Lovereading.co.uk

Blood Memory

Greg Iles

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

Click here to buy this book and read more

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER 1

When does murder begin?

With the pull of a trigger? With the formation of a motive? Or does it begin long before, when a child swallows more pain than love and is forever changed?

Perhaps it doesn't matter.

Or perhaps it matters more than everything else.

We judge and punish based on facts, but facts are not truth. Facts are like a buried skeleton uncovered long after death. Truth is fluid. Truth is alive. To know the truth requires understanding, the most difficult human art. It requires seeing all things at once, forward and backward, the way God sees.

Forward and backward. . .

So we begin in the middle, with a telephone ringing in a dark bedroom on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans, Louisiana. There's a woman lying on the bed, mouth open in the mindless gape of sleep. She seems not to hear the phone. Then suddenly the harsh ring breaks through, like defibrillator paddles shocking a comatose patient. The woman's hand shoots from beneath the covers, groping for the phone, not finding it. She gasps and rises onto one elbow. Then she groans and picks up the receiver from the bedside table.

The woman is me.

"Dr. Ferry," I croak.

"Are you sleeping?" The voice is male, taut with anger.

"No." My denial is automatic, but my mouth is dry as a cotton ball, and my alarm clock reads 8:20 P.M. I've been out for nine hours. The first decent sleep I've had in days.

"He hit another one."

Something sparks in my drowsy brain. "What?"

"This is the fourth time I've called in the past half hour, Cat."

The voice brings up a well of anger, longing, and guilt. It belongs to the detective I've been sleeping with for the past eighteen months. Sean Regan. An insightful, fascinating man with a wife and three kids.

"What did you say before?" I ask, ready to bite off Sean's head if he asks me to meet him somewhere.

"I said, he hit another one."

I blink and try to orient myself in the darkness. It's early August, and the purple glow of dusk filters through my curtains. God, my mouth is dry. "Where?"

"The Garden District. Owner of a printing company. Male Caucasian."

"Bite marks?"

"Worse than the others."

"How old was he?"

"Sixty-nine."

"Jesus. It is him." I'm already getting out of bed. "This makes no sense at all."

"Nope."

"Sexual predators kill women, Sean. Or children. Not old men."

"We've had this conversation. How fast can you get here? Piazza's hovering over me, and the chief himself may be coming down for a look."

I lift yesterday's jeans off the chair and slip them over my panties. Victoria's Secret, Sean's favorite pair, but he won't be seeing them tonight. Maybe not for a long time. Maybe never again. "Any gay angle on this victim? Did he use male prostitutes, anything like that?"

"Not even a tickle," Sean replies. "Looks as clean as the others."

"If he's got a home computer, confiscate it. He might—"

"I know my job, Cat."

"I know, but—"

"Cat." The single syllable is a probing finger. "Are you sober?"

A column of heat rises up my spine. I haven't had a sip of vodka for nearly forty-eight hours, but I'm not going to give Sean the satisfaction of answering his interrogation. "What's the victim's name?"

"Arthur LeGendre." His voice drops. "Are you sober, darlin'?"

The craving is already awake in my blood, like little teeth gnawing at the walls of my veins. I need the anesthetic burn of a shot of Grey Goose. Only I can't have that anymore. I've been using Valium to fight the physical withdrawal symptoms, but nothing can truly replace the alcohol that has kept me together for so long.

I shift the phone from shoulder to shoulder and pull a silk blouse from my closet. "Where are the bite marks?"

"Torso, nipples, face, penis."

I freeze. "*Face?* Are they deep?"

"Deep enough for you to take impressions, I think."

Excitement blunts the edge of my craving. "I'm on my way."

"Have you taken your meds?"

Sean knows me too well. No one else in New Orleans is even aware that I take anything. Lexapro for depression, Depakote for impulse control. I stopped taking both drugs three days ago, but I don't want to get into that with Sean.

"Stop worrying about me. Is the FBI there?"

