

BROTHERLY LOVE

Chapter One

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My name is Sloane, Sydney Jessica Sloane, and I'm a private investigator.

For the past ten years, my partner, Max Cabe, and I have had an office on the Upper West Side of Manhattan near where we both live—which is not to say that we live together. Max has a cozy one bedroom on Eighty-ninth Street just off Riverside Park. I inherited my parents' three bedroom apartment on West End Avenue when my father was killed eleven years ago. Max says he likes to see us as "lovers waiting to happen," which is as likely as goats flying or Republicans agreeing to tax the wealthy. I see Max more like the brother I never had in David.

Like Max, Nora has her own agenda for me and hasn't approved of most of the choices I've made since 1972, when I first applied to the Police Academy. Fortunately, she lives far away in Baltimore with her husband, Byron, which, if nothing else, makes the stress level in my life more manageable. Don't get me wrong, I love my sister. It's just that ever since Mom died, Nora's tried to take her

place in my life. Nora doesn't seem to understand that I don't need her to be my mother. I need her to be my sister.

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It started Monday morning after I had taken my neighbor's cat, Charlie, for a few days. Long ago, Charlie found a way to maneuver between our two apartments, but when Carmen leaves town, she officially moves his bowls and litter box from her kitchen to mine. Charlie is an exotic, friendly Abyssinian who, as it turns out, is a perfect companion; independent yet affectionate, his needs are simple, and his demands are few—unlike most of the relationships I've experienced. This doesn't mean, however, that I would own a pet. I will occasionally pet-sit for friends to satiate whatever fleeting needs I have for petlike companionship. Unlike most of the people I know who are either cat or dog owners, bird lovers or even fishophiles, I like to live alone. I don't want to commit myself to anything even as permanent as goldfish. But I do like Charlie.

Just after 9:00 A.M., when Carmen left and Charlie was scoping things out in the apartment, I went to Nora's and my old bedroom — now the den — with a pot of Zabar's gourmet decaf and the newspapers, prepared for a long morning of hedonistic rest and relaxation. A prefab log burned evenly in the small but functional fireplace, and I settled onto the sofa. Max was in the Caribbean with a model whose name I kept forgetting. Kerry Norman, our secretary, was taking care of the office, so I felt comfortable taking a morning for myself.

All was right with the world when I took that first sip of joe and started reading slowly through the A section of the Times. By the time I was ready for the News, Charlie had joined me and was snuggled in a ball by my feet.

It was page three that caught my eye.

There was an article about a murderer who had accidentally been released from prison while awaiting trial. There had been a mix-up up with the bail papers and he managed to slip through the red tape. Now he was back out on the streets.

But it wasn't the story that caught my eye. It was the mug shot printed just above the article. Noah Alexander. The name meant nothing to me, but the face was another story. Noah Alexander wore a full beard, long hair, and a glazed-over look.

The picture was a bad blurred reprint of his mug shot but I knew that face as well as I knew my own name.

I hadn't seen it in close to fifteen years, but I would have been willing to bet my teeth — which are near and dear to me — that this was a picture of David, my older brother and onetime nemesis.

A voice in the back of my head suggested I breathe.

David was dead. He had died in a bombing in Israel thirteen years earlier.

I squinted at the photograph. It had to be David. His left eye was slightly off center and his eyelids drooped gently as if he was about to fall asleep. The right corner of his mouth pulled up into the hint of a smile, and though I couldn't see beyond his lips, I'd have been willing to lay any odds that there was a gap between the two front teeth.

Thirteen years ago, my sister had called me ghoulish, among other things, for doubting that David was really dead. Ghoulish, perhaps, but my instinct to doubt David's earthly departure was testimony to his life. Nora, like our mother, had a "pass the peas" approach to life and death. I, like our dad, liked to have proof in hand—especially when it concerned David.

He was a pathological liar who had been rescued from the long arm of the law on more than one occasion by our father. Dad had created a respected place for himself as an attorney and his connections worked as a buffer for David in his blossoming career as a forger. It had worked until David was arrested and charged with stealing, forging the signature and cashing in stocks that belonged to the mother of his girlfriend. No one could persuade the woman to drop the charges, so David, out on bail, decided it was time to leave the country.

I read the article again and again, trying to kind something, anything that connected the face I saw with the man I knew.

Noah Alexander had been in prison pending trial for the murder of liquor-store owner Jesse Washburn and one of his clients, Ms. Mildred Keller.

