

CHAPTER 1

Jack Cole knew they were coming for him next. He waited in the dense shrubs with a vengeful patience. He reminded himself he was here for a reason—one that justified the action. He fought back the dark sensation that this was wrong. *Thou shalt not kill* had been drilled into him at Saint John's. But this was the only way to end it—to be safe.

His hand shook as he gripped the heavy rifle and took aim at the front door of the mansion across the private cul-de-sac. He settled the jitter with the thought that this man had killed his dad.

He leaned back against the tree and braced for the kick. Then, through the bushes, he saw a sliver of light widen as the front door opened. He dropped his head and took aim through the scope. He'd been watching the lawyer's house for days.

The thick door swung open and his target stepped out, closing the door behind him. Jack hesitated when he came face-to-face with him through the scope. Still, he steadied the heavy rifle and squeezed the trigger.

The blast slammed his back against the thick tree. The kick felt stronger than it had when he'd fired it on his first hunting trip with his father, just two months ago. As he scrambled to regain his balance, he saw his prey—the man responsible for destroying what was left of his family—fall against the front door of the red brick home, his white shirt splattered with blood and his face paralyzed in shock. Blood smeared as the man grabbed at the door, apparently reaching for someone inside. Finally, the attorney collapsed with his contorted body wrapped around his large legal briefcase.

Jack stood and froze, shocked by the carnage he'd unleashed. When the door swung open and a panicked woman rushed out, he came to his senses.

In seconds, Jack secured and covered the rifle and began his escape. Halfway down the cul-de-sac, he was sure someone had called 911. As he calmly pulled the red wagon his father had given him on his ninth birthday, he heard the police cars responding. They raced through the expensive suburban homes toward 1119 Blackbird Court.

The two cars turned onto the cul-de-sac and slowed when the patrolmen passed a mom and her children standing in their driveway, gaping at the terrifying scene. At the deep end of the cul-de-sac, the police cars screeched to a stop. Their doors sprang open and two officers swept the area with their guns drawn. The other two rushed to the porch. The woman cradled the man's body, screaming wildly. Blood coated the porch and covered the woman's face and arms.

Jack fought the urge to run and wandered out of the cul-de-sac. Two other police cars and an ambulance raced past. Over his shoulder, he saw the paramedics rush to the porch. Then Jack turned the corner and lost sight of what he'd done—and he began to cry.

Six Months Later

CHAPTER 2

Ike Rossi hated this place. Not because something had happened here. Instead, it was something that hadn't. It represented failure. A rotting failure that he placed firmly on his own shoulders. While it had been twenty-two years, the wound was as raw as it was on that dreadful day he'd tried to forget for most of his adult life. Now, after years of dead ends, he was here once again to close that wound.

He waited on the hard bench in the massive lobby of the Allegheny County Courthouse flanked by murals of Peace, Justice, and Industry. Despite their ominous presence, he ignored them. He'd never found any of those here.

As nine a.m. approached, the lobby swelled with people making their way to their destinies. Their voices and the clicks of their best shoes echoed through the massive honeycomb of thick stone archways as they wound up the network of stairs leading to the courtrooms on the floors above. Nameless faces all carried their tags: anger, sadness, fear, and arrogance. Those

who were above it all, those who feared the system, and those who just saw money. While he'd always heard it was the best system on earth, he was painfully convinced that justice deserved better.

Three benches down, Ike's eyes locked on a small boy who was crying and leaning into a woman's side as she tried desperately to comfort him. When he recognized Jack Cole from the flood of news reports over the last six months, he didn't feel the prickly disdain that had roiled in his gut as he watched the initial reports on TV. At first, he'd condemned the ten-year-old boy as another killer—one who took the life of someone's parent. But as the case unfolded he'd discovered the boy had lost his father. The constant wound Ike kept hidden in his soul opened a little wider. He knew what it was like to lose a parent.

