

Book of Shadows
by
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Chapter One

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It was a vision of hell.

A dimly foggy day over stinking heaps of refuse - a city landfill, the current euphemism for an old-fashioned dump. Caterpillar trucks and front-loaders crouched with metal jaws gaping, like gigantic prehistoric insects on the mountains of trash, an appalling chaos of rotting vegetables, discarded appliances, filthy clothing, rusted cans, mildewed paper: the terribly random refuse of a consumer society gone mad. A lone office chair sat on the top of on one hill, empty and waiting, its black lines stark against the fog.

And below it, tangled in the trash like a broken doll, was the body of a girl.

Stiffened... naked... bloody stumps at her neck and wrist where her head and hand used to be.

Homicide detectives Adam Garrett and Carl Landauer stood on the trash hill: Garrett, with his Black Irish eyes and hair and temper, hard-muscled, impatient, edgy; and chain-smoking, whisky-drinking, donut-eating Landauer, a living, breathing amalgam of every cop cliché known to man: middle-aged spread, broad sweating face, and bawdy, cynical humor - a lifer who used the caricature as a disguise. The partners were silent, each taking in the totality of the scene. The landfill was a succession of hills and pits and carefully leveled ground; rutted roads wound up the hills to the fresh dumping mound on which they now stood. A strong, cold wind whipped at their coats and hair, swirling plastic carrier bags across the trash hills like ghost tumbleweeds and mercifully diffusing the stench. On a hot day the smell would have been beyond bearing.

On one side of the summit a forest stretched below, startlingly green and pure against the chaos of human waste. On the other side the city of Boston was a hazy outline, like a translucent Oz in the bluish fog. Far below, at ground level, were smaller hills of gravel, sand, broken chunks of concrete, logs and stumps, wood chips, various earthy colors of mulch, a black pile of tires. A corrugated tin roof sheltered an open-walled recycling center.

A row of BPD cruisers lined the dirt drive up to the landfill's main office trailer. The temporary command post had been set up beside the trailer, and two dozen mostly African-American and Latino workers huddled beside it, waiting to give statements to a couple of uniforms, while other patrolmen walked the periphery of the fence. A long line of city sanitation trucks was stalled at the front gate, being diverted by traffic control. The first responders had done their best to establish a perimeter, considering the crime

scene was a joke – how do you begin to process a mountain of refuse a hundred yards high?

Landauer looked over the reeking heaps of garbage, shook his head gloomily. “Shit.” He spit the word. “I don’t know if he’s the smartest perp I’ve ever seen or the dumbest.”

Garrett nodded, keeping his breathing even, trying not to suck in too deep a breath of the sulfurous stink. Smartest - because any trace evidence would be completely lost in the junk heap. Dumbest - because the unsub must have driven straight in past the office trailer and paid the attendant for the privilege of dumping his terrible cargo. Garrett lit a mental candle, half-thought something like a prayer. *Please let there be a record.*

The partners turned away from the dismal panorama and climbed over trash to where Medical Examiner George Edwards, a stocky Irish banty rooster of a man, stood looking down at the body. Seagulls circled sullenly high above, their breakfast taken from them.

Two crime scene techs were extracting and bagging one piece of garbage at a time from around the corpse, meticulously preserving as much evidence as possible in the hope that the refuse in which she lay might yield some personal connection to the killer. A videographer documented the original placement of each piece. All three technicians stood and moved back in solemn simultaneity so Garrett and Landauer could approach.

It was Saturday, which meant Garrett was the lead on the case. Department protocol was that partners alternated leads, but Garrett and Landauer had found through long experience that if they took regular days of the week and flipped for Sundays, it all evened out anyway. Garrett nodded to Dr. Edwards and crouched beside the body.

The girl was as stiff as a Barbie doll - still half-buried and splayed on her stomach; a handless arm, a curve of buttock, one leg visible in the bed of trash. Garrett’s face tightened as he stared down at the jagged red stump of the neck, the gleaming white nubs of cartilage, the black stream of ants swarming over the gaping wound. The gulls had also been at it. But there was shockingly little blood - none at all on the trash below the severed neck and very little congealed around the stump - a small blessing: the decapitation had occurred after she was dead.

Garrett pulled a micro-recorder from his suit coat pocket and clicked it on. “Killed elsewhere and dumped,” he said aloud. “Decapitation was post-mortem.” Above him, the M.E. grunted affirmation, before Garrett continued, “Head and hands probably removed to prevent identification.” It happened more often that anyone would want to think.

