

# *The Sense of Death*

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*An Ann Kinnear Suspense Novel*

## Chapter 1

Ann Kinnear followed her brother, Mike, the distraught mother, and two bodyguards down the alley of the Baltimore slum, wearing the sweatshirt of a girl very likely dead. The first day there had only been one bodyguard—the giant who was leading the way today. However, an encounter with an angry prostitute and her pimp had convinced the group that one bodyguard for three clients who were very clearly strangers to the neighborhood was not a desirable ratio and today the giant had arrived with a colleague who made up in attitude what he lacked in stature. Today had been largely uneventful.

“Uneventful” was both good news and bad—good in that they were not dealing with switchblade-armed pimps but bad in that they were no closer to the goal that the distraught mother had hired Ann to reach—locating her missing daughter. The girl’s last online post suggested that this area of Baltimore was where she was headed when she disappeared, but the police had exhausted every option for locating a runaway—hospitals, jails, halfway houses, drug dens. That had been three months ago, and the fact that the mother was now willing to hire Ann Kinnear to continue the search suggested that she recognized that she was less likely with each passing day to find her daughter alive.

They were mid-way through the second of the search grids the mother had mapped out and the seeming hopelessness of the search and the growing despair of the mother were making it hard for Ann to concentrate. They were periodically trailed by a small knot of children who yelled obscenities and then rushed away shrieking when one of the bodyguards turned toward them. At each cracked concrete front stoop or packed-dirt, garbage-strewn backyard, they stopped for a moment for Ann to look and to sense. She just wanted the day to be over so she could return to her safe and sterile hotel room in the Inner Harbor and fall into bed and sleep for days.

Near the end of an alley amid an assault of frenzied barking from a three-legged, mixed-breed dog chained to the back stair railing, Ann caught a glimpse of what she was searching for.

*There was something in the yard near the foundation of the building, a faint lavender flicker that brightened as they approached. It snaked out from beneath a dented metal trash can, hovering over ground strewn with overflow which was clear only in the area reachable by the dog. The light stretched toward them then jerked to a stop, seemingly chained to its spot like the dog. The mother stepped up beside Ann and the light brightened beseechingly.*

“What is it?” the mother asked, almost too tired to allow herself to be hopeful.

“A light. Do you see a light?” Ann felt a familiar lurch in her stomach.

Mike, at her other elbow, scanned the yard. “I don’t see anything,” he said, glancing at the mother.

“I don’t see anything either. Should I?”

“No,” said Ann, still watching the light. “Take a step forward. But watch the dog.” The mother took a step forward—the dog lunged at the end of its chain, barking insanely.

*The light pulsed and extended toward them like an arm outstretched.*

“She’s here,” said Ann.

The mother turned back to Ann. “My daughter? She’s here?”

Ann turned to her, her eyes stricken. “Yes, she’s here. In the yard. Under the trash cans.” She slipped off the sweatshirt and handed it to the mother. “It’s the best I can do. I’m sorry.”

She turned away and began walking toward the street at the end of the alley, then broke into an awkward run before lurching behind a pile of sodden cardboard boxes. They heard a retching noise and the big bodyguard glanced at Mike.

“She’ll be OK,” said Mike. “You stay with Mrs. Chen. Make a note of which yard this is. And you,” he inclined his head toward the bantam bodyguard, “come with me.” The small one looked at the giant who nodded. Mike touched the mother’s arm. “Mrs. Chen, I have to go see to Ann. You call the police. Let them know we found your daughter. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

The mother nodded, her eyes still fixed on the filthy yard.

Mike squeezed her shoulder then he and the smaller bodyguard followed Ann down the alley. The giant took out his cell phone, snapped a few pictures of the backyard and the surrounding buildings, then took the mother’s elbow and led her the other way down the alley, the children still watching but suddenly silent.

The next morning the police dug up the body of Jocelyn Chen from the back yard of the Baltimore row house.

## Chapter 2

Biden Firth slammed his fist down on his mahogany desk, making the ice cubes in his drink jump. He sat breathing heavily for a moment and then slammed his fist down again and then a third time. As he sat with his hands still clenched, a movement caught his eye and he looked up to see the nanny, Esme, standing in the doorway, her fingers twisted together in front of her.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Firth, I thought something had ... fallen.”

Biden tried to relax the grimace on his face and slow his breathing. “No, Esme, everything’s fine. Close the door on your way out. Please,” he added. His mother had always told him it was important to be polite to the help.

“Yes, Mr. Firth,” said Esme, and pulled the door closed softly behind her.

