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by Carolyn Arnold



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SILENT GRAVES

**CAROLYN
ARNOLD**



Excerpt from *Silent Graves* (Book 2 in the Brandon Fisher FBI series)
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PROLOGUE

“THE GRAVES LAY SILENT. The graves lay untouched. The graves lay silent. The graves lay untouched.”

He tapped his hand against his thigh as he repeated the chant. He had done everything right. He had made sure not to leave anything behind and had chosen only those who deserved to suffer and die.

The way they'd tilt their heads back in laughter, flaunting what wasn't theirs to own, draining their cocktails as if there was no tomorrow. No risk. Nothing to lose.

CHAPTER 1

PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY, VIRGINIA
SEPTEMBER

HE HAD PROMISED HER A time she'd never forget. It was why she sacrificed comfort and drove in her stuffy BMW into the countryside. The weather had such nerve to reach record heat waves in September. It scorched as if it were the middle of summer.

She glimpsed in the rearview mirror, angling it to better see her reflection.

"A woman has been reported missing..."

Those few words from the radio made it through to her ears. That was top news? Surely, there was a murder, or a stock market drop to report.

"...it's suspected that she may be the victim of foul play. Police are urging women of the Washington, DC area to be careful."

She laughed. *Be careful.*

A song came on, one she didn't care for, and she commanded the radio off.

She had never been where he had directed her to go, but she was excited to see this Wooded Retreat. Usually, they'd meet up at her house or the Marriott, but he had wanted today to be special—personal.

She had long given up on feeling guilty about her marriage. Her husband was too busy with his prestigious law firm in central Washington. Really, it was his work that killed their marriage—his love for revenue his priority.

Her focus returned to the road and where she was headed. She

wasn't used to the country with all its color. She was accustomed to the shades of gray that were intrinsic to life in the city. Maybe there was something to be said for the simple things. She lowered the window and breathed deeply, ready to give the rustic experience a chance.

The air was fresh, despite the humidity, carrying with it the smell of greenery—but there was something else. She inhaled deeper, coughed, and raised the window back up. Damn blasted cows that polluted nature with their stench.

Why would he think she'd be in the mood once she got there?

The thought barely formed, and she had the answer. He was a fabulous lover. Thinking of his hands caressing her skin sent shivers through her and made her lower abdomen quiver.

She turned left when she noticed the rundown diner he had mentioned to her.

The gravel crunched beneath her tires as she went from the highway's asphalt to an unpaved surface. The strip was narrow, barely wide enough to accommodate two cars if one came in the opposite direction. She studied the edge, anticipating the need to do just that. The soft shoulder appeared unforgiving as if it would suck in her car given a chance.

Fifteen miles.

She found it hard to believe this stretch would continue that long. Her eyes went to the woods, being cautious, watching for any deer or other animal that may decide to become a hood ornament. She checked her side mirror. All the dust being kicked up would wreak havoc on the wax job.

So much for showing up looking perfect.

She glanced in the mirror again and touched her fingertips to her forehead. She couldn't let him see her like this.

Driving with one hand, she reached into her designer handbag on the passenger seat and pulled out her compact. She lifted the loaded brush and the air conditioning vent cascaded powder through the air. She blew to keep it from landing on her cream-colored pantsuit and began application. The scent of the powder made her sneeze.

As she reached for control of the wheel, the case dumped on the floor, going straight through her legs, barely missing her pants.

She slammed on the brakes. The mailbox he had told her to watch for, once a bright red, had worn from time. She almost missed the turn.

She couldn't see the house from the road, but her heart beat rapidly now, anticipating what awaited her.

She fished into her bag again, this time for her gloss. She smeared some on with a finger, smacked her lips, looked in the mirror, and declared herself perfect. She was ready to go to bed with her lover.

CHAPTER 2

WOODBRIDGE, VIRGINIA
SEPTEMBER, TUESDAY MORNING

A COUPLE MONTHS HAD PASSED, but I was still getting used to sleeping alone. Most mornings I would roll on my left side, open my eyes, and expect Deb to be lying there. Every time I did this, it met with the same result. I was alone.

