

CHAPTER 1

Jordan Copeland ran like a monster through the rain-soaked woods, chased only by his demons.

The darkness fell in on him—and within him—as he fought the choking sensation in his throat. It was just like forty-one years ago. But this time...*this time*, it was deeper, darker and more profound.

Sweat beads bled into the fat raindrops that covered his long, oil-cloth, olive green duster. The full moon traversed between the clouds, emitting fleeting glimpses of the world around him—a stand of trees, the rushing, unforgiving river, his log cabin on stilts. Nearly out of breath, he took temporary shelter under a leafless oak.

That's when he smelled it. *Death*—sudden, stark, shattering and without dignity. Death, with vacant eyes staring back, the silver cord cut between the worlds.

Jordan crouched down against the tree trunk, burying his head in his chest. The hard rain heightened the sharp, pervasive, oiled odor of his duster. Lifting his head toward the heavens, his wide-set blue eyes and elongated forehead felt the brunt of the icy pellets. His grey beard was laced with mud and rain that quickly hardened into frosty threads. The roar within was deafening. He clamped his large, calloused hands over his ears, as the syncopated beat of his racing heart pounded in his head. *Not again*, he thought. *God... not again.*

The pressure around his throat increased. Forty-one years ago, he had youth on his side. He could run harder and longer. But now, his fifty-nine-year-old body was broken by a life unraveled. If he didn't keep running, he knew he'd

black out. Jordan felt the walls of his narrow world caving in. The sound of the rushing river thirty feet away, drifted into the distance.

He pressed his hands harder against his ears. For a moment, he heard nothing—just sweet silence and peace. Then, a second later, a stabbing pain sliced across his heart. He pulled his hands from his ears and pressed them against his chest, bracing himself against the oak tree's trunk. The relentless storm sent waves of freezing rain across the inky landscape, raising the water of the thunderous river. The pressure around his throat increased until each breath became a life or death fight. *Run*, he thought. *Run hard and escape*. Yes, it was the same detached terror from forty-one years ago. He was able to sprint like a champion then, but it didn't do him any good. The end result was still a life of suffering and loneliness.

The storm subsided. Jordan sucked in a deep breath, the primal grip on his throat suddenly releasing. The knife-like pain in his chest mellowed to a dull throb. He could handle that, he figured, as he glanced down to his chest. The moonlight swept across his hands, revealing crimson streaks of blood. *But from what? From where?* Jordan regarded his oversized hands, as if they belonged to another. It made no sense. *Dear God*. It was happening again. But this time...this time, the terror was carving into his gut. *Think, dammit, think*. But as hard as he thought, he couldn't remember how he'd arrived at this spot—under the oak tree, dying for breath, and bleeding.

The demons moved closer, their claws whipping toward him like the lines of the fly fisherman that stalked the river's edge. Rising to his towering height, Jordan's eyes flared into a wild gaze. His wet, tangled salt and pepper mane slapped against the soaked duster. Spinning from one side to the other, Jordan

exposed a warrior's sword that only he could see. The rage inside flared into a conflagration as he slashed and cut the demonic tentacles that coiled around him. *They won't win this time.* A generous sweep of his blade slaughtered the last of the fiends and sent them back into the underworld.

Crack!

Jordan turned toward the still echoing sound. The taste of death prickled on his tongue—bitter and sour.

Roar!

They were coming for him and he was cornered. Hunted like a rabid dog, Jordan wasn't going to give up without a fight. Taking a step backward, he misjudged the embankment and plunged down the muddy, clay-laden slope. His ravaged body absorbed every rock and fallen tree while the pain consumed him. He was back on the cement floor of the jail cell forty-one years ago, getting the shit beaten out of him by the guards. "Fucking killer!" they screamed with a brutal punch to his face. "Child killer!" they grunted with each kick to his kidneys.

A high-pitched squeal shot into the night air as Jordan's body hurtled toward the water's edge.

CHAPTER 2

“Jane?”

Jane Perry stood staring outside the office window. The spring rain swept across the Denver landscape as the somber grey dusk enveloped the city. It was a fitting backdrop to the jarring statement she was still attempting to grasp. Jane wrapped one arm around her chest, her fist balled. Chewing the thumbnail of her other hand, she felt the syncopated pounding of her heart. The rain fell with renewed fury as her world narrowed and darkened.

“Jane...why don't you sit down?”

