

Prologue

Twelve miles from Ar Rutbah, Iraq
Sunday, March 14

The bandages reeked. The tang of infection touched Mitch Sheridan's nostrils even from several feet away. The old man—inured to the stench of his ancient wound—crouched still as a heron, robes pooling around his ankles and rocket-propelled grenade propped against his good shoulder. Behind him, the sky glared so bright it crinkled the eyes, the sun pulling ripples of heat from the sand. Row upon row of tents sagged in the distance, like soldiers too weary to stand.

K-chhr-k-chhr. The shutter on Mitch's Leica whirred. The old man made a good shot: gut-wrenching and austere at the same time. *K-chhr.* Mitch cranked the focus ring clockwise, zooming in, letting the sky and tents go fuzzy in the background. Not too small; keep the stump of the shoulder in the frame, the bandages filthy and yellowed and oozing. Don't ask the man's name or wonder how it happened. Don't think about the pain. Just get the pictures, tell the story. *K-chhr. K-chhr.*

Mitch rose and the man gave a nod, then squinted back across the horizon, sentry to the northwestern portion of the camp. Life as a Kurdish refugee.

“Hey. Mister!”

Mitch turned. The kid. He was a hundred yards away, waving a spindly arm, kicking up tufts of sand as he ran. Three days ago, Mitch had found him digging through a mountain of garbage with a mongrel dog, both of them rooting for treasures. Mitch shot the two of them for ten minutes, got maybe thirty pictures before the child had dared to approach him.

The boy called out again and Mitch dropped his Leica inside his loose linen shirt, letting it hang from the strap around his neck. He started toward the kid, but stopped when the old man rose from his crouch.

“*Firoke,*” the man whispered, almost to himself.

His eyes locked on the horizon and Mitch followed with his gaze. Nothing, but the hairs on Mitch's arms stood up. And a heartbeat later: *Thwp-thwp-thwp-thwp.*

Firoke. Helicopter, in Sorani.

Ah, no. The old man began to run, shouting as he headed for camp. Mitch looked up. It was coming in fast. *Thwp-thwp-thwp-thwp...*

“Hey!”

Jesus, the kid. He was eighty yards away.

“Get down,” Mitch yelled, though the sound of the chopper drowned him out. The boy stopped and gaped into the sky. “Get down!” Mitch called again.

The chopper swooped in, a giant bee, whipping sand into windstorms. In the distance, the camp scattered, the old man still fifty

yards out, but men grabbing weapons and women clinging to each other or screeching for their children, seeking cover. The helicopter stopped in mid-air, hovering, the doors opening like gaping jaws. Terror poured out. Bombs. Explosions. Gunfire.

The boy froze, gawking at the sky. The camp behind him had erupted, a cacophony of screams and gunfire and the unrelenting hacking of the chopper blades overhead. Mortars exploded and tents collapsed; voices rose into the air only to be churned by the rotors into a raging cloud of panic. *Thwp-thwp-thwp*.

“Here!” Mitch shouted, but the boy didn’t move. Mitch covered his head and ran toward him, geysers of sand exploding all around him. Something hit him and his legs buckled; he screamed at the child from the ground. He struggled to get up, smoke filling his nostrils and distant cries in his ears; his leg was sticky and hot, and when he moved, it was like dragging his limbs through quicksand. He kept his eyes on the boy, shouting, but the kid was a statue—the eye of the hurricane whirling all around him.

Hurry. Get to the boy, find cover. Mitch dragged closer. Sixty yards away, fifty. “Come here!”

The boy snapped out of his daze. He saw Mitch, and for a fraction of a second, relief opened Mitch’s lungs. The kid started toward him, running, his little arms covering his head. Mitch staggered toward him—forty yards away, thirty. Get there. Help him.

The ground exploded. Sand shot into the air and reflex closed Mitch’s eyes. When he opened them again, the sky rained down shrapnel and debris and maybe blood, and the boy was nowhere and Mitch squinted and shouted and ran, stumbling, disbelieving.

He almost tripped on him. A child in a heap. Mangled. One arm gone.

Mitch heard his own voice rise into the air. He dropped and covered the open shoulder with his hands, blood and ripped tissue squeezing between his fingers. Hard, press hard. Stop the bleeding. The child’s eyes mooned up at him, his lips moving with no sound. Press hard. Stop the bleeding. You can do it.

Then sky flashed. For one fraction of time, the world froze in an instant of blinding white light.

Then it went black for a long, long time.