According to the reports, Jack Cole's father had committed suicide as a result of a nasty divorce from Brenda Falzone Cole, the estranged daughter of one of the richest families in the country. Jack, a genius ten-year-old, had shot and killed his mother's family law attorney—not exactly what Ike expected from a kid. When he was finally identified in video from a neighbor's security camera and questioned, he shocked investigators by admitting the act.

Claiming he didn't have a choice under Pennsylvania law, the prosecutor was trying the boy as an adult. Jack faced a murder charge. Due to his young age, both sides wanted to fast-track the trial. It was scheduled to start next Monday, just a week away.

The boy looked up and caught Ike's gaze. Despite his best efforts, Ike couldn't look away. Tears streamed down Jack's face, but at the same time, his eyes begged for help. A mix of fear and generosity accumulated deep in Ike's chest. He knew the boy sought the same help he'd sought for himself years ago, but the prospect of exhuming that pain warned him to stay away.

Still, yielding to a magnetic force that had no regard for his own protection, Ike stood, smiled, and walked to the boy, ignoring the condemning stares from the people eyeing Jack. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a small Rubik's Cube he carried to amuse distressed kids on long flights to distant oil provinces.

He stopped in front of the pair and asked the woman, "May I?" while he showed her the toy. The dried streaks down her cheeks told him she shared the boy's pain. He recognized her from the news reports but didn't want to remind her that millions of people were now witness to her custody battle with Jack's mother's family—and the progression of her devastating pretrial defeats at the hands of the district attorney.

"Oh, that's so kind of you," she said, nodding gently.

Ike gave Jack the toy and sat beside him. Jack's smallish build and timid posture made it hard to believe he was ten—and he'd killed someone.

Jack sniffled and wiped his nose with the back of his arm.

"Here, honey," the woman said as she handed him a Kleenex. Jack wiped his nose and immediately began twisting the cube, ignoring Ike.

"I'm Lauren Bottaro," the woman said. "This is Jack. I'm his aunt."

Ike reached out. "Ike Rossi."

Her eyes flamed with familiarity. She seemed stunned. "You're Ike Rossi?"

Jack handed the cube back to Ike. "Done!"

Ike wasn't sure what startled him more, the look on Lauren's face or the fact that Jack had solved the cube in less than a minute. "That's great, Jack." Ike offered Jack a high-five, but Jack awkwardly hesitated. Finally, he slapped it and Ike returned the toy. The tears were gone,

replaced by a proud smile. Ike looked back at Lauren, who'd apparently caught herself staring at him.

She seemed to regain some composure, and a serious expression swept across her face.

“Mr. Rossi, can I ask what you do, now?”

Ike hesitated, hearing more than just that question in her voice.

He looked up and saw Mac Machowski, grinning.

“I'll tell you what he does.”

Ike could have kissed Mac for the timely rescue.

Mac counted on his thick gnarled fingers. “He fixes things that can't be fixed. He keeps fat cats from getting kidnapped—or killed if they do—and he's the best damn investigator I've ever seen.”

Ike noticed Jack had stopped playing with the Rubik's Cube and was listening intently to Mac, along with Lauren.

Ike smiled. “Mac, I'd like you to meet Lauren and Jack.”

Mac tipped the bill of his Pirates cap to Lauren. “Ma'am.” Then, extending his meaty paw, he knelt painfully and came face-to-face with Jack. “Nice to meet you, young man.”

Jack nervously looked away but reached for Mac's hand and shook it.

“Jack. What do you say?” Lauren said.

Jack faced Mac. “Nice to meet you, sir.”

Mac's joints creaked as he reached to the floor and pushed himself up. “You ready there, partner?” he said to Ike. “We gotta catch him before he leaves the courthouse at nine.”

As Ike stood, Lauren rose with him. “So you're a detective?”

Ike threw a nod toward Mac. “He is—a retired homicide detective. I’m a private security and investigative services consultant in the oil and gas business.”

Lauren tipped her head back, as if enlightened. “That makes sense now.”