The mornings were hard to take. At night, my mind was usually preoccupied with the day's events, a current case, or the complicated relationship that existed between Paige and me. We had just closed a case a few days ago, and it was easier to let go of that than the continuing innuendos that remained, as fissures, beneath the surface of our relationship. I loved her, in a way, but not on the level she required. She acted as if everything was fine, but I knew—I sensed—it wasn't.

I rolled over and faced the clock. Five a.m.

I returned to my back and stared at the ceiling. It was hard adapting to the early mornings, but these days I usually beat the alarm. Even on days off, my body would wake me.

AC/DC's *Thunderstruck* came on, and, at the same time, my cell vibrated on the nightstand. I rolled over again and sat up. It wasn't like I would be getting more sleep anyhow.

"Rise and shine, Kid."

I rubbed a hand across my brow. Even though I had earned being called by name from Supervisory Special Agent Jack Harper, periodically old habits would resurface and, with it, the nicknames. "What's up?"

“What’s up? Am I some friend now? I’m your boss.”

“I’ll save professional for office hours,” I said the sardonic statement with a grin I’m sure he didn’t miss. In this career, there was no such thing as set hours.

“Come in straight to the meeting room today. We’ve got a new case.”

“Sure.”

“What’s that noise in the background? Have you been partying all night?”

I hit the button and turned it off. “It’s AC/DC, classic rock.”

“Well, it’s not music. Music is—”

“I know—The Rat Pack, Natalie Cole, Michael Bubl .”

“Don’t knock it, Kid, and there’s nothing wrong with Michael.”

Yeah, I suppose if you’re good with the crooner music in the first place.

“See you soon,” I said.

“Don’t be late.”

I rolled my eyes, wishing the expression weren’t lost on the walls of my bedroom, yet thankful he couldn’t witness it, or I might be searching for a new job.

I rose from the bed and flicked on the stereo, turning up Nickelback’s *Burn it to the Ground* until the glass in this old house rattled. I loved this song, and loud was the way I preferred it.

I had an hour to make it to the office. I wrapped my hands and wrists with tape, and then started beating on the heavy bag I had installed in the bedroom. Deb never would have let it happen, but I didn’t have her to worry about anymore.

With each impact, I let it go—the stress, the anger, the frustration, the lack of control. The physical movement drained the negative and infused me with the positive.

Adrenaline pumped through me, and I embraced it, as I roundhouse kicked the bag. It swung on its chains. I reset the bag and had at it again.

The song changed to the next on the playlist—Poison’s *Nothing But a Good Time*.

Damn. Now this was music.

I uppercut and jabbed at the bag mercilessly, going at it as if sucking its life force.

Thirty minutes later, sweating profusely, I headed for the shower. There was no better way to start the day. In a matter of minutes, I'd be facing the next monster to cross paths with the FBI.

I SMILED AS I ENTERED the meeting room just on time. How could one get any more punctual than that?

"You're late, Fisher." Jack was sitting at the table with the rest of the team.

"It's Pending, boss. He probably forgot to set the alarm." Zachery lifted a steaming take-out cup to his mouth, cutting his smirk short. Whenever he could poke at my probationary period with the nickname, he would.

"He even got a wake-up call," Jack mumbled.

"Brandon," Paige said. Her red hair hung in loose curls, serving as a soft frame for her face, but her eyes were cool.

I took all of them in, not sure how they did it. They were there, not just on time, but early. They were all alert, despite the caffeine they clung to as if their lives depended on it.

"Sit. We don't have all day." Jack patted his shirt pocket where he kept his cigarettes. He had probably already smoked a few since waking up.

"Hey." Nadia came up behind me and tapped me on the back as she walked by.

"Hey." I took a seat.

The screen was filled with faces of various women. On the left side, was their smiling before photos. On the right, was the aftermath—their remains, part flesh, part bones.

