster a dignified look in the ill-fitting sweatsuit, but at least it covered her and it was clean. Without a comb, she tamed her short, light red hair by wetting her hands with water from the sink and running her fingers through it.

She cupped her hands under the cold faucet and used her cooled palms as a poultice against her puffy red eyes. Water dripped across her lips and she tasted the salt of her tears and a metallic tang from the blood on her fingers. The bathroom light seemed harsh when she opened her eyes again, but she forced herself to look in the mirror. *Who are you, she asked her reflection, and what right do you have keeping that a secret from me?*

She needed to be in command of herself if she was to have any influence over what might happen to her. When she was ready she unbarred the door and opened it. As she left the bathroom, a woman she presumed to be Detective Daniels stepped aside, offering a clear path to the bed but blocking the room's exit. She took a seat facing the door at the small table beside the bed. *Beds are for people too sick to sit. I go back there, and I lose even before I begin.*

When Jack returned, he stopped at the doorway. The woman sat waiting, eyes fixed to a spot near the center of the table. He made eye contact with Char, who shifted her gaze to the empty chair and back, indicating it was reserved for him. *So that's how it is*, he thought, scowling.

"Doctor Stevens will be here shortly." At the sound of Jack's voice, Jane Doe stood. He saw that she was of average height and a healthy weight, her hair cut in a short, feminine style. She had broad square shoulders, but with her eyes downcast, her posture was ever so slightly stooped.

She wants to project self-confidence, he deduced. He sensed this woman was accustomed to being in control of herself and her circumstances, but her bravado seemed out of place. Suspects sometimes behaved that way; victims rarely did.

"Where am I?" she asked, initiating the interview herself.

"New York Presbyterian Hospital in Lower Manhattan. Do you know where that is?"

“Yes. What happened to me?”

Jack looked at Char, inviting her to answer.

“We haven’t worked that out yet,” she said. “We think you planned to start a hike from The City. You may have had a seizure although we haven’t ruled out a physical attack.”

“Was I . . .”

“No, Darlin’. There’s not a mark on you, inside or out.”

Jack placed a clear plastic evidence bag on the table in front of her. Inside, a medallion the size of a quarter depicted a landscape scene in enamel paint and the words “Sage” and “Femme” surrounded the image.

“We found this in your pocket,” Jack said. “Does it mean anything to you?”

She picked it up from the table. “It’s mine. I had it made.”

“That’s your name?” Jack asked skeptically.

“No, but that’s what I go by. Sage Femme.”

That’s something, Jack thought. *Better than Jane Doe, anyway.*

“May I call you Sage?” Char inquired, getting a nod in return.

“Can I get you anything, Sage? Water?”

Sage shook her head ‘No’.

“Can we get you something to eat?”

“Okay.”

“What would you like?”

Sage shrugged. “Whatever.”

“There’s a cafeteria downstairs,” Char said. “They have a full menu.”

“A bagel,” she answered tentatively.

“What kind? Plain? Sesame Seed?”

“Plain.”

“Anything on it?”

“Cream cheese,” Sage let out a deep sigh that suggested to the two investigators she might be letting down her guard.

“I’ll get it,” Jack volunteered. Char was clearly making progress with non-threatening questions, but she needed more time to build rapport and work her magic. *If she has authority issues, then Char will be more successful if I’m out of the room.*

Char took his vacated seat.

“Coffee,” Sage added before he reached the door.

“Coffee and a bagel, coming up.”

“Can you tell me why you call yourself ‘Sage’ . . .” the sound of Char’s voice faded as Jack left the room.



“Jack, did you know you shouldn’t pick wild carrot in August?” Char stood, offering her seat to Jack when he returned. “Tell Jack what you just told me,” she invited.

“Just some granny wisdom . . . pick wild carrot in any month ending in ‘R’.” Sage’s gaze remained fixed on the medallion in her hands as she rubbed its surface through the plastic envelope.

Jack took the lid off the coffee and placed it and the bagel on the table.

“Tell us about hiking. About the woods,” Char suggested.

“It’s as close to God as you can get this side of the grave, I guess. The smells. The sounds. Sometimes it’s very still and sometimes it’s wild.”

“You know a lot about nature?”

“I guess.”

“How did you learn?”

“Taught myself, I think. I remember catching tadpoles in the creek behind the parsonage where the black raspberries grew. Most folks around me couldn’t even name the trees after Maple, Oak and Pine, so I had to learn mostly from books.”

“Did you live in the parsonage? Was your father a minister?”

Sage furrowed her brow. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“What did your father call you?” Jack asked. If Char had gotten a name from her, he’d have known it by now.

“Sometimes he called me Scary Alice.”

Jack was not expecting that.

“Would you prefer we call you Alice?” Char asked.

Tears welled up in her eyes, but did not fall. “That’s not my name. It’s just something he called me. I see flashes . . . but when I try to remember, my head hurts . . . like it’s all in there waiting. Like it can’t find the door, so it’s beating on the walls.”