The doctor's voice sounded as though it was filtered through a wall instead of a few feet away. *Breathe*, Jane thought. But breathing was dangerous. Sucking in too much life might burn it up too fast. Everything would need to be measured from now on. *Jesus Christ, what a way to live.*

She turned toward the doctor, still in suspended animation and noted that the woman had a look of finely tuned compassion on her face. Jane wondered how many years it had taken to hone that visage so that patients would feel safer in her presence. Even with the news, Jane's cynicism was still alive. “So, what's the protocol?” she asked, in the same tenor she used when entering a crime scene.

“I'd like to do another cone biopsy,” the doctor responded flatly.

“I thought you already determined it to be...”

“The pathology suggests a possible Grade II cervical intraepithelial neoplasia. It looks to be confined to the basal third of the epithelium...”

The words swam through Jane's head like sharks during a feeding frenzy. Each multi-syllabic word gnashed into the other, creating a chaotic drone. She knew she'd get a second opinion, but this *was* the second opinion.

"Suggests?" Jane interrupted with an edge to her voice. "Is it or isn't it cancer?"

"There appear to be premalignant dysplastic changes but there are also abnormalities in the biopsy that are inconclusive..."

The sharks resumed their multi-syllabic feast. *It's fucking insane*, Jane thought. Life had been going along at a nice, uneventful pace for over a year. She was now *Sergeant* Detective Perry, sharing duties with her former boss, Sergeant Morgan Weyler. They were an odd, yet highly effective team; Jane with her gruff, penetrating approach and Weyler with his eloquent, restrained demeanor. Together, they'd solved a few high profile Denver homicide cases, washing away the tragic stain that had dogged the Department two years ago. After nearly four decades of shallow breathing, Jane had finally been able to exhale.

Now that old voice in her head started spouting the mantra again—*Life is a struggle and then you die*. All the books she'd read in the last fifteen months on everything from Buddhism and the mind/body connection to esoteric meditation and higher consciousness were a waste of time. Faith and trust were incomprehensible now. It was easy to have faith and trust when life was chugging along at a happy pace. Now, *right now*, when she needed them most, Jane's abject fear devoured them whole.

"So, we do another cone biopsy and then what?" Jane asked.

“It all depends on what that biopsy concludes. Typically, if it confirms severe cervical intraepithelial neoplasia, there’s an eighty to eighty-five percent chance that it’s a squamous cell carcinoma...”

“English, dammit!” Jane insisted, her patience wearing thin.

“We can do a few things,” the doctor related, undaunted by Jane’s tone. “We usually perform a loop electrical excision procedure and conisation in which the inner lining of the cervix is removed and examined...”

“Electrocution?” Jane asked, shifting her weight uncomfortably in her cowboy boots. “That sounds medieval.”

“It’s basic protocol. The pathology will determine what stage we’re looking at. Early stages may involve radiation and/or a hysterectomy.”

Jane noted a cold, rather calculated delivery of her options. She was reminded of the unemotional banter standing across from medical examiners over the years, as they rattled off a perfunctory list of data that led to the death of the poor son-of-a-bitch filleted open on the metal table between them. It was one thing, Jane considered, to discuss a dead man’s outcome in a detached manner, but to use the same cadence with someone who still had a pulse felt insensate to Jane. “Isn’t a hysterectomy a bit aggressive?”

“Cervical cancer is aggressive, Jane.” The doctor glanced at Jane’s open file on her desk. “I know the idea of a hysterectomy at the age of thirty-seven can be difficult to wrap one’s mind around, but the fact that you can’t conceive a child anyway...takes a bit of the concern out of it.”

Right, Jane thought. *Wasn’t using my uterus anyway, so what the hell?* She slid into the single chair opposite the desk and felt the butt of her Glock bite into her side as she dug her elbow into the arm of the chair and dragged her fingers

through her shoulder length brown hair. Her leather jacket issued a soft *crick* as she sat back and looked the doctor straight in the eye. "I don't get it. I think I've made some significant changes in my life. I'm eating better...sort of...I took up running two years ago. I even completed a three month yoga course that my boss signed me up for." Jane still had a penchant for calling Weyler her boss even though they were now on equal footing. "Good God, I've been sober for fifteen months and nine days. Doesn't that count for something?" Jane instantly realized that it was both absurd and desperate to think you earned points and dodged death for choosing sobriety.

"Lifestyle changes that improve health benefits are always positive," the doctor offered.

