

CHAPTER 1

Detective Brady had been with the Homicide Division of the Parker Police Department for over two decades, and this was the most brutal murder he had ever seen. He was fifty and experienced, but this scene almost brought him to his knees.

He was a large man with an intimidating presence, but at this moment, he was small and unnerved. He hadn't come this close to getting sick at a murder scene since the beginning of his career as a police officer.

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, and saliva collected in his mouth, the kind that warned him he had better get to a toilet quickly. His palms were wet under the latex gloves, and his heart was beating so fast he could barely catch his breath. Vomiting was not an option. Not in front of his colleagues. Brady stood, staring, fighting back nausea.

It wasn't only the gruesome scene. She looked about his daughter's age—twenty, maybe.

His gaze fixed on her mutilated body, and he realized she had more stab wounds than he had ever seen. Her internal organs lay separate from her remains, her scalp was detached from her skull, and her hands and feet were removed but not missing. Her body had been arranged in a contorted position. It was overkill, possibly personal. The level of mutilation, hopefully postmortem, was beyond words.

Still, her face had not been touched below the hairline. Her skin was like porcelain. She was beautiful. Her eyes were frozen in an open stare toward the heavens.

Petechial hemorrhaging covered the whites of her eyes and the skin around them. It drew Brady's attention to her neck. Between the stab wounds, he could see what looked like faint ligature marks. Had she been strangled?

It was evident that she had not been killed here. It occurred to him that her body had been washed. There was very little blood and a strong odor of bleach. There was no purse, no jewelry, no identification, and no clothes.

He was used to bodies thrown out like trash, but he knew someone had taken great care to make a statement with this crime scene. They took their time. They wanted her to be found in this place, in this position, on this day.

She was left on the side of a walking trail, and it didn't appear that she had been there long. Animals and insects hadn't reached her. The cool spring temperatures in Colorado had allowed her to remain preserved.

He removed a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face and neck. After a few minutes, he finally blinked. He snapped himself out of it and walked to one of the police officers who responded to the call.

"Who found her?" Brady asked.

"His name's Todd Graham. He's twenty-eight and runs here every day. He's sitting over there." The police officer pointed to a man in shorts, a T-shirt, and running shoes sitting on the cold ground. His head was down, resting on his folded arms, which were supported by his knees. He was curled into a near-fetal position. "He was out for a run and called it in. He's pretty upset. We had the paramedics check him out, but he seemed to calm down. They're getting ready to leave."

“How long ago did he call it in?”

“About an hour ago.”

Brady looked at his watch. “So, about six this morning?”

“Yes.”

Brady turned to walk toward the man when the officer stopped him.

“Detective Brady?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been a police officer for seven years and have seen a lot of things, but this is bad.”

The officer searched Detective Brady’s face as if seeking reassurance, comfort, or anything to make sense of what he had seen.

“It’s bad,” was all Brady could say as he walked toward the witness.

The man still had his head down, almost rocking back and forth, when Brady approached.

“Mr. Graham?” A few seconds passed, and Brady asked again. “Mr. Graham?”

The man slowly lifted his head and looked at Brady. His eyes were swollen and full of tears.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Graham, my name’s Detective Brady. I’m with the Parker Police Department, Homicide Division. I understand you found the body and called the police.” He showed Mr. Graham his badge.

The man looked at Brady in utter bewilderment. “The body? That’s not a body, Detective. That’s a head with God knows what else! Oh my God, that isn’t even a human being.” The man began to hyperventilate.

“I understand, Mr. Graham. I don’t mean to upset you. I need you to take some deep breaths, all right?”

“All right?” Mr. Graham looked at him in confusion. “No, it’s not all right! I don’t know what you see every day, but damn it, I was just out for a run. I’ve been trying to unsee what I’ve seen for the last hour, but it won’t leave my head.”

The man grabbed at the ground, searching for stability. His breaths became increasingly shallow. “I can’t breathe! Oh my God, I can’t breathe!”

Brady realized that, with one glance to his left and one step of his Nikes on a running trail, Mr. Graham’s life had changed forever. He knew it would affect his home life and work life and dominate his mind for a long time. Brady recognized that Mr. Graham would need to calm down before he could question him any further.