“Oh, Sage, Honey, it’ll be all right,” Char encouraged. “That happens sometimes in difficult situations. It’ll come back to you. I’m sure of it.”

“Is your head the only thing that hurts?” Jack asked gently.

Sage wrapped her hands around the coffee cup, took a sip, then shrugged slowly before answering. “My arms. Shoulders. Not bad. Not ‘broken bones’ bad, anyway.” She rotated one shoulder, by way of demonstration, and winced.

“Listen, Sage, Darlin’, Detective Mathias needs to go home and get some rest.” Jack recognized that Char was messaging both of them at the same time. “I’d like to stay here with you until you’ve spoken with the doctor,” she continued. “Then you should rest too. Okay?”

Sage nodded, but said nothing more.

Jack realized that Char was right. He was exhausted and needed to catch up on his sleep. His questions would have to wait. He wanted to ask Doctor Stevens whether the pain she experienced was consistent with the dislocated shoulder, but that could wait too.

Jack wanted her to trust him more going forward and weighed how he might end his part in the interview. He had observed little eye contact between the two women, and none at all between the woman and himself. If he came across as patronizing, she would shut down again.

“I’m sorry we have to ask these questions.” He cupped his hands around hers.

She barely nodded in return, but he felt a slight relaxation of her muscles. Satisfied with that response, he excused himself.

Char left it to Sage to break the silence.

“I have a dog. Had a dog? A beautiful, gentle, golden-haired fella. Maybe if he’d been with me . . .”

“He must be very important to you since you are remembering,” Char replied encouragingly.

“More important than my name, I guess. What’s a name, anyway? Just something people call you. Doesn’t say anything about who you really are.”

“And who are you, really?”

“Just someone trying to do good. ‘*If us as knows so little can see a bit o’ good and rights.*’ That’s from Silas Marner. It’s about a man who suffered seizures. The quote starts, ‘*there’s trouble in this world*’.”

Char recognized the parallel. Whoever she was, Sage had stumbled, unprepared, into serious trouble.

“He had a golden-haired beauty too, didn’t he?” Char contributed, showing a passing familiarity with that George Eliot work. “Eppie?”

“MmmHmm. My dog is my Eppie, I guess. I need him.”

Char had a hunch, “Most folks can’t remember whole passages like that. Did you read it recently?”

“Re-read. I read it in school and wanted to read it again . . . I don’t remember why.”

“Sage, I’d like to help you remember. There are diagnostic instruments that allow us to follow your brain activity as we talk. They record how you respond so I can ask my questions better. This guided interview may help you call up your memories gently, much like we’re doing now.”

Sage looked confused. “Are you asking me?”

“I need your cooperation. Your subconscious may be trying to block something very painful. The process will only work as long as you are committed to it.”

“Okay.”

Now that Char had convinced Sage, she had to convince Jack to support her proposed plan.



Hey God, remember me? Sage prayed when she was alone. *I hope so 'cause I don't. . . . I remember You though.* She recalled the time her brother told her parents that she had an imaginary friend after hearing her talk to God aloud. She did not know to be ashamed, but she understood that she spoke to God differently than other people. They used special words when they prayed in church – words she did not understand. She took the problem to God. Together they decided she should use her ‘inside voice’ – the voice she could hear when she thought the words rather than said them. *Anyway, I hope I haven't been a stranger since then. I'd hate for You to think I only look for Your help when I'm in trouble . . . but I think I'm in trouble.*

Sage remembered the tune of a hymn her father sang regularly. Frustrated that she could not recall more than a handful of words, she left her room hoping to find a hymnal.

She found the chapel on a dead-end corridor flanked by the chaplain's offices and a series of closet-sized rooms designed for individual counseling and meditation. The windowless room held several rows of chairs facing a simple wooden pedestal that served as an altar.

She thumbed through a hymnal until she found what she was looking for, and she sang:

“O Lord my God, When I in awesome wonder, Consider all, the worlds Thy hands have made.” She sang through all the first verse in a low alto. When she arrived at the refrain, she remembered her mother's soprano voice beside her and struggled not to follow it up beyond her own range: “How great Thou art. How great Thou art!”

She prayed again. *I don't know where I've been, but I see glimpses when I sing “How Great Thou Art.” I'm sure I've seen the stars and woods and forest glades; heard birds and brooks and thunder. I've looked down from mountain tops and felt the breeze and so, so much more. I don't know who or what I am, but I remember what my Sunday School teacher said about Whose I am. “We all belong to God.”*

Sage remembered another tune and hummed it softly until she was safely alone in her room. “Come and take this thirsting of my soul,” she sang, “Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more. Fill my cup. Fill it up and make me whole.”

She put a fresh hospital gown on so she could keep her clothes fresh for tomorrow. Folding the sweat suit carefully, she slid it inside her pillowcase flat against the pillow. She laid her head on it, reassured that no one could take them away while she slept.