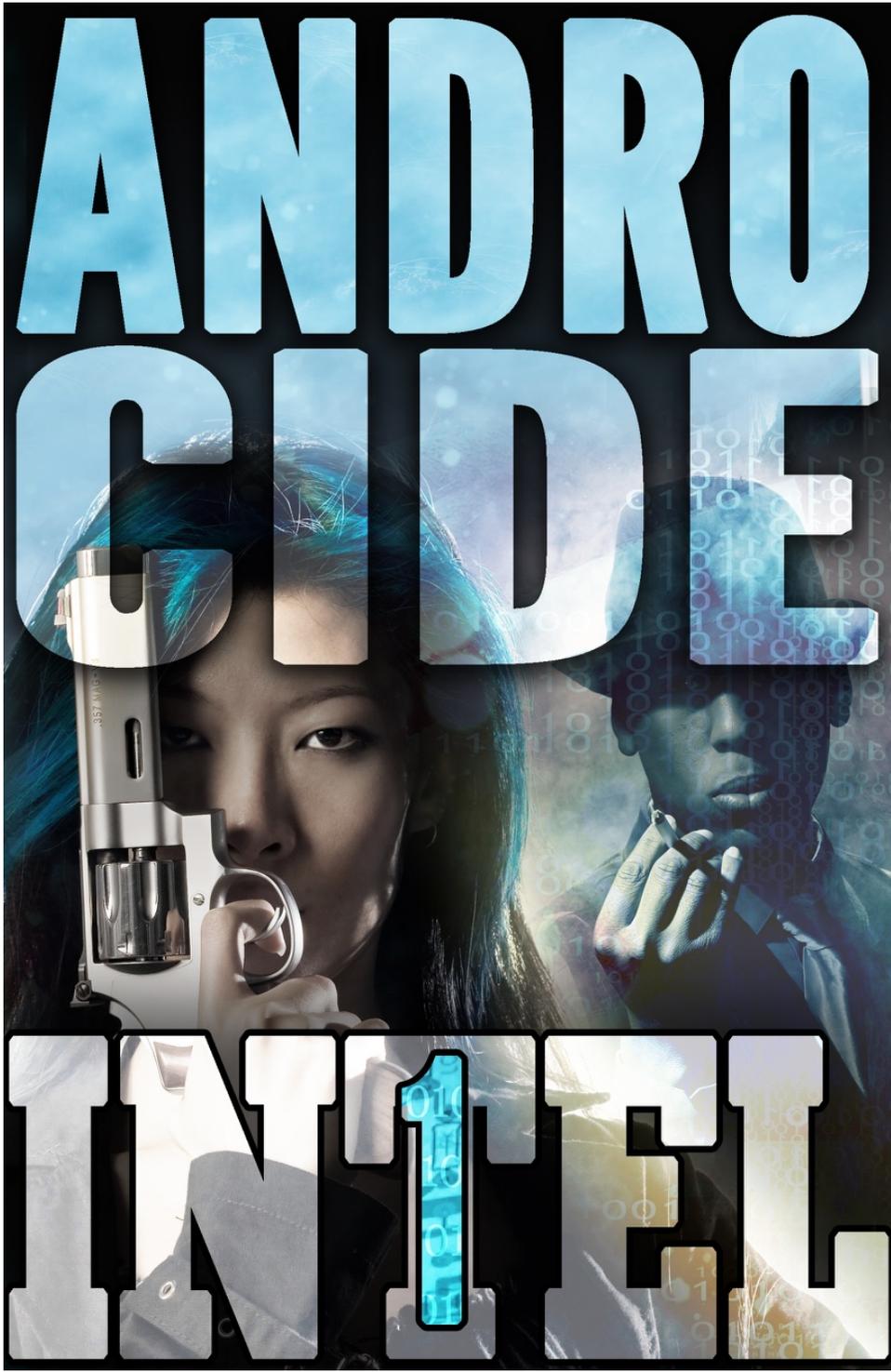


ANDRO SIDE



INTEL

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INTEL 1, BOOK 5

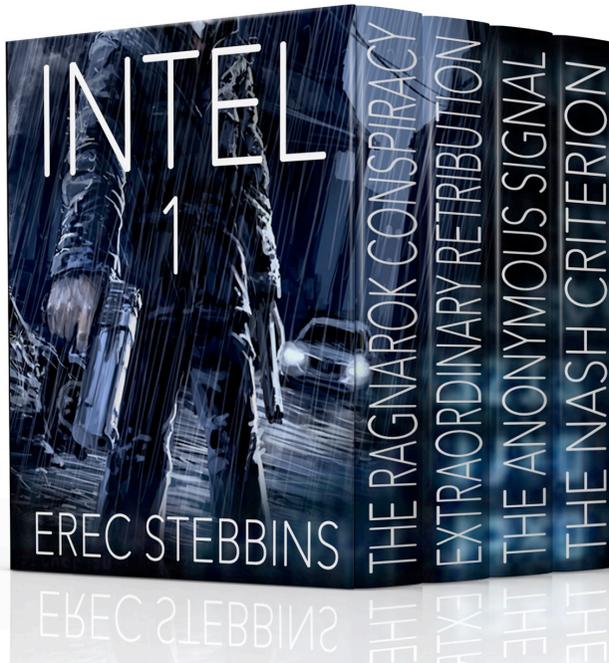
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Content Guide

This novel contains depictions and references to events and ideas that some will find disturbing, including, but not limited to, sexual assault, battery, murder, imprisonment, captivity, severe illness, pain, fear, medical procedures, torture, and war. There is also profanity and strong language, the challenging of some accepted norms, and the questioning of different kinds of authority, religious and secular. It could be rated PG-13, R, or even NC-17 in the Motion Picture Association of America film rating system. The book also contains religion, partisan politics, Oxford commas, and an unnecessary number of typos and grammar mistakes. Readers are asked to prepare accordingly.

To Mark Ward

*for fond high school memories
of vigorously debating
the relative merits of the genders*

*also for taking turns
drop-kicking copies of "Great Expectations"
into our lockers after class*

“An evolutionary arms race is a struggle between competing sets of co-evolving genes that develop adaptations and counter-adaptations against each other. The co-evolving gene sets may be in different species, as between a predator species and its prey, or a parasite and its host. One example of an evolutionary arms race is in the conflict between the sexes. Sexual antagonism represents an evolutionary conflict at a single or multiple [genetic] locus that contribute differentially to male and female fitness.”

— FROM THE MARCH 11, 2013 WIKIPEDIA ENTRIES
“EVOLUTIONARY ARMS RACE” AND “SEXUAL CONFLICT”

PART I

DEAD AND GONE

“And Dinah the daughter of Leah, which she bare unto Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land. And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw her, he took her, and lay with her, and defiled her. The sons of Jacob came out of the field when they heard it: and the men were grieved, and they were very wroth. They took each man his sword, and came upon the city boldly, and slew all the males.”

