

PROLOGUE
FOUR DAYS BEFORE JAKE'S FUNERAL

MONDAY, APRIL 20th
2:00 PM EDT
MANHATTAN INTERNATIONAL TRAUMA CENTER (MITC), NY

In the last forty-eight hours, Kate Preacher had killed seven men. *The count doesn't matter. That's what Jake would say. The message did: Come at me, and it's the hospital or the morgue—I don't care which.*

The helicopter's rotors clawed at the Manhattan sky, lifting Kate into the air and away from the carnage. She was safe—for now.

From the hospital rooftop, Vitali Moshenski watched her ascend, his expression almost fatherly. But Kate didn't trust him—too many secrets, too much left unsaid. Still, he was useful—opening doors, managing chaos, cleaning up the fallout at Moore Tower

When Kate asked for somewhere to go, Vitali's first suggestion had been to seek the company of friends. But when she insisted on solitude, he relented, arranging this flight to his Hudson Valley estate—a place to think, to work, and to plan her next move.

Alone in the helicopter, a roller-coaster of emotions and thoughts collided. She was startled to realize it had only been four days.

Four days ago, Jake was in Paris. Smiling. Bragging about an anniversary present. Promising he'd make it home—this time.

That was a promise Jake couldn't keep. While Kate watched and listened, her world turned upside down. Tires screeched. Cries of “Allahu Akbar!” rang out. She could still hear the continuous explosion of automatic gunfire and the collision of screams and shattered glass. Jake's phone laying at the edge of the road caught flashes of the terror, while Kate's screams for

her husband vanished amid gunfire and chaos.

The world was shocked by yet another Paris terrorist attack—the senseless murder of thirty-six, and the heroics of a man the French media dubbed l'Américain, *the American*. It seemed Jake was the right man in the wrong place. Kate knew better—Jake was executed. She didn't know why, not yet—but she wouldn't stop until she did.

The helicopter banked east. City lights vanished, replaced by forest and water—but the noise in Kate's head remained. She closed her eyes, her fingers pressing against the NanoVault beneath her shirt as if the touch might summon Jake's voice.

She pulled it free, turning the device over in her fingers. The cool metal was familiar now—like a well-worn chess piece between moves. But the board was still a blur. The opponent, unseen.

Jake left her the first move.

She just had to see it.

“Find this,” Jake said in the recording, lifting the device from under his shirt. His voice was steady, but she saw the tension, the clenched jaw. *“And do your thing. See what everyone is missing. What I missed. Solve the puzzle. And take them down.”*

Kate exhaled slowly, her grip tightening around the device.

Devin Moore never took it off—not until the moment he had no choice.

His throat crushed, gasping for air. He ripped it from his neck and thrust it into her hands. Bargaining for his life.

She let him die.

A marketing ploy. That's all it was supposed to be. The Golden NanoVault. A high-stakes

challenge to hackers around the world—break its encryption, claim a fortune. Fifty million in Bitcoin.

No one ever cracked it. Not even Nomad.

But it wasn't just a game.

Devin's encrypted storage wasn't just a gimmick—it was a vault of secrets, shielding something so dangerous that he killed to keep it buried. A French mathematician—gone. Nomad—next on the list.

And now it was hers.

Jake's files were inside, somewhere beneath layers of encryption. But what else did Moore hide? He built this empire on privacy, selling the illusion of security to the world. But what was he protecting for himself?

She exhaled again, gripping the NanoVault tighter.

The helicopter jolted slightly, catching an air pocket. Kate opened her eyes, swallowing the ache in her throat, and glanced at the co-pilot.

He gestured toward the window, his voice cutting through the roar of the rotors. “Almost there.”

Kate tugged at her harness, then leaned forward, her gaze following his hand. What she saw was a picture of old-money grandeur—a relic of America's Gilded Age. She guessed the estate was easily 200 acres, or more, of rolling hills and forest, the kind of property built by families whose names adorned library wings and hospital foundations.

The helicopter touched down on a pad set just beyond the main house. Everything about the man who greeted her, from his posture to the way he clasped his hands behind his back, radiated an unshakable confidence that came with a lifetime of service.

“Mrs. Preacher,” he began, his voice as polished as the rest of him. “Welcome to Deerfield. I am Langdon, the estate manager. Mr. Moshenski asked me to ensure your stay is...uninterrupted.”

