

Land of Careful Shadows

Chapter 1

It was the Day-Glo orange basketball sneakers that nearly got him killed. Adidas adizeroes with EVA midsoles. A hundred dollars on sale. You could have picked him up on a satellite transmitter as he swung his legs out of the open door of his black Escalade to untie the laces.

“Stop right there, sir.” The voice, full of sinew and muscle, didn’t fit the freckle-faced altar boy in the police raincoat before him. “Step out of the car slowly and put your hands on the roof of your vehicle.”

Jimmy Vega stopped untying the laces and pushed back his Yankees baseball cap. “Hey man, chill. I only pulled over because—”

“—Sir? Get out of the car and put your hands on the roof of your vehicle.”

It was the “sir” that got to him. The knife-thrust of the word. All that coiled aggression tricked out as politeness. And okay, maybe he looked suspicious in his dark hoodie, pulling up on the gravel shoulder of this wooded two-lane a few hundred yards from where the Lake Holly cops had just found a body. But did this rookie really think he’d put it there?

“Just give me a minute to change out of my sneakers.” Vega slid a hand toward his back pocket. “Hey, if it makes you feel any better—”

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That's when he heard the familiar rattle of plastic. A cheesy claptrap sound, totally out of sync with the smooth piece of hardware that produced it or the fresh-from-the-academy holster that cocooned it. Vega's hand shot out of his pocket like his jeans were on fire. The cop had his Glock nine millimeter pointed inches from Vega's chest.

"Out of the car! Now! Hands on your head!"

All the blood drained from Vega's extremities. His throat constricted. His bladder muscles developed amnesia. He was almost more embarrassed at the prospect of pissing his pants than at the prospect of getting shot. How odd that this little man-made contraption could so completely unmake a man.

He laced his fingers behind his head and willed his voice to stay calm by pretending he was still undercover, still behaving like somebody he wasn't.

"Okay, officer. Relax. I'm getting out of the car. My hands are locked behind my head." He stated the obvious because he felt he needed to, felt this guy needed all his senses relaying the same information if Vega was going to walk out of this in one piece. Stupid what runs through your head at a time like this. He hadn't finished his paperwork on last night's job. He had a lottery ticket in his wallet worth twenty dollars that he hadn't collected on yet. He was no more than half a mile from his daughter's house and she had no idea he was in Lake Holly, though maybe under these circumstances, it was best she didn't know.

He tried to sidestep a puddle but it ran the length of the driver's-side door. Cold, gritty water sloshed between his toes the moment his feet hit the ground. Rain slipped under the sleeves of his hoodie when he locked his hands behind his head. A few hundred feet east, a circus of emergency vehicles beat out a blood-red rhythm against the bare trees that stood in mute witness on either side of the road.

“So you don’t panic, I’ve got a nine millimeter in the waistband of my jeans. My badge and ID are in my back right pocket.” He supposed the rookie had already surmised the first part and never considered the possibility of the second or he wouldn’t be in this mess. Something burned slow and deep. He thought he was past the stage where people judged him by the color of his skin or the cast of his features. He thought his line of work insulated him from that. But now, spread-eagled across the Escalade, he wondered if all he’d really done was get better at navigating people’s prejudices. When he steered himself within the bounds of their assumptions, he managed to avoid the shoals and reefs that used to cut him so unexpectedly. When he didn’t—well, here was the result.

A vacuum cleaner of a voice suddenly boomed over his shoulder. “He isn’t that detective the county was supposed to send by any chance? Vega? James Vega?”

The young cop’s voice faltered, the testosterone wavering as it sank in. “I thought—he looked—he didn’t show me any ID—”

“—You wouldn’t give me five freakin’ minutes to change out of my sneakers,” hissed Vega. He felt safe enough to turn around and face the kid now. The cop’s eyes, so full of suspicion a minute ago, now looked wild with panic and bewilderment. Vega studied the wavy brown lines that ran along the sides of his orange high-tops and shook his head. Water squished out of the fabric when he shifted his feet.

“I’ll take my stuff back.”

The cop held out his gun, keys, and ID without meeting his gaze. Vega waited for an apology. It didn’t come. Not that it would have changed anything. But still.

“I’ll take it from here, Fitz.” The man with the vacuum cleaner voice casually stepped into view. He was a head taller than Vega, broad as a side of beef, with the put-upon look of a cop near retirement who felt he was not near

enough. He was dressed head-to-toe in white Tyvek coveralls that made him look like a giant marshmallow. He held out a fleshy hand.

“Detective Lou Greco, Lake Holly PD.” The detective dropped his chin and peered at Vega over the black rims of his glasses, beaded with rain. “I see you came dressed for the occasion.”

“I didn’t get the part that said ‘black tie.’” Vega shoved his badge and keys into his pockets and returned his gun to his waistband. “I was up all night doing a meet-and-greet between a couple of heroin dealers and a rookie undercover. I didn’t have time to change.” His skin still felt coated in sweat and nicotine.

