

Prologue

He stalked toward her slowly, as if he enjoyed drawing out her fear and suffering. Which, of course, he did. She pulled against the chains that bound her to the cold, metal table, but it was no use. Those chains had withstood several struggles, several bids for freedom, all with equally fruitless results. This time was no different. The closer he drew, the more frenzied she became. The tape over her mouth muffled her screams. He almost removed the tape so he could hear an uninterrupted shriek, just one, before she was forever silent. But he resisted. Her cries would only draw attention that he didn't want. Yet.

When he reached her side, she leaned as far away from him as the restraints would allow. It wasn't far enough. She still strained and struggled, but her movements slowed, becoming feeble. She was getting tired. He smiled. It was almost time. He brandished his favorite knife, the one with the cleanest cut. She let out one more good, albeit useless, scream. His grin widened. Now for the fun. He held her head down with one of his own large hands so her thrashing didn't cause him to make a mistake. She was perfect and he would hate to waste that perfection because of a misplaced slice.

He went to work and her panic, at first renewed with pain and a desperate wave of self-preservation, eventually dimmed until she moved no longer. He checked her pulse. Surprisingly, she was still alive, but in shock. The fluttering in her neck was weak. It wouldn't last long. Neither would she.

Chapter One

"Some college kids found the body early this morning," Head Detective Jonah Marks explained after consulting his notepad. He stood at the top of the river bank, back a few steps from the crowd of crime scene techs and the crouched medical examiner.

His partner, Melissa Vega, nodded. "And none of them interfered with the crime scene?"

Marks made a face. "Well, they were drunk and stumbling home. They sort of tripped over the remains."

Vega sighed in frustration. She'd been a junior homicide detective for only a couple of months and already she was beginning to hate civilians. They always made solving a case more difficult than it had to be. Marks looked at her expectantly.

"So, we should interview them and collect samples of their DNA to rule out any traces they may have left after coming into contact with the body as evidence relating to the case," she stated.

Marks smiled approvingly. "Very good. On site, the ME declared this a homicide. I'll get started on those interviews if you want to examine the crime scene."

Vega swallowed hard. She knew she was good at her job, and not much made her squeamish, but she had yet to see enough death that she could get used to examining a fresh victim. "How did he determine intent of death so quickly?" she wondered.

Marks grimaced. "You'll see once you get over there."

Vega walked down the gritty embankment, ducking under the police tape as she neared the river's edge. She wondered what Marks meant by his parting

comment. Sometimes he displayed an ominous sense of humor, but this time he sounded serious. She tried not to psych herself out. More often than not, the murders she saw were far less sensational than on TV.

Dr. Jackson rose when he saw her approaching. He removed his gloves to shake her hand. "Good morning, Detective Vega."

"Doctor." Vega grasped his hand. "What's your take on the victim? Marks told me you already declared it a homicide."

"Yes, if you'll follow me." He motioned toward the temporarily covered shape laid out on a black tarp. "Early signs decomposition and predation, indicating she was dumped relatively recently, maybe between twenty-four and forty-eight hours ago," Dr. Jackson explained. "Clearly a female, based on remaining features, as well as pelvis shape."

"*Remaining* features? I thought you said decomp was minimal," Vega interrupted. Then Dr. Jackson uncovered the body and she had to take a breath before continuing. The girl's face had been completely cut away. The only identifying features left behind made the image before them all the more horrifying: her eyes. Bright blue and staring.

Dr. Jackson caught her expression. "Yes, quite gruesome, isn't it?"

Vega frowned. "It's downright evil! How could anyone do this to another human being?" Her even tone didn't diminish the outrage in her voice.

"Some people are sick," Marks said simply, walking up behind her. Vega turned to him, eyes wide, but her superior was the picture of calm, aside from the small, disgusted frown marking the corner of his mouth. "What do you make of the crime scene, Vega?" His voice was steady and firm, reminding her of the job she had to do.

She nodded and looked around where the body was found, searching the sand for patterns and anomalies. Then she knelt to examine the girl's body more closely, forcing herself to see it in sections, starting at the extremities and concluding again with the red mass of flesh that was once a face.

