

Dressed and coffee in hand, Mace stepped out onto his backyard patio, and despite the tranquility of the cool, damp March morning, he couldn't quell his churning unease. Today was the start of a new week, a new life, and his final shot at doing the job he loved, a job he did without peers, praised by colleagues and superiors alike. It was just him they disliked. Officially, he had started the MBI two weeks ago, but only as a student completing his orientation course. Now the real work began; he needed his social guide. He needed Naomi. He pulled up his phone and tapped her number. He regretted the heated words they had exchanged a week ago. Her number continued to ring. You would think the years of therapy he had with her, and the following two years building a close relationship, would have tempered them both, but it didn't. He shook his head. His call went directly to voicemail. Her mailbox was full.

He shook his head and dropped his phone into his back pocket. This wasn't the FBI, and it was not a failed marriage. Just a relationship setback. He hoped. But today he needed her.

His phone chirped.

The sound hit him like a hand on the chest. FaceTime. Naomi. At last.

He answered before the second ring. "Hey, sweetheart, I've been trying to reach you. I'm sorry for—"

"Mace," Naomi whispered.

Her face filled the screen at a bad angle, too close, one eye cut off by the edge. Behind her: darkness, hanging clothes, the white sliver of a closet door. Her eyes kept jumping toward something he could not see.

Every apology died in his throat. "Naomi?"

"I'm in my closet. Someone broke into the house." Her whisper cracked. "Mace, I'm scared."

He was already moving. "Listen to me. Don't talk unless I ask you a question. I'm fifteen minutes away. I'll make it in ten."

Mace tapped RECORD on his phone, set his coffee cup on the warming pad, and turned the handle outward without thinking. Habit. Then he ran.

Keys. Wallet. Front door. He skipped the garage and the ordered maze of unpacked boxes, sprinted across the drive, and dropped into the BMW. The engine barked alive.

His phone snapped into the holder. Naomi's face shook on the screen. "I'm out the door," he said. "Stay low. Stay quiet. If whoever it is left, we'll know soon. If they didn't—" He swallowed the rest and buried the accelerator.

The development blurred past. Stop signs became red smears. He hit Interstate 94 too fast, tires skittering over damp pavement as he slashed around a semi and forced the car into the open lane.

"Mace!"

"Talk to me."

"I heard something downstairs."

Her voice was barely there, thin as a cracked pane.

"Don't move. Don't breathe if you don't have to. I'm almost to Saline Road."

"That's five..."

Naomi screamed. The screen bucked. Mace caught a flash of a black glove, a fistful of hair, Naomi's mouth open on a sound that ripped through the speakers as she was hauled out of the closet.

"Naomi!"

She still held the phone.

A blow landed. The phone tumbled, struck something hard, and stared up at the ceiling while Naomi choked for air somewhere off-screen.

Mace stabbed HOLD and punched 911.

"Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?"

"Mace Franklyn, MBI 58297, there is a break-in and assault in progress, 663 Scio Church Road. Send backup and paramedics."

"Are you on the scene?"

"No, five minutes out. Got to go."

He switched back. The phone lay on the floor now, tilted just enough to show Naomi slumped in a chair while a figure in black cinched something around her wrists. Her office had been gutted. Books sprawled open across the carpet. Drawers hung out like broken jaws. Papers skated under the intruder's boots. This wasn't burglary. It was a hunt.

Naomi lifted her head. An inaudible sound pushed through whatever gagged her.

The gloved hand smashed across her face.

“Stop!” Mace’s shout exploded inside the car. Useless. Worse than useless. It risked attention, he didn’t need. He clamped his mouth shut and drove harder. Scio Church Road came up too fast. He cut left, tires screaming, then threw the BMW onto her residential spur. No more miles. No more minutes.

He pitched the BMW into Naomi’s driveway and skidded to a crooked stop, angling the car between himself and the front door. Gun out. Door open. Body low behind steel and glass.

He listened. Nothing from the porch. Nothing from the windows. Only the engine ticking, his breath, and sirens still too far away.

He swept the front of the house in pieces: two-car garage, deep porch, three dining-room windows, the narrow walk toward the back office addition. Naomi’s floor plan unrolled in his head—garage, half bath, kitchen, utility room, living room, dining room, the glass door to the office beyond. Bedrooms upstairs. Too many corners. Too much glass. Too little time.