—Genesis 34

REAPER

The whore by the 7-Eleven was perfect.

Too perfect, really. Wetback cunt with long black hair. Seventeen maybe unless that bucket of makeup lied. Goddamned chest nearly exploded out of the tight, zippered jumpsuit. And those round hips—he felt them under him while she screamed for help.

Jack Reaper stepped out of the shadows. His hand reached casually into his pocket and he palmed the bills. Sadly, there would be no cries for help tonight.

Can't believe I have to pay these sluts now.

He sure hated the bitches. They deserved what came to them. But after Attica, well, he wasn't going back behind bars. He had to be smarter. He'd do her hard, get a little fun in. *Maybe*. But not too much. And he'd fucking pay.

The whore sized him up across the street. Arcing her exposed breasts in his direction, she sauntered toward him, wisps of fog escaping her painted lips. He felt an erection stirring, and a burning need to grasp her throat, see the fear in her eyes.

Too perfect.

“You wanna party tonight?”

Where did they get these lines? Whore school? Reaper licked his lips.

She smiled. It was fake. "I know a nice place, 'round the corner." She slid her arm around his waist and rested her hand in his pocket, long fingernails clawing near his groin. His breath deepened. "We'll have a *good* time."

The pair left the wan radiance of the streetlights and walked along shuttered businesses. Reaper watched drug pushers distributing product and other whores dancing for their Johns on the street. They approached the doorway of a neglected apartment building, the señorita pressing her hips against his. He scowled. It burned that she toyed with his body, flicked switches, pushed buttons and what could he do?

Fucking pay.

Once, I took what I wanted. I had control.

He taught them lessons. Lessons they never, ever forgot.

You get what you can now.

She led him into the building, stopping at a ground-floor room. A filthy window overlooked trash and grime in the alley. The little whore rocked her hips side-to-side and smiled, her tongue to her teeth. Well, he would at least drive this car.