Chapter One

Camden Park, Lancaster, MD
Sunday, September 22

Whoops and giggles, canned music, the screech of balloons being bullied into bubble-necked poodles. The air smelled of soft pretzels and Belgian waffles, the sidewalks teeming with fathers talking into Bluetooth earpieces and mothers juggling sippy-cups and strollers stuffed with toddlers who had dozed off by late afternoon. Slightly older siblings orbited their parents like forgotten moons in the sinking evening—lagging behind, straying from the paths, lured from reach by the remnants of popped poodles on the ground or the call of a snow cone vendor.

Bait, if you were a child molester or kidnapper. Easy pickings.

The killer was neither. No need to risk grabbing a child from a weekend carnival, as simple as that would be. Not when women sold newborns outright on the black market. A baby broker could stake out any abortion clinic, talk to any pimp. Women with unwanted pregnancies were a dime a dozen.

One such woman now lurked behind a magician's kiosk with a camera, secretly shooting pictures of the Kinney family—Robert, Alana, and their four-year-old son, Austin. A floppy hat hung over her brow and she'd let her hair grow out in the years she'd been gone, but there was no doubt who she was or why she'd been stalking the Kinneys. Four years after the fact, her conscience had apparently kicked in.

Fury knotted in the killer's throat. She was a worthless, no good slut, just like the others. But she'd slipped through the cracks—cozied up to some cop with a Mother Theresa-complex. The cop steered her to a women's shelter and by the time the killer realized she wasn't hooking anymore, she'd skipped town, quit the life. Left a gaping hole in the killer's work.

Tonight, that hole would be filled. And after that, it was only a few more days until everything would be ready. One week from tonight, amidst the glitz and glamour of Maryland's elite upper crust, the killer's new life would begin. The life that always should have been.

First things first: the woman. She followed the Kinneys through the park exit and ducked into the woods along the far edge of cars. The killer tagged a good distance behind, though there was little chance of recognition: baseball cap, sunglasses, boots. Loose nylon jacket with deep, square pockets. Anonymous.

The Kinneys dragged through the parking lot, Austin straddling his father's neck with his face stuck in a blue cloud of cotton candy. His mother aimed a key fob at a row of cars, and a silver Jaguar gave a toot.

The woman's camera came out again.

Damn her, she was getting the license plate, and the killer knew the time had come. If anyone found the pictures of Austin Kinney, if the woman had spoken to anyone about him, the entire brokerage would go under. The Foundation that housed it would crumble.

This weekend's debut would be lost.

Be calm, now, stay sane. By her own design, the woman with the camera was making things easy. She stayed behind the shrubs, out of sight. By her own design, easy pickings.

Now.

A pair of gloves came from the jacket's pocket first, then an set of shears. The blades were old and stained with a touch of rust, but sharp enough to do the job. They'd done it a half dozen times before and had one more to go after this.

The killer came in fast, from behind, the long blades heading for the woman's throat like a missile. She must have heard it coming; she whirled and opened her mouth to scream, but the shears caught her in the larynx and the sound came out *Unkh*. She dropped and the killer was right there, jabbing deep into cartilage and tissue—in and out, in and out—over and over again, into the throat. *Bitch. Worthless, no good slut...*

It was over in seconds. The killer backed off, fighting for breath, and glanced around. No one, not back here in the woods. The woman lay on the ground, her legs angled like the letter Z, her hat askew and hair falling over her face. Geysers of blood from her throat fizzled to tiny gurgles.

That's it. Settle down. She's finished. Just one more to go. And she was already holed up in Virginia awaiting her turn with the scissors.

The killer stepped back. Now, keep your head, take care of business. Boots, phone call, camera. For god's sake, don't forget the camera. The killer slipped it into a pocket, purposely stepped in some of the woman's blood, then used a gloved finger to punch a number into the dead woman's cell phone. *You've reached the office of Russell Sanders...* An answering service: fine. There was no need to talk to Sanders, only to let the whore's phone records confirm their acquaintance so his suicide would make sense.

Now, just one more thing. The killer bent and grabbed a handful of the hair draping the woman's cheek, lifted it, sawed it off with the shears. The locks dangled in a haphazard ponytail, curling and twisting around the glove as if alive.

Finally, after all these years, the first woman was dead.

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Zürich, Switzerland
Monday, September 23

A beep sounded and Mitch cringed, pulled a pillow over his head. If he ignored it, maybe it would stop. He pressed an arm tighter over the

pillow but three seconds later, the cosmic little beep came again. The satellite phone.

He rolled to the edge of the bed and sat up, his head in a haze. Only one person would be calling him on the sat phone: Russell Sanders. And he wasn't going to stop calling until Mitch answered.

He dug the phone from its case. Grunted.

"Mitch, it's Russ. Are you there? Can you hear me?"