Nadia clicked the remote she held, and the screen filled with a picture of one woman. She was beautiful, with long dark hair and brown eyes. Nothing, in particular, stood out about her.

"Her name is Amy Rogers. Her husband is Kirk Rogers."

"Hmm."

I knew what Jack was thinking—money bought results. We were in the Behavioral Analysis Unit to stop serial crime, not for

a single abduction. Why weren't the police handling this case?

"He owns the communications company Trinity," I said.

Nadia acknowledged me with a bob of her head. "That would be correct Brandon, but the man has lawyers, and he paid people to do some snooping around. They found out that a bunch of women have gone missing in the area over the past decade. He also has a tight friendship with the chief of police down in Washington. He had him call us in."

"So, we're looking for Amy Rogers? No real concern for the other missing women?" I knew I was being cynical, but the power of a buck, the control and sway it held, sickened me at the best of times.

"We're investigating this case because this is the one we've been assigned." Jack intensified the reprimand with a hardened facial expression.

"I'm not saying anything contrary to that. It's just--"

"I know what you're saying, Brandon. We have a chance to find Amy Rogers before it is too late. To accomplish that, a good place to start is investigating the older cases," Paige said.

I let what she said go. I didn't need another parental surrogate on the team. I already had a father figure in Jack. I addressed Nadia. "Who were these women you had on the screen when I came in?"

"Their naked bodies were found in ditches along I-95 between Lorton and a little west of Dumfries."

"No jewelry or anything?" Zachery asked.

"No."

"I-95 is a major highway, but it's not a huge stretch. What—twenty minutes," Paige offered. "It's likely someone from the area."

"How many women and how long ago do these bodies date back to?" Zachery asked Nadia.

"The oldest dates back to nineteen seventy. Her name was Melanie Chase. She was discovered along I-95 near Woodbridge by the Levine family who was on a road trip. The youngest, age three, had to go to the washroom. There were no rest stops for a

distance so the father pulled over for the kid to go, and they got more than a number one.”

Woodbridge? That is where I live. “How was she killed?”

“The ME ruled the cause of death as being pulmonary edema.”

“Fluid in the lungs.” Everyone gave me the once-over as if to say, *yes, that would be pulmonary edema*. “What about the other victims?”

“Another died of a severe stroke while yet another of a brain hemorrhage. These three old cases, the thirty missing women from Prince William County—”

“Thirty?”

Nadia nodded. “Yeah, that has our interest too, and that’s thirty missing women in the last six years. Seems Amy Rogers wasn’t the only target.”

Zachery quickly compiled the math. “On average, that’s one woman every two months.”

“Holy crap.” The words left my lips without thought, and everyone’s attention was on me again. “What more do we know?”

“These three women were married, as is Amy Rogers. None of these women had children either. All were reported by their husbands. All of them were taken from Washington or PW County. It’s too coincidental to ignore.”

“I agree,” Paige said.

Nadia turned to the screen, magnifying on their wrists and ankles. “The three women that were found all had these same markings. It appears the killer had bound them all with linked chain.”

“I see there are different nationalities among the victimology.” Zachery bobbed his head toward the screen.

“Yes, the only similarities are what I mentioned—married, no kids. Among the law enforcement community, by the time the third victim was found, he had earned the moniker The Silent Killer.”

“And here, I thought that was cancer,” I said implicating Jack’s smokes.

Nadia continued as if I hadn’t said anything. “Based on

forensic evidence, these women were aware they were going to die but couldn't do anything about it." Nadia's face paled and she swallowed heavily.

"Ketamine?" Zachery lifted his cup but didn't press it to his lips.

"Actually, there wasn't any trace of that in their systems."

"Possibly something herbal then that would inhibit their ability to move and then leave the system quickly."

"If they figured one person was responsible for the death of these three women, why not call in the FBI?" I asked.

"They did, but the case was never taken on. The killer went silent, no pun intended, and there didn't seem to be any threat."

"We're thinking this guy's back and could have Amy Rogers?"

