

## SWEETHEART

### Chapter 1

Forest Park was pretty in the summer. Portland's ash sky was barely visible behind a canopy of aspens, hemlock, cedars, and maples that filtered the light to a shimmering pale green. A light breeze tickled the leaves. Morning glories and ivy crept up the mossy tree trunks and strangled the blackberry bushes and ferns, a mass of crawling vines that piled up waist-high on either side of the packed dirt path. The creek hummed and churned, birds chirped. It was all very lovely, very Walden, except for the corpse.

The woman had been dead a while. Her skull was exposed; her scalp had been pulled back, a tangle of red hair separated from the hairline by several inches. Animals had eaten her face, exposing her eyes and brain to the forces of putrefaction. Her nose was gone, revealing the triangular bony notch beneath it; her eye sockets were concave bowls of greasy, soap like fat. The flesh of her neck and ears was blistered and curdled, peeled back in strips to frame that horrible skull face, mouth open like a Halloween skeleton.

'Are you there?'

Archie turned his attention back to the cell phone he held against his ear. 'Yeah.'

'Want me to wait on dinner?'

He glanced down at the dead woman, his mind already working the case. Could be an OD. Could be murder. Could be she fell from the wheel well of a 747. Archie had seen that last one on an episode of Law & Order.

'I'm thinking no,' he said into the phone.

He could hear the familiar concern in Debbie's voice. He'd been doing well. He'd cut back on the pain pills, gained a little weight. But he and Debbie both knew it was all too tenuous. Mostly, he pretended. He pretended to live, to breathe, to work; he pretended he was going to be okay. It seemed to help the people he loved. And that was something. He could do that, at least, for them.

'Be sure you eat something,' she said with a sigh.

'I'll grab something with Henry.'

Archie flipped the phone shut and dropped it into his coat pocket. His fingers touched the brass pillbox that was also in his pocket, and lingered there for a moment.

It had been more than two and a half years since his ordeal. He'd only been off medical leave a few months. Long enough to catch his second serial killer. He was thinking of getting some business cards made up: serial killer apprehension specialist. Maybe something embossed. His head hurt and he reflexively moved to open the lid of the pillbox, then let his fingers drop and lifted his hand from his pocket and ran it through his hair. No. Not now.

He squatted next to Lorenzo Robbins, who sat on his heels inches from the body, his dreadlocks hidden under the hood of his white Tyvek suit. The smooth stones of the creek bed were slick with moss.

'That your wife?' Robbins asked.

Archie pulled a small notebook and a pen out of his other pocket. A flashbulb went off as a crime photographer took a picture behind them.

'My ex-wife.'

'You guys still close?'

Archie drew an outline of the woman in his notebook. Marked where the surrounding trees were, the creek below.

'We live together.'

'Oh.'

The flashbulb went off again.

'It's a long story,' Archie said, rubbing his eyes with one hand.

Robbins used a pair of forceps to lift the woman's loose scalp, so he could peer under it. When he did, dozens of black ants scurried out over her skull and into the decomposing tissue inside her nasal aperture.

'Dogs have been here.'

'Wild?' Archie asked, twisting around to look up at the thick surrounding forest. Forest Park was five thousand acres, the largest urban wilderness park in the country. Parts of it were remote; parts of it were crowded. The area where the body had been found was in the lower part of the park, which was frequented by a steady stream of joggers, hikers, and mountain bikers. Several houses were even visible up the hillside.

'Domestic probably,' Robbins said.

He turned and jabbed a latex-gloved thumb up the hillside.

'Way the body's down here behind the scrub, can't see it from the path. People come running through with their dogs off leash. Sparky scrambles down here, tears a hunk of cheek off the corpse.' He looked down at the corpse and shrugged. 'They think he's found a dead bird or whatever. Owner lets him sniff around a little. Then they run on.'

'You're saying she was eaten by pugs?'

'Over time. A few weeks.'

Archie shook his head. 'Nice.'

Robbins raised an eyebrow as he glanced back up at the path. 'Funny no one smelled anything.'

'There was a sewer leak,' Archie said. 'One of the houses at the top of the hill.'

The eyebrow shot up another few millimetres. 'For two weeks?'

Archie drew the hiking path across the page of his notebook. It was maybe forty feet above, at its closest point. Then it curved and headed farther up the hillside, deeper into the woods.

'People rationalize.'

'You thinking she was a prostitute?'

'Based on the shoes?'

She was still wearing one – an amber Lucite pump. The other they had found nestled in moss underneath a fern a few yards away.

'Maybe. Maybe she was a stylish thirteen-year-old. Hard to tell.'

Archie looked at the grinning mouth, the teeth straight and white against all the surrounding blood and gristle.

'She's got nice teeth.'

'Yeah,' Robbins agreed softly. 'She's got nice teeth.'

Archie watched as his partner, Henry Sobol, came slowly, tentatively, down the hillside. He was wearing black jeans, a black T-shirt, and a black leather jacket,

despite the heat. Henry kept his eyes down, lips pursed in concentration, arms outstretched for balance. With his arms extended and his shaved head, he looked like a circus strongman. He walked sideways, trying to step in Archie's footprints, but his feet were bigger than Archie's and each step sent a spit of dirt and small rocks rattling down the embankment.