"Unzip that. To your waist."

She dragged the zipper out and down. He throbbed, aroused from the teeth pops, her magnificent breasts a revelation erupting from the tight fabric. His mouth was a desert.

"On your knees," he managed.

She complied, placing her purse on the ground beside her as she sank to the stained carpet. Gazing up at him, her big brown eyes and fake eyelashes and bounding breasts, it was utterly, completely, *perfect*.

He remembered the blade.

You still took it tonight, Jack.

He approached. "Eat me, *bitch*. Slowly."

She grinned and unfastened his belt, dropping his pants to his ankles. She gasped as he yanked her hair back.

I'm in charge.

Reaper pulled harder. Like some little girl, she grabbed her purse for security. Her muscles tensed. The fear response blossoming. A thrill raced through him.

It's going to be a beautiful night.

A sharp sting burned his left thigh.

"Fuck!"

He grabbed the leg, squeezing with both hands to stop the pain. The whore leapt backward, a miniaturized jet injector in her hand.

What the hell?

He gaped at the muscle, an inflamed circle bursting from his skin.

"You bitch!" I'm really going to hurt this one. He stepped toward her.

And fell on his face. His leg didn't respond. He tried to stand, but couldn't coordinate his motions. He slurred his words.

"What'd th'you gib me?"

She backed further away. Icy rivers ran up his leg through his body. He couldn't speak. His hands twitched, refusing commands, muscles paralyzed. Only his thoughts flowed.

Time dragged and stumbled. Words spilled toward him in waves.

"Gave him the shot. Yeah, just like you said. He ain't moved. Yeah, he's breathin'. No, still awake. He's lookin' right at me. Now? Sure, yeah, unlocked."

What's happening!

Her zipper ripped across his consciousness. Heels clicked as she strutted past him, the disturbed air burning hypersensitive skin, the rough carpet on his face an agony. Drool dripped from his mouth, his leg a fire of a thousand needle pricks. His body twitched, helpless and alone.

The door opened with a sound of heavy steps. Powerful hands lifted and tossed him on the bed like a postal package. *My eyes are screwy.* He couldn't focus on the blurred giant. *Her pimp?* What was this thug doing here?

He couldn't ask. Couldn't bargain for his life or whatever they wanted from him. He gazed helplessly as the shadowed figure removed several tools from a dark and heavy bag.

Oh, God.

But the tools weren't for him. The shape turned to the window and disengaged the two sashes, a foul breeze pouring into the room. A long zippering sound tore at his ears. His vision darkened, a synthetic surface raked over his face. Hands shoved his body into a bag face first. A tightening of fabric and pressure on his back muffled the sounds outside.

He was entombed.

Reaper screamed, but nothing came out. He strained madly, but nothing moved. The strong arms raised him off the bed and onto a solid shoulder. He struggled to breathe. A dizzying lurch, and he was airborne, falling several feet to a painful landing on the trash in the alley.

Someone landed heavily to his left, and jerked him upward like a sack of cement. An angry hinge screamed as doors opened, and the giant flung him to a hard floor. The doors slammed, rending the air.

I'm going to die.

His bones tingled, a fateful certainty like poison inside. How did this happen? His life crashed so terribly off course? He didn't deserve this!

Someone help me!

A final hour remained for Jack Reaper to contemplate these mysteries. The vehicle coughed and started, lurching forward, disappearing into the night.

TEHRAN

S ara Houston adjusted the folds of her custom abaya in the failing light of the Tehran sunset. *Custom* was a kind word. Her garment simulated Arabic tradition, not Persian, but function did not follow form. Combat ready, she'd designed it to give her complete flexibility and range of motion, the fabric a microfiber turning most bladed weapons. Hidden pockets lined the interior, storing unladylike contents.

Like my Browning.

A matching black niqab left only her eyes in view. The formal Islamic garb singled her out as conservative in comparison to more modern women sporting a manteau and stylish roosaris. But it covered her face and skin, hiding her Western appearance, and the full black fabric suggested men gaze elsewhere. For the new INTEL 1, secrecy was everything in this mission.

So what else is new?

Deception and concealment—Houston was well acquainted. Years of running, a fugitive plastered at the top of the FBI's most wanted list, framed for terrorism and the assassination of the former VP of the United States, she was hardened to it all.

At least the Iranians are clueless.

