

# Switched in Death

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By Sherry Foley

*Winter Goose*  
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## Chapter One

It was always another day, another dead body—until that body was someone you knew.

Detective Seth Banning paused at the bedroom doorway of the rundown duplex, his gaze fixed on the dead woman lying on the floor. He swallowed while his brain absorbed the shock. He squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them again.

She was still there. He would know that profile anywhere.

*Sheila Peterson.*

A woman he never expected to lay eyes on again alive, much less find dead.

As the forensic unit milled around doing their thing, Seth was reminded he wasn't alone. He took a moment to recover. He tried to turn his focus to his surroundings. Foil covered the only window in the room. Dirty clothes littered the floor, and the walls were lined with ripped-into boxes marked "bedroom." How recently had she moved to this duplex?

His gaze returned to Sheila who was staring up at the ceiling with eyes faded from this world. He stepped into the room and back into another time.

He no longer saw the bad bleach job on the hair splayed around her ashen face. Instead, he saw the way she used to wear it; soft brunette curls framed her heart shaped jaw. She could produce a smile that lit up the dreariest of days. He remembered how her chocolate brown eyes always promised sinful secrets, and her incredible sexy laugh sent his libido into overdrive. Things he thought he had long forgotten surfaced from a more carefree era of his life. A time when the world rested at his feet and the woman by his side could do no wrong. They once had shared so much laughter.

With closed eyes, he drew in a slow breath. The pain of her betrayal was a distant thunder now. Three years had passed since he proposed to her on bended knee, with the sun setting on the beach as their backdrop.

Sheila had enjoyed taunting him to his face. Her cruel words still echoed in his memory.

He'd never bothered to retrieve the ring from where she'd flung it after she'd announced there was someone else. The hurt lingered for a good year, nearly choking the life out of him. For a long while after the breakup he compared every woman who came along, to her.

And all had fallen short.

Of course, his perception had changed when he found out the guy she'd left him for was his supposed best friend. The two of them had been screwing around behind his back for some time before they went public with their affair.

Seth opened his eyes, released the breath he had been holding, and resolved himself to the demands of his job. The past had a way of wanting to hold you prisoner.

He refused to wear the chains.

Odd that he found himself kneeling beside her once again, only this time her body was lifeless. Sadness settled in as he surveyed the evidence with a discerning eye. It wasn't hard to miss the large band of hot-pink duct tape wrapped several times around her neck. A pool of blood stained the carpet beneath her shoulders, the coppery smell unmistakable. Lying on her back, arms flung out to the sides, her fingers curled to reveal chipped black fingernail polish. There were dark circles under her vacant, haunted eyes, and a purple bruise marred her right cheekbone. Smoker's lines fanned out around her mouth. Lips faintly stained with an orangey-red color. Needle tracks scored both of her arms. A user.

Time had not been her friend.

Rage tunneled through him, mixed with regret for what she could have been, and should have been. He found himself fighting against the urge to grab her, shake her, and demand answers. How could she throw away everything they'd had together for this?

Seth knew he had to rein in his emotions. He leaned one elbow on his knee and pinched the bridge of his nose. His heart fueled to a faster beat. He cleared his throat and silently vowed he would find who did this to her, and nail his ass to the court wall. It was his job and he owed it to her, for the good times they had shared.

Voices from the forensic guys blended behind him and brought him back to focus. The crew would be done in the living room soon, and head in any minute to report their preliminary findings.

He resumed cataloging the facts. Her plain grey t-shirt, saturated with blood, was tucked into black sweatpants. The dark sock on her right foot had a hole in it, and her big toe peeked out, painted with hot-pink polish.

Seth frowned, leaned back, and scanned her from head to toe again. Something wasn't right. He moved closer to inspect the body.

“A Brad Snyder leases this place,” Detective David Denton said as he breezed through the doorway. “We’re trying to get a name of the victim so—”

“Born Sheila Peterson, age thirty-one, originally from Linden, Georgia,” Seth responded as he rose from his position to tower above his partner. “Nine years ago she was an interior design major at UMKC.”