Biden unclenched his fists and placed his hands palms down on the desk blotter. He stared at them and, after a minute, pulled a letter opener from a wooden holder on his desk. With his left hand still flat on the blotter, he grasped the handle of the letter opener with his right hand and drove the opener into the blotter between his thumb and first finger. Pulling the knife away he examined the dent the opener had left on the blotter, then drove the opener down again, between his first and second fingers. This time he misjudged and the opener grazed his index finger.

“Fuck!” he yelled, jumping to his feet. Holding his hand out in front of him he went to a bar built discreetly into the bookshelves in the corner of the room and put his hand under the faucet, watching the water as it circled pinkly down the drain. When the throbbing subsided he

pulled a paper towel from under the sink and blotted his finger, then examined it. The letter opener, not being sharp, had gouged rather than cut the skin and a ragged flap of skin hung from the inside of his finger. "Fuck," he muttered to himself and, giving the finger a last blot, he dropped the stained paper towel into a small trash can under the sink.

He retrieved his glass from the desk and, opening a silver ice bucket next to the sink, dropped an ice cube into his glass, then added more Glenfiddich with a shaking hand. He returned to his desk and sat staring straight ahead for a moment and then sank forward with his elbows on the desk, his head in his hands. His face was even paler than normal, his fingers messing his short, dark, usually carefully combed hair.

The cause of his distress was a call from his father, Morgan Firth.

"Biden, I got a call from some guy named Miles Walters, said he was a buddy of yours from Penn," said Morgan.

Biden's stomach flipped. "Yes?"

"Do you know why he was calling me?" said Morgan, his volume rising. "He says you owe him \$270,000."

"Yes?" said Biden, a sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"Goddamn you, Biden, don't make me pry every goddamn piece of information out of you one piece at a time! Why is this guy calling me and telling me you owe him money?"

Biden rose from his chair, striking a pose of nonchalance. "He's opening a restaurant. In Northern Liberties. I made an investment in it but I didn't like the way it was going so I decided not to give him any more."

Morgan's volume rose another notch. "A restaurant? A restaurant is not an investment, you idiot, it's a money pit! You told him you'd give him \$270,000 for his restaurant?"

"No," said Biden. He had, in fact, told Walters he would give him \$350,000 and had already paid out \$80,000.

"Well, what *did* you tell him?"

"I told him I'd contribute. I don't think I ever specified an amount."

"That's not something you *think*, Biden, it's something you *know*. Does this guy have anything that would contractually obligate you to give him more money?"

Biden wasn't sure. "No," he said. "He's hiring a very well-known chef."

"I thought you didn't like the way it was going."

"I didn't," said Biden. "I'm just saying he got a good chef."

Biden heard a deep sigh over the phone line and imagined his father shaking his head in disgust. It was a sight he was well accustomed to.

"Biden, restaurant people talk. They talk to newspapers. They talk to *real estate investors*. If this guy says the son of Morgan Firth legitimately owed him money and didn't pay, that's not the kind of publicity I want. People deal with me because they know I'm on the up-and-up. If you have jeopardized that, you are going to be in a world of hurt."

Biden didn't say anything.

"Did you hear me, Biden?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to take care of this?"

"Yes."

"Do you need Culp"—the Firth family lawyer, fondly known as Culpability Culp—"to

get involved?"

"No. I'll take care of it."

"Do that. I'm going to call this Walters guy back in a week and make sure it's put to bed."

"Jesus, Dad, I said I'd take care of it," said Biden angrily.

There was a moment of silence and Biden knew what was coming. Morgan Firth's volume went up one final notch. "Don't you dare act angry with me, Biden, I have had it up to here with bailing you out of the shit you get yourself wrapped up in and I'm not going to do it anymore." Over the phone, in the background, Biden heard a woman's voice—his mother, Scottie. "Who do you think," said his father, his voice aimed away from the phone receiver. "It's Biden." There was another pause as he heard his mother's voice again. "No, everything is not all right. I'll tell you when I'm done here." There was a pause while, Biden assumed, his mother left the room. "One week," said Morgan into the phone, "and when I call Walters you better have gotten this worked out." And he slammed down the phone.

Biden slammed his own phone down and fell back into the desk chair. Then he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, found Walters' number in the contacts list, and dialed it, then disconnected before Walters answered. He had been intending to ask what the fuck Walters thought he was doing calling Biden's father, but he knew what the answer would be—Walters had been calling Biden himself for the past month, asking where his money was, yelling about contractors and employees needing to be paid. When Biden stopped answering Walters' calls, and told his housekeeper, Joan, to tell Walters he wasn't home the one time he had actually come to the Rittenhouse Square townhouse, Walters had left a message on voicemail that he was going to go to Biden's father.

"I'm thinking your father would rather cover your debts than see the lawyers get involved," Walters had said. "I don't like getting family involved, Firth, but I'm going to make sure you pay up the money you committed."