Greco nodded to Vega’s sneakers. “You got another pair of shoes?”

“I was trying to switch into them when your local representative from the Aryan Brotherhood stopped me.”

“You should have been clearer that you were a cop. Fitzgerald sees a gun under your hoodie at a crime scene, he’s going to think the worst.”

“Not that he was profiling or anything.”

Greco ignored the dig. In his mind at least, the situation was already behind them when in fact Vega was just feeling the recoil. His fingers were only beginning to get back sensation. His bowels and bladder still felt temperamental. The back of his head throbbed as if he’d been cold-cocked. It would be hours before the flutter in his chest died away, weeks before the memory lost its primal hold on his senses. Still, what choice did he have except to move on? He had to work with these guys. He’d had to work with guys like Fitzgerald and Greco his whole career.

It might have been easier if being a cop had been a life-long ambition. But the truth was, it just happened. One minute, he was the reluctant holder of an accounting degree (his mother’s idea), planning for the day when he’d

chuck it all for the wide-open road and his steel-string guitar. The next, he was out of work and in debt with a baby on the way. The county was recruiting Spanish-speaking officers. Vega needed a steady job with medical benefits. So he traded in his six-string for a nine millimeter and told himself he was doing for his kid what his old man had never done for him. There were worse reasons to give up on your dreams.

He sat in the Escalade and peeled off his high-tops and socks, tossing them onto the floor of the passenger side where they immediately formed their own ecosystem. He shoved his bare feet into black leather work boots.

“You don’t have another pair of socks?”

“Nope.” He had a pair of white crime-scene coveralls and booties that would keep him dry enough, and a button-down shirt and pants for later. But he hadn’t anticipated his run-in with Fitzgerald.

“Gonna have blisters tomorrow,” said Greco.

“Better than bullet holes.”

“True.”

Vega suited up and followed Greco down a path slick with mossy rocks and acorns. Through the bare branches, Vega could see the tin-colored reservoir for which this town fifty miles north of New York City was named. Back when he was a boy, the only things you could find in Lake Holly were the fan-tailed sun perch you could catch with a cheap rod and a loaf of Wonder Bread, the snapping turtles that sunned themselves on the broad, weather-beaten rocks, and the flakes of shale that if you threw just right, you could skim halfway to Bud Point.

Now unfortunately, you could find much, much more.

She was lying in a soupy mix of dead leaves and branches that had gathered in a pocket along the shoreline. If not for the reams of yellow police tape strung like parade garland or the dozen or so officers milling about in white coveralls,

Vega might have assumed he was staring at an old picnic blanket. Its pattern, once distinct, was now brackish and covered in algae.

“Dog-walker called it in around o-seven-hundred this morning,” said Greco. “Female. Been in the water for at least a few weeks is my guess. No obvious trauma to the body.”

“You’ve ruled out drowning?”

“Duh. Give us townie cops *some* credit.” Greco snapped on a pair of blue latex gloves and squatted before the victim. He edged up one sleeve of her jacket. The underside of the material showed some sort of black-and-silver snowflake pattern. Beneath the sleeve, a frayed, algae-covered rope encircled her skeletal wrist.

“She’s got three more just like it—one on each limb. Don’t think it’s a fashion statement.”

“Any indications whether she was dead going into the water?”

“The medical examiner will have to rule on that. The ropes are pretty thick. Three-strand nylon. She was tied down to something. Whoever tied her wanted her to stay a spell.”

“Find any ID?”

“On her? Negative,” said Greco. “But we found a handbag about thirty feet up the hill with a photograph in a zippered pocket. Forensics is gonna have to figure out if it’s related, but I’ve got a feeling it’s her. She’s Hispanic, in case you’re wondering.”

“How can you tell?” A bumpy, gray-white film covered the victim’s face. Both eye sockets were empty. Only a long, thin tuft of black hair remained on the back of her head like some ancient Chinese scribe.

“We played Ricky Martin and she danced.”

“Better Ricky than Dean. I’d have tied the ropes myself.”

Greco grinned. Puerto Ricans versus Italians. Cops never tired of ethnic jokes.

Vega pulled on a pair of gloves and bent down to examine the victim. She was lying on her side; her body bloated to perhaps twice its normal size, yet her jaw had receded, exposing an overbite. Her clothes had begun to fall apart but the zipper on her jacket still worked. Vega opened it to reveal the remains of what appeared to be a pink buttoned-down polyester blouse over blue jeans. No jewelry, though that may have been stripped. Her ankles had decayed much faster than her sneakers. The contoured soles sported the brand name Reebok. Vega could still make out the red racing stripes along the sides.

“The sneakers made me think jogger when I first saw her,” said Greco. “We had that freak warm spell early last month. But the clothes are all wrong for it.”