Her lover and partner in crime, the former priest Francisco Lopez, walked beside her more openly in a rundown corner of Tehran's District 14. The ramshackle neighborhood was isolated, a long walk from the metro lines.

And state security cameras.

His muscular frame strode through streets built by rural immigrants decades ago, his salt-and-pepper beard thick and trimmed like a cleric's. His Central American bronze stood out even in former Persia, giving him the look of an Imam who worked construction on the side.

A pace in front shuffled Nader Zaringhalam, a bookish and bent computer scientist who was their contact in Tehran. Zaringhalam worked in the covert Revolutionary Guards Corps with an elite collection of hackers who had targeted US banks, water, and power companies. A double agent, he sympathized with the West. Following a long tradition of Iranian revolutionaries, he resisted the ruling powers, funneling information to the CIA and other agencies. Rumors tagged him as instrumental to the Israeli malware destroying hundreds of uranium centrifuges a decade ago.

INTEL 1 now had access to such assets. After the crippling cyber-attack of the Anonymous hacker Fawkes, after his revelation of a global ruling conspiracy INTEL 1 helped bring down, President Elaine York had taken control of the decimated FBI special division. York buried INTEL 1 and resurrected it, creating a shadow corps of some of the most unorthodox and talented counterterrorism and espionage agents in the United States government.

And not of the government.

Houston smiled. What a scandal! Hunted terrorists, part of covert intelligence forces, answering only to the President. Their newfound power thrilled her. Lopez, the priest in him remaining despite excommunication, mulled the darker undercurrents. But Houston saw the *possibilities*. She liked to get things done.

"This city never sleeps," mumbled Lopez as vehicles raced along larger roadways surrounding them. "And it's like every block is a new socio-economic sector."

Zaringhalam chuckled. "Yes, we have Rolexes and minarets. Drug addicts, prostitutes, and the Holy Qur'an. Much oil, no rivers, deserts, and a giant sea." He gestured around them. "This neighborhood used to be called Beseem-E Najafabad. Peasants moved in for decades in the millions. Then the state decided it was too much and moved them out. Capitalism and socialism. Mountains and plateaus. Shahs, revolutions, rich and poor, building up and earthquakes taking down." He shook his head. "Only a fool tries to understand Tehran."

Headlights flashed as a van rounded the corner in front of them. Zaringhalam held up his hand.

"Wait," he hissed, ushering them off the road to the broken sidewalk. The lights bounced and flickered through the windows of parked cars. "Something isn't right."

"What?" asked Houston.

Zaringhalam eyed the approaching vehicle. "I'm not sure. See the antenna they tried to hide in the back? Not civilian."

Wonderful.

Houston ground her teeth behind the abaya. Her eyes, blue turned dark brown from colored contacts, squinted down the road.

We're almost at the safe house!

Zaringhalam read her thoughts. "We shouldn't go to the house. Not until this clears."

"We need to contact New York," she said. "We've got the arms dealer. He's one step from Mirnateghi herself!" Houston removed her Browning from an inside holster.

Lopez put his hand on her shoulder, his firm grip calming.

"We're blind here, Sara. Isolated. Let's be careful before we start shooting. Okay, hothead?"

The corner of her mouth ticked upward. She holstered the weapon.

"Yes," whispered Zaringhalam, eyes darting between them and the approaching van. "Walk normally. Make no eye contact. They'll pass by. We're nobody."

They walked forward, the headlights blinding, Houston glancing away not to lose her night vision.

The van did not pass by.

“I don’t understand,” said Zaringhalam as the vehicle stopped, the brake engaged. Two men stepped out of the van in worn police uniforms. He dropped his voice. “Scammers? At night, here?”

The men shouted in Farsi. Zaringhalam took the lead, walking toward them as Houston and Lopez hung back. Lopez spoke under his breath.

“Like we practiced. I’m a foreign imam, you’re my wife, Nader is our host. We say nothing. If we’re engaged, we sterilize.”

She nodded, adrenaline flowing like cold water to her extremities, sweat building under the fabric even in the chilly October night. The pitch of the discussion rose, Zaringhalam gesturing with both hands. The policemen stared over his head at them.

“Okay, Francisco, the needle’s in the red. Get ready.”

The men brushed aside the computer scientist and marched toward Lopez and Houston. They reached down.

For weapons.

Instinct took over and two raptors pounced. Their aggression startled the policemen, weapons kicked from their hands and clattering against the stones. Then the chaos flared in earnest.