Garrett studied the visible arm and leg. Despite a fashionable slenderness and gym-enhanced muscle tone the girl’s limbs were rounded, and silky smooth – the heartbreaking plumpness of baby fat. Garrett felt hot and cold flashes of anger. He spoke aloud, biting off the words.

“Eighteen, nineteen years old. Twenty-five at the most, but I doubt it.”

Landauer shifted behind him grimly. “Yep.”

Garrett swallowed his fury and continued his visual inspection. He was fighting his assumptions, fighting to keep his mind clear. A naked girl on a trash heap – so often these miserable victims were prostitutes. Sex killers notoriously trolled highways and

rough neighborhoods for these easy, anonymous targets. But there was not that sense about this one.

Okay, why?

He looked her over, looking for the facts. He gently used a latex-gloved hand to lift a stiffened forearm. No track marks, no cuts or bruising, no ligature marks - although telltale abrasions might have been cut off with the hand. "No defensive marks, and it doesn't look like she was bound." *Someone she knew? Or just someone with the element of surprise?*

Garrett was about to set the arm down, then noticed a trail of six black dots along the partially exposed shoulder, about the diameter of a pencil eraser. Hard, smooth, shiny, irregular...

Scabs?

He used a fingernail to dislodge one of the drops and examined it on his thumb, held out the dot to Landauer, then Edwards. "Wax, I think."

"Black wax? Kinky." Landauer commented.

Garrett nodded to a tech, who crouched with an evidence bag to take samples of the dots.

Garrett turned his gaze to the exposed leg - not just smooth, but hairless - a salon wax, and fresh pedicure. The skin was healthy and blemish-free.

This was not a runaway, not a heroin addict, not a prostitute.

"Not a hooker," Garrett muttered.

"Not any I could afford," Landauer agreed.

Garrett stood, and the detectives watched as the techs resumed clearing the trash around the body like archeologists uncovering an ancient skeleton, painstakingly removing trash one piece at a time, placing beer bottles, fast food wrappers, orange rinds, a stained lampshade, into various sizes of labeled paper evidence bags. Garrett turned to the Medical Examiner.

"What do you say, Doc?"

"Livor mortis is fixed and she's in full rigor. I'll have to wait for the vitreous potassium tests to confirm, but given the temperature I'd put the time of death at no more than twelve to sixteen hours."

The techs cleared several more pieces of refuse to reveal her back. Between her shoulder blades there was a single stab wound, in the vicinity of the heart. The slit was narrow and practically bloodless.

"Could be the fatal wound." Edwards said, neutrally. The photographer clicked off photos.

Garrett's attention was suddenly drawn to the right arm, still mostly buried.

"Look at that." He crouched beside the body again, lifted a wet clump of coffee filter and grounds so the other men could see. The right hand was still attached to the right arm, intact.

The detectives looked at each other. "He takes the left hand but not the right?" Landauer said, perplexed. "S'the point of that?"

Garrett stood to let the techs back in. "Maybe he was interrupted. Didn't get to finish." But it sounded wrong as soon as he said it aloud.

With enough trash now removed from around her, the techs rolled the stiffened body onto its back.

“Holy shit.” Garrett heard Landauer breathe out behind him, as all the men stared down.

There were dark streaks of blood on her thighs, and the sight was a sick stab, though hardly unexpected.

The true shock was higher, in the pale flesh of the girl’s chest.

Someone had carved into the torso with a knife, cruel red slashes against the young skin – the number 333 and a strange design, three triangles with the points touching.

Looking down at the crude slashes, Garrett felt his stomach roil with apprehension, even as his investigative mind registered details. *No bleeding from the cuts; they were done post mortem.* So why the looseness in his bowels, the tightness in his scalp, the overwhelming impulse of fight or flight?

Landauer was speaking, the hoarseness in his voice hinting that he was struggling with a similar reaction. His eyes were fixed on the bloody carvings. “Is that supposed to be Satanic?”

Garrett found his own voice – tried to breathe through the constriction in his throat. “Or someone trying to make it look that way.”

“Three-three-three?” Landauer blustered, some of his panache returning. “The fuck is that? The Devil Lite? Satan can’t count? I say someone’s messin’ with us.”

Garrett stood slowly, an anvil in the pit of his stomach. It didn’t feel like a game. Not at all.

The three men, and the techs behind them, stood looking down at the girl’s corpse, puzzling over the design. The three triangles were maddeningly familiar, and ominous. Garrett was fighting a creeping dread, a feeling of imminent danger. All of the men had moved slightly back from the body. Garrett realized what he was thinking at the moment that the M.E. spoke it.

“Radiation,” Edwards said suddenly.