Brady motioned for the paramedics, who were just about to pull away. Both EMTs came over, one carrying a bag.

“I can’t breathe!” Mr. Graham looked at them as if seeking reassurance that he would be okay.

While one checked his heart rate and blood pressure, the other returned to the ambulance for the stretcher. One of the officers helped the EMT bring it over and get Mr. Graham onto it.

As they loaded him onto the stretcher and placed an oxygen mask over his face, Brady informed him that he would meet him at the hospital to ask some questions.

Mr. Graham looked right through the detective. Sedatives and a good therapist might help him get through the worst of it, Brady thought.

The coroner had arrived to start the process of removing the body. Forensics had been taking pictures and collecting evidence while officers spoke with potential witnesses. It appeared that Mr. Graham may have been the only witness at this point, and other than finding the body, he had nothing further to provide for now.

Detective Landry, Brady's partner, walked up to him, watching the crime scene unfold. "Not a good day," Landry said as he shook his head.

"I just can't imagine the person who did this," Brady said quietly.

Landry didn't respond and began to turn away from the scene to walk back to his car. He put his hand on Brady's shoulder. "Come on. Let's go to the hospital. Forensics will let us know if they get an ID."

Both detectives remained silent as they drove to the hospital. Brady did what detectives do—go over the crime scene, the potential suspect list, and the possible motive. He knew Landry was doing the same.

Whoever had done this had incredible rage. Brady considered how much time the killer had taken to be cruel, yet how precise they had been in cleaning and displaying the body. He could only hope that there would be something of evidentiary value. Anything under her nails,

on her body, or in her body might lead them to the killer. He hoped in silence that they could obtain some usable DNA.

He wished this had been personal, maybe a boyfriend. Otherwise, the thought of a total stranger, a deranged maniac on the loose killing pretty young girls, was not something he wanted to consider.

There was silence except for the road noise as Landry drove. A seasoned investigator, Landry was only a few years younger than Brady. Brady often considered him the cure for his high blood pressure. Where Brady was serious and perpetually cranky, Landry was calmer and more optimistic, always trying to inject lightheartedness into even the worst situation. Brady appreciated him for this.

They walked to the hospital check-in desk and explained who they were and why they were there. A nurse walked them to Mr. Graham's room. As they entered, Mr. Graham opened his eyes to see who had come through the door. His eyes were much calmer and a little glazed over. Brady knew why. They had probably given him some pretty good sedatives through the IV. He lay on a hospital bed, wearing a hospital gown and covered with a blanket.

Sitting next to him was a young woman. She stood to greet the men.

"Hi. I'm Rebecca, Todd's wife." Her eyes were red from crying.

"Nice to meet you, Rebecca. I'm Detective Landry, and this is Detective Brady."

"Nice to meet you. Todd is kind of out of it, but he's doing better." She reached over and touched his arm sympathetically. "Do you need to ask him questions now?"

"If Todd is able, we'd like to," Landry said, taking out his notebook.

Rebecca nodded. "Of course."

Landry confirmed Todd's full name, address, and how long he had lived there before turning his attention to Todd.

Todd's eyes darted between them. "I didn't see anyone."

"We'll get to that," Landry said. "Do you usually run that trail in the mornings?"

"Yes, most mornings."

"Same park? Same time?"

Todd nodded. "Most of the time."

"Have you ever seen anything that you considered odd or suspicious there?"

"No. Nothing. It's a very safe park. Usually, there are other runners, parents with kids, and people with pets. It's in a nice neighborhood. My wife runs there too, usually with me."

Landry turned to Rebecca. "Do you usually run with your husband?"

"I do. I wasn't feeling good this morning, so I didn't go."

"Was Todd home with you all night?"

Rebecca's eyes widened as if she understood the line of questioning. "Yes. We watched a movie after dinner and then went to bed. I wasn't feeling well most of the night, so I was awake quite a bit. He was there every time I woke up."

"And you were awake before he went for his run?"

“Yes. He woke me up to see if I wanted to go. I told him no. He kissed me and left. He was at work the day before and came straight home. I hope that helps.”