Mitch laid his head against the phone. It was the size of a brick, like the walkie-talkies he and his brother Neil used to play with, except that what used to be static halfway down the block now allowed conversation halfway around the world. "I can hear you."

"Good. Christ, I was afraid you wouldn't answer."

"No, Russ. You can't have the Ar Rutbah photos so stop asking. The exhibition is full enough without those pict—"

"I'm not calling about the exhibition. Not this time."

"I called because—" Russ paused, maybe still catching his breath. The silence made the hairs on Mitch's arms stand up. Something going on. "I'm in trouble, Mitch. It's about the Foundation. Come home."

"I'll be there in time for the opening Saturday."

"No, now. We need to talk."

"About what?"

"There was this woman—" A scrape, then, "No."

"Russ?" Another strange sound. Grunts, shuffling. Maybe a piece of furniture dragging across the floor. "Russ, what's going on?" Mitch stood, wide awake now, his leg screaming at him. He heard Russ's voice, muffled, and gripped the phone tighter. "Russ."

More scrapes and scuffs. Panic trickled in. Mitch strained to interpret sounds from the other damn side of the planet. Dread congealed in his veins, then, as suddenly as the commotion had started, silence streamed in. No more voice, no more scuffle.

"*Russ.*" But all he could hear was the thundering in his chest. The connection went dead.

Chapter Two

Tuesday, September 24
Lancaster, MD

Danielle Cole honked her way through traffic to a murder scene in Camden Park. *Murder* scene. It pissed her off just thinking about it. She wasn't some pussyfoot homicide detective; she'd told Tifton a dozen times she didn't want to do that kind of work. She didn't want to spend her days at a computer or in a courtroom or morgue, or on the phone or in a cramped interview room. She didn't want to become the kind of cop who had to be reminded to pull her gun from her desk drawer before leaving the building.

Dani liked the streets. Vice—that's where the action was. It was where her dad had spent his career and where she spent hers. She didn't have the sort of bust record her dad had prided himself on, still: no freaking desk job for the daughter of Artie Cole.

The squad sergeant didn't give a damn about Dani's likes and dislikes. "Tifton caught a murder this morning at Camden Park," he'd said into the phone thirty minutes ago, dragging her from a short night of dreams. "He wants you on it."

"Tell Tifton to call Scarpio." She sat up, scrubbing the sleep from her eyes, and blinked the clock into focus. Seven-oh-eight. Tuesday.

Ah, shit, *Tuesday*. She popped out of bed, wide awake in an instant. Damn it. Today was the deadline.

A stone dropped on her chest. No way could she get tied up with a murder investigation today. She had an appointment. And it wasn't the kind of appointment you could change.

"Hold on, Sarge," she said, thinking fast. The appointment was at eleven. She staggered to the kitchen pulled a chopped spinach box from the freezer, struggling to open it one-handed. Pretty damned cliché, she'd thought when she threw the spinach away and re-glued the box to use as a hiding place. But she hadn't been able to think of anything better.

She got it open and saw the wad of cash tucked safe inside. The stone eased up on her chest a little.

Back to the Sergeant. "Look, I've gotta hit the club on East Fulton Street today. I got a tip the owner's putting out underage dancers."

"I'll send Simmons to the club. You go meet Tifton. You're his until further notice."

"Aw, jeez..."

"Nails," he'd said, using her departmental nickname. "Is that a whine in your voice?"

Her jaw snapped shut. Dani Cole didn't whine. She also couldn't buck the shift sergeant.

Which is why, thirty minutes later, she knocked back her last swig of coffee and rolled onto a murder scene at Camden Park. God willing, she could bail in time to make the meeting at eleven.

A uniform waved her through the park gate and into a television-perfect crime scene: yellow ribbon strung around the perimeter of a parking lot and disappearing in the woods, half a dozen black-and-whites parked at various angles, a couple more gray Chevrolets belonging to investigators. An ambulance sat square to the curb, the back open and two EMTs sitting on the bumper talking football—no one to save. The media were roped off at a respectable distance, as if distance mattered with the kinds of magnifying lenses they used these days, and a handful of detectives in coats and ties stood in the parking lot.

Reginald Tifton was one. He spoke with two of the uniforms, pointing in an arc behind them. Dani walked up as the officers turned and jogged off in the direction Tifton had pointed.

“About time, Nails,” he said dropping from the curb and meeting her in an empty parking slot. “Your beauty routine hold you up this morning?”

Dani scowled. There wasn’t an Avon lady in the world who would call her efforts a beauty routine: three swipes of mascara per eye and a smear of tinted chapstick. Her hair had major control issues, so she kept it shoulder-length, pulled back as often as not, and let it have its way.