"That's exactly what we're thinking."

CHAPTER 3

THE NIGHT BEFORE...

DUMFRIES, VIRGINIA

MONDAY EVENING, 7:30 P.M.

THE NEWS WAS PUBLIC NOW. Another woman's life summed up in the media—missing. Trent Stenson wished he could discredit it as something menial. He was surprised it was worthy of the news, and the reason was likely because she was the wife of some rich businessman—Kirk Rogers of Trinity Communications—and he was worth millions. According to the newspapers, Rogers even got the FBI involved.

His superiors made Trent feel that his contributions held little value. He had the official training and three years on the job, but he didn't rank and was kept under the label of officer. There wasn't much room for advancement within Dumfries PD, but he could always move up to captain. That was the only downfall about a smaller department. People typically retired before they were replaced. It had him considering a move over to Prince William County PD where they had about six hundred officers to Dumfries eleven. PWPD also got involved with the complex crimes—where he saw himself.

He already had a friend there too. Lenny Hanes, a detective from the Violent Crimes Bureau. They even had beers on occasion. Trent hoped that Hanes would put in a good word and help him transfer and advance, but things hadn't worked out that way yet. For the most part, shit floats to the top. At least, that's how some disgruntled cops saw things.

But none of this stopped Trent from doing the job. In fact, he was determined to excel. He subscribed to the advice “anything worth doing is worth doing well.”

Amy Rogers wasn't the only missing wife who graced the missing persons database from the area. There had been many others before her. He suspected more would follow.

He looked beyond the front desk, and out the glass doors to the parking lot. It was a quiet night. The PWRD communications center had dispatched only a couple domestic calls and one drunk and disorderly at a local bar. Officer Becky Tulson had that covered.

Yes, it was the perfect time. Management had left for the evening—it was up for debate who benefited the most from their absence. He loved being left alone to do his digging, and these missing women had his attention.

He logged onto the missing persons database and searched the area for women ages twenty-two to thirty. It didn't seem race mattered so he let that parameter go. He searched Prince William County and surrounding areas as far as Washington on the south side.

Thirty faces came on screen. He searched for new ones. He had the others memorized and categorized in his mind—and in his filing cabinet at home. If his sarge found out about the latter, he could lose his badge, but it was worth the risk if it meant bringing even one woman home.

Most of their faces were familiar to him. He scoured this information every day, sometimes more than once day. It had become not a fascination, but an obsession.

Who would take these women? How did the husbands lose track of their wives?

Not that Trent had any experience being married. He was only twenty-four and preferred to hold onto his single lifestyle as long as he could. He didn't need a woman telling him how to live his life.

He dropped forward and cupped his forehead in the palm of a hand for a few seconds. His bangs brushed the back of his hand.

Silly how, at a time like this, he thought of his mother and how she preferred his hair cut above his collar. He let it grow out, only trimming its length periodically. The women he took to bed liked to run their fingers through his hair.

The door opened, and a woman in her late sixties walked in. Her blue eyes stood out in stark contrast to her pale face and gray hair. Tears had dampened her cheeks.

“I should have called it in. I shouldn’t have driven all the way here.” She shook her head, and tremors ran through her body as if she fought off a chill.

Trent rounded the desk. “Ma’am. Slow down. You’re safe now.”

The radio crackled to life, and Officer Tulson confirmed she was returning to the station.

“Sorry about the interruption. Ma’am?”

In the time he listened to the transmission, the woman had collapsed to the floor. She sat there with her knees tucked into her chest.

“Ma’am. I’ll call you an ambulance. You’ll be fine.”

She reached for his hand and tugged on it. “There’s no time.” Her eyes seeped fresh tears. “It’s there...I found it. I should have called.”

Trent agreed with her assessment that she should have stayed put at home and called it in, but he didn’t verbalize this. “It’s okay. You said, ‘it’s there’ ma’am? It what?”

She nodded, slowly. Her eyes reached into Trent’s. Her body heaved with another bout of crying. Her hand covered her mouth, her eyes pinched shut, and her head burrowed to her knees.