Above them, on the hillside, Archie could see that everyone had stopped to watch, their faces anxious. A homeless man looking for a place to set up camp had found the body and called the police from a convenience store a few blocks outside the park.

He had met the first officer to respond and taken him to the site, where the officer had promptly lost his footing in the loose dirt and slid down the hillside into the creek, polluting the crime scene and nearly breaking his leg. They would have to wait for the autopsy results to even know if they had a homicide.

Henry reached the bottom, winked at Archie, and then turned and waved merrily up above. The cops at the top of the hill all turned back to their work taping the crime scene off, and keeping the growing group of sportily dressed hikers and joggers at bay.

Henry smoothed his salt-and-pepper moustache thoughtfully with a thumb and forefinger and rocked forward to examine the body, allowing himself a reflexive grimace. Then business.

'What killed her?' he asked.

Robbins placed a bag over one of her bloated, mottled hands and secured it with a twist-tie. He did it gingerly, as if she had nodded off and he didn't want to wake her. The fingers were curled, blistered, and swollen, and the nail beds were black, but the hand was still recognizable, though probably not printable. The other, which lay half buried in the earth and moss, was crawling with beetles.

'Search me,' Robbins said.

'She die here?' Henry asked.

'Hard to say until we know what killed her,' Robbins answered.

He gazed up at Henry. 'Do you wax your head or is it naturally that shiny?'

Archie smiled. Henry had called Robbins out at the police softball game that spring. It had been like this ever since.

'I was just asking,' Henry said to Robbins.

'Ask me after the autopsy,' Robbins muttered.

He produced another bag and gave it a snap in the air, and then gently lifted her other hand so he could slide it into the bag. The beetles scattered, and Henry took a small step back.

Archie wrote something in his notebook. It had been twelve years since they had stood over another dead girl in that park. That had set them on the trail of the Beauty Killer. They didn't know back then it would become a career. Or that Archie would become one of her victims.

A voice from up the hillside hollered, 'Hey.'

Henry looked up at the path, where Claire Masland was waving for them to come back up the hill. He put his hands on his hips.

'You've got to be kidding me,' he said to Archie.

Claire motioned again. This time she put her whole arm into it.

'I'll go first,' Archie said.

He glanced back at Henry and added, 'So when you fall you won't take us both down.'

'Ha, ha,' said Henry.

'What do you have?' Archie asked Claire when they reached the path.

Claire was small and angular with a very short haircut. She was wearing a striped T-shirt and jeans. Her gold shield was clipped to her waistband, along with a phone, a gun in a leather holster, and a pair of red plastic sunglasses jauntily hooked through a belt loop. She tilted her head at a young uniformed cop who was covered in dirt.

'This is Officer Bennett,' she said. 'The first responder.'

Bennett looked like a kid, tall with a baby face and a slight double chin that pressed fretfully against a skinny neck. He hunched his shoulders miserably.

'I'm so sorry,' he said.

'Show them,' Claire told Bennett.

He sighed glumly and turned around. He had taken a header down the ravine and his uniform was stained with muck, and tiny bits of vegetation still clung to his shirt. Both Henry and Archie leaned forward to get a better look.

Clinging to Bennett's shoulder blade, among the fern seeds, the moss particulate, and the dirt, was, unmistakably, a clue.

Henry looked at Archie.

'That would be a human hair,' he said.

'When you, uh, fell,' Archie asked Bennett, 'did you actually make contact with the body?'

Bennett's spine stiffened. 'Jesus no, sir. I swear.'

'Must have picked it up on the way down,' said Henry.

Archie pulled a slim black flashlight out of his pocket and shone it along the length of the red hair. He held it for Henry to look. There was a tiny clump of tissue at the base of the hair.

'It's got a scalp fragment on it,' Archie said.

Bennett whipped his head around, eyes wide. 'Get it off me,' he pleaded. 'Get it off me, okay?'

'Easy, son,' Henry said.

Claire, who was a good foot shorter than Bennett, reached up and plucked the hair off and dropped it in an evidence bag.

Archie called a crime scene tech over. 'Bag all his clothes. Socks, everything.'

'But what will I wear?' Bennett asked as the crime scene tech led him off.

Claire turned to Archie and Henry. The path they were on was about three feet wide, carved worryingly out of the hillside. The back foot of it had been taped off to let the fifty-year-old women by, so they didn't have to backtrack a mile into the woods and miss afternoon spa appointments. A chocolate Lab bounded through the foliage on the hillside as its owner, in cargo shorts, hiking books, and reflective sunglasses, walked past without even a second glance at the activity at the bottom of the glen.

'So?' Claire said.

'Head injury,' said Archie.

'Yep,' said Henry.

'Maybe she fell,' Claire theorized. 'Like T. J. Hooker, there. Hit her head on a rock.'

'Or maybe the rock hit her,' Henry said.

'Or,' Archie said, 'maybe Sparky scrambled down there and stuck his snout in our corpse, and the hair dropped off his tongue on his way back up the embankment.'  
Claire and Henry both looked at Archie.

'Sparky?' Henry said.

'That is so gross,' said Claire.