Dave paused; his brows raised, he hooked a thumb toward the body. “You knew the vic?”

Seth turned to face him. “At one time, I wanted to marry her.”

Dave’s mouth dropped open. “No shit?”

“None intended.” He clenched his teeth. He hadn’t meant to blurt the information out. Maybe he was more rattled than he thought.

He heard Dave clear his throat and watched him chew on the news for a long minute. Seth could almost hear the other man’s wheels spinning out of control. The two had been partners for close to two years. Dave knew him better than anyone on the force, but still that wasn’t saying much.

Seth liked it that way. He knew they referred to him as the Ironman. He heard their whispers sometimes as he walked away. Seth shrugged his shoulders in a dismissive gesture and rammed his hands into the pockets of his pants. He prided himself on his control.

“Look . . . Seth, I’ll talk to Bassett and explain your personal conflict so—”

Calling on a lifetime of practice to mask his feelings, Seth kept his expression impassive. “I don’t recall asking to be removed from this case. There’s no personal conflict here. As far as I’m concerned . . . Shelia died three years ago. I can do my job.”

Skepticism winged Dave’s bushy eyebrows up again, but he nodded and resumed his rundown of the facts. “The call came in about an hour ago from a Kelly Parker. Said she’s a neighbor who lives in the place down and to the right. She heard a dog barking for a long time and couldn’t get to sleep. She came up here to complain.”

“How did she get in?” Seth asked as he paced the room, committing everything to memory. There were some things forensic pictures couldn’t capture. Along with crazy trivia that no one else really knew or cared about, he could recall a crime scene down to every last detail.

“Miss Parker said she knocked repeatedly; after no answer, she tried the door and noticed it open,” Dave said. “She came in, called out, wandered in here and found the body.”

Seth processed that information while he noted the two pillows on the bed, both with indentations where heads had lain. A man’s Timex watch sat on the nightstand along with a warped coaster from The Roadhouse Bar & Grill. The joint was in the rougher part of downtown Kansas City, where only seasoned cops got to do the beat.

Two men from the forensic unit strode into the room and set their bags on the carpet. The taller one greeted them. “Detective Banning. Denton. We need to go over some more evidence in here.”

“We’ll get out of your way and let you do your thing. We’ll catch up with you when you’ve completed everything you need to do,” Seth said, giving a curt nod. He stole one last glance at the body before he turned to leave. In that moment he realized he had tried not to think of her at all over the past few years, but the image of her corpse would haunt him day and night until he found her killer.

Dave came up behind him and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “What do you say we check out the rest of the place?”

Seth led the way, glad to have some space. He needed to clear his head of emotion and concentrate on nothing but the facts.

Muscles knotted, Seth raised a hand to rub the side of his neck while he made a slow circle around the room to take in every detail. A drab brown, threadbare couch took up most of the back wall with a folding chair and footstool parked alongside. A modest TV sat across from the furniture on a red milk crate turned over to make a stand. A stack of DVDs, mostly war titles, lined the covers. He leaned forward to check out the movie cases standing on their sides under the TV. While Seth studied the movies, he felt Dave study him. He glanced toward his partner and raised an inquiring eyebrow. “What?”

“You’ve got that look on your face again,” Dave told him.

Seth rifled through the movies with his index finger and frowned. “Hmm? What look is that?”

“That mulling over look, like you’re onto a killer lead. Out with it. What did I miss in there?”

Seth cleared his face of all expression. Dave really did know him better than he thought. He would need to work at changing that. It never worked out well to let anyone get too close. Some would call it protection, or lack of trust, but he liked to call it survival.

Dave sighed. “Okay, let me try. The perp killed her by slashing her throat, thought better of it, and tried to duct tape her back together again?”

“Interesting theory, but . . . no.”

“No?”

“No. Not exactly.”

Dave shrugged his shoulders. “Okay, Banning, how you figure it went off?”

“That’s Shelia’s head . . . but it’s not her body.”