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REMNANTS
by Carolyn Arnold



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CAROLYN ARNOLD

REMNANTS

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PROLOGUE

PERIMETER MALL, ATLANTA, GEORGIA
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 11:30 AM EASTERN

THE TIME HAD COME TO select his next victim. He had to choose carefully and perfectly—he wouldn't get a second chance. The mall was teeming with life, and that made for a lot of eyeballs, a lot of potential witnesses. But he supposed it also helped him be more inconspicuous. People were hustling through the shopping center, interested solely in their own agendas. They wouldn't be paying him—or what he was doing—much attention.

He was standing at the edge of the food court next to the hallway leading to the restrooms eating a gyro. The lidded and oversized garbage bin on wheels that was behind him would ensure that anyone who did notice him would just think he was a mall janitor on his lunch break.

The pitchy voice of a girl about eight hit his ears. “Daddy, I want ice cream.”

Trailing not far behind her were a man and woman holding hands. The woman was fit and blond, but his attention was on the man beside her. He was in his twenties, easily six feet tall with a solid, athletic build. He'd be strong and put up a fight. Yes, this was the one. And talk about ideal placement—he was across from the Dairy Queen.

He wiped his palms on his coveralls and took a few deep breaths. What he was about to do wasn't because of who he was, but rather, because he had to do it.

And he had to hurry. The family was coming toward him.

“It's almost lunchtime,” the woman said, letting go of the man's

hand.

“Daaaaaaddyyyyy.” A whiny petition.

The man looked to the woman with a smile that showcased his white teeth. “We could have ice cream for lunch?”

The little girl began to bounce. “Yeah!”

“Really, Eric?” The woman wasn’t as impressed as the girl, but under the man’s gaze she caved and smiled. “All right, but just today..”

“Thank you, Mommy!” The girl wrapped her arms around the woman’s legs but quickly let go, prancing ahead of her parents and toward the DQ counter.

“Brianna, we wash our hands first.” The woman glanced at him as she walked by and offered a reserved smile. Had she detected his interest in them?

Breathe. She thinks you work here, remember?

Smile back.

Remain calm.

Look away and act uninterested.

“Oooh,” the girl moaned but returned to her mother anyway.

“We’ll just be a minute,” the woman said.

“Hey, doesn’t Daddy have to wash his hands?” the girl asked.

Sometimes things just work out...

The woman smiled at the man. “Eric?”

“Yes, he does,” he playfully answered in the third person.

Mother and daughter headed to the restroom, the man not far behind.

It was time to get to work.

He took the last bite of his sandwich, crumpled the wrapper, and tossed it into the bin. He casually moved behind it and pushed it down the hall into the men’s room.

He put up a sign that said it was closed for cleaning and entered, positioning himself next to the door. From there, he could see his target at one of the urinals and another man washing his hands at the sink. Otherwise, it was quiet.

Just as if it was meant to be...

The stranger left the restroom without a passing glance. This left

him alone with his target.

He twisted the lock on the door and then moved behind the man, who paid him no mind. He took the needle out of his pocket and plunged it into the man's neck.

The man snapped a hand over where he'd been poked. "Hey!"

It would take a few seconds for the drug to fully kick in. He just had to stay out of the man's way and block the exit in the meantime.

"What did you..." The man was away from the urinal now, coming toward him on unsteady legs. Both his hands went to his forehead and then it was lights-out. He collapsed on the floor.

He hurried to the bin, wheeled it over to the man's body, and lifted him just enough to dump him inside. Once the man was in there, he lowered the lid, unlocked the restroom, collected his sign, and left.

His heart was thumping in his ears as he wheeled the bin out a back service door. Some people were milling around, but they didn't seem curious about him. He went to his van and opened the back door. He put the ramp in place and simply wheeled the bin inside.

When he was finished, he closed the doors and headed for the driver's seat. He wanted to hit the gas and tear out of the lot. The adrenaline surging through his system was screaming, *You got away with it again*, but he didn't like to get too cocky.

Still, he did take some pride in the fact that he'd gotten what he'd come for—and it had been so, so easy.

CHAPTER

1

SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1:05 PM EASTERN

VALENTINE'S DAY WOULD HAVE TO wait until next year, and I couldn't say I was disappointed—or surprised. Working as an agent in the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit makes planning anything impossible. This time, being swept out of town for an investigation was saving me from a day that was otherwise full of expectations and pressures. And even though my relationship with Becky was casual, it had been going on for several months now and she would be expecting a romantic evening.

But all that was hundreds of miles behind me now...

When I stepped off the government jet, the warm Savannah air welcomed me and made me think of my childhood in Sarasota, Florida. No cold winters there, either, unlike Virginia, where it could dip below zero this time of year, occasionally bringing that white stuff along with it.

My boss, Supervisory Special Agent Jack Harper, walked in front of me. This was his first time heading into the field after an unsub had almost killed him this past summer. He'd barely scraped by, but he was far too stubborn of a bastard to die. Having come so close to death, though, he had to be looking at life differently. I knew when I had just *thought* I was going to die during a previous investigation, it had taken me a long time to shake it.

