



March 2000

Chapter One

Inspector Jordan Gray reached for the ringing phone, careful not to wake his wife. Shaking himself awake, he sat up in bed.

"Gray," he mumbled into the receiver. He glanced over at his wife's empty side of the bed and ran a hand over his unshaven face. Every time he woke up, he expected her to be lying there next to him like nothing had happened. But something had happened. A lot of somethings. She'd left two weeks ago--taken Will and Ryan and gone back to L.A. 'Home' she called it. She had even enrolled the boys in school there for the rest of the year. Shit.

"You there, Gray?" repeated the patrol officer.

"I'm here."

"We got another one--a pu-puppet."

Jordan swallowed hard and shook his head, fighting to retain his objectivity.

"Caucasian female?"

"This one's black."

Jordan raised an eyebrow. It didn't sound like the same killer. "Age?"

"Same as the white girl--maybe ten or eleven."

"Can you identify her?"

"No, sir. You'd better come down."

Blood flowing hot and angry like lava, Jordan took down the address.

"Don't let anyone touch her until I get there."

He dropped the receiver and flipped the bedside light on, staring past the empty side of the bed as he reached for his pants. "When it rains, it fucking pours," he mumbled.

He was out the door in four minutes.

As he pulled his '93 Explorer down 52nd and onto 580 toward San Francisco, he glanced at his cellular phone. It was three a.m. His sons, Will and Ryan, were in L.A. They were safe. Still, Jordan couldn't stop his fingers from dialing to make sure.

"Hello," came his mother-in-law's voice, like a snappy crow.

Jordan cringed and started to hang up when he heard Angela on another extension.

"It's Jordan, Baby."

His mother-in-law quipped something he didn't hear and dropped the receiver. Bitch.

"You know what time it is?" Angela said, her voice filled with the sleepy tone Jordan loved.

"I know. I'm sorry. I had to check. The boys okay?"

"They're fine. They're asleep, Jordan. We're all asleep."

"I know." Why had he called? Because he needed to hear that his sons were okay. Was there something so wrong with that? "You okay?"

She stifled a yawn. "Fine. Are you in the car?"

"Yeah."

She sighed and Jordan knew she was thinking she'd been right about him and his job. Damn. What could he do about it?

"You okay?"

He pictured Angela lying in bed. Man, she was beautiful. "I'd be better if you were here."

Angela sighed. "We've been through this, Jordan. I can't live like that. You're crazy all the time. And what's worse is you don't talk to me about it, we don't share things any more."

Jordan nodded. "I know. Listen, can you guys come up for the weekend? I can get off and we can go see the Warriors."

"You hate the Warriors."

"But you like 'em."

He could hear her smile through the phone. "You can come down," she said. "Why don't you call later?"

"Okay," he said. "I love you, Angie."

"I know you do. Be careful out there, Jordan."

He heard the click of the phone on her end and set the cell phone on the seat. What the hell was he doing chasing down psychopaths when his marriage was failing and his sons were 500 miles away? To make things worse, his partner was on medical leave and he hadn't been assigned a new one. So he was working the case alone. His life was shit.

#

His car stopped at the curb of the crime scene in San Francisco's mission district. The mouth of the alley was littered with cans and bottles and the remainder of some homeless person's cardboard box home. Jordan didn't move. Instead, he

scanned the area for stragglers. The body would wait. No one would touch it. The girl was beyond saving. But if the perp were here, he wouldn't stay long. There were too many people looking around to risk staying and being spotted.

"The sickos love to watch the excitement they've created," a seasoned inspector had told him years before. "Look for them at the scene, at the site of the body dump, the fire, the robbery, whatever. Look in the crevices and cracks, in the crowds of bystanders watching. That's where they'll be. And that's the best place to catch them. Because they can't stay away."

At three in the morning, though, this particular scene would be an easy place to spot an outsider. Other than the two local news vans, four cop cars, and an ambulance, the street was deserted.

From the head of the alley, Jordan could tell where the girl's body had been left. The buzz of police surrounded her as dense as vultures around a kill. Thick yellow crime-scene-tape blocked off the area, but the reporters constantly pushed forward to test the borders like dogs edging along an invisible fence. Three officers held them at bay. As he passed, the reporters pushed after him.