These can fight.

Professionals, not random Iranian beat cops. The initial surprise gone, Houston’s target thrust her into a defensive mode, the man’s size and strength hard to counter. The move to disarm weakened her position, and her attacker pressed the opening. Vibrations from a battle beside her resonated, thundering impacts suggesting someone getting the upper hand.

She fought for leverage, using her greater speed and flexibility, never giving the man a hard target.

Just one slip, friend. I’ll give you a surprise.

Bone cracked, splintered with an expulsion of air to her right. She ignored it, ignored the fate of her lover, and maintained her focus. But her foe wavered, his eyes darting toward the sound.

Slip.

Her Ka-Bar knife whistled as it cut the air. The man raised an arm

in defense, but too late. The knife slashed his throat, major arteries severed. Blood burst from the wound and he fell to one knee, hands at his neck, gasping wide-eyed at a red river flowing down his arm. He collapsed. Houston tasted copper in the mist around them.

Francisco.

Her chest tightened as she spun in the direction of Lopez. She lowered the knife, exhaling. He clenched and unclenched his fist, knuckles red and inflamed. At his feet lay the unconscious form of the other policeman. His lower jaw jutted to the side of his face.

Zaringhalam sprinted over, his eyes wide. He stared at them and the downed forms of the policemen. Kneeling, he examined the bodies, avoiding the growing pool of blood.

“Mary and Gabriel. God be praised. Your reputations are deserved.” He grimaced. “This one’s dead, of course. I think the other’s jaw is shattered.” He stared at Lopez. “You’re a strong man.” Turning back to the bodies, he ripped the tattered shirts open, revealing body armor underneath. “Shākh dar āvordam!”

Houston knelt beside him, the energy rushing from her body, her voice hoarse. “Okay, Nader, who the hell are these guys? And don’t tell me police.”

“No, not the police. But they were meant to seem so. The black kevlar underneath, their skills? They’re NOPO.” He looked back to her and held her gaze. “You’ve been compromised.”

Lopez’s bass reverberated over them. “The NOPO?”

“Yes!” he said. “Iranian special forces. Under the NAJA, the special police units. Such men do not patrol run-down sections of Tehran. They are put on missions. They take out serious targets. Someone powerful is looking for you.”

Houston stood and wiped the knife on the dead man’s shirt. “*Mirimateghi*. Iran’s her home base. She’s like an octopus here, tentacles in everything.”

Zaringhalam also stood, clouds of air puffing between clattering teeth. “So you say. Until tonight, I admit I was skeptical. But if she can control the NOPO, well, she controls Iran.”

Lopez grunted. “She used to control a lot more than that.”

The Iranian glanced up and down the street. “You were wise to stop them without shots fired, but we’ll have to move to the other safe house. This neighborhood’s dead to us now.”

Houston pointed. “Pull them inside, off the streets. Tie this one up. Search them and the van for GPS devices. We move to the second location, tonight. But first we contact New York.” She glanced toward the idling van. “Things are moving fast now.”

MAN PARTS

Detective Tyrell Sacker pulled the dilapidated Crown Victoria to the curb and sighed.

Yellow police tape was all over the picturesque Upper East Side brownstones near Central Park. The flashing lights of police cruisers blinded him in the early morning darkness. Pedestrians strained from a distance to glimpse the victim. Flashes burst from windows above, the upper crust Manhattanites documenting the grisly scene at their doorstep. They were likely tweeting them already.

And pictures of the lanky black dude at the crime scene.

He'd lost count of how many times he'd been mistaken for a suspect.

Sacker grunted as he eased his six-two frame out of the vehicle. At thirty-five, telltale signs of age simmered in his muscles and joints. Two tours in Iraq, shrapnel wound in the thigh—easier to take at twenty-two than yesterday's workout. His younger self took a personal oath to stay in fighting shape, not understanding the future struggle.

The alcohol isn't helping either, Tyrell.

He grabbed his vintage Bailey Ice Topper hat, slammed the door, and marched toward a man and woman shivering beside the tape.

Two assistant detectives he'd been saddled with. Their young faces were slack, blank. Shock flooded them. The pair weren't ready for this.

I need to take charge.

He fitted the hat on his head.

"Morning, detectives," he said, rubbing a hand across his smooth cheek. Sacker rarely needed to shave. "Got the boss up early for this one. What we got?"