The money Biden had already given to Walters had come from a trust fund that his wife Elizabeth's grandfather had set up for her. Biden's name was on the account because they mainly used it for house-related expenses. The gracious old townhouse just off Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square had been a wedding gift from his parents, so the expenses were mainly for furnishing and decorating it, Elizabeth's area of expertise, and maintaining it, the payments for which Biden handled. The house had been renovated shortly before they moved in and the initial onslaught of decorating expenses had subsided in the last couple of years so that, aside from the periodic demands that Elizabeth put on the account for a new piece of furniture or painting, the money just accumulated in the account.

Biden had been withdrawing twenty or thirty thousand dollars at a time in a schedule of payments to Walters. He had sat in the shell of the building on North 2nd Street, discussing the location of the bar and the equipment that would be installed in the kitchen. He had felt like an insider. He looked forward to the day when he could take Elizabeth to the restaurant and be greeted with the deference appropriate to a major investor. They would have their own table, and Alain Broussard, the chef Walters had lured away from Etoile, would come to their table to greet them, maybe even sit down with them for a few minutes before hurrying back to the kitchen.

Then one day Walters had called Biden to tell him his check had bounced and when

Biden called up the account there was only \$100 left in it, a withdrawal of the remainder having been made by Elizabeth the previous week. She had never said anything to him about it.

The knowledge that Elizabeth had known about his withdrawals and had never given him a chance to explain had set him up for the humiliation at the hands of Walters, a humiliation that still made his face burn. His father's derision—his assumption that he, Biden, had done something stupid—and Biden's inability to confront Walters was too much.

Now, his drink on the desk before him and his head in his hands, Biden sat for so long that the watery February afternoon light began to give way to dusk. He heard Elizabeth come in the front door and go to the kitchen, at the back of the house, and then go upstairs and some time later he heard Esme leave. Shortly after that he heard steps descending the stairs and a knock on the door. He sat back in his chair and smoothed his hands over his hair and was preparing to say "come in" when the door opened and his wife entered the library.

Elizabeth was a stunningly beautiful woman in her early thirties, with dark, straight hair that fell to her shoulder blades. She was tan despite the time of year, thanks to a recent visit with acquaintances in the Keys. She was wearing a cream-colored silk blouse cinched at the waist with a wide brown leather belt, camel-colored silk pants, and brown leather boots with very high stiletto heels. A large solitaire diamond pendant on a gold chain glinted at her throat. She was petite and whip-thin, thanks to the ministrations of a personal trainer in the gym she had outfitted on the top floor of the townhouse. She stood—posed, one might say—at the door, her hand resting on the knob.

"Working?" she asked.

"No," said Biden.

Elizabeth glanced at the glass on Biden's desk. "I'll have one of those." She crossed the room and sank into a leather couch near the fireplace. Biden returned to the bar and made a scotch and water and put it on the table next to her.

"Biden, coaster," she said, and Biden returned to the bar for a coaster, moved his wife's drink onto it, and wiped the moisture off the table with a clean handkerchief. He sat down at the other end of the couch. They sat in silence for a minute, sipping their drinks, Biden looking into the empty fireplace and Elizabeth glancing around the room.

It was a handsome room, lined with built-in bookshelves filled with a mixture of old and new hardcover books and objets d'art. A large oil painting of a hunting scene, painted a century and a half before in nearby Chester County, hung over the fireplace, and smaller oils of the same era decorated the walls not covered with shelves. A pair of wing chairs flanked the couch and a grouping of two antique chairs and a table provided seating in front of the windows that looked onto the street. Across the room from the windows was a large mahogany desk set at an angle. Several richly colored Persian rugs covered the floor.

Elizabeth stood, crossed to one of the bookshelves, and adjusted the placement of a jade elephant. "We should leave by 6:30," she said.

Biden nodded.

"Joan had to run an errand but she'll be back by then. Sophia's asleep." Sophia was their two-year-old daughter.

Biden nodded again.

"The Jurgensens will be there."

"Great."

"They're buying a house in Bermuda."

"Great," said Biden again, and drained his drink. He returned to the bar for a refill.

"Take it easy, Biden, it's going to be a late night," said Elizabeth.

Biden dropped ice cubes into the glass with a clatter. "Let's skip the dinner," he said, knowing that there was no way in hell his wife would miss the charity dinner scheduled for that evening—a chance to see and be seen by Philadelphia's most wealthy, a chance to show off whatever dress she had bought for the occasion which would, of course, never be worn again.

Elizabeth crossed to where Biden stood, put her glass down on the bar, and patted his cheek. "Take it easy on the scotch. I'm going to go change." She headed for the door.

"Elizabeth, we need to talk," said Biden.

"Not now, Biden."

