

PROLOGUE: NOVEMBER 1991

SERGEANT BRADFORD LOOKED OUT over the devastation from the safety of his patrol car, the radio squawking at a barely audible volume. Below, blackened remains of neighborhood upon neighborhood stretched off to meet the setting sun. When the last of the contractors' trucks swept headlights across the empty road and disappeared over the hill, he got out and walked down a steep driveway to nowhere. This point, the farthest south and east of the firestorm damage, looked like a pointing finger from above, as if the fire sought out this one site, so far from the rest of the burn, with intelligent purpose.

He remembered the row of cottages that lined the street before the fire, split-levels on the odd side of the street, single-stories on the even. In a neighborhood most Oakland residents knew nothing about, gardens blossomed and tall trees grew; structures and paint appeared well maintained, save for one property.

In his mind, he could still see the house at the end of the driveway, behind a screen of dead branches from trees planted so close to the structure that the foundation reared up. Windows either stared with flat darkness or hid behind gray plywood patches. While around the rest of the neighborhood stood cords of fresh, white lumber, this patch of ground remained black and burned, so far untouched by reconstruction.

Bradford continued down the driveway and around to the concrete slab, a former porch. Where the front door once stood now lay a steep drop to the crawl space under missing hardwood floors. The sergeant stopped here, not wanting to sift through the charred remains.

"I just wanted to make sure you burned," he said aloud.

His eyes couldn't help but trace a trail he himself had followed nearly ten years before, the length of time this house had been abandoned. Through the front door, his foot exactly parallel with the lock, charging headlong into a living room filled with antique furniture and hundreds of knick-knacks and pounds of fragile bric-a-brac. Screams and growls had come from the other end of the house. Bradford had run through the kitchen to a hallway, finding three doors. Two stood open, and his eyes had darted to them and away as quickly. Bradford was almost certain he'd shouted, "Police!" as he broke down the bedroom door, gun drawn.

His lips formed the word silently as he stood amid the wreckage. He mused that those two impacts—his foot against the front door and his shoulder against the one in the bedroom—set him on a dual path from that moment on. On one hand, it led to a promotion from traffic patrol to the Violent Crimes Unit, and he believed subsequently to his current rank of sergeant, on the fast track to command, as his lieutenant put it. On the other hand, it led to his divorce and his inability to sleep at night.

Philosophy aside, he couldn't shake the goose flesh that crawled up his arms beneath his warm Tuffy jacket or stop fondling the 9mm holstered on his hip. Even though the nightmare house remained only a bombed-out hole in a fire-blackened neighborhood, his memory rebuilt the place more solidly than any contractor ever would.

His feet had slipped when he smashed the bedroom door half off its hinges. Slipped in blood that soaked nearly the entire off-white wall-to-wall carpet, that painted the walls in arcing spatters, dotting the ceiling and overhead light in bright red.

All of it had come to him in the quick beam of his flashlight, held away from his body to make him less of a target for gunfire. On the bed, the beam had caught two eyes, reflecting the bright light like an animal's. He was crouched on the bed on all fours, black shirt, white collar, stripped from the waist down. The man, too, had been dripping blood, chalk white flesh peeking through in streaks on his face, his legs. The shirt had shined with fresh liquid, the collar pinkish with it. When the man saw Bradford, he'd snarled, showing teeth stained almost black, ragged bits of flesh hanging from the

gaps. Bradford had aimed his gun, a .38 special in those days, at the dark mass of the bloody man's body.

"Freeze!" With his finger slightly squeezing the trigger, Bradford had edged closer. "Get on the floor!"

At the same moment, he saw the woman.

She'd lain on the bed beneath the crouching animal-man, white hair matted with dark crimson and brown, eyes staring at nothing. Red had smeared her mouth and cheeks like ghastly clown makeup. Frail and naked, her age must have been somewhere around eighty. The old woman had bounced and flailed on the bed with stiff, creaking movements.

Because the animal was still fucking her dead body.

And worst of all, he'd recognized a series of torn, glistening marks running up and down the victim's corpse, though his mind desperately wanted not to acknowledge the fact. But he couldn't have denied his senses, even in the wan light of his flash. Bite marks, human bite marks torn into the skin, some surrounded by drying brown stains—pre-mortem, the coroner would say. The man had savagely ripped the woman apart with his teeth, eating her flesh before she died, and while she died, and after...

Bradford's teeth had clenched involuntarily.

His gun had fired.

The man had jerked back from his victim in a spray of blood—his or hers, Bradford couldn't tell—and fell half off the bed. Growling and snarling, the murderer had tried to rise on palsied limbs. More blood added to the gruesome slaughterhouse, and more again as Bradford walked forward, still shooting.