The two parted, saying nothing, allowing him to peer into the center of yellow tape. The crime scene did enough talking for the both of them, a corpse staged as some spectacle of street art. Naked, propped up on stacked bags of garbage, the victim rested with his back to the plastic, arms and legs splayed out. Bruises covered the skin from head to foot like some purple Rorschach test. But it was what was absent that focused all attention.

"Well, *damn.*" Sacker turned a piercing gaze toward his trainees.

"Garbage crew found him this morning," said one of the pale detectives.

"Just like this?"

The young man swallowed, his blond hair disheveled in the wind. "Ah, yeah. No clothes. Someone beat the shit out of him. And, um, missing, well, you know, his man-parts."

Sacker grimaced. *I need a smoke.* "Man-parts? New jargon they teaching you at the Academy?"

The pair squirmed.

He turned to the male. "Snyder, right?"

"Ah, yes, sir." The kid looked seasick. Nothing like a mutilated body at dawn to get those stomach juices churning.

Sacker eyed the woman. "Hill?"

"Kathy Hill, sir, yes."

"Ladner wants me to babysit you two. That's fine. But my case load isn't always pretty. You're gonna see scenes like this," he gestured toward the body. "You gotta be able to handle it or ask for a transfer. Am I clear?"

They nodded.

“So let’s game up. Act professional. Look on the hard things.” He smiled. “You’re detectives for some reason, I assume. I trust your reports will have real medical terms?”

“Yes, sir,” they stammered.

“Right.” Sacker shook his head, donning nitrile gloves and coverings over his shoes. He exhaled soft clouds in the late October chill, stepping over the tape. “Where’s the medical examiner?”

“En route,” said Hill

“This one’s sure gonna break the monotony.” He crouched beside the body, his head inches from the gaping wound in the groin. “There’s no blood here at all,” he muttered, voice monotone. “Those man-parts—yeah, looks like they were cut out.” The young detectives struggled to look at the body. “Damn. Just a big, clotted hole.”

Snyder coughed. “No clothes. No ID. Nothing.”

“Witnesses?”

“Just the garbage guys,” Hill noted. Her voice was a mellow alto. “Body was already here. No one saw the murder.”

“Hmmm.” Sacker straightened. “John Doe was certainly murdered, but not here. Our killer worked the poor bastard over something fierce. Mutilated him, then dumped him in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Manhattan.”

Hill frowned. “Doesn’t make any sense, sir. Why leave the body where it’s certain to be found?”

Sacker removed his gloves and stepped outside the tape. First day of criminology 101. He needed another coffee.

And a damn smoke.

“Why indeed? Unless you *want* it to be found.”

Hill furrowed her brows. “Why would the killer want the body to be found?”

“Look at the crime scene. Most bodies I’ve come across are in dumpsters, the river, or some alley or room where the perp capped them. Crimes of passion are in random places. More careful killers use the trash. Usually, that’s as clever and far as they go. Here the vic’s propped like porn. Sure to catch everyone’s attention, especially considering the whole missing man-parts problem.”

“Killer’s making a statement,” said Hill. Snyder glanced at Sacker for confirmation.

“Why else? Our killer wanted the world to know about this murder and to utterly humiliate the victim. One *nasty* piece of work. I’m going to call the captain.”

The two young detectives scribbled on notepads as Sacker took out his cell phone. He tapped the screen to make a call. A reddening sky signaled the creeping dawn.

“Yeah, Ladner? It’s Sacker at the 92nd crime scene.” Sacker listened. “Yes, Sutherland’s on his way. He’s going to have a party over this one—not that his ass ever saw a party.” Again the silence. “Right. Well, it’s pretty bad. I’d say *newsworthy*, if you get my drift. Every damn phone’s popping like Christmas. It’ll be everywhere in a few hours.”

Several police vehicles approached and additional officers got out. With them strutted a tall, older man in a lab coat, issuing orders with gentle points of his finger.

Sacker frowned. “Speak of the devil. Sutherland’s here. Full *I’m-a-doc* mode. I’ll let you go and brief you at the precinct.” Sacker kept the phone to his ear as the tall doctor approached him. “What do I think?” He smirked at Hill and Snyder, who hung on his words. “No disrespect intended to any man-parts involved, looks like we’ve got a Bobbitt on ‘roids.”

He winced at the first arrival of news vans.