The three crime scene techs drew back, more noticeably this time.

“That’s it. The radiation symbol,” Landauer said, his voice thin.

“It’s not exactly, though. There’s something different about it. The fallout shelter symbol?” The M.E. frowned, thinking.

“Do you think she’s hot?” Landauer said. For once the morbid double entendre was completely unconscious. The wind gusted around them. All the men shifted slightly, uneasily.

“I don’t think so,” Garrett said, only half aware that he spoke. *The whole damn thing is weird enough already.*

“I doubt it,” Edwards agreed. “I’ll call HazMat, but I don’t see any burns or inflammation.”

Radiation or not, this was a bad one. And the acid feeling in Garrett’s gut told him it was going to get worse.

Chapter Two

The men split up to do other work until a Hazardous Materials team could arrive to take readings. The detectives left the crime scene techs behind to walk the grid, and unhappy uniforms to start the odious process of sorting through refuse looking for the missing head and hand. An exercise in futility, Garrett was sure, but it had to be done.

Landauer lumbered down toward the trailer set on blocks that served as the landfill's office to question the attendants, lighting up a Camel non-filter as he went.

Garrett shouldered the backpack he carried at crime scenes, filled with the bags and flags and miscellany of evidence gathering, and took off in the opposite direction, along the road, walking the curve the killer must have driven to access the dump site. The road was gutted and gouged, a bitch to drive even in a heavy truck. On one side there was only the flimsiest of fences between Garrett and a sheer drop to the valley below, thick with green trees. On the other side of the road, gripping the hill, was a wide shoulder of startlingly luxuriant weeds. There had been a full week of rain just days before and now ferns and grasses and golden black-eyed Susans and feathery white Queen Anne's Lace rippled in the wind, which still carried a surprising chill – a fall day with the underbite of winter.

Garrett shivered slightly, found he was wishing for a cigarette himself. The carvings in the body disturbed him. Ritualistic elements almost always meant multiple killings. And if he really analyzed his feelings about it, there was an unease that went deeper, back to childhood, to the huge and dark mysteries of the Masses that were an unquestioned part of childhood, the enforced service as an altar boy.

But along with the disquiet there was a thrill: the strong sense that this was a big case, huge, maybe the case that cops dream about, with all the mediagenic elements that made careers. Along with the shifting uncomfortable memories, he felt the stir of ambition.

He stopped at a turnout to look out over the entire dump, the consecutive hills of refuse. The property was circled in fencing, and patrolmen had already been all around the perimeter – nothing had been cut, making it likely that the killer had driven straight in through the gated entrance to dump her.

Why would he risk it? Why not dump her out in the forest somewhere?

He. Another assumption. But the chances of a woman doing this to another woman were microscopic.

Garrett took in the scene again, and couldn't help feeling that the unsub had chosen the setting deliberately, had reveled in the filth and chaos and ungodly waste; had sought the ugliness like a civilized person seeks beauty.

He turned back toward the road and was startled by movement in the sand right in front of him. A horned beetle the size of his kneecap was creeping across the road, shiny black carapace gleaming. Garrett felt a shudder of repulsion, moved sharply aside to avoid the thing.

As he circled the creature at a good distance, his eyes were drawn to a bare patch in the green shoulder beside him. He moved closer to the clump of weeds, staring over the small field.

There were irregular oval brown marks in the wild grass, the size of footprints. The wildflowers around the marks were shriveled and blackened, as if by fire. Through his initial confusion, Garrett thought immediately and oddly of the three triangles.

Could it really be? Radiation?

What in God's name would make footprints like that?

A feeling of dread rose up through him, from his legs through his groin and spine, up to the top of his head. The hair was standing up on his scalp and arms.

He gasped in, sucking breath, inhaling a rotten egg smell...

Sulfur

...then he wheeled in place, staring around him.

Nothing but piles of gravel and crushed concrete, tangled heaps of rebar. After a long moment he turned back to the dead flowers. He fumbled his digital camera from his backpack and snapped a few shots, then took a plastic evidence bag from a side pocket of the bag and broke off several of the burned flowers, slipping them into the plastic sheath. He stepped back and scanned the dirt road. It was criss-crossed with tire tracks, an amorphous mess, but he pulled a handful of colored flags from the pack and flagged the brown scorch marks in the grass, and the multiple tire marks in the sand of the road.

On his way back toward the body, he stopped a tech beside the parked crime scene unit van and pointed out the flags he'd placed. "Get impressions of the treads in that area. And there are some burn marks in the grass – get some photos of those, too."