"Half the task force is here, and they want to know what you think about these bite marks. The Bureau guy is photographing them, but you have that ultraviolet rig . . . and when it comes to teeth, you're the man."

Sean's admiring misstatement of my gender is typical cop talk, and it tells me he's speaking for the benefit of others. "What's the address?"

"Twenty-seven twenty-seven Prytania."

"Sounds like an address with a security system."

"Switched off."

"Just like the first one. Moreland." Our first victim—one month ago—was a retired army colonel, highly decorated in Vietnam.

"Just like that." Sean's voice drops to a whisper. "Get your lovely ass down here, okay?"

Today his Irish intimacy makes me want to jab him. "No 'I love you'?" I ask with feigned sweetness.

His reply is barely audible. "You know I'm surrounded."

As usual. "Yeah. I'll see you in fifteen minutes."

* * *

Night falls fast as I drive my Audi from my house on Lake Pontchartrain to the Garden District, the fragrant heart of New Orleans. I spent two minutes in the bathroom trying to make myself presentable, but my face is still swollen from sleep. I need caffeine. In five minutes I'll be surrounded by cops, FBI agents, forensic techs, the chief of robbery homicide, and possibly the chief of the NOPD. I'm accustomed to that kind of attention, but seven days ago—the last time this predator hit—I had a problem at the crime scene. Nothing too bad. A garden-variety panic attack, according to the EMT who checked me out. But panic attacks don't exactly inspire confidence in the hard men and women who work serial murder cases. The last thing they want is a consulting expert who can't hold her mud.

The word got around about my little episode, too. Sean told me that. Nobody could really believe it. Why did the woman that some homicide detectives call "the ice queen" suddenly lose her composure at the scene of a not-very-grisly murder? I'd like to know that myself. I have a theory, but analyzing one's own mental condition is a notoriously unreliable business. As for the sobriquet, I'm no ice queen, but in the macho world of law enforcement, playing that role is the only thing that keeps me safe—from men and from my own rogue impulses. Of course, Sean gives the lie to that little strategy.

Four victims now, I remind myself, focusing on the case. Four men between the ages of forty-two and sixty-nine, all murdered within weeks of each other. In a single thirty-day period, to be exact. The pace of the killings is virtually unprecedented, and if the victims were women, the city would be gripped by terror. But because the victims are middle-aged or older men, a sort of fascinated curiosity has taken hold of New Orleans. Each victim has been shot in or near the spine, mutilated with human bites, then finished off with a coup de grâce shot to the head. The bites have increased in savagery from victim to victim, and they've also provided the strongest evidence against any future suspect—mitochondrial DNA from the killer's saliva.

The bite marks are the reason for my involvement with the case. I'm a forensic odontologist, an expert on human teeth and the damage they can do. I acquired this knowledge in four boring years of dental school and five fascinating years of fieldwork. If people ask me what I do for a living, I tell them I'm a dentist, which is true enough and all they need to know. *Odontologist* doesn't mean any-

thing to anybody, but in post-*CSI* America, *forensic* prompts questions I'd just as soon not answer in a grocery store. So, while most acquaintances know me as a dentist who's too busy to accept new patients, an assortment of government agencies—including the FBI and the United Nations Commission for the Investigation of War Crimes—knows me as one of the leading forensic odontologists in the world. Which is nice. I take my identity where I can find it.

The task force wants my expertise on bite marks tonight, but Sean Regan wants more. When he sought my help on a murder case two years ago, he soon learned that I knew about a lot more than teeth. I completed two years of medical school before I withdrew, and that gave me a strong foundation for self-education in forensics. Anatomy, hematology, histology, biochemistry, whatever a case requires. I can glean twice as much information from an autopsy report as any detective, and twice as fast. After Sean and I became closer than the rules allowed, he began using me unofficially to help with difficult cases. And *used* is the proper word; Sean Regan lives to catch killers, and he'll exploit anything and anyone to help him do it.