GONE TO THE OFFICE

Grace Gone pulled the rusting Jetta to a stop in front of a run-down block in Astoria, Queens. The car sputtered to silence and she glanced at the bent sign beside the curb: two-hour parking after nine. She'd leave it the whole day. The traffic cops only cared about Manhattan and other upscale locations. Where the fines got paid. Where you wouldn't get shot.

She yanked down the sun visor and slid the mirror cover to the side. *Passable*. Bordering on graduate student, but it would have to do. Besides, without clients, what did it matter?

She flipped the visor up, gathering the river of black from her shoulders and stuffing it into a ponytail. She tried to suppress the afterimage. Vietnamese features on a Chinese girl brought school-yard bullying in Shanghai. Photos populated with pale skin and a mouth forever assuming a pensive pout. Gone couldn't abide makeup, but longed for more color. She always looked tired.

You always are tired, Gracie.

The hinges groaned harshly as she opened the door. Her left leg stumbled and jerked from the floorboard and she swung the right leg over, planting it on the ground as an anchor. Falling was losing its novelty, and she wasn't going to test the strength of the poor limb

again. Grasping the steering wheel in her right hand and the seat in her left, she propelled herself upward.

Steady as she goes.

Gone closed the door, prayed for a desperate car thief to pass by, and limped from the curb to her office door. A bright, new sign hung over the entrance, black lettering on a white background: *Gone Investigating, LLC*.

She unlocked the door and eased her way inside. Spartan, musty, and creaky, her office was the converted husk of a family home. She intended the living room for the queue of clients yet to queue up. Dust covered the secondhand furniture—a couch and several chairs—and danced in the morning sunbeams. To the right a door led to her office. Half a century ago, it had served as a kitchen for a growing family. Stripped of counters and ovens, only the sealed gas lines revealed its origins. A small, round carpet of faded brown rested in front of an uneven IKEA desk of matching color.

Damn, this is getting harder.

She limped toward the desk, dropped her keys and mail, and fell backward into the chair with a sigh. Nine in the morning and she wanted to quit. Forget the fatigue, she couldn't get a serious client or case into her docket. She knew starting out was hard. She knew it took time to build a reputation. But, she had to start *somewhere*.

And how much time do I really have?

A few missing animal cases. A jealous pervert who wanted to hire her to take porn videos of his ex-girlfriend and her new lover. And her personal favorite, a man who offered real money to investigate whether he'd been cloned by aliens and determine if he occupied his original body.

"Should have taken the clone case," she muttered, tilting the chair forward and flipping through her mail. He at least had *money*.

Instead, she had bills. Licensing fees for her agency. Oh, God, *rent*. Car insurance she stopped paying. *Not much use for that anymore, I think*. Coupons (she set those to the side). Three or four useless catalogs. One by one she chucked them into the garbage.

She stopped, staring at one aimed at upwardly mobile yuppies

who swarmed Brooklyn and Queens. The clothes were fashionable yet reserved, attractive without being provocative, practical rather than designed to uncomfortably accentuate body parts. She liked this catalog. She liked the clothes. She wanted to order several boxes of things.

Gone tossed it into the garbage and opened her laptop.

A series of scripts ran, automatically culling news and headlines from the online universe. World politics, gang violence, another political sex scandal. She flew through the articles of interest at light-speed. Using a pirated version of a speed-reading app, she focused on one region of the screen. Words flashed like machine-gun rounds. Her eyes stationary, she halved the time to process printed language. Gone digested four thousand words a minute, racing through the day's information in a fraction of the time anyone else would spend.

Her hand hovered over the trackpad as she stared forward. A large and bold headline covered the top of the screen: *Junk Male: Killer Castrates Manhattan Man*. Grisly photos accompanied the New York Post article. Gone leaned back in the chair and pressed her fingertips together.

I need this.

A game-changer. Something loud and big and interesting to plant her flag as a PI. She didn't care if it came from the garish Post or sounded like a bad summer slasher. *Something big*. Something forever linked to her name, ensuring a steady flood of customers for her unique services. Of course, the point was to bring in other interesting cases, spread her reputation, increase her earnings.

Survive.

Her head crashed on the desk. *I'll never change*. One dream after another to secure her now dwindling future. A desperate need to contribute, to make up for so much, to use her talents for good.

Meanwhile, I'm about to be evicted.

Gone's soft brown eyes peered above the fold of her arm and stared at the Post headline.

"So who's the lucky bastard who got this case?"

