

THE GIRL IN ROOM 16

A DARCY HUNT FBI MYSTERY THRILLER



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A Darcy Hunt FBI Mystery Suspense Thriller Book 1

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Prologue

Miller's Grove, New York
November 2003

An orange flame flickered atop a solitary candle perched in the middle of the stone floor. The muted glow animated eerie shadows that danced across the greystone walls, dark sheets of gyrating motion that looked like evil spirits conspiring to step into the room.

The girl huddled her ten-year-old body into the corner as tightly as she could, trying to use what little warmth she was generating to insulate her younger sister against the cold.

"I can't feel my toes," Lila said.

"Me neither," she replied. "It won't be much longer."

"I'm scared."

I am too.

But she didn't say it out loud. She had to be strong for Lila, which meant that she had to keep her own fear and terror locked tightly inside. On the other side of the steel door, she could hear the chanting getting louder. She tugged at the hem of her nightgown again, drawing it back down to her bare ankles. Her teeth began to chatter.

"Whatever happens," she said, "I'll protect you. I promise."

"I miss Mommy."

"Mommy is looking for us right now. So is Daddy. They'll find us."

The chanting was almost feverish now, its cadence rising and falling with an unearthly energy that brought muted sobs from Lila's little body. "What do they want with us?" she cried.

I don't know.

"They won't hurt us," she reassured her little sister. "They'll just..."

The chanting stopped, and everything became eerily quiet. High above them, a narrow horizontal opening in the wall whistled in a flurry of snow that drifted to the floor like frozen tears.

The silence was shattered by the heavy bolt in the iron door sliding back. It echoed across the stone floor and walls, not fully dissipating before the door was thrown open. Lila screamed as a hooded figure stepped into the room. Her sister gathered her close as it moved toward them and stopped not three feet away. When it spoke, the deep resonance of the voice caused a haunted shiver to run through both girls.

He extended his arm and then, slowly, a finger. It was directed at Lila. "You. It's time."

The man was clothed in a dark flowing robe, the contours of his face hidden beneath the sprawl of a thick hood. The robe drifted along the floor, and the oversized sleeves rested below his wrists.

"No..." Lila's sister said, and then with a sudden surge of panic, "No !"

The man in the hooded robe reached out and snatched at Lila. Like a terrified rodent with no place to run, Lila huddled closer to her sister, who then snapped at the man: "Take me. What—whatever you want with her, mister... *please* , take me."

"All in the proper order." The man took a step back and raised an arm high above his head. Moments later, soft footsteps sounded on the floor behind him. Two more figures similarly clothed stepped in beside him. He pointed down at Lila again. "Her."

With swift, ghoulis movements, the two figures swooped in and grabbed Lila, quickly pulling her from her sister's grasp.

She screamed as Lila was yanked from her. "Nooo !" She scrambled to her feet and reached for the little girl. One of the figures stepped forward and

shoved her back. Her shoulder blades slammed into the wall just before the back of her head smacked against it with a hollow crack. Dazed, she fell to the floor and watched through blurry vision as the three shadows disappeared through the door with her sister. She wildly screamed Lila's name again and again, begging for help as she was carried away.

The door slammed shut, and the bolt was secured. Soon, the sound of her sister's cries drifted away. "Lila... Lila..." she muttered through a state of half awareness. "I'll protect you... I promise."

She swam in and out of consciousness. High above her, snow continued to swirl in and drift down, dusting her in a powdery film. Too cold to even shiver and too dazed to tug her gown across her bare legs, she lay there, unmoving and unthinking, hardly able to feel the horror of what was happening, but wondering deep inside why anyone would do something like this to two young girls.

Time slipped by. The candle went out. Somewhere she could smell smoke. The next thing she was aware of was a loud thud that jolted her back into a semi-conscious state. It sounded again, and she heard anxious voices coming from the other side of the door. Too weak to move her lips, she tried to squeak out the only thing screaming to get out of her chest. "*Help* ." But the word miscarried in her throat. She couldn't speak.

The thud came again, louder this time, and then again. The door clattered off its hinges and crashed with an ear-splitting clang to the floor. A rush of footsteps entered the room, accompanied by an assembly of worried voices.

One of the voices called her name. It was gentle, not hard and commanding like the voice of the man who had taken her sister.

She tried to speak, but her voice would not obey.

"It's okay, Sweetheart. Just a minute. We're going to get you out of here."

She felt the soft fibers of a blanket draped over her, and the cold slowly retreated beneath it. Minutes passed and she was laid on a stretcher and carried out of the room. Flashlight beams cut across the walls, but she could make nothing out. Nothing but cold, gray stone.

Swallowing, she focused all her energy on uttering a single word. "Lila."