“You oughta try it sometime,” she shot, pointing at his clean-shaven head. “Learn the wonders of hair products.”

Tifton tried for a smile, but didn’t quite get there. He was a big man pushing forty, black, going for wife Number Three, and had a bowling-ball head perched on a neck like a log. He spoke like a Yale graduate, except when he decided to turn on the street charm and make a suspect believe he was from the hood. He was actually from the old-money area of Cheshire Lake, a well-to-do suburb much like most of Lancaster. Secretly, Dani suspected he *had* gone to Yale.

His eyes homed in on hers. “I haven’t seen you since your dad’s funeral. You hanging in there?”

Dani shot him a glare.

He showed his palms and jerked his chin toward the bushes. “Clean-up crew from the carnival found a dead woman in her twenties. Shot sometime during the clown-fest this weekend.”

Dani started toward the site. “And where’s your partner? You drive him to early retirement already?”

“Thought you might know something on this one the rest of us don’t.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“The vic was one of your snitches.”

Dani stopped, the news hitting like ice water. Her collection of snitches was comprised of a few low-level drug dealers, a bookie, a couple

of hookers, a guy who sold tickets at the dollar-theater on Barker Street. And Jed, a bum who'd lived under a bridge in Reading. That was the extent of the list, and she couldn't make any of them work at a Camden Park carnival.

She beat a path toward the bushes, Tifton trailing after her. "Dani, hold on. It's ugly back there. It's—"

The smell hit her and Dani hesitated, slowing as she approached the body. She couldn't see the face, but it was a woman with long dark hair, her legs crooked as if she had simply crumpled, like an accordion losing air, or as if she had folded them toward her body while dying. Dani stepped around to look at the face.

Her heart stopped. "Ah, no," she said, emotion clogging her throat. She turned her back. "No, no, no."

Tifton said, "It's her, right? Rosie?"

Dani couldn't breathe. She braced her hands on her knees and tried to get her lungs to function, her stomach churning her morning coffee. "Rose McNamara."

"Okay," Tifton said, then called to another investigator over Dani's back: "I was right, Wilson, it's Rose McNamara. She was a hooker for Ty Craig out of Reading."

"No," Dani said. "She hasn't hooked for a couple years. Or snitched."

Tifton blinked, then ran a hand over her scalp. "Ah, jeez, Nails. Was she another one of your charity cases?"

"Shh," Dani said, and lowered her voice. "She was going through some emotional crap, that's all. I got her to go away for a while. She called me about three months ago to tell me she was back." Dani closed her eyes, then looked at Tifton. "She wasn't back with Craig. She had a job at the Big Lots on Grimby Street. She was going to counseling, paying rent on her own apartment." *Making it.*

The grief came in a flood. *Tough it out. Don't be a baby.* Dani swallowed the lump in her throat and walked back to the body, summoning the cool detachment the job required. The victim's eyes were frozen in a moment of shock and pain, her throat a mishmash of blood and torn tissue. The bugs had gotten to her: maggots speckled the ragged flesh like grains of rice, flies battling the medical examiner for access. A cell phone sat in her right hand. Her fingers were lax; rigor mortis come and gone. She was fully clothed, and her hair—Dani crouched closer to get a better look—appeared to have been hacked.

"Bad hair day," the ME said, noticing Dani's regard. "Someone took a chunk."

"Here? You mean post mortem?"

"Post mortem, I can't say. Here? I can say. There's a few cut-off strands, and blood in the hair. Maybe used the same object he used to turn her throat into hamburger."

"Object."

He shrugged. “Thick blade of some sort. That’s all I’ve got for you so far.”

Dani swallowed. She moved slowly around the body, trying to feel the killer, then sank in a crouch next to Rosie’s face.

Tifton bent down beside her. “So, what’s the theory? You’re the shrink.”

“I’m not a shrink.”

“You’ve got that degree in psychology. It makes you more of a shrink than the rest of us.”

“It’s not anonymous, that’s all,” she said. “It’s personal. Or maybe sexual. You don’t get this kind of overkill for nothing.”

“You’re saying she knew him, or at least he knew her. That might explain why she came back here in the woods, anyway.”

“Got some footprints here,” the ME said. “Boots, probably.”

Tifton walked over and looked. “Boo-yah,” he said. Prints were good.