"Keep 'em back," Jordan commanded as he moved past the shouting voices. But this crowd was nothing in comparison to the numbers that would show up when the story really got out.

Even after fifteen years on the force, Jordan had never once spoken to the press.

Years ago he thought eventually they would realize he wouldn't comment, but they still saddled up to him, throwing questions like darts at the bull's eye. He had become so proficient at ignoring the clamoring voices, he often missed his own men calling him in the process.

As he approached, the officers moved aside and the girl came into view. In size and stature, the victim could easily have been his own son were it a boy. Her naked body had been propped against a rusting chain link fence that lined the back of the alley, an old sheet thrown across her middle. The area beneath the body had been swept clean of trash, broken bottles, and debris that was scattered about the rest of the alley.

Like the last girl's, her arms had been tied with fishing line and attached to different levels of the chain link fence behind her. With her arms suspended in the air, she looked like a life-size puppet. The fishing line cut into the skin, but it could hold a hundred-pound fish so it worked plenty well on a little girl's arms.

A piece of duct tape attached her forehead to the fence to keep her head from falling to her chest. Her hands hung limp at her wrists. Her right arm was high as though she was waving good-bye, her left hung low and flat against her chest.

Though not identical, the last girl's position had been similar enough to be recognizable. And like the last victim, this one wore a pointed party hat. The last hat had been orange, this one was yellow. Maybe there was a pattern here--the rainbow or something. But then the killer wouldn't have skipped red.

The last girl had bled to death. The thought made Jordan sick and he tightened his gut and forced himself forward. From the look of this victim, he would guess the same. Thankfully, though, it wasn't his job to guess. The Medical Examiner would deal with cause of death.

The girl's cheeks had been bound with heavy white gauze, the tie hidden beneath her hat. Her cheeks were puffy and swollen and Jordan could only imagine what torture the child had endured. The best Jordan could hope was that the girl had been dead at the time. But from the bruising that had begun to develop under her eyes, Jordan suspected that the injuries had not been postmortem. There was nothing he could do about the terrifying manner in which this child had died. But he could certainly stop the killer from doing it again to someone else.

The last girl's injuries had been similar but her face hadn't been the recipient of the damage. Instead, her killer had dissected her feet, the defense wounds on her arms suggesting that she had been alive throughout the process. The ballerina slippers she was wearing had been hung limply around her neck. Jordan clenched his jaw.

His mind created the image of a half-man, half-monster evil enough to engage in this sort of brutality, especially to children. Jordan forced the image away. He knew how dangerous it was to use reason in imagining his killer. More than likely, the killer would be someone who looked more trustworthy than himself. And someone who was likely more clever. Creating disillusion about what the killer should be like would only make it more difficult to find him.

For now, Jordan had work to do. His job on a crime scene was to make sure the evidence was preserved, collected, and documented and that nothing was overlooked. He glanced up at the graying sky. He would be here four hours, at least. He only hoped it didn't start to rain. He looked back at the girl. Rain or no rain, they were going to catch this son of a bitch.

He took another look at the body and shook his head. It was the same futile gesture he'd seen every cop make when they saw something so revolting. As a new cop, Jordan would have been sick to his stomach, looked away, and then ranted and raved about the perverted fuckers that shared this earth. He remembered reacting that exact way.

But he'd learned that it wouldn't do any good. Nothing would until he had the killer in custody. Then, the courts took over. And even then, sometimes it

wouldn't do any good. It was suspected anywhere from three hundred and fifty to thousands of serial killers were at large in the U.S. alone. That didn't even begin to account for those who only killed once and weren't considered serial murderers. At times like this, he wondered if it was worth the sacrifice to even fight the battle.

Two ambulance attendants waited to be dismissed, and Jordan waved them off. They weren't going to be any help.

"Medical Examiner's office has been called," Leroy Thomas, one of the newer patrol officers, reported, his back to the girl.

Jordan nodded. "Anyone touch the scene?"