In flashbulb moments from the blasting revolver, the officer had seen the downward-pointing pentagrams scrawled on the walls, satanic, fresh.

Four, five shots had entered the predator, making his body jerk, his naked legs spasm, his red-stained erection fall.

"This is Officer Bradford. I need back-up at 9092 Greene Street," he'd said into the mic on his shoulder—rote, routine, training.

Six, the last one in his head right between the reflecting beast-eyes, and the cop had seen that the eyes were white-blue, darkly ringed, wolf's eyes.

No breathing.

No twitching.

Bradford had inhaled, cordite, blood, shit, viscera burning his nostrils, then exhaled hard. Dumping his shells, he'd reloaded—rote, routine, training—and gone to the victim. Just a quick look had shown her to be eviscerated from her sparse gray pubic hair to the visible bone between wrinkled breasts. He'd moved out of the room, searching the rest of the house, talking in his radio; he needed backup, detectives, an ambulance; he'd found the Predator Priest, code three, please, everyone.

Leaving a trail of red footprints across hardwood floors and throw rugs, he'd checked closets, cupboards, any place large enough for a man to hide. Point of entry, he saw, was a jimmed back door leading onto a deck. He'd touched nothing, leaving only scarlet shoe marks that faded more with each step.

As he'd examined the grooves on the back lock, a crowbar, he imagined, he froze as the growling and the screams came again from the bedroom. He'd ran back, slamming his hip against the corner of the stove, nearly falling. Sirens echoed in the distance, the sound of little solace compared to the predatory snarls coming from twenty feet away, the tearing scream of defiance or pain or both—neither sound very human.

Again, with the flashlight held away from his body, Bradford had entered the bedroom, this time turning on the overhead. Shock flooded through him, sudden and cold, leaving him paralyzed in the doorway.

Light, still smoky with gunpowder, had blazed clinically down in a solid beam. The body of the woman once again floundered on the mattress, dead arms flopping. The bony knees were raised, the feet off the bed. Her torso heaved back and forth on the scarlet- and sienna-drenched sheets. Howling, shrieking sounds had filled the room, echoing off the walls. On the floor, the half-naked man had lain dead. The din rose in volume as the dead woman's corpse was flogged harder and harder. Sounds with no source.

Bradford had pointed the gun at nothing, at the nothing that raped the lifeless body, at nothing, nothing, nothing there, though he could see indentations around her ankles where fingers seemed to grip, twin indentations on the mattress where knees must have been—must have been, but were not. Organs, purplish gray, green, sickly,

creamy white, fell from the open cavity on the victim's abdomen, spilling to both sides of her wracked, pale form.

A dresser on the far wall began moving, bumping up and down on the floor. Pictures fell from the walls as one, smashing simultaneously on the soft carpet. Both bedroom windows exploded inward, showering the bedroom with shards of glass, shutters banging in a gust of unfelt wind. The bed itself lifted, pounding its legs on the floor but barely disturbing the victim and invisible predator.

Reaching a crescendo of pounding, screeching, roaring cacophony, the fragile old woman's body tore in half, head lolling to the left, gore-slick spinal column and ribs to the right, meat falling on all sides, with a tremendous rip louder than all the unnatural noise in the small chamber.

Bradford fell on his ass, gun still aiming in mid air. At once, the room froze into quiet, normal stillness, save the quite pat of dripping.

"Bradford!"

Officer Bradford had twisted, gun raised, finger tight on the trigger. Someone knocked the weapon from his hand. It went off, a bullet puncturing the ceiling. Cops everywhere, uniforms, suits, the hall full of people and light, hands shaking him, someone vomiting behind him. Jump-suited EMTs had run forward in spite of the voices shouting for them to leave. Then, Bradford had gazed at the ceiling racing past him like a maze as they wheeled him out of the abattoir on a gurney.

Standing on the concrete slab, Sergeant Bradford felt his heart race at the memory from ten years before. Unconsciously, he took his pulse. Those ten minutes of his life remained fully focused, fully intact, a burn scar on his mind; yet, the month after the incident was lost to him. He knew he was hospitalized for a time. Perhaps for the whole month, but he couldn't be certain.

Bradford's refusal to talk about what happened after gunning down the priest ate away at him, awake or asleep. To this day, he never said a word about the invisible presence; to this day, it still festered inside him, waiting to be purged.

At least the place, the house, the room, no longer existed, the firestorm pointing a blazing finger and erasing an entire neighborhood. Bradford last visited two years before almost to the day. He hoped