Vega had to agree. He exercised in whatever old T-shirts and gym shorts happened to be lying around. But his ex-wife and teenage daughter seemed to have whole wardrobes devoted to getting sweaty and none of it looked like this.

Vega shielded his eyes from the rain and searched out a thirty-foot overhang on the far side of the lake. The steady April drizzle had turned the rock face black.

“Guess it’s safe to say, given the time of year and the ropes on her limbs, she didn’t Bud out, either.”

“You know about Bud Point?” asked Greco.

“Jumped off it, actually. At seventeen.” After a few cold ones, if you hit the water just right, you became a legend. If not, you became a statistic.

Greco’s jaw set to one side. “So were you suicidal, shit-faced—or just plain stupid?”

“I did it to impress a girl. Though I think I inspired more pity than awe that night.”

Vega could still see himself at the edge of that cliff, his hair in an embarrassing mullet, dressed in discount-store

jeans his mother—the only parent at his school with an accent—bought in one of her many excursions back to their old neighborhood in the Bronx. He didn't fit in at Lake Holly High. Not with all those fair-haired kids in Top-Siders and polo shirts. So he decided to stand out in some way he'd chosen, some way that wasn't thrust on him without his consent. When that girl batted her blond lashes and told him she didn't think he was brave enough to jump, he proved her wrong. If adolescence were a permanent state, the species would die out.

Greco wiped the rain off his glasses slowly and deliberately. Vega felt the grind of gears as he did the math. "I thought the closest this town got to Hispanic culture back then was watching reruns of *I Love Lucy*."

"I guess we were what you'd call, 'the tokens.'"

"Different place now, that's for sure. Whole town's crawling with 'em."

"Them?"

"I'm talking illegals, Vega. Not *your* people."

He said it the way Anglos often did—like there was a chasm of difference between the two groups when to Vega, the distinctions sometimes felt as porous as the paper that divided them. Maybe that's why the words stung so much. The acid couldn't help but leak through.

"Come on, Vega. Don't get all PC on me. You drove through town this morning. You had to have seen them."

He saw them. Of course he saw them. They were huddled in groups in front of the Laundromat and under the deli awning where Vega went to fetch his coffee. Their eyes were wary beneath the soaked brims of their baseball caps. Their shoulders were hunched, whether from rain or cold or fear, he didn't know. He felt their collective intake of breath when he walked by, the way their adrenaline seemed to hitch up a notch and their voices turned soft as prayers. They were like soldiers in a war zone, bracing for everything and nothing, all in the same instant.

“Are we discussing the latest census figures? Or does this conversation have a point?”

“Got something you should take a look at on the hill.”

Greco led Vega up an embankment slick with mud. On the other side of a downed tree, two county crime-scene techs Vega knew were on their hands and knees, poking around a thicket of thorny barberry bushes. Greco picked up an evidence pouch beside one of them and handed it to Vega. It contained a red shoulder bag with two buckles across identical outer pockets. The vinyl had flaked off in places, exposing a whitish backing beneath.

“You haven’t found a wallet, I take it?”

“No wallet, driver’s license, cash, or ID,” said Greco.

“Sounds like a robbery.”

“Could be. The photograph was zipped into a small pocket. I don’t think the person who tossed the bag even knew it was there.”

Greco handed Vega another evidence bag containing the snapshot. A square-shouldered young woman with almond-shaped eyes was sitting on a sagging beige couch with an infant girl on her lap. Both the woman and child appeared to be Hispanic. The resolution was fuzzier than Vega would have liked, as if the woman had been bouncing the child on her knee when the photographer snapped the picture. Still, Vega could make out enough details that he would have been able to identify the woman if he’d known her. Her smile revealed two prominent front teeth that were slightly bucked. Around her neck, she wore a silver-colored crucifix with tiny bird wings dangling beneath each of Christ’s bound arms.

“Never saw a crucifix with wings on it before,” said Greco.

Vega thought about his own much simpler crucifix that his mother had given him when he got confirmed at Our Lady of Sorrows. He’d stopped wearing it after he married Wendy. Not that she’d asked him to. It just seemed hypo-

critical to pretend to a faith he had no connection to anymore. Looking at this photograph, however, he felt a sudden urge to dig that crucifix out of his dresser drawer and wear it, if only for the joy it would bring his mother.

But it wouldn't. Not anymore. Funny what you remember and what you can make yourself forget.

"If the crucifix doesn't turn up in the lake, we should check the state pawn registry," said Vega. "It's distinctive enough that we might get a hit if someone tries to hock it."

"We'll have better luck tracing the crucifix than we will tracing the kid," said Greco. "Even if the photograph's only a few months old, she'll be tough to identify."