Thomas shook his head. "A woman from the ninth floor called it in. Said she saw 'another drunk kid' in the alley. Said he looked a little young and she thought he'd freeze to death out here with no clothes on. So she called us. Guess she couldn't tell it was a girl from up there."

Jordan removed a notebook from his coat pocket and patted his pockets for a pen. "Shit."

Leroy handed him one.

Jordan looked up to the ninth floor. "What's the woman's name?"

"Louisa James. Lives here with her daughter."

Jordan wrote. "Has anyone spoken to her?"

"Just on the call. I came to check it out. When I saw the body, I called you."

"Good." Jordan looked up at the surrounding buildings, taking careful count of the potential witnesses. Four buildings had views of the alley--one on each side, one behind and one across the street.

He glanced at his watch and pointed. "Starting at seven a.m., I want guys out to each of these buildings. Talk to everyone you can. If anyone saw so much as a fly, I want to know about it. As for Ms.--" He glanced back down to his pad. "James. I'll speak to her myself."

Thomas gave a quick nod and disappeared.

The crime scene team arrived like a small parade, marching in line through the alley in their white lab coats. They carried packs of supplies, vials and bags, cameras, a small vacuum cleaner--everything they needed to capture whatever looked like evidence. Their expressions were varying shades of grim as they surveyed the crime scene. Outside crimes were tougher--the actual scene harder to define than inside a living room or a bar.

Here, dispersed amongst the trash, might be the one clue that allowed the police to pinpoint the killer. And that same clue may have been swept away by a simple breeze, or carried off by a small animal or even a bum looking for food

hours before. Thankfully, it hadn't rained--yet. With the heavy rains of this season, the scene's preservation could have been nil. He should have felt lucky, but nothing about the situation felt lucky.

"Interesting set-up," Al Ting, head of the crime scene team, announced as he bent down and pulled a pair of rubber gloves from a box.

Jordan nodded, knowing Ting meant familiar. And familiar in crime scenes was not often coincidence.

As always, Al Ting wore a starched white shirt, buttoned to the collar, and a pair of pressed khakis.

Raised in San Francisco's Chinatown by a couple who ran a local grocery store, Al was meticulous from head to toe. As a young kid, his chore had been to clean his parents' store, and Jordan imagined Ting must have taken the job very seriously. Thin, round, gold wire frame glasses sat flat to his cheeks.

Each of his lab coats was monogrammed with his initials. It was rumored he did this to prevent the other technicians from picking up his coats. But even without the monogram, it would be easy to tell if they had. Somehow Ting was the only one on the team consistently able to get the bloodstains from messy crime scenes out of his clothes. He always joked that as a Chinaman, it was his heritage to know a good cleaner.

Al had been head of the crime scene investigations group for as long as Jordan had been on the force. While Al didn't seem to have aged a day, the fifteen years made Jordan feel at least thirty years older. Al's meticulous nature and sharp eye made him an invaluable asset. And Jordan was counting on him now more than ever.

Al looked up and started directing. "Let's take it in a grid formation--divide it in sixths, everyone does two and then we rotate. I want each quadrant looked over twice."

Jordan interrupted. "Also, I think we may have a partial print to the right of the body along the fence." He pointed to a small patch of mud and the corner of what looked like a tennis shoe track. "Can we get someone to cast that before we step on it?"

Al nodded to one of the technicians. "Deborah, can you handle that one, please."

The woman nodded and headed back to the van.

Another technician moved around the body, a heavy camera covering his face as he recorded the body's resting spot. Al followed close behind, confirming which shots should be captured.

Normally, it was the supervising inspector's role to direct the evidence technicians and the forensic photographer. But Ting was the best and Jordan watched him work in silence, adding only a rare request for something AI failed to notice.

"M.E.'s on his way," Jordan said, when the photographer was done, knowing there would be nothing else to do until the Medical Examiner moved the body. Jordan was praying this crime was perhaps a copycat, but he wouldn't know until the evidence was documented and analyzed. Still, he sensed the girl's leg would tell him. The party hat and bandaged head could be the work of a copycat, but only the killer would know his signature.

Just then, Jordan saw Ray Zambotti, the Medical Examiner, pushing through the crowd. Ray was a short, heavysset man with skin so pale it was almost blue like skim milk. He had been given the nickname 'Skim' for this reason.