Jesus Christ, she thought. *There must be a manual these physicians follow, filled with pithy, mollifying statements that sound good but mean nothing.* She couldn't stand it any longer. "What in the hell are you talking about?" Her voice raised several octaves as she leaned forward and slammed her fist onto the doctor's desk. "*Obviously*, it made no difference, given your diagnosis!"

"You can't put a price on sobriety, Jane."

Fuck! Another Hallmark card contribution. Jane promised herself if the doc's next statement was, "You have to name it and claim it," she was going to dive across the desk and strangle her.

"You *are* a smoker, Jane," the doctor gently put forth. "That's one of the ten behaviors that put you at greater risk."

Great. Somebody made a list. Somebody *always* makes a goddamn list, Jane deduced. We've become a nation where we respond to lists and studies. Out of studies you get lists and out of lists you get people who chat about the lists as

if the list was absolute. “Yeah, of course I smoke,” Jane said nonchalantly, realizing that a cigarette would taste pretty damn good right about now. “Cigarettes are the reformed drunk’s best friend.”

“Cigarettes are also a significant risk factor for cervical cancer, not to mention...”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“Multiple partners...”

Jane regarded the doctor with an arched eyebrow. “That’s on the list?” The doctor nodded. “Define ‘multiple.’” Jane stated, pretending for a moment that she was talking to her across a dimly lit table in Denver Headquarter’s tiny interrogation room.

“That’s difficult to say. It’s more pertinent whether a partner had an STD.”

“Well, let’s see, I haven’t had a *partner* in the religious sense for two years. And *he* was pretty fucked up on drugs. Are fucked up partners with drugs on your list? Before that, I could count my *partners* on one hand and still have a finger or two available. So, I don’t think I fit the multiple partner profile.” The doctor flipped the page on Jane’s report. Across the table, Jane could read her name across the top line: *JANE ANNE PERRY*. *Who in the hell was that?* she thought. She was Sergeant Detective Perry. *That* was a name she could answer and relate to—not Jane Anne Perry. Jane Anne Perry died a long time ago. “What you else you got on that list, doc?”

“Long term use of birth control pills...”

“Since pregnancy has never been possible, the Pill was never an issue,” Jane countered.

“Multiple pregnancies.”

Jane shook her head and a disparaging half-smile crept across her face. "This is your list?"

"Genetic history of cancer...especially the mother." The sarcastic grin quickly left Jane's face. "That's actually a formidable risk in comparison to the others," the doctor stressed, sitting back in her chair and holding Jane's gaze.

Jane swallowed hard. It had been twenty-seven years since she had witnessed her mother, Anne, take her last violent breath before collapsing in a pool of blood and vomit. The memory was as fresh as ever, as was the invasive stench of death that Jane could never shake. "She died of lung cancer and never smoked a cigarette in her life." The randomness of life suddenly struck Jane. What was the point of changing one's lifestyle if it all came down to an arbitrary spin of the wheel? You might as well build a meth lab in the bathtub and have anonymous sex.

"It doesn't matter the type of cancer she had. It matters that she *had* cancer and died of it. Between that and smoking, you are at a much higher risk."

"She never lived..." Jane's voice softened as she turned toward the office window. The rain was quickly turning to snow as it pelted the glass. "She existed."

The doctor flipped through Jane's file. "She died at 35."

Jane turned back to face the doctor. "Is that supposed to be significant? I've lasted two years longer than my mother so my clock's ticking?"

"Genetics...our family history plays a major role for all of us." The doctor closed the file and leaned forward. "You can't ignore your DNA, Jane...your bloodline."

“What are you saying? That I’m doomed to repeat my mother’s history? I don’t buy that, doc. I’m nothing like her. She was compliant...she was fragile...she had no gumption, no fight. She was always a broken woman. Cancer was a gift because it got her out of a life that she chose to crawl through.”

“So, you’re saying that strong, tough people like *you* don’t die of cancer?”

Jane sat back. She’d painted herself into an idiotic corner. “I’m saying...that I don’t believe blood defines my life...or my death.” She realized her hand was shaking. Suddenly, there was a strange sense in the tiny office—a heaviness that had not been there a few minutes earlier. Jane shifted with purpose in her seat, hoping she could shake off the unidentified impression that lingered around the edges of her chair. But instead, it hung even tighter.

“Did your mother take DES when she was pregnant?”

Jane felt outside of herself. “What?”