“It does. Thank you. We’ll need to confirm his whereabouts with his employer, but we’ll do that later.”

Rebecca nodded.

Landry turned back to Todd. “How long were you on your run when you found the body?”

“Not long. I usually park on the southeast side of the park and run the trail’s full length a few times.” Todd motioned for his wife. “Can I have some water?”

“Let me check.” Rebecca let go of his arm and left the room to ask a nurse.

“I can’t believe I passed the body, but I must have. I can’t figure out how I missed it the first time, except that it was still pretty dark when I started my run. I mean, it was right there, off to the side. It’s not like there were neon lights, but seriously, how could I have missed it?”

“Were there any other joggers on the trail?” Landry asked.

“Not when I was running. I usually go early. Sometimes there are other runners, but it was empty today. Thank God, I guess.” Todd’s words were slow, and he was much calmer than he had been at the park.

“Did you see anyone else?”

“There were a few people there with their dogs, but I think that was all as far as I can remember.”

“Can you describe them?”

“Not really. They weren’t near me, and I wasn’t paying attention. I was listening to music. They weren’t together. They all wore hats and coats. Caucasian, I think. I didn’t see them well enough to give you their hair color.”

“Were there any cars in the parking lots?”

“No. Just mine. So, I assume the others live in the neighborhood. I’ve been racking my brain trying to think of anything. There’s nothing I can think of.”

“That’s all right, Mr. Graham. We appreciate you trying to give us any information you can. But I need to ask what you did when you noticed the body,” Landry said.

Todd closed his eyes tightly and took in a large gulp of air. The sedatives seemed to help his anxiety. He took a few moments before he began to speak.

“I saw it out of the corner of my eye. It was right there. You saw it. That’s why I can’t get over why I didn’t see it the first time,” he said, taking in long, lingering breaths.

“Anyway, at first, I thought it was a mannequin or pieces of one. I slowed down and walked back over to it. And then I realized what I was seeing. It was horrible.”

Todd swallowed hard.

“I ran. I kept running. I dialed 911 on my phone. I think I was still running when I spoke to them because the next thing I remembered, I was in my car, and the police knocked on my window.”

“Was anyone around? Were the people with the dogs still there?” Landry asked, but Todd didn’t acknowledge his question.

“I didn’t want to go back. I told the police where it was, but they insisted I show them. They couldn’t find it at first. I told them I didn’t want to!” Todd’s eyes filled with tears as his wife came in with the nurse, who had a cup of water and a straw. “I told them, but they wouldn’t listen.” Todd began to cry.

“Excuse me, detectives.” The nurse slipped by with the water. “Here you go, Mr. Graham. Take a sip.”

As tears streamed down his face, she brought the straw to his lips and held it there until Todd could control himself enough to take in some water. He took a few moments to calm down as his wife held his hand, wiped the tears, and stroked his hair. The room was silent for a while.

“What was your question, Detective?” Todd looked at Landry.

“Did you notice if any of the people you saw earlier were still there?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember too much after I saw the body. I’m sorry.” Tears slowly streamed down Mr. Graham’s face.

Todd’s wife looked at the detectives. “I think that’s enough for now.” The nurse entered the room with another syringe and pushed the medication into the IV line.

“Absolutely,” Landry said.

“Thank you for your help, Mr. Graham. Mrs. Graham, if he thinks of anything else, and I mean anything, even the smallest thing, please have him call us.” Brady handed her two cards, his and Landry’s.

“I will.” Mrs. Graham walked over to the sink to wet a washcloth and began to wipe Mr. Graham’s face as the detectives exited the room.

“We’ll give it a couple of days before we meet with him again. I don’t think we’ll get anything more from him. Do you?” Brady asked Landry as they walked out of the automatic hospital doors and into the clear, cool morning.

“I don’t either. I don’t think he saw anything relevant other than discovering her body. One thing’s for sure: this has messed him up. I don’t think he’ll ever be the same,” Landry said.

“Can you blame him? It’s just disappointing that he didn’t see anything else and couldn’t describe the people at the park. No cars in the parking lots. No other runners. Here’s hoping forensics has something.”

“Here’s hoping.” Landry reached for the car door handle. “You hungry?”

“Starving!”