“What makes sense?” Ike said.

“I saw your name written on my brother’s day planner.”

The claim jolted Ike. “My name?”

Lauren nodded again. “Did you speak to him?”

“No, I’ve never talked to your brother.” Ike was sure investigators would have checked the planner, but he’d never been questioned.

Jack reached up and tugged on Ike’s forearm. “Can you help me?”

Those eyes were begging again.

Lauren gently pulled Jack’s hand from Ike’s arm. “I’m sorry,” she said. “He’s been through a lot.”

Jack kept his eyes, now wet again, locked on Ike. “My dad wouldn’t do that to me. He wouldn’t kill himself.”

Ike was frozen by Jack’s stare. It was as innocent as any ten-year-old’s. A primal desire to protect Jack stirred in Ike’s heart. He didn’t want to believe the kid—but he did.

Lauren hugged Jack. “It’s okay, honey.” She looked back at Ike and Mac. “We have no right to ask you th—”

A thick, towering woman with dark brown hair and a stone-cold stare wedged into the space between Mac and Lauren. She studied Mac, then Ike. “What’s going on here, Lauren?”

Ike immediately recognized her from the news reports. Jenna Price represented Jack. For the last two months she’d been billed as a hopeless underdog, and the string of losses so far—

other than prevailing at the bail hearing—supported that label. A basketball player-turned-lawyer, she was battling a DA who so far showed little mercy. She worked with her father in their tiny firm, and every talking head said she didn't stand a chance.

Lauren said, "Jenna, this is Ike Rossi and Mac ... I'm sorry?"

"Machowski," Mac said as he shook Jenna's hand.

Jenna gripped Ike's hand and held it as she spoke. "My dad said you were the greatest quarterback ever to come out of western Pennsylvania."

Ike always had one answer to that comment to quell any further discussion of his accolades. "That was a long time ago."

"What are you doing now?" she asked.

Jack leaned around Lauren and nearly shouted, "He's a detective. He can help us!"

Lauren hugged him tight again. "Shhh."

"A detective?" Jenna said.

"A private security and investigative services consultant."

Jenna nodded and held her gaze but said nothing.

"We gotta go now," Mac said, looking at his watch.

Ike stepped back from Jenna. "Stay strong, Counselor." He nodded to Lauren. "Ms. Bottaro." Then Ike offered a handshake to Jack.

Jack sheepishly held out the Rubik's Cube for Ike. Immediately, Ike felt Jack's awkwardness.

"You keep that, Jack." Ike raised his hand for another high-five. Jack took the cue this time and slapped it. "Ladies," he said, turning with Mac and walking down the hall.

As they reached the stairs at the end of the corridor, Ike glanced over his shoulder. He could see Jack edging around the two women to keep his eyes on Ike, with the Rubik's Cube clutched in his hand. Ike turned back to the stairs.

"You okay?" Mac said. Ike nodded and started up the stairs to meet a man he despised. A man who might finally deliver the key to *his* parents' murder.

CHAPTER 3

Ike knew he'd rather set himself on fire than have a conversation with Vic Cassidy. But he needed what little information Cassidy might have. Cassidy called himself a detective, but he'd been nothing but a roadblock since he took over Ike's parents' case eight years ago—a cold case, he'd said. Buried under the avalanche of unsolved murders committed over the last five years along the Liberty Avenue corridor, their case was lumped in with those of drug dealers and gang members who didn't exist when Ike's parents were killed outside the bar in Bloomfield. Now, according to Mac's sources inside the department, there was finally a new lead.

Ike followed Mac into one of the district attorney's meeting rooms on the third floor of the courthouse and wrestled his rage into its box. He assumed Cassidy was working on a trial and trying to show off his stroke. He spotted Cassidy in the back of the cramped room hovering over an open file.

Mac bull-rushed him and extended his hand, keeping him seated. “Vic. Thanks for meeting with us.”

“Your waste of time, not mine.”