Oh, he thought, please don’t be another crazy.

“Ma’am, I can help you, but only if you talk to me. Let me help you off the floor.” He held out a hand to her, and she took hold. He helped raise her up, but when she reached about halfway, her legs faltered.

“You have a face like my grandson.”

He pulled up on her, attempting to straighten her out—this time assuming most of the responsibility against gravity. He feared that, if he let go, she’d crumple back to the floor.

“I could go home and pretend I never saw a thing. I’ll shut my eyes, and the body will be gone.”

The body?

Morbid excitement pulsed in his veins.

A homicide case—in his lap? Maybe this was the break he was waiting for?

He reined in his emotions which were balanced quickly by the realization that this *body* was once a human being, or at least he hoped so, although, even that thought sounded wrong to him. He didn’t need a crazy making a fool of him. If he took her seriously and an investigation revealed nothing more than a decomposing cow on a riverbank, or even worse, thin air, he’d never make detective.

He considered the empty station. If anyone came in, no one would be at the front desk. “Excuse me. One minute.” He spoke into his radio. “Officer Tulson, what is your ETA?”

“Tulson here. Pulling in now.”

“Roger that.” He turned back to the woman. “We’ll just wait for Officer Tulson and we’ll make out a report.”

The woman nodded. She understood. Good. She had some wits about her.

He studied her in those few seconds. Her eyes, although moist, were cognitive. There was awareness behind them. Her pupils followed his as he took in her face. They were not dilated or pinpricks. She wasn’t on medication.

“Honey, I’m home.” Becky walked in the front door, her steps coming to a standstill when she saw the woman.

He went over to Becky.

In the limited space of the station, her sexual pheromones sparked making it impossible for any man in her vicinity to ignore them. She had a uniquely shaped face, and, when paired with her confidence, it made her beautiful.

“I need you to watch the front for a bit.”

“Sure.”

The way Becky’s gaze pierced his eyes, he wondered if she read his thoughts. Then she smiled, but only a partial display.

The light in her eyes completed the expression.

Trent led the older woman to a conference room, thankful his sergeant wasn't there to take over. If he got in over his head, though, he had someone he could call—Hanes—but he'd reserve that as a final option. Technically, he should have driven her to PYPD, but why squander this opportunity?

"Would you like some water?" he asked.

She was already seated at the table. "Yes, please."

He poured a glass and sat beside her. "My name is Trent Stenson." He dropped the officer part, not because he lacked pride in his position, but what did it matter in here? If he wanted her to relax and feel like an equal, he needed to level the playing field. "And you are?"

"Audrey Phillips."

Holding a pen in his hand, he fidgeted with the pad in front of him. He would rather listen to her recollection of the situation and then make notes, but he had to follow things by the book if he would ever rank. He wrote her name on the form.

"Now, you said you found a body?"

Her face paled further, eyes blank and distant. She nodded.

"This was a human body, I assume."

Seconds had passed before she answered. "Yes."

This would take a long time if all he received were simple answers, direct, concise, and to the point. "Continue." His pen was poised, eager to spread some ink on the page.

"Most of her..." Shivers jerked her shoulders upward and her head twitched. "Most of her was a skeleton, but her face, her hair, it was there. And she was...gray. Is that normal?"

Excitement laced through his insides. Could this be one of the missing women?

"Where did you find her?"

"Out back. On my property." She gave him the full address and waited while he took down the details. "She was in the field. Just... just lying there." She covered her mouth with a hand, lowering it a second later. "We had flooding, but it's receded now. Do you think she came up in the river?"

It was too early to offer an opinion, and they needed men out on the scene. The longer the body remained exposed to the elements, the more contaminated it would become.

“How old do you think she was?”

She lifted her shoulder and nudged it against an ear. “Thirties. I took this.” She pulled out a plastic sandwich bag and extended it to him. Inside was a gold band.

He wanted to scream, *you touched the body*, but, instead, countered with, “She was a married woman?”