The little girl in the photo had to be no more than about five or six months old. From the tender, possessive way the young woman held the child and the comfortable ease of the baby, Vega felt certain he was staring at a mother and daughter. The little girl was wearing a bright red velvet dress with silk white bows across the front. Her crown of shiny black hair was carefully combed and held back from her face by a headband with an enormous red bow. Gold posts glimmered from her earlobes. She gave the photographer an unfocused smile that could have been the result of familiarity, or the bouncing gyrations of her mother. The red velvet dress made Vega think the picture was taken around Christmas. He flipped the bag over to look for any markings on the photo.

"No date? No names? Nothing? This could have been taken anywhere."

"You got it," said Greco.

"At any time."

"Yep."

The baby could be a year old by now. Or she could be twenty. In the lake, two scuba divers bobbed and dove like overfed seals, looking for something no one wanted to find. If the woman in the photograph was the corpse on the shore, where was the baby?

“That’s not the worst,” said Greco. “There’s one thing more.” He picked up a third evidence bag and handed it to Vega. Inside was a single sheet of loose-leaf notebook paper that was beginning to disintegrate.

“This was found inside the main zippered compartment.”

Vega brushed the rain off the bag and looked down at the handwriting. The words were printed in capital letters using black ballpoint ink that had blurred slightly from dampness and exposure to the elements. But the words—in English—were still easy enough to read:

*GO BACK TO YOUR COUNTRY. YOU DON'T
BELONG HERE.*

“Shit,” said Vega.

“Shit is right. Walk with me,” said Greco, handing the bagged envelope back to the techs. “We need to talk.”

They walked in silence, their boots kicking up the slick leaves underfoot. Vega tugged the drawstring tighter around the hood of his coveralls to seal out the rain and fought the limp that was coming on from the blisters that were blooming, large and watery, at the back of each ankle. Voices and sounds came at him from every direction. He could hear the whoosh of water as divers broke the surface. He heard the rustle of a body bag being loaded and zipped by the lake. He listened to the static of walkie-talkies from different police agencies drowning each other out until even the occasional moment of radio silence seemed punctuated with feedback.

Greco removed his latex gloves, one inside the other, and shoved them into a bag. From a pants pocket beneath his coveralls, he produced a package of red licorice Twizzlers and held them out to Vega. Vega declined. Greco took one and shrugged.

“Used to smoke.” The detective looked down at his gut. “Sometimes I think smoking was better for my health.”

He yanked a piece of red licorice off with his teeth and stared out at the lake. The edges were indistinct this time of year. Runoff from the winter snows swelled the shore, drowning small saplings and birches that would normally rest on solid ground. Mud compressed around their heels, tugging at them like an insistent beggar. Above, a canopy of bare branches laced a lint-colored sky.

“Both our agencies need to sit on that letter,” Greco said finally. “Far as I’m concerned, we’re best off not calling this a homicide until we get a suspect. It’d be like putting a torch to gasoline, if you know what I’m saying.”

“Because of Dawn and Katie Shipley,” said Vega. It wasn’t even a question. Everyone in the county knew about the mother and her four-year-old daughter who were struck and killed in Lake Holly on Valentine’s Day by an illegal alien driving drunk without a license. For weeks now, there had been rallies and angry editorials in the local newspaper calling for more stringent laws against illegal aliens—though not, Vega noted curiously, for stricter penalties against drunk drivers, as if the man’s immigration status was what killed the mother and child rather than his intoxication.

“They just set a court date for Lopez this week,” said Greco. “It’ll be months before he’s tried—on the taxpayers’ dime, no less. Who knows if they’ll even deport him after he’s served his sentence? Probably depends on who’s hanging curtains in the White House.”

“So I guess we’ll blanket the media with that photo and hold back the rest.”

“Yeah. If the press asks what happened to this chick, we’ll just tell ’em it’s under investigation.”

“She’s a mother,” said Vega softly.

“Huh?”

“The woman. In the photograph. She’s a mother. Same

as Dawn Shipley.” *Same as my mother*, Vega wanted to say. But he refused to offer up any more of his grief to police indifference.

“Yeah, okay, she’s a mother. Whatever. I’m just saying we’re best off doing this slowly and quietly, without all the ruckus you know will take place if we make this public.”

“What about the baby?”

Greco surveyed the lake where the divers continued their grim search mission. One of them suddenly broke the surface, holding something over his head. It was a Velcro-strapped sneaker. Toddler-sized. The white leather had turned dark green from the water but Vega thought he could make out the round cartoon face and punchbowl haircut of Dora the Explorer on the side. Suddenly, everyone got a little quieter.

Greco cursed so softly, it sounded like a prayer. He swallowed the rest of his Twizzler and wiped a sticky hand down the side of his coveralls. Even the radios went silent. Vega saw one of the officers near the shore make the sign of the cross. Greco did the same. Vega kept his hands at his sides.

And he tried, as always, not to think about Desiree.