He had more gray hairs than I'd remembered, and the lines on his face were cut deeper. His eyes seemed darker these days, too. More contemplative. He had been cleared for field work, but I still

questioned how he could have fully bounced back in six short months.

I looked over my shoulder at the other two members of our team, Zach Miles and Paige Dawson. Zach was a certifiable genius, and although he was older than my thirty-one years, he had the sense of humor and maturity level of a college student. He'd found endless amusement in calling me "Pending" for the entire two years of my probationary period. Another reason I was happy to be a full-fledged agent now.

Paige was another story. She and I had a rather complicated history, and whether I wanted to admit to it or not, I loved her. But we had to make a choice—our jobs or our relationship. Since we'd both worked far too hard to throw our careers away, the decision to remain friends was, in effect, made for us.

We silently weaved through the airport and picked up a couple of rental SUVs. Jack and I took one, as we usually did, and Paige and Zach were paired together. We were going straight to meet with Lieutenant Charlie Pike, who commanded the homicide unit of Savannah PD, and his detective Rodney Hawkins, at Blue Heron Plantation where human remains had been found in the Little Ogeechee River. According to our debriefing, an arm and a leg were found there a week ago, and yesterday, another arm showed up. Savannah PD had already run tests confirming that we were looking at three different victims, and that was why we'd been called in.

The drive went quickly, and when the plantation's iron gates swung open, I spotted a female officer guarding the entrance. She lifted her sunglasses to the top of her head as Jack rolled to a stop next to her and opened his window.

Jack pulled out his credentials. "Supervisory Special Agent Jack Harper of the FBI. I'm here with my team."

The officer's hazelnut eyes took in Jack's badge, then she looked behind us to Paige and Zach in the other SUV. She lowered her sunglasses. "Lieutenant Pike is expecting you. He's just down there." She pointed to a path that came off a parking lot and seemed to disappear amid cattails.

We parked the vehicles and wasted no time getting to where she had directed us. The echoing calls of red-winged blackbirds and the whistling cries of blue herons carried on a gentle breeze, but the presence of investigators wearing white Tyvek suits drove home our purpose here and it had nothing to do with relaxing in nature.

As we approached, a black man of about fifty was talking animatedly into a phone. He was easily six foot four, thin and fit, and he had a commanding presence, even from a distance.

A younger male officer in a navy-blue uniform stood in front of him and gestured in our direction.

The black man turned to face us, his phone still to his ear. "Gotta go." He tucked his cell into his shirt pocket and came over to us while the officer went in the opposite direction. "I take it you're the FBI."

"SSA Jack Harper, and this is my team." Jack gestured to each of us.

The lieutenant took turns shaking our hands and getting our names. He finished with me, and I was surprised by how firm his grip was.

"Brandon Fisher," I said. "Good to meet you."

There was a loud rustling in the tall grass then, followed by a splash.

"Probably just an alligator," Pike said.

Yeah, just an alligator...

As if on cue, twenty feet down the bank, someone began wrangling one of the reptiles, the animal's tail and head swiping through the air as it tried to regain its freedom. No such luck, though, as its captor worked to get it away from the investigators. I took a few steps back. There was no harm in being extra cautious.

"I'm glad all of you could make it as quickly as you did. I'm Lieutenant Pike, but most people call me Charlie."

Maybe it was his age or his rank, but I knew I'd continue to think of him as Pike.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "Detective Hawkins won't be joining us today or for the remainder of the case. He's dealing with

a family matter.”

“I hope everything will be all right,” Paige said, showing her trademark compassion.

Pike shook his head. “They were expecting and just found out that they lost the baby.”

His words had my past sweeping over me. I knew exactly how that devastation felt. My ex-wife, Deb, had gotten pregnant once, but her body had rejected the fetus. She’d never really been the same after that, truth be told. And by the time she had seemed to return to a version of her normal self, she’d asked for a divorce.

Jack’s body was rigid. “Where was the arm found yesterday?” As always, his focus was solely on the case. While he was a person who sheltered his emotions quite well, he usually could muster some empathy.

“Ah, yes, right out there.” Pike pointed toward a boat in the water, about halfway out from the riverbank. A diver surfaced next to it. “The arm was lodged in some mud and sticking out above the surface.”

To be out that far, either the limb had been dumped from a boat, had come down the river and settled here, or our unsub had a good throwing arm. If we could determine which, it would give us some helpful insight into our unsub.

The investigation by Savannah PD had dismissed the idea of the murders taking place on plantation property, though. But if our unsub had chosen here as the dump site, it would tell us how organized he was, whether he assumed risk or preferred isolation.

“Are the gates normally left open for the public?” I asked. “It seems rather remote back here, but is there much traffic?”

Pike wasn’t wearing sunglasses, and he squinted in the bright sunshine. “It’s not an overly busy place, and they close at night.”

“But could a person come down the river to the plantation on a boat at night after hours?” I asked.

Pike curled his lips and bobbed his head. “Yeah, I suppose that’s possible.”

“I want the parts of the river going through the property under surveillance. Twenty-four seven,” Jack directed, drawing Pike’s

gaze to him.

“I’ll make sure that happens.”