While David and I had never been friends, as kids he had always been devoted to Nora. I decided, with trepidation, give my big sister a call. I fished my address book out of my purse and hiked my feet up onto the desktop. After dialing the number, which I have a mental block against, I leaned back into the squeaky old swivel chair. Three rings later, Nora's familiar singsongy voice came at me through the receiver, loud and clear.

"Hel-low-oh."

"Hey, stranger, how you doing?"

"Sydney?" She paused. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Couldn't be better."

"Really? Then why are you calling? Especially on a weekday."

"I'm just calling to see how you are. How are you Nora?" I reached for the binoculars I keep on the window ledge in the den. In the last ten years, I have witnessed surprisingly little with the help of my glasses.

"Fine." She sounded wary, as if she was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Which, of course, it would.

"And how's Vicki?" My niece was away for her first year at college and, according to her letters, loving every second of it.

'Oh, puleeze, that child is going to be the death of me. Do you have any idea what she's doing now? She's playing electric violin with an all-women's rock-and-roll band.'

"Hey, that sounds great."

There was silence, then a sigh. "Well, it figures you'd think so. Personally, I hate it. I think it's gauche and a waste of time, but then, whenever I say white, you seem honor bound to say black. I don't know why you always have to be so contrary."

"I am not contrary. I'm just different from you."

"Mmm. And was her playing electric violin your idea? She was perfectly content with classical music until you gave her that horrible album."

"Stephane Grappelli is not horrible music. He's one of the best jazz violinists of our time. He's great. Besides, that was ten years ago, Nor. What is with you?"

She sniffed and cleared her throat. "Ach, I don't know. This house is just so damned stuffy. I'm just . . . hot. I hate being hot."

"It's February. It's cold."

"Well, this house is just unbearable. I turn the heat down, and Byron comes home and turns it right back up. It's enough to drive me crazy."

My brother-in-law, Byron, is an attorney in Maryland who has made a small fortune from saving the hides of political screwups who have been caught with their hands in the till or their pants around their ankles. He looks like a cross between a weasel and a bear, with a tiny little head and beady eyes atop a massive, misshapen body. When Byron hit forty

five, his body changed drastically, and without any apparent warning the large Byron Bradshaw became the massive Mr. Bradshaw, belting his pants just inches under his chest and waddling like a chafed penguin. Though he's noted for being a killer in the courtroom, Byron is one of the gentlest men I have ever known. He has the patience of Job and a heart the size of Texas.

"Well, you know what it sounds like, Nor."

"I don't want to talk about it, Sydney, do you understand?" she snapped.

"Hey listen, I have a lot of friends who—"

"I do, too, and I'm too young, all right?"

"Sure, but forty-five isn't—"

"No buts. I know what you're going to say and I don't want to hear it, okay?"

"Okay."

"Good." She exhaled loudly. "So what's up? I know you well enough to know there has to be a reason for this call."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I saw the strangest thing this morning. I was reading the paper and there's a story here that caught my eye." I pulled the paper off the file cabinet, set it in my lap, and looked at his picture.

"Oh?" I could hear Nora lighting a cigarette.

"I know this is going to sound crazy, but there's a picture of a guy here—a mug shot, actually—and you'll never guess who he looks like." I tried to make my voice sound light.

"Who?"

"David."

Silence.

"Hello?" I tapped at the mouthpiece.

Big sigh.

"I know you're there—I can hear you smoking."

"Just tell me, are you planning on starting this all over again?"

"Starting what?" My voice went up an octave or two.

"You know perfectly well what." Nora had mastered the tone of sanctimony by the time she was fifteen and made Mom—our family disciplinarian—look like Glinda the Good Witch of Oz. When Mom died, Nora thought her lectures might encourage me to act more in line with what she thought Mom would want, but then, as now, it only turned every muscle in my body to stone.

"I didn't call for a speech. I just wanted to know if you'd heard from him, that's all."

"He's dead, Sydney. If you're so anxious to see him, why don't you call Minnie?" Her throaty laugh turned into a hacking cough.

Aunt Minnie is our father's sister, who connects daily with loved ones who have already passed on to the other side. She is seventy-nine and apart from her dialogues with the deceased, she still works, meditates, and smokes a pack and a half of Parliaments every day.

I listened as Nora's cough worsened.