Kate raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. “Langdon,” she repeated, testing the name. “Do you have a first name?”

“No, ma’am,” he replied with the faintest hint of a smile. “Langdon will suffice.”

Her lips quirked, a faint smirk escaping. “Alright, Langdon. Lead the way.”

Langdon gave a small nod, his expression betraying the barest trace of amusement. “I understand you’re traveling light,” he continued, “so a few essentials have been selected and placed in your suite. Additionally, Mr. Moshenski has arranged for a personal stylist to assist with anything else you may require. Discreetly, of course.”

Kate’s smirk deepened, and she allowed herself a wry glance at him. “Of course.”

* * *

The Highlands Suite was a picture of understated elegance. A central seating area. A plush gray couch. A large picture window framed a view of rolling hills and a shimmering lake below, its surface reflecting the golden hues of the late afternoon sun. Beyond the lake, groves of ancient trees stood like sentinels.

By the window sat a small dining table with a setting for one. A bowl of perfectly arranged fruit and an assortment of artisanal snacks—a small plate of cheeses, crackers, and chocolates.

Langdon gestured to the table. “The chef thought you might appreciate a few light refreshments after your journey. Dinner can be served here, should you prefer, or in the main dining room.”

Kate glanced at the table, already certain this was where she would dine. “This is perfect,” she began. “Are there any other guests?”

“No, ma’am,” Langdon replied. “And none are expected.”

Thank God, she thought. No introductions, meaningless chit-chat, questions, or condolences.

“In the master closet, you’ll find an estate robe and slippers, along with a few additional items procured for your stay. Should you require anything further, your stylist is scheduled to meet with you tomorrow morning at nine, but she’s at your disposal should you wish to adjust the time.”

Kate nodded, but her attention was captured by the executive workstation positioned near the far wall. “Floating high-res monitors. Herman Miller chair,” she began. “Power and network ports, cable management, and task lighting—this setup was designed by an expert.”

Langdon nodded and smiled. “The card on the desk provides details on accessing the estate’s network.” He paused, a hint of humor threading his voice. “I suspect, given your expertise, you’ll find the setup adequate. Mr. Moshenski has asked that you refrain from exploring the estate’s network security. He suspects you would have little difficulty circumventing our defenses but would prefer you not test that theory.”

Kate allowed herself a faint smile. “Understood.”

When Langdon left, Kate dropped her bag onto the couch and plopped down alongside. For the first time in days, she felt a flicker of calm. Just a flicker, but for now, it was enough.

* * *

Whether consciously or not, everything about her arrival at the estate had been in slow

motion. Bathing, changing, dinner in the room—even setting up her devices—each step had been careful, methodical, and calculated. But beneath it all, she knew the truth: she was afraid.

Moore's NanoVault was a Pandora's box. At the last possible moment, Jake's files had been transferred to the device, but their condition was a mystery. She suspected some files would be corrupt. But how many? And how important? She was afraid of what she might find—and might not. She was afraid to fail.

She sat at the workstation, her fingers cradling the device, hesitating as the weight of its history pressed down on her.

Jake's files weren't just answers to his final riddle—they were a reckoning. And now, with his files tucked inside Moore's one-of-a-kind device, Kate wondered what else was on Moore's NanoVault. *What secrets might Devin have secured on the vault, Kate wondered. What did he think was so valuable, so important, he never took this off—except to bargain for his life?*

Kate took a deep breath, steadying herself. *You can do this*, she thought, echoing Jake's words from the video. *Solve the puzzle. See what everyone else missed.*

She pushed the fear aside, connected the device to her system, and considered Moore's passcode.

Hardly unique, she thought. *He must have believed the code's irrelevance added security.* In that regard, he wasn't wrong. Most passwords, phrases, and codes had a personal connection, and with enough time and background information, they were relatively easy to break.

Kate recalled Moore lying on the floor, his trachea crushed, the image of him gasping for air and pleading silently for her help burned into her mind. With trembling hands, he tore the device from the chain around his neck and pressed it into her palm. His right hand lifted weakly, flashing three fingers, then one, then four, repeating the sequence over and over—three, one,

four.

She turned to the NanoVault and set its mechanical dials to the first seven digits of Pi:

3-1-4-1-5-9-2

The lock clicked open.

Excerpt ends here.