“And make sure the officers are hidden so if our unsub is brazen enough to return—”

Pike nodded. “Not our first rodeo.”

“And make sure the search for more remains continues during daylight hours.”

“Those are already their orders.” Pike put his hands on his hips. “The community has gotten wind of yesterday’s finding, and on top of last week’s discovery, let’s just say people are panicking. Somehow a local news station found out that the FBI was being brought in. Don’t ask me how.”

While I probably should have, I didn’t really care. My senses were too busy taking in the crime scene: marshland, relative seclusion, an arm and leg discovered last week, an arm yesterday. Aside from the human remains that had been found here, the property had a serene feeling to it, a sense of peace. There was a tangible quality to the air, though—or maybe it was the presence of law enforcement and crime scene investigators—that made it impossible to deny that death had touched the place.

“What else can you tell us about the limbs that were recovered?” Paige asked.

The lieutenant cleared his throat. “Well, both arms didn’t have hands, and the leg didn’t have a foot. We found incision marks indicating the hands and foot had been intentionally cut off.”

“Our killer could have taken them for trophies or to make identification impossible,” I suggested.

Pike gave a small nod and continued. “And while we know the hands and foot were removed, it’s not as clear how the appendages separated from the torso. It would be something we’d need the medical examiner to clarify.”

Jack’s brow furrowed, and I could tell his mind was racing through the possibilities.

“But,” Pike continued, “all the limbs have one thing in common: muscle tissue remained, even though the skin had been removed.”

“It is possible that the skin was also taken as a trophy,” Zach

speculated.

“We could be looking for a hunter or a sexual sadist,” Jack said.

Hunters were typically identified by the type of weapon they used—a hunting knife, rifle, or crossbow, for example—and they tended to dispose of their victims’ bodies in remote, isolated areas. A sexual sadist, on the other hand, got off on the torture and pain. But we’d need to gather more facts before we could build any sort of profile on our unsub. Even knowing more about the victims themselves would help. Was the killer choosing people he or she was acquainted with? Were the victims of a certain gender, age group, occupation? The list went on and on. From there, we could more easily speculate on our killer’s motive and what they had to gain.

“Any IDs on the victims yet?” I asked.

Pike shook his head. “Not yet, but they’re working on it. I’m not sure when we’ll know.”

I looked at Jack. I didn’t know all the steps involved with processing DNA, but it could take weeks, if not months, to go through the system. Things could be sped up if the government was willing to foot the bill for a private laboratory, which was costly and would still take days. Oftentimes this was approved for cases involving serial murder, but primarily when we had seemingly solid evidence that we believed would lead us to the killer.

Jack gave a small shake of his head, as if he’d read my mind and dismissed the private laboratory.

“Anyone reported missing from the area recently?” Zach asked.

“No.” Pike’s single word was heavy with discouragement.

“It could be that the victims aren’t being missed by anyone.” Zach’s realistic yet sad summation was also a possibility.

“The ones from last week were all Caucasian males in their mid- to late twenties,” Pike offered next.

“What about the arm from yesterday?” Jack asked.

“It was male. I called in a friend and colleague to get us more information. She’s an anthropologist, and she’ll take a look at it as she had the other remains, but she won’t get to it until much later today.”

“She?” Paige queried.

“Shirley Moody. She’s one of the best in the field but from out of town.”

Jack nodded his acknowledgment. “What can you tell us about the guy who found the arm yesterday?”

“Name’s Jonathan Tucker. He works at the plantation, and we took his statement, of course,” Pike began. “His record is clean, and he seems like a down-to-earth guy. He’s got two young girls and his wife died a couple years back. He seemed really shaken up by all this.”

“What about Wesley Graham?” Jack asked.

“The man who found the remains last week? Nice guy. He’s single and proud of it. Never been married. No record, either. But he didn’t seem too upset by the whole situation.”

So far we weren’t getting much more out of Pike than we had his detective’s reports. Graham didn’t work for the plantation, and the file noted that his reason for coming to the plantation was to de-stress.

“This site attracts tourists and locals,” Pike said. “People like to surround themselves in nature. Personally, I could live without mosquitoes.” He swatted near his face as if to emphasize his point. “I know you’ll probably want to pay Tucker and Graham visits yourselves, but—” Pike made a show of extending his arm and bending it to consult his watch “—right now, I’ve got you an appointment with the owner of the plantation. We should probably get moving toward the main house.”

“Lieutenant!” A female investigator shouted as she waded through the water toward the riverbank in a hurry. She was holding a clear plastic evidence bag.

“We found a cell phone,” she called out as she reached us.

Pike looked at the investigator skeptically. “Where?”

Her eyes dipped to the ground, but she regrouped herself quickly. “It was near where the arm was found.”

“And it took a day to find it?” Pike raised his eyebrows.

She squared her shoulders but shrank somewhat under the lieutenant’s gaze. “It was in a tangle of weeds, but it could have just

come to rest there in recent currents.”

It seemed Pike was a hard one to please, and he reminded me of the way I used to view Jack—an unforgiving perfectionist. And while Pike might not be impressed, I was pleased. That phone could lead us to a killer.

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