Audrey nodded.

He took the bag and pinched the ring between his fingers. Saying those words out loud caused images from the missing persons database to play through his mind as if on fast forward.

Could it be her?

He studied the ring and got the burning sensation in his gut, the one that contracted it into an acidic raisin. “Can you excuse me for a minute?”

“Yes, of course.” Her brows sagged, and the corner of her mouth twitched as if she were confused by his rush to leave the room.

“I will be back. We need to get some officers over to your place.”

His heart beat fast, the pressure in his gut not easing up, instead, intensifying. He pulled out his cell and dialed. “Len... you’re at home... this is important. You know all those cases we’ve been talking about? How I think they’re all connected somehow? Well, now we have a body.”

DETECTIVE LENNY HANES STOOD IN the doorway of his kitchen. He watched his wife cleaning up the dinner dishes and loading what would fit into the dishwasher. Nicole and Brett, both under eight years of age, had been put to bed not long before. Lenny hoped the ringing phone hadn’t wakened them.

“You’re sure this is her?” he asked into the receiver.

His wife looked at him and he mouthed the words, *it’s a case*.

“When isn’t it?” She closed the dishwasher door and started the cycle, leaving him in the kitchen but kissing his cheek on the way by. “See you in the morning?”

Lenny made a sad face. He held her hand until it filtered out of his, keeping his eye on her until she disappeared up the staircase.

“The ring. It matches, I swear to you.” Trent sounded out of breath.

“And she took the ring off the woman’s finger?”

“Off Nina’s finger? Yes.”

“Before you get all caught up on—”

“I swear to you, it is. The engraving on the band matches the one noted in the missing persons database and there’s—”

“There’s what?”

“Audrey Phillips, who found the body and took the ring, she took some of the flesh with it.”

Bile hurled up Lenny’s esophagus. He swallowed—roughly. “What is wrong with some people?” His stomach tightened, compressing his dinner into a reduced space.

“Don’t know. She seems like a sweet woman, but I don’t get it.”

“People do strange things when faced with extreme circumstances.”

Lenny remembered one case where a woman leaned over her husband’s body and open-mouth kissed him. She only admitted that he was dead when he didn’t reciprocate. The hole in his head and the blood pool around him wasn’t enough. He shook the memory from his mind.

“And you haven’t told anyone else about this yet?” A couple of seconds passed. “Trent? You hear me?”

“Sorry, I was shaking my head.” He let out a small laugh. “Guess you couldn’t see that.”

“No.” Lenny sensed a mixture of emotion coming through the line. Trent was excited that his fixation on the missing women hadn’t been in vain, but, at the same time, he came across as regretful that his assumptions might be correct.

“We’re dealing with a serial killer, Len. It’s obvious. Amy Rogers went missing just last week. They called in the FBI for her. They need to know about this.”

“We can’t rush to conclusions. I’m going to notify the chief to let him know about the find and contact crime scene and the ME.

I'm heading out to her place now. Stay with the woman there, keep her calm, and let her know we'll take care of it."

"It?"

"The DB, Trent. The victim. You have to learn to think of them that way. Otherwise the job will eat you up."

"I'm not babysitting this woman. I'm going to the crime scene."

"Oh, no, you're not."

"Len—"

"There isn't room for debate here. You have to stay there. That's your job. This is mine."

"So you keep reminding me. Just remember, I connected everything before the detectives of PWPDP even had a clue."

"Now you're resorting to digs? Come on, Trent, you know I've got your back. I always have."

"I still don't see detective on my badge, and, yep, I'm definitely in uniform."

Lenny laughed. "Stop sulking. I'll keep you posted." He hung up the phone, went upstairs, and told his wife there was another case. His hours around home would be hit—and more likely miss—for the next while.

"Just take care of you." She brushed a hand on the side of his face, and he kissed her forehead.

"That's why I love you."

"Love you." Her nose went back into her paperback. She would be carried off into a fictional world before he hit the front door.

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