"There is no evidence of a struggle in the sand, nor any blood. She wasn't killed here. Welts on the wrists and ankles indicate she was restrained. There are also bruises around the neck and, er, what remains of the facial area. Maybe inflicted by the killer. The body doesn't show any other signs of trauma that I can see."

"Cause of death?" Marks directed the question at both of his colleagues. Vega thought for a moment, then turned to the doctor.

"Preliminary examination reveals very little injury, other than that done to the face," Jackson answered. "I will of course have to run the usual battery of tests, but so far, the cause doesn't appear to be physically induced. She may have been poisoned."

"What do you think, Vega?" Marks pressed.

"Well, I agree with Dr. Jackson. Other than a cause of death that doesn't show up to the naked eye, I can't think of what might have done it. Unless," she hesitated. "Her face...could that have killed her?"

"Doc?" Marks faced Jackson. "Could the removal of her face have killed her? Shock or blood loss?"

Dr. Jackson considered it. "It's possible. The bleeding wouldn't have been very heavy unless the killer nicked an artery, but I've seen stranger." Somehow, Vega doubted it. The stiff, faceless girl in the sand was an image she would not soon forget, not when it would likely haunt her dreams. "If you both are finished with the crime scene, I'll take Ms. Jane Doe back to the morgue and get started on an autopsy."

Detective Marks nodded. "Vega, I want you to take a few unies and canvas the area. See if anyone heard or saw anything. You know the drill."

Vega pulled a note pad from her coat pocket and motioned to two officers. "Come on, boys. You heard the boss." She took one last look at the victim's pale form before Dr. Jackson zipped a body bag around her. Then she stalked toward the road, the officers in tow.

Marks watched her for a moment, a small approving smile creasing his lips, before he turned to a crime scene photographer. "Do another sweep of the area before you pack up," he instructed. "It may not seem like it, but the killer must have left something behind, a shoe print or a hair. I'll take anything. I want this sicko off the streets, get it?" The photographer nodded curtly. CSU had already come up empty handed, but she didn't think the head detective would want to be reminded if the look on his face was any indication.

* * *

Detective Vega's mood had only soured by the time she returned to the station. Given the early hour, virtually no one had been around to witness the body dump or any suspicious figures. At least, Vega didn't classify Mrs. So-and-so's cheating husband sneaking back or a strange yowling that was probably a stray cat suspicious. But those were the only stories she heard. Now rather than walk up into the precinct, she turned right from the parking lot toward the basement that held the medical examiner's office. With no leads, she needed another look at the vic's body and hoped Dr. Jackson had some useful insights.

Jackson's back was turned when she entered the lab where he performed autopsies. The room was cold, as usual, the bright white lights overhead doing

nothing to warm the space. It didn't offer a creepy or cryptic vibe that she knew many associated with death and morgues, but still she wasn't sure the unforgiving metal fixtures were what she wanted to be surrounded by when her time came. Then again, she'd be dead, so would she really care at that point?

Vega. knocked on the doorframe and he turned to face her.

"Ah, Detective Vega. What can I do for you?"

"I was just wondering if you'd gotten anything from her yet." She nodded to the covered shape on the slab between them.

Jackson pulled back the sheet to reveal the woman's upper body. "I was just about to open her up," he said, indicating the vaguely y-shaped lines drawn over her chest.

"Any leads from your preliminary tests?" Vega pressed.

"A few things, actually. The welts on her wrists and ankles are deep, indicating that she struggled desperately. However, the skin is bruised and rubbed raw, but not burned or stuck with fibers the way a rope might leave them."

"So, her restraints were metal, cuffs or chains."

"Exactly," the doctor agreed. "I'd say chains, based on the size and pattern of the marks. More interesting are the cuts used to remove her facial skin. They are precise, clean. We know that she struggled, probably thrashed around, doing anything to put distance between her and her killer. And yet, the incisions made

are perfect. The knife used must have been very sharp, very finely honed. And the killer's hands must have been steadier than a surgeon's."

"Couldn't she have been sedated?"

Jackson shook his head. "None of the usual sedatives showed up in her blood work. I'm still running more tests, but if she was unconscious the killer used something that doesn't show up with preliminary testing, or else leaves the system incredibly quickly. But I don't think he did. The bruises from her restraints are very recent, from minutes before she died."

"You're saying she was awake when he did that to her face?" Vega clarified. She shuddered thinking about it.