The only person who despised Cassidy more than Ike was Mac. Both men’s postures foreshadowed a dogfight, but they played the game and held their tempers. Mac had always suspected Cassidy had planted cash from the evidence room in Mac’s locker eight years ago. The IA investigation that followed had provided enough heat that even Mac’s reputation couldn’t overcome the chief’s political fears. Mac had been allowed to resign with the full pension benefits he needed to care for his wife, Doris, who’d been diagnosed with brain cancer five months earlier. He’d left without a fight. Oddly enough, the chief was convicted of embezzlement shortly after.

Cassidy was dressed in a brown herringbone blazer that was well above the budget for a detective. He glanced at Ike, then back at his file. “I should have guessed he’d be with you.”

Mac stepped closer. “They’re his parents, you—”

“It’s okay, Mac. He knows who I am.” Ike wanted to get to the point of the meeting.

Mac stepped back. “Joey said there was a call to the station over the weekend about the Rossi case. Said you checked it out.”

Cassidy didn’t look up and flipped to another page in the file. “It’s nothing.”

“Let us be the judge of that,” Ike said.

Cassidy slammed his hand on the page. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

Ike lunged forward, but Mac pulled him back. Ike rested his six-foot-three frame on his hands on the table, stopping face-to-face with Cassidy. “I’m one of only two people in this room who give a shit about solving this case.” Ike allowed Mac to pull him back.

“Okay, okay, let’s settle down.”

“Who called, Vic?” Mac said.

Cassidy held his stare on Ike. Ike didn’t flinch. Cassidy’s eyes always held lies. Ike knew if he didn’t back down there was a fifty-fifty chance they’d get the truth.

Finally, Cassidy returned his attention to the file. “It was some ancient crackpot at a nursing home for the demented.”

“And?” Mac said.

Cassidy looked up at Mac. “And nothing. Her son called. Said she was dying and wanted to clear her conscience about something regarding the case. I went there and she couldn’t remember her name, what day it was, and every minute I had to remind the old bat that *she* asked for *me*.”

Mac looked over his shoulder at Ike. Ike read his expression. Mac thought it was another dead end.

“What was her name?” Ike asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You interviewed her and you don’t know?”

Cassidy stood. “Hey, dipshit, I don’t have to tell you anything.”

Mac leaned in between Ike and Cassidy. “What was her name and where was she, Vic?”

Cassidy seemed to spot something in Mac’s eyes. Ike knew Mac had leverage on Cassidy, but Mac never said what.

“Emma Sosso. Homewood Nursing Home.” Cassidy sat down and nearly ripped the next page he yanked from the file.

“Thanks, Vic. What you working on?”

Cassidy glared up at Mac but then leaned back and smiled. “That kid’s case.”

“The Cole case?”

“Yup. Easiest one yet. The kid’s guilty as hell. Got all the evidence locked down. Just a matter of time.”

“You’re handling Jack’s case?” Ike said.

Cassidy crossed his arms. “Well, well. On a first-name basis, are you?”

Ike could see Cassidy took sick pleasure in the fact that Ike knew the boy.

“How’d that case come to you?” Mac said.

“Handled his father’s suicide. They thought I should handle this one, too—you know, keep it in the family.” Cassidy chuckled.

Ike thought of Jack asking for his help. He’d like nothing better than to make a fool of Cassidy, but his gut said to stay away from the kid. He’d felt the bottom drop out of his heart when he’d met him. It was the same feeling he’d had when the resident assistant at Penn State gave him the phone and a younger Mac Machowski introduced himself as a homicide detective and told him his parents were dead. He’d promised himself to avoid that sickening feeling for the rest of his life.

“You’re an asshole,” Ike said.

“At least I’m not some washed-up jock trying to play detective.”

Ike again took a step toward Cassidy, who stood.

Mac blocked his path and pushed against Ike. “Let’s go, Ike. We’re done here.”

Ike backed out of the room, his stare locked on Cassidy. He wasn’t done—not by a long shot.