The dance got under way, the steps rehearsed a couple of dozen times a year in bedroom communities like Lancaster, three or four hundred times a year in bigger cities like Baltimore or D.C. or Philadelphia. Techies, uniforms, and detectives—all wearing booties and gloves—went about their jobs: studying the body, canvassing for witnesses, searching the woods and parking lot with rubber gloves and plastic bags, collecting items that would ultimately prove there had been a carnival. Dani hung with Tifton, keeping an eye on her watch and trying not to think about the fact that Rosie was dead. Finally, those all-important words came from the ME: “We’re ready to flip her,” he called out.

Dani worked her way over and stood next to Tifton. The ME and one of his assistants flanked the body.

“Let me have her phone,” Dani said.

The ME slid it from Rosie’s fingers. Wearing fresh latex gloves, Dani took it, then watched while Rosie’s body was ceremoniously flipped. No new wounds on her back side. No murder weapon underneath. No chewing gum wrappers or matchbooks.

Dani walked to the parking lot, bent over the hood of Tifton’s car like a desk, and pressed POWER on the phone. She copied down numbers from recent calls, incoming calls, missed calls, then dropped Rosie’s phone into an evidence bag and took out her own. Climbing onto Tifton’s hood, she propped her feet on the bumper and dialed the precinct. Spelled each name and number to a desk officer.

Twenty minutes later, the guy called back and recited the names and addresses of people matching the phone numbers. Dani recognized a few of them—Rosie’s sister, her landlord, her mom. No one identifiable as a boyfriend or lover. No one unusual at all, at least not that Dani could tell, until the last name on the list: *JMS Foundation for Photography Art*.

She frowned and checked the time of the call. Sunday, eight-oh-seven p.m. It had lasted just eighteen seconds.

“Careful, your brow is gonna stay that way.” Tifton had stepped over to her, pressing his thumb into the frown line above her nose.

She brushed his hand away, already dialing that last number from Rosie’s phone. Voice mail picked up. *“You’ve reached Russell Sanders, managing director at the JMS Foundation for Photography Art. Please leave a message...”*

She disconnected and looked up at Tifton. “What would a hooker-turned-Big-Lots-cashier have to do with an upscale art guild like the Sheridan Foundation?”

“Developing an interest in photography, maybe?”

She ignored the pun. “The last call Rosie made was to Russell Sanders.”

“Who’s Russell Sanders?”

“The director of the J. M. Sheridan Foundation.”

“Open eyes, open hearts. *That* Sheridan?”

Like there was another.

“Pretty posh circle of friends,” Tifton speculated. He arched one brow. “Which begs the question, how do you know about him? You got a love for photography you’ve kept hidden all these years?”

She fished her keys from her pocket. “I met him a couple of times—Sheridan. Back when we were kids.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“It was no big deal,” she lied, and jumped off the hood of the car. “I used to see him and his brother at the pool sometimes, that’s all.” And he’d pulled her out of the deep end once after she got kicked in the head. A strong, lanky teenager with dark hair and sparkling blue eyes. He’d handed her off to her brother and forgotten all about it.

Dani hadn’t.

“So that’s it,” Tifton said. The coroner’s wagon pulled away with Rosie’s body; the crime scene unit was packing it in. “We’re done here. I guess we oughta make Sanders our first stop. The Sheridan Foundation is on Franklin Avenue, right?”

“Yeah. But...” Dani looked at her watch again. The Gemini was across town, a good twenty minutes away. “I’ll meet you there. I’ve got something I gotta do first.”

“Whoa, Dani, you’re on a murder case. Nothing comes first.”

She gritted her teeth. “It’ll only take a few minutes. I’ll be right behind you.” She got into her car. “You going, Ace, or are you gonna go sit behind your desk and wait for forensics to figure out who dunnit?”

Tifton gave in, slapping the last of the CSI guys on the shoulder as he passed. “When did forensics ever solve a case?”

“Last night,” the guy answered, “on CBS.”

Dani gunned into traffic, with Tifton tailing her in his own car. Hurry, hurry. Jesus, she couldn't be late. Eighteen thousand dollars in cash burned through the fabric of her pocket. Eighteen thousand dollars it had taken two weeks to compile. She'd emptied her savings account, cashed in CDs for a loss, and withdrawn from her graduate classes at U of Maryland for a partial refund. She'd sold Dad's car and spoken with the mortgage broker about her house for the last twelve hundred: a month's reprieve, but that month had only three weeks left.

She weaved into the left lane, missed her turn and did a U-turn across bed of flowers in a median. Tifton laid on his horn behind her—Tifton liked flowers—and her phone rang ten seconds later.

“Shut up,” she said, before Tifton could speak. “They'll grow back.”

“They won't, but that's not why I'm calling. The squad sergeant just called. Russell Sanders's son is at the precinct.”

“Why?”

“He's filing a missing persons report. Russell Sanders disappeared.”