"Yes, quite. There is an amount of sadism in the action."

Vega wasn't sure how to respond to that, didn't trust her voice. An amount of sadism was an understatement. She couldn't stop herself from imagining some unknown figure coming toward her, the blade of a knife glinting inches from her eyes, all while she thrashed uselessly. The stuff of nightmares.

Finally, she cleared her throat. "Well, if that's all, I'll leave you to your work." She wasn't eager to see the doctor cut this woman open, having witnessed her share of gore for the day. She turned to leave. "Let me know the minute you find something." Jackson nodded, patting his pocket where he kept his phone.

After leaving the morgue, Detective Vega headed back to the precinct. On her desk she found a stack of photos from the crime scene, as well as the CSU's report. Settling into her chair, she took a deep breath before looking at the pictures. Most were of the scene, but several featured the victim as well.

"Get anything from the Doc?" Marks asked, coming up behind her. Vega wasn't surprised he'd guessed where she was. There was a reason he was head detective, after all.

She shrugged. "Not much yet. He said that she was bound with metal chains. Also, she was awake when he...cut her face." She couldn't say it without grimacing.

"Damn," Marks replied, shaking his head. "The things we can think up to do to each other. What about cause of death?"

"He doesn't have one yet. Said he'd let me know what he finds once he's opened her up."

"Okay, let's focus on what we do know, then. Fairly secluded dump spot. Not likely where she was killed. We didn't find any trace of her or the killer in the area, other than her body."

"She was naked when those kids found her," Vega added. "Could be sexual assault."

Marks considered it. "Possible, but the body was clean when Jackson examined her. No external injuries he could find. No dirt or residues, aside from what stuck to her back from laying on the bank. Hell, even her hair and nails were immaculate. There's no evidence pointing to sexual contact, pre or post mortem."

Vega made a face at that last. "Okay, so unless she was impervious to filth, even while being abducted and murdered, he was very careful with her. The killer left her the way we found her for a reason."

Detective Marks was quiet for a few moments. "I think he was showing her off," he finally muttered.

Vega looked up at him with interest. "What do you mean?"

"Well, she was beautiful. I mean, I got the impression she was a knockout, even without her face." He said it with a straight face, but Vega's cheeks reddened.

"I suppose her body was nice, from a certain point of view."

Marks laughed gruffly. "Yeah, a heterosexual man's. But seriously, I think he left her naked because he thought she deserved to be shown off. Or at least, his handy work did. He may not have marked up her body, but I think he cleaned it up."

"Do you think he meant for her to be found?" It was a question she'd considered since the crime scene that morning.

"I don't know. This neatness, this...presentation, makes me want to say yes, but it just as easily could have been for his benefit as ours. Maybe he's just a perverted neat-freak."

Vega bit her lip thoughtfully, then shook her head. "I don't think so." She remembered Dr. Jackson's comment on the precision of the killer's blade work and shared it with Marks. "I think he knew exactly what he was doing. And that got me wondering...do you think he could be a serial killer?"

Marks winced, an uncharacteristic display of emotion. Cops like him didn't like throwing around the s-word without cause. It meant a lot of late nights, a lot of paperwork. More importantly, it meant more deaths. "The ritualistic behavior might suggest that, especially the face removal. But he could just be another sicko who had it out for his girlfriend. One body does not a pattern make."

"What if there were other cases with the same MO?" Vega knew Marks was probably right, but she couldn't shake this hunch.

"Trust me, if they were in this city, I'd remember." The details did stand out. And Marks had been on the force a lot longer than she.

Still, she persisted. "I think I might look at some of the cold cases, just to make sure. I'm still waiting on Jackson to finish his autopsy anyway."

Marks shook his head but could tell Vega wouldn't drop this. "Alright, if you want to dig through dusty files, that's your prerogative. Let me know once you have any updates from the Doc. And I still expect your report from the crime scene by tomorrow morning."

Detective Vega slumped in her seat. She liked Marks and appreciated being his partner because she knew she'd learn a lot from him. But despite that, he never cut her any slack. And certainly never missed an opportunity to hand the tedious paperwork that accompanied this job off to her. Ruefully, she pulled a pen from her neatly organized desk drawer and set the crime scene photos aside to get started on that report.