I had stopped smoking three years earlier on a bet. My pal Ned, a great trumpet player from Louisiana, was a betting man. One night, when we were out on the town and neither of us was feeling any pain, he bet me that he could give up smoking before I could. If I had a cigarette during a period of five years, I owed him five thousand dollars. If he had a cigarette during that time, he owed me five thousand dollars. Piece of cake. There was only one problem. Ned died of cancer after six months without a cigarette. Being the gentleman that he was, he stayed true to his word even in his will. If I go for five years without a cigarette, I am to be given the five grand and his trumpet. If I have a smoke during that time, the money goes to the cancer society and the trumpet is to be tossed into the Hudson

River. I look at it this way: Either way, the money goes to the American Cancer Society, but I'll be damned if the Hudson will get his trumpet.

"Are you all right?" I asked when her coughing had subsided.

She took a deep breath. "Fine. You shouldn't upset me like this."

It wasn't a point worth arguing over.

"I don't mean to upset you, Nora. I just assumed that if David was alive and well, he'd contact you before anyone else."

"Why are you so obsessed about David?"

"I'm not."

"Think again, Sydney. I mean it wasn't bad enough that you two hated each other when he was alive, but you insisted on certification when he was dead. You don't think that's sick?"

"Nora, he was a liar and you know as well as I do that—"

"That what? You were being absurd then, and as far as I can tell, nothing's changed. You're still being absurd. And obsessed."

I took a deep breath and counted to eight silently. "If you remember correctly, he was wanted by the law here." It was an old argument and I could feel my heart starting to race.

"My memory is fine, Sydney, it's my patience that's wearing thin. We have been over this a thousand times. David wasn't wanted anymore. He was married and he'd made a clean breast of things. Why do you find that so hard to accept?"

I hadn't felt this sort of friction between us since I'd decided to move back into and renovate the apartment. Nothing had been changed since Mom renovated it in the mid sixties, and when Dad was killed in 1980, the kitchen wallpaper still had grotesque huge orange and yellow "mod" daisies that made me queasy even when they were hip. When Caryn and I redesigned the place in 1981, the daisies were the first thing to go. It was more an act of survival than anything else. Nora hated the thought of changing the apartment and resisted us every step of the way. To her, it was like erasing our past and our parents from the place. In a way, she was right, I was trying to create a new life in an old space.

But Nora and I always butted heads when it came to family matters, especially David matters. Nora believed in protecting family, right or wrong. But I'd been burned by David enough to know I didn't buy the right-or-wrong bunk.

After David left the States, he'd moved to Israel, where he allegedly came clean by marrying Basha a well-endowed Israel citizen whose parents were well connected. Her parents had pull with the government and struck a deal with David. If he promised to stay clean, put in eight-hour days six days a week in their bookstore, and remain faithful to their daughter, they would happily welcome him into their little fold. For this, he would become an Israeli citizen with a clean record. His alternative was a three-year lease on a cozy little jail cell back in the States. However, for the first year after their marriage, David had Basha convinced that he was a bona fide surgeon, though he had gotten his high school diploma by the skin of his teeth.

"If he thought this was a way to get out of Israel, do you honestly think he wouldn't have at least tried to fake his own death?" I paused. I'm telling you, if you saw this picture ..."

"I'd probably say that he looks a lot like David. Big deal." There was a sharp edge to her voice that struck me like nails on slate.

"Why is it, Nora, that it couldn't possibly be David? Stranger things have happened."

There was a long pause. Finally, she exhaled. "And you don't think you're obsessed?" She snickered.

"I'm sorry I brought it up." I tossed the paper onto the desktop.

"Well, that's all right. I understand these things."

I resisted the urge to dump the phone into the garbage.

"So have you heard from your . . . friend?" Nora struggled to be oblique.

"Which friend?" Squirm, worm.

"You know, what's her name, the girl who went to Europe," she said impatiently.

"Caryn?"

"Yes, her."

"Caryn's not a girl, Nora. As a matter of fact, she's still older than you by five years."

"Whatever. Now please, don't go getting defensive."

Conversations with Nora can be exhausting. By the time we hung up, I felt as if I had done a long hour on the rowing machine.

I started pacing and wound up in the living room. Above the fireplace was the only piece of artwork in the room. A portrait Caryn had painted of the two of us nine years earlier. In the painting, I was sitting on an arm-chair with my hands folded in my lap, looking straight at the artist. Caryn was squatting on my left side. Her right arm rested on the arm of the chair and her feet were bare.

When Caryn decided to move to Ireland and study sculpting with Liam Greene, it hurt to look at the portrait. But as the days turned into months, and now years, I have discovered that whenever I need to lighten up, I look at that painting.

I felt Charlie rub against my leg. His touch brought me back to the moment.

"Yeah, pal, maybe you're right. Maybe I should have called Gilbert in the first place."

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