But Sean isn't simply a user. He's my comrade-in-arms, my rabbi, and my enabler. He doesn't judge me. He knows me for what I am, and he gives me what I need. Like Sean, I'm a born hunter. Not of animals. I've hunted animals, and I hate it. Animals are innocent; men are not. I am a hunter of men. But unlike Sean, I have no license to do this. Not really. Forensic odontology brings only tangential involvement with murder cases; it's my involvement with Sean that puts me into the bloody thick of things. By allowing me access—unethical and probably illegal access—to crime scenes, witnesses, and evidence, he has put me in a position to solve four major murder cases, one of them a serial. Sean took the credit every time, of course—plus the attendant promotions—and I let him do it. Why? Maybe because telling the truth would have exposed our love affair, gotten Sean fired, and freed the killers. But the truth is simpler than that. The truth is that I didn't care about the credit. I'd tasted the pulse-pounding rush of hunting predators, and I was addicted to it as surely as I am to the vodka I need so terribly at this moment.

For this reason, I've let our relationship run long past the point where I would usually have sabotaged it. Long enough, in fact, for me to have forgotten one of my hardest-won lessons: *the husband doesn't leave*. Not the husbands I pick, anyway. Only this time it's

different. Sean has gone a long way toward convincing me he really means to do it. And I'm very close to believing him. Close enough to find myself hoping desperately for it in the most vulnerable hours of the night. But now . . . the situation has changed. Fate has taken a hand. And unless Sean really surprises me, our relationship is over.

Without warning, a wave of nausea rolls through my stomach. I try to tell myself it's alcohol withdrawal, but deep down I know better. It's panic. Pure terror at the idea of giving up Sean and being alone. *Don't think about it,* says a shaky voice inside me. *In two minutes you're onstage. Think about the case . . .*

As I decelerate down the interstate ramp to the surface streets at St. Charles Avenue, my cell phone rings out the opening notes to U2's "Sunday, Bloody Sunday." I know without looking that it's Sean.

"Where are you?" he asks.

I'm still fifteen blocks from the stately Victorian houses of Prytania Street, but I need to calm Sean down. "A few blocks from the scene."

"Good. Can you handle your gear okay?"

My dental case weighs thirty-one pounds fully loaded, and tonight I'll also need my camera case and tripod. Maybe Sean is hinting that I should ask him outside to help me. This would give him an excuse for a private talk before we find ourselves together in front of others. But a private talk is the last thing I want tonight.

"I've got it," I tell him. "You sound strange. What's going on down there?"

"Everybody's uptight. You know the history."

I do. There have been three serial murder cases in the New Orleans–Baton Rouge area in as many years, and serious investigative mistakes were made in all of them.

"We got some Sixth District detectives down here," Sean goes on, "but the task force has taken over the scene. We'll be running our investigation out of headquarters, just like the others. Captain Piazza's already busting my balls."

Carmen Piazza is a tough, fiftysomething Italian-American woman who came up through the ranks of the detective bureau and is now the Homicide Division commander. If anyone ever fires Sean for his involvement with me, it will be Piazza. She likes Sean's record of arrests, but she thinks he's a cowboy. And she's right. He's a tough, devilish Irish cowboy. "Does she suspect anything about us?"

"No."

"No rumors? Nothing?"

"Don't think so."

"What about Joey?" I ask, referring to Sean's partner, Detective Joey Guercio. "Has he blabbed to anybody?"

A millisecond's hesitation. "No way. Look, just be cool like you always are. Except for last time. You feeling okay about that? Your nerves or whatever?"

I close my eyes. "I was until you asked."

"Sorry. Just hurry down here. I'm going back in."

A rush of anxiety blindsides me. "You can't wait for me?"

"Probably better if I don't."

Better for you . . . "Fine."

Focus on the case, I tell myself, checking the house numbers on Prytania to be sure where I am. *They expect you to know your business.*

The facts are simple enough. In the past thirty days, three men have been shot by the same gun, bitten by the same set of teeth, and—in two cases—marked by the saliva of a man whose DNA shows him 87 percent likely to be a Caucasian male. The NOPD crime lab did the ballistics that matched the bullets. The state police crime lab did the mitochondrial DNA match. And I matched the bite marks.