Landauer met him on the road, his big face flushed red with heat despite the chill, and sucking smoke from probably his fifteenth Camel of the day. "See no evil, speak no evil," he grumbled, exhaling and jerking a thumb back down the road toward the office trailer. He lit a second cigarette from the one he had burning, carefully dropping the butt into a metal Band Aid box he carried around at crime scenes for that precise purpose. "These bozos don't record names or plates – just vehicle size and classification of load. 'Sanitation Truck, Pick-Up, Trailer, Truck, Dump Trailer.' 'Refuse, Stumps and Brush, Concrete, Rebar, Dirt/Asphalt, Brick.' The attendant doesn't even leave the trailer – just eyeballs the load through the window, weighs the truck on the in and out, and collects the cash. Next time I got a body to dump, I'm a comin' here too."

"How many customers today?"

Landauer grimaced. "They average 2250 a day."

Garrett's heart sank. "So this morning..."

"Over nine hundred by noon. Got a patrolman getting Closed Mouth Mary to write down every make, model and color she can remember, but we're not talking rocket scientist here. And yeah, she collected a few checks, but it's mostly a cash business. I don't think we'll be pulling devil-boy's name and coordinates off one of those stubs."

The big detective paused, puffed in smoke. “There is something, though.” He exhaled a noxious cloud and nodded up the trash mountain in the direction of the body. The sun was sinking in the sky, throwing long shadows over the hills. “That whole area was scheduled to be capped this morning – they bulldoze dumploads of dirt, cover it up, level it off.” He indicated a high heap of dirt on the flat road above the trash pit. “Thing is, this morning the front-loader broke down, threw the schedule off.” He pointed to the gigantic vehicle next to the pit.

“So she would have been completely covered if there hadn’t been that glitch,” Garrett said slowly. *She wasn’t meant to be found. And that meant carving the numbers and symbol was a private ritual, not meant for anyone else to see.*

“He’s familiar with the operation and schedule of this particular landfill, then,” he said aloud with cautious excitement. “A worker, or landscaper or contractor.”

“That’s the best case,” Landauer nodded. “The catch is, a lot of these loads that get emptied are from dumpsters that get picked up all over the city. Someone coulda just tossed her in the nearest one of those – it gets picked up - and she gets dumped out with the rest of the trash. The dumpster trucks back up to the pit and are emptied hydraulically – so the driver wouldn’t even see what he was dumping.”

Garrett fought a wave of disappointment. “What about the guy who found her?”

“Worker who came up to repair the dozer.”

Garrett’s eyes immediately traced the distance between the bulldozer and the body far below. *A hundred yards, minimum.* Landauer saw him calculating.

“Guy’s got good eyes,” Garrett said slowly.

“Says he saw seagulls fighting over something.” Landauer offered, his voice flat.

Garrett glanced at his partner sharply. “You don’t believe him?” In fact the gulls were still circling above, hoping to return to their interrupted meal.

Landauer spat. His face was neutral. “Guy’s skittish, that’s all.”

Garrett found the mechanic in the office trailer. He sat in front of a raggedy corkboard bristling with invoices and flyers, his hands tearing apart a Styrofoam coffee cup, a precise quarter-inch at a time. He was short and built like a bull, with dark copper skin and an Aztec nose. He hunched in the metal folding chair as if trying to disappear into it.

Garrett’s Spanish was serviceable, but the bilingual version of Severo’s story was identical to what Landauer had related in English. Landauer was right, though – the Mexican was decidedly jumpy – eyes shifting around the room, sweating profusely even in the cold of the underheated trailer.

“*Tienen calor?*” Garrett asked. *Are you hot?* The lone space heater was on the other side of the room; Garrett couldn’t feel any heat coming from it at all.

“*Poco,*” the mechanic said, and his eyes shifted away again. His fingers found the cross at his neck.

“*You seem nervous.*” Garrett remarked in Spanish.

The mechanic half-shrugged. “*It is a terrible thing,*” he answered.

“*It is,*” Garrett agreed. “*Una infamia.*” *An outrage.* It was one of the first Spanish words he’d learned on the street and it seemed to express what he felt better than any English word that existed.

“Pero – es todo?” Garrett pressed . *Is that all?* The mechanic dropped his eyes. Garrett looked at the litter of Styrofoam chips at the man’s feet. *“I think you are afraid.”* Garrett challenged .

The mechanic stiffened, but said nothing.

“Porque?” Garrett demanded. *Why?*

The mechanic glanced toward the screened front window, in the direction of the trash hill. The sun was a bloody crimson ball on the horizon.

“Bruja,” he mumbled, and Garrett’s flesh rippled again.

Witch.