“DES. It’s a synthetic estrogen that was used between the 1940’s and 1971. Women were given it to prevent complications, especially with a history of premature labor...”

Jane tried to push herself back into her body. “I’m the oldest. She wouldn’t know if she had a predisposition to premature labor so why would she take the drug?”

The doctor pursed her lips. “She could very well have taken it if there were complications during the pregnancy...”

Jane’s head was spinning. “There were no complications when she was pregnant with me.”

“How do you know?”

“I would have heard about it. Trust me,” Jane responded curtly.

The doctor took a breath. “DES-exposed daughters have an increased chance of developing dysplasia in the cervix, usually around twenty to thirty years of age.”

The strange, wraithlike heaviness sunk around Jane’s body, almost demanding to be acknowledged. “And I’m thirty-seven,” Jane stressed.

“It’s not absolute. Since you don’t fit into the profile completely, all other mitigating possibilities should be considered.”

“She didn’t take the drug.”

“She didn’t take it because you *know* she didn’t or because you don’t want to believe she took it?” In an unconscious, almost trance-like manner, Jane gently brushed her fingertips across her forehead, repeating the motion continuously. “Are you alright, Jane?” Jane stared into nothingness, her hand continuing its soothing rhythm across her forehead. “Do you have a headache?”

Jane suddenly noted the odd, uncharacteristic movement of her hand. She crossed her arms tightly against her jacket, a slight disconnect engulfing her. “I’m fine.” She was aware of how distant her voice sounded.

“It’s absolutely normal to feel anxious.” The doctor reached for her prescription pad. “I can write you a script. It’ll take the edge off.”

Jane let out a hard breath, struggling to ground her scattered senses. “Doc, I came out of the gate with an edge. I’ve self-medicated for years to take the edge off and the result has been an extremely sharp point that almost cut the life out of me.” She could feel that comforting, familiar grit return as she stood and faced the doctor. “I’ll take a pass on your happy pills.”

Jane stormed out of the parking garage in her '66 ice blue Mustang and was met with a battering mixture of rain and snow pattering across the windshield. Checking the car's clock, it was 6:30 pm. In a little over twelve hours, she'd be back at the doc's office with her feet in the stirrups as they sliced another chunk of tissue out of her. A few years ago, her plan of action would have been simple: go home, get piss drunk, pass out, wake up, nurse the hangover and plod through her day. She may have given up the bottle, but Jane hadn't given up her need to escape.

She gunned the Mustang onto I-70, easily passing three cars before stationing in the fast lane. Tomorrow was Friday. Next week was spring break. *Perfect.* She hadn't taken any time off save for the two days when her younger brother Mike got married barefoot in Sedona. *Yes, yes,* she thought. The escape plan was coming together perfectly. Jane unconsciously reached for her American Spirits, deftly lifting one of the slender cylinders out of the pack with her teeth as she changed lanes to pass a truck going the speed limit. Slamming the car's lighter into place with the heel of her hand, she continued to formulate her unplanned temporary departure. She'd wake up tomorrow, get the biopsy done, go to the market and stock up on enough food and DVDs to last a week, then return to her house and hole up like the old days—sans booze—until she got the phone call with the test results the following Thursday. She liked her plan. It was a classic Jane Perry mixture of *fuck you* revolt and sanctioned hooky. The car's lighter clicked. Jane pressed the pedal to the floor, passed an 18-wheeler and slid back into the fast lane. She drew the lighter to the tip of the cigarette when the reality of the moment came into focus. "Fuck," she whispered, and her plan quickly deflated.

It was only right that she leave a note for Weyler at DH. It also didn't hurt that it was 7:15 pm when she squealed into police headquarters at 13th and Cherokee. Weyler was certain to be home by now, feet propped up on his ottoman, watching whatever PBS had programmed.

Getting off the elevator on the third floor, Jane quickly entered the homicide department and took a sharp right into her office. She snagged a blank sheet of paper out of the fax machine, scribbled a few sentences and signed her name. Before turning off the light, she grabbed a stack of paperwork from her cluttered, dusty desk, tucking it under her arm. *Goddamned Protestant work ethic*, she scolded herself.

A quick look around the Department showed no one. She walked into Weyler's office, placing her letter in the center of his pristine, uncluttered desk. It would be a stealth departure, Jane assumed, until she spun around and smacked into the 6'4" frame of Sergeant Weyler.

"Jane," Weyler said with ease. "Just the person I'm looking for."

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