This is much more difficult than it appears to be on television. To explain my job to homicide detectives, I often tell them about the forensic researcher who used an articulated set of teeth to try to create perfectly matched bite marks on a corpse. He couldn't do it. The lesson is clear, even to street cops. If matching two bite marks known to have come from the same set of teeth can be difficult, then matching marks that might have been made by any teeth among millions is next to impossible. Even comparing bite marks on a corpse with the teeth of a small group of suspects is more problematic than many odontologists pretend.

Saliva left in a bite mark by a killer can simplify things enormously, by providing DNA to compare against that of suspects. But four weeks ago, when the first victim was discovered, I recovered no saliva from the two bite marks on the body. I figured the killer for an organized offender who washed the saliva out of his bites to prevent recovery of DNA evidence. But a week later, when the second victim

was found, my theory was blown out of the water. I recovered saliva from two of four bite marks left on the corpse. This raised the possibility of a different—and disorganized—killer. But by using reflective ultraviolet photography and scanning electron microscopy on the bite marks, I concluded that the same killer had indeed murdered both victims. Ballistic analysis of the recovered bullets supported my conclusion, and six days later, when the third victim was murdered, my opinion was confirmed beyond doubt by DNA recovered from the bite marks left on that body. The same killer had murdered all three men.

The importance of this cannot be overestimated. The baseline criteria for classifying a serial murderer are three victims killed by one person, each victim killed in a different location, and a cooling-off period between the crimes. I had helped prove what I'd known from the moment I saw the first victim. New Orleans had another predator on the hunt.

My official responsibility ended with matching the bite marks, but I wasn't about to stop there. As the New Orleans Police Department joined the FBI in the uneasy marriage of a task force, I began to analyze other aspects of the case. In sexual homicide, the murderer's selection criteria for his victims hold the key to every case. And like all serial murders, the NOMURS killings—so dubbed by the FBI for "New Orleans murders"—are at root sexual homicides. Something *always* links the victims in these cases, even if it's nothing more individual than geographic location, and that link draws the predator. But the NOMURS victims have ranged widely in age, physical type, occupation, social status, and place of residence. The only similarities are that they're white, male, over forty, and have families. These four facts combined exclude them from the known target profiles for serial killers. Moreover, none of the victims is known to have had habits that might draw a predator to an atypical target. No victim was gay or had a known sexual paraphilia. None was ever arrested for a sexual crime, reported for child abuse, or known to frequent strip clubs or other sleazy establishments. For this reason the NOMURS task force has made no progress at all in finding a suspect.

As I slow the Audi to read a house number, my skin itches with fear and anticipation. The killer was on this street only hours ago. He may be here *now,* watching the progress of the investigation, as serial murderers often do. Watching *me*. And herein lies the thrill. A preda-

tor is not prey. When you hunt a predator, you place yourself in a position to be hunted yourself. There's no other way. If you follow a lion into a thicket, you step within reach of his claws. And my adversary is no lion. He's the deadliest creature in the world: a human male driven by anger and lust, yet governed—at least temporarily—by logic. He stalks these streets with impunity, confident in his prowess, meticulous in his planning, arrogant in his execution. The only thing I know about him is this: like all his brothers before him, he will kill again, and again, until someone unravels the riddle of his psyche or he self-destructs from the intensity of conflict in his own mind. A lot of people don't care which way it ends, so long as it ends soon.

I do.

Sean is standing on the sidewalk, waiting. He's walked a block up from the victim's house to meet me. He always did have guts. But does he have enough to face our present situation?

I park behind a Toyota Land Cruiser, get out, and start to unload my cases. Sean gives me a quick hug, then unloads the cases himself. He's forty-six years old but looks forty, with the easy, confident grace of a natural athlete. His hair is mostly black, his eyes green with a bit of a twinkle. Even after being his lover for eighteen months, I half expect a lilting Irish brogue to emerge when Sean opens his mouth. But it's the familiar New Orleans accent instead, the Brooklynesque drawl with a hint of crawfish.