He moved.

His thumb found the latch. Unlocked. He eased the front door open with the barrel and slipped inside, gun cutting the foyer first. Dining room empty. Mail on the table. Chairs tucked in. A room pretending nothing was wrong.

He crossed the threshold one inch at a time, letting the door settle open behind him.

He slid low next to the arm of the contemporary sofa and took the living room in angles: television flicker over the fireplace, empty bowl on the cushion, a glass, half full on the side table next to Naomi’s favorite chair. The news anchor kept talking in a low, cheerful murmur, obscene in the quiet. Nothing moved. That was worse.

Sirens threaded faintly through the walls, then faded under the refrigerator’s hum. Too far. Still too far.

The half bath gave him a mirror, a towel, a bowl of potpourri—nothing. He cleared it anyway. Kitchen next. Milk sat uncapped on the counter, sour and thick in the air. Two pots on the range. Cold pasta congealed in the sink. Ordinary things, abandoned in mid-life, each one tightening the wire in his chest.

He backed out of the kitchen without turning his shoulders, gun tracking the pantry, the utility room, the black square beneath the stairs. No movement. No voices. No Naomi.

The office door waited at the end of the short hall, shaded glass throwing back only a warped smear of his face. He put his ear to it. Held his breath. Nothing inside. Not a scrape. Not a whisper. Not the smallest proof she was still alive.

He eased the handle down millimeter by millimeter. The latch gave with a soft metallic kiss. Mace froze. Counted one breath. Two. Then he nudged the glass door open, gun leading into the dark.

The door opened on silence.

For one stupid, merciful second, his brain refused the room. Except for an overturned chair, it remained carefully arranged, order paramount in a psychologist's office. Then reality struck. A heavy copper stink under the sour milk smell still clinging to him. He saw her.

She was folded forward between chair and desk, bound so tightly her shoulders had been dragged out of their natural line. Blood darkened her clothes in heavy, drying patches. Her hair veiled one side of her face. One bare foot rested at an impossible angle beneath the chair.

Her hands were clasped as if in prayer, bridging over the keyboard toward the monitor. Not posed by accident. Not collapse. A message.

Mace made a sound he did not recognize. His gun dipped. His knees wanted the floor. For a heartbeat, there was no case, no procedure, no badge—only Naomi, and the impossible fact of her not looking back at him. He reached for her, stopped short, and curled his free hand until his nails bit his palm.

He could not let himself touch her yet. That became the first rule because it was the only one he could hold. Don't contaminate. Don't collapse. Breathe. He dragged air in through his nose, counted it out the way Quantico had beaten into him, and used the count to build a wall between the scream in his chest and the room in front of him.

The wall was thin. It shook. But it held long enough for his eyes to work. Chair overturned. Hands placed. Desk searched, not ransacked at random. Computer awake. Files dumped in a pattern, not panic. Whoever had done this wanted something, and wanted him to see it.

He holstered his weapon with fingers that did not feel like his own and moved around her in a tight, careful arc, stepping only where he could see clean floor. No obvious wound

explained all the blood. No weapon in sight. The cursor blinked on the dark monitor, steady and indifferent, as if waiting for him to become useful again.

The sirens swelled outside, close now, but Mace barely heard them. He lifted Naomi's head with both hands, gentle enough to hurt himself with it. Her arms slipped from the keyboard, and her body started to tip. He caught her against his chest, held her upright, and pressed his mouth to her forehead. "Whoever did this, Naomi," he whispered, "will pay tenfold."

Sirens groaned to silent. Doors slammed. Voices rose on the porch. Mace should have stepped back, hands visible, scene untouched. Instead, his eyes caught on the locket resting on the blood-strewn desk. The one he had given her. The one she had worn every day until their last fight. It sat apart from the chaos, clean enough to accuse him. Evidence, his training said. Leave it. Mark it. Let someone else bag it. His hand moved anyway, then stopped inches above it, trembling. If he took it, he crossed a line he had spent his life policing. If he left it, strangers would seal the last piece of her in plastic and number it. "I'm sorry," he whispered, not sure whether he meant Naomi or the badge, and slipped the locket into his pocket.

"Hands where we can see them, sir, hands now."