A long pause, and then another gentle voice, different from the first, said, "Just relax. You're safe now."

As they carried her to safety, she felt the unrelenting grip of sleep pulling her back under. Just before she closed her eyes and drifted off, her lips traced the words: "I'll protect you. I promise."

Chapter One

Present Day

Delfax County, NY

“Do you think he’s dead?” Skylar’s fingers squeeze my forearm while her other hand covers her mouth and concerned eyes bulge toward the scene of the accident.

“I don’t know,” I say. “He hit his head pretty hard. He’ll be lucky to walk away with just a concussion.”

We’re standing behind a temporary railing designed to keep spectators off the road and out of the path of the cyclists. Twenty yards away, golden bales of hay stand along the verge where the country road enters a hairpin turn, some of them overturned now and hay strewn across the asphalt.

“Or walk away at all.” Her voice is pitched and filled with concern. “How was his helmet not on?” Skylar is still speaking from behind her hand. Because I prefer the feeling of blood flowing through my arm, I slowly peel her iron grip off me as medical personnel and training staff hurry to the scene of the crash.

“When the bicycle flipped, one of the handlebars snagged the back of his helmet and ripped it off,” I reply.

We arrived in the New York countryside last night from Albany to watch a regional cycling race. Cycling is Skylar’s preferred sport of choice, and she regularly travels around the region to watch and participate in races.

Although I prefer tennis, the race was a perfect opportunity to get away and get in some much-needed girl time with my best friend. Work has kept me busy lately as I focus on catching the unsubs that are still running free throughout my city.

I have hardly seen Skylar at all these last few months. She is a special agent in the FBI's Rochester field office, on the other side of the state, which means that we don't get to spend nearly as much time together as we would like. One of us usually tries to make the trip to see the other every few weeks, but even that has been hard to do lately, as I haven't had a single moment for myself, opting for short catnaps at my desk or on a couch at the office. At one point, I didn't even return to my apartment for three days, only doing so when my ASAC ordered me to under threat of transferring the case to another agent. I finally conceded and returned home for a shower and a change of clothes. After sleeping for several hours in the comfort of my own bed, I made a protein shake in the kitchen before making a beeline back to the office.

All my diligence finally paid off when we caught the Night Knocker Killer four days ago. For over a year now, he had plagued northeastern New York. His MO was simple enough: at exactly midnight, he would knock on the front door of a single woman's home. After making sure that he woke them, he would leave. The next night, they would be dead in their beds, strangled to death. Seven victims had fallen prey to his hands when he finally grew bolder and started to increase his frequency. Instead of one victim a month, he moved to one a week.

The Night Knocker was growing thirstier, looking for a fresh kick of endorphins and a rush of adrenaline that, for him, accompanied the violent taking of an innocent life. My ASAC finally let me get involved with the case when the number of victims had risen to double digits and no clear leads had been established. For six weeks, the Night Knocker struck every week without fail. Four of the final six victims had even gone to stay with relatives or friends away from the city after receiving a midnight knock on their door.

But it hadn't helped. The killer still managed to find them the next night, slipping in and out of the homes without being detected.

And that had been why I couldn't sleep, why I couldn't allow myself to get back to normal life. Every week that went by meant another innocent woman whose life would be taken from her. If my office couldn't stop the Night Knocker, then he would only continue to prowl and breed terror in the community that I love and have sworn to protect. That meant sleep and going to visit Skylar for the weekend was a luxury I couldn't allow myself.

The break in the case finally came when a piece of evidence from the most recent murder connected with another detail I had found tucked away in an ME's report. We scrambled a SWAT team to a house on the outskirts of the city and arrested James Chalmers as he sat on his couch watching *Taxi Driver*. His kitchen table was littered with the names, photos, and addresses of his next five victims. He had it all planned out.

My office presented me with an award for breaking the case, even going so far as to order cake and bring in balloons. I really hate that kind of attention. Being in the spotlight is just not my thing, and knowing the names and faces of the very women whose lives we had saved was reward enough.

I didn't join the FBI because I knew the work would be easy or because I could put in my forty hours and then go home without thinking about work until Monday morning. I became a federal law enforcement officer because, more than ever, dedicated people are in demand, men and women who expect to put in long hours with average pay, but who feel a strong sense of purpose knowing that they are a necessary arm of justice.

Don't get me wrong. Some days I catch myself wondering if there are other lines of work that I might enjoy more. It's usually when Bureau politics somehow hinder the forward progress of one of my investigations that I start to wonder. I have friends who love being lawyers, flight attendants, and small business owners. But no matter how much political garbage I have to navigate in the workplace, I remain committed to my work as a special agent. The FBI isn't just a career for me. It's a calling, and nothing else will make me feel truly fulfilled.