Ray shook his head, the bluish-purple circles beneath his eyes more enlarged than normal.

"Sorry for the late call."

"The dead never sleep," Zambotti said, laughing at his own joke.

"Right."

Impatient, Jordan crossed his arms and waited as Ray strutted around the body, waving his arms. "Bled to death. Look how pale she is. Paler than regular dead. Just like the other one."

"We're not making any assumptions," Jordan said. He didn't want anyone getting the idea that they could or couldn't link the murders until he had evidence. Despite the bodies, that was. Damn if this wasn't getting frustrating.

"We can assume there are some sick fucks, can't we?" Ray said, wearing a full grin.

"Sure."

They returned their attention to the body.

"She was moved, too," Ray continued. He stood and moved closer to Jordan and added in a hushed whisper, "Just like the other."

Jordan nodded.

"Hard to say how long she's been dead. Rigor is slowed with the temperature. But, I'd guess less than twelve hours. Smell's still fine."

That meant she had been killed in the middle of the afternoon. If that was the case, the killer had moved the dead body--just like Ray said. There was no way a little girl had been sitting dead in an alley all afternoon and evening without being noticed. "I'm going to need something more specific."

Ray put his hands on his hips. "Of course. I'll work with the entomologist and see what the bugs say."

Jordan pictured the tiny creatures that were already feasting on the girl's tissues.

With gloved hands, Ray lifted the girl's eyelids and looked at the eyes. Bringing a mini tape recorder to his lips, he spoke into it. "You've got scleral hemorrhage and petechiae in the eyes and on the lids. Also I can see slight traces of petechiae in the cheeks, confirming strangulation during the process. However, coloring suggests blood loss as means of death."

He turned the recorder off and pointed to the white gauze wrapped around the girl's head. "And the bandages--looks like more surgical work. Boy, you got a wacko here, Gray."

"Thanks for the input, Doc. I want the body moved so we can do a thorough search of the area, but let's check the thigh first."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever happened to 'patience is a virtue?'"

Jordan sighed. "It's late, Ray."

"Technically, Gray, it's early."

Jordan exhaled.

Ray laughed, leaning back with his face to the sky. "The thing I love most about working with the dead is they don't always rush you--rush, rush, rush."

Ray's assistant squatted beside the body. His sleeves were rolled up, exposing thick, blond curls and strong arms.

Jordan figured Ray had hired someone strong enough to move the bodies. With his gut, Ray could hardly lift a leg.

"Ready?" the assistant interrupted, though his tone wasn't at all impatient.

Ray raised his hands like he was about to conduct an orchestra. "Ready," he replied. "Let the fun begin."

Jordan shook his head, wondering if one day Ray Zambotti wouldn't end up on one of his suspect lists. As long as the city kept providing the bodies, maybe not. But he sure seemed to have a penchant for what the killers left behind.

"Here we go."

Jordan leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees and holding his breath.

Ray started to pull the sheet off the girl's leg, while others around him carefully swept for evidence around his every move. The thin leg was the same size as Will's. The sight reminded Jordan of teaching his son to slide into home plate. Will had slid so hard, he'd come home with bruises all up and down his left side. His little leg black and blue, just like this girl's.

Clenching his teeth, Jordan swore to catch this monster if it killed him. And when it was over, he was going to take a long look and try to figure out what the hell he was doing with his life.

Ray turned the body into the light, a thin gasp escaping from his lips as he did.

Jordan shined his flashlight and cringed at the sight. The same as the other's, the mark looked like an uppercase 'L' with touching lower case 'O's on either side of the 'L'. Cut with something sharp like a small scalpel, the mark still oozed blood. Pre-mortem, just like the others.

Zambotti pulled a tape measure from his pocket and pulled one end out against the skin. "The middle mark is two and one eighth inches; each of these ovals on the sides an eighth of an inch high, a quarter inch wide," Zambotti measured out loud. "I'll check for consistency with the last ones to try again for the type of blade." His gaze met Jordan's. "Looks like the same thing, though--some sort of signature."

Jordan raised his head and looked away. "Damn."