"You doin' okay?" he asks.

"Changed your mind?"

He shrugs. "I felt bad."

"Bullshit. You wanted to see for yourself if I was sober."

I see the truth of it in his face. He gives me a penetrating survey with his eyes and makes no apology for it.

"Go on," I tell him.

"What?"

"You were about to say something. Go ahead."

He sighs. "You look rough, Cat."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Sorry. Are you drunk?"

Anger tightens my jaw muscles. "I'm stone sober for the first time in more years than I can count."

I see skepticism in his face. Then, as he studies me, belief comes into his eyes. "Jesus. Maybe a drink is what you need."

"Worse than you know. But I'm not going to."

"Why not?"

"Come on. Let's do this."

"I still need to go in ahead of you." He looks embarrassed.

Exasperation makes me look away. "How long? Five minutes?"

"Not that long."

I wave him off and get back into my car. He steps toward my door, then changes his mind and walks down the block.

My hands are shaking. Were they shaking when I woke up? I grip the steering wheel and force myself to breathe deeply. As my pulse steadies and my heart finds its rhythm, I pull down the vanity mirror and check my face. I'm not usually compulsive about my appearance, but Sean has made me nervous. And when I get nervous, crazy thoughts flood into my head. Disembodied voices, old nightmares, ancient slights and mistakes, things therapists have said . . .

I consider putting on some eyeliner to strengthen my gaze in case I have to stare somebody down inside. I don't really need it. Men often tell me I'm beautiful, but men will tell any woman that. My face is actually masculine in structure, a vertical series of V's, simple and to the point. The V of my chin slants up into a strong jaw. My mouth, too, curves upward. Then comes the angular bottom of my nose; my prominent, upward-slanting cheekbones; my tilted brown eyes and sloping eyebrows; and finally the dark widow's peak of my hairline. I see my father in all of this, twenty years dead now but alive in every angle of my face. I keep a picture of him in my wallet. *Luke Ferry, 1969*. Smiling in his army uniform, somewhere in Vietnam. I don't like the uniform—not after what the war did to him—but I like his eyes in the picture. Still compassionate, still human. It's how I like to remember him. A little girl's idea of a father. He once told me that I almost got his face, but at the last minute an angel swooped down and put enough softness in mine to make me pretty.

Sean sees the hardness in my face. He's told me I look like a predator myself, a hawk or an eagle. Tonight I'm glad for that hardness. Because as I get out of the Audi and shoulder my cases and tripod, something tells me that maybe Sean is right to be worried about my nerves. I'm going in naked tonight, without benefit of anesthesia. And without the familiar chemical barrier that shields me from the sharp edges of reality, I feel more vulnerable to whatever it was that panicked me last time.

Walking down the dusky street lined with wrought-iron fences and second-floor galleries, I sense a human gaze on my skin. I stop and turn but see no one. Only a dog lifting its leg beside a lamppost. I scan the galleries overhead, but the heat has driven their owners inside. Christ. I feel as if I've been waiting all my thirty-one years to see the corpse in the house ahead of me. Or maybe it's been waiting for me. *Something* is waiting for me, that's for sure.

A crystal image rises into my mind as I resume walking, a sweating blue Dasani bottle with three inches of Grey Goose sloshing in its bottom, like meltwater from a divine glacier. If I had that, I could brazen my way through anything.

"You've done this a hundred times," I tell myself. "You did Bosnia when you were twenty-five and didn't know shit."

"Hey! You Dr. Ferry?"

A cop in uniform is calling to me from a high porch on my right. The victim's house. Arthur LeGendre lived in a large Victorian typical of the Garden District, but the vehicles parked in the cross street around the corner are more commonly found in the Desire and St. Thomas housing projects—the coroner's wagon, an ambulance, NOPD squad cars, and the FBI Suburban that carries the Bureau's forensic team. I see a couple of unmarked NOPD cars, too, one of them Sean's. Climbing the steps, I think I'm fine.

Ten feet inside, I know I'm in trouble.