"Now, Elizabeth," he said with unaccustomed force.

Elizabeth turned at the door and looked at him quizzically.

"You took all the money out of the house account," he said.

She examined him for a moment then shut the door and said, "Yes, I did."

"Why?"

"Because you were making withdrawals without discussing them with me first."

"I've never discussed the withdrawals I make with you before."

"I was always able to confirm that withdrawals from the house account have been spent on the house. Except for the past few months."

"You've been checking up on me?"

Elizabeth laughed humorlessly. "Trust yet verify."

"I can't believe it ..." said Biden.

"You can't believe it?" she said incredulously. "So, what were you spending the money on?"

"It was a surprise."

"It certainly was."

"It was a surprise for you."

"What was it?" she said sharply and, when he didn't answer, turned back to the door and said, "Get ready for dinner, Biden."

"I was trying to make some money," he said angrily. "I was trying to make some money to keep you in the lifestyle to which you have become accustomed," he added nastily.

She turned back to him. "I had 'become accustomed' to a certain lifestyle long before I met you, Biden," she shot back. "I thought you would be able to support that lifestyle. If not, you shouldn't have asked me to stop working."

There was a long silence, Biden looking down into his glass, Elizabeth looking first at him and then toward the window, her arms crossed. The street lights had come on outside. She crossed to the window and pulled the curtains shut.

"I need some money," muttered Biden.

"Good luck with that," she said coldly.

He paused. "Maybe your father ...?"

"Don't even think about it. It is not my family's responsibility to bail you out of your financial difficulties."

"There are worse things than having financial difficulties," said Biden, beginning to

sound petulant.

Elizabeth walked over to where he stood and took his glass from him. She leaned toward him and, almost whispering, said, “No, Biden, there are not. A person’s financial standing determines his standing in his community and is an indicator of his success, of his worth. Having money ensured that your daughter would have the best in life because that’s what she deserves. It’s what I deserve too. I expect you to be able to continue to provide that. If you can’t, then I’ll go back to work and do it myself.”

Biden looked into his wife’s eyes and saw nothing but cold appraisal and contempt.

“You’re a bitch,” he said, and she flung his scotch into his face.

Biden’s hand shot out and slapped his wife across the face. She dropped the glass which bounced on the thick carpet and put her hand to her cheek and glared at him with undisguised hatred.

“You’re pathetic,” she said, and turned once more toward the door. “Can’t you do anything right?”

Biden felt a stab of pain like a needle in his eye and with a cry he grabbed Elizabeth’s arm and spun her around. He thought he was going to hit her again but instead he found himself shaking her, her head whipping back and forth. There was a moment when the pain of his anger receded before the shock of what he was doing and he loosened his grip, and in that moment she drove her knee into his crotch and twisted away as he gasped and doubled over. Elizabeth ran for the door and was through it before he recovered, but she hesitated in the entrance hall and that’s where he caught up with her, tackling her like the football player he had been in high school. His 185 pounds landed on top of her barely hundred pounds and he felt the breath whoosh out of her body. He flipped her over so she was facing him and now her face was filled not with contempt but with terror. He straddled her and then closed his hands around her neck and tightened, his thumbs pressing into her Adam’s apple, his fingers digging into the back of her neck. He was going to choke off every slight, every insult she had ever thrown his way.

She was thrashing beneath him trying to get air, her feet banging into an antique sideboard and rattling the dishes in it. Her eyes were bulging, her body jerking spasmodically beneath him.

“Shut your eyes!” he yelled, and banged her head against the marble floor. Her eyes, huge, stayed on his face. “Shut them!” he shrieked and banged her head against the floor again, and then he wasn’t looking at her eyes anymore, just tightening his fingers still more and listening to the thumps as her head hit the floor again and again.

It seemed to take forever for Elizabeth to stop struggling and even when she was motionless he still sensed a flicker of life in her. *I could stop now*, he thought, and then realized that there was no going back. He kept his hands tight around her throat as he fought back his rising gorge.

Eventually, when he could sense no life left—not a hint of breath, not a flutter of a heartbeat—he let go and her head bounced on the marble floor one last time. She was not the beautiful Elizabeth she had been a few minutes before, hers was a grotesque parody of a human face, her tongue and eyes protruding, her legs splayed out behind him.

Dimly he heard Sophia crying from the second floor for the nanny—“E-mee! E-mee!” He pushed himself to the wall of the entrance hall and leaned against it, burying his head in his

hands. His blood pounded in his ears and his breathing was fast and shallow, his body covered with a cold slick of sweat.

After a minute, when his breathing had slowed somewhat, he crawled over to Elizabeth. "I can't do anything right?" he said, gazing into her glazed eyes. "We'll see about that, you bitch."

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