“Look,” Skylar says. “They’re putting him on a stretcher.”

We watch as the medical staff wrap the cyclist’s neck in a cervical collar and then slip a stretcher beneath him.

“It might be a good thing that you didn’t race this morning,” I say. “That’s a hard turn in the road. I can’t believe he has been the only one to bite it so far.”

The women’s race had been held earlier this morning. Normally, Skylar would have entered it and placed somewhere in the top ten, but a recent knee injury kept her out this time around.

“It was a freak accident,” she says. “It could have happened to anyone.”

“My point exactly.”

“You sound like my mother right now. Stop sounding like my mother.” She shoots me a wily grin.

“Fine, but looking at that cyclist and thinking of it being you—”

“Well, it’s not,” she interrupts. “And everything worth doing comes with its risks.”

“All I’m saying is that you have a kid to think about. If you wipe out, then I’m the one who will have to bring Reuben to the hospital and watch him see you like that. Anyway, I’m not telling you not to get back on the seat after your knee heals.”

“Darcy,” she says. “I’ll always be careful. I promise.”

“I know,” I sigh. “And I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound like your mother.”

Her mouth curves upward into a smile. “I know you don’t. And I’m just teasing you. I know why you watch out for me like that.”

“Thanks.” I take in a deep breath of fresh, country air. “I’m glad I came with you. I didn’t realize how much I needed the time away.”

As soon as we arrived last night, Skylar and I immediately found the nearest—and possibly the only—foot spa. After getting full pedicures, we crossed the street, settled into a booth at the steakhouse, and ordered steaks and drinks. With our stomachs full, we returned to our hotel room and watched a movie with Kate Winslet in the lead role. Exhausted from a rigorous work schedule, I fell asleep halfway through, leaving Skylar to finish

it by herself. But this morning, I woke up feeling refreshed and ready for a relaxing day in the countryside.

The sun is climbing higher into the sky, and I can feel the heat warming my face a little too much. Reaching into my handbag, I bring out a ball cap, pull my long hair back, and thread it through the hole in the back of the cap before settling it onto my head.

“You need to come in this week and let me give you a cut,” Skylar says. She runs her fingers down the length of my chestnut brown hair. “It’s way too long.”

“I like it,” I contend. “It’s not even halfway down my back.”

“But it needs more style—layers. Not many. Just enough to give it a little more charm.”

Skylar has been styling hair ever since we were in high school. Even though she’s a top-notch FBI agent during the week, in her spare time, she works magic with her scissors and hair dyes on a few clients every weekend. She has gained a reputation for turning bland into bravo and gets paid well for it, too.

Her sunflower blonde hair contrasts sharply with mine, her bright blue eyes with my hazel, and she stands an inch taller than my five-foot-seven frame. We couldn't look more different, but we couldn't get along better; I'm lucky to have her as a best friend. At twenty-nine, she's a year older than me and has a beautiful nine-year-old boy, Reuben.

Skylar keeps me balanced. She's always pushing for me to get away, cut loose, or just find a way to relax. I really don't know what I would do without her. I would probably be a workaholic on my way to complete burnout. There are plenty of good agents who can put the job behind them when they go home to their families at night. I'm not one of them. For one, I don't have a family to go home to. And second, I feel the weight of solving each and every case I work on. The victims deserve it. At the Academy, they teach new agents to leave work at work whenever possible. It's their attempt at making sure that their agents stay fresh and don't go looking for a new line of work a few years into their new career. But what never leaves me is the knowledge

that if I don't solve a case, then the odds are it will never get solved. Other agents have their own cases to deal with. They don't have time to pick one up that I can't solve. Even if they did, it would only be added to a stack of other cases they're currently working on. Eventually, it would get placed into a cold case folder and the victims' relatives would never know peace. I know something about not getting closure, about going to bed every night wondering... I don't want that for anyone else.

Skylar is shooting me a look.

"What?" I ask.

"You didn't answer me."

"About what?"

"Your hair. You need to let me style it."

I gave her the same answer I do every time she brings it up. "Maybe. We'll see."

"Mhm."

It's not that I don't care about adding a little more style to my look; it's more that I like it the way it is. My hair is naturally shiny and easy to throw into a ponytail, something essential when you're pouring over a thick file or inspecting a crime scene. I know Skylar and she'll want to layer it, which means that half the ponytail will probably try to slip out of whatever hair tie I throw it up in.

Skylar glances at her watch. "It's not noon yet," she says. "Once they get the road cleared, the race should be over in another half hour. We should have time to peruse some of the boutiques in town before we head back to the city. Want to?"

Just as I begin to form an answer, we're interrupted by my phone ringing.