

**A sample of
BLUE BABY
by Carolyn Arnold**



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BLUE BABY

**CAROLYN
ARNOLD**

Excerpt from *Blue Baby* (Book 4 in the Brandon Fisher FBI series)
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carolynarnold.net

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PROLOGUE

THE WHITE SILK WAS DRAPED over the porcelain of the tub like angel wings. She was beautiful, radiant. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were open and staring at him.

He took the set of fake lashes from his pocket and applied them. He coated her eyeball with glue before delicately using both hands to pull her eyes closed. The extensions fanned against her flesh.

He applied the eye shadow and stepped back to appreciate the hues of brown and gold.

Next. Lipstick.

He smeared the tube across her lips. The bright red was an exquisite touch of color against her fair skin. He put the veil in place and wiped back the nylon until it framed her face and ensconced her shoulders. He stood back to admire his work thus far.

Divine.

The blonde sat with her back against the end of the tub, her dress spilling down her frame and over the ledge. Her hair was a bed of curls beneath her veil. Her makeup appeared professional, and he was pleased with his hard work. He wasn't nearly as perfect with the first one.

Her mouth carried a hint of peace. Of happiness.

The Big Event was under way.

"Almost."

His gaze went to her left hand resting in her lap.

How could he have been so foolish? Was he rushing things? He moved swiftly through her apartment and found what he sought on her dresser.

“There you go, beautiful.” He slipped the wedding ring on her finger, leaving him with one final task.

He took the cigar cutter from his pocket, slipped her ring finger into it, and squeezed. As he had the first time, he marveled at the ease of it, how such small blades were able to cut through bone. He let the severed finger fall against her ivory dress.

Stepping back, he took in her beauty.

She was pleased. It was in the way her lips were set.

He smiled. “Now, you can just be happy.”

CHAPTER 1

HER SNORING HAD KEPT ME up for most of the night, but I wasn't cruel enough to wake her. While I had considered pinching her nose to quiet her, I mustered the restraint not to. I didn't really want to deal with a sleep-deprived *and* pissed-off woman.

The solution wasn't in getting sleep myself—it was already five AM—it would be in downing a pot of coffee. I'd need that much to function today. But thanks to technology, I'd have to repeat the coffee-brewing process twelve times since I'd upgraded to one of those single-serve makers. I put in the pod, and after some protest in the form of moaning and gurgling, the machine sputtered out the black nectar into my waiting cup. While the brew finished, I rested my eyes. I'd have to be alert soon enough.

The text message had come in overnight, bathing the bedroom in a white glow. I had read it, careful not to tug the sheets and wake my female companion. The gist was that another sicko had decided to use the world as his demented playground. I didn't know the details yet, but the summation was always a variation of that fact, and my presence had been requested in the briefing room first thing.

I breathed in, eyes closed, my nose appreciating the robust aroma that filled the air while my mind drifted to last night. It might have been a bad idea inviting her over, but it had been fun. I'd have to wake her soon, but I'd put it off for as long as possible.

The puttering of the coffeemaker came to an end, and I added two lumps of sugar and some milk to my cup.

“Brandon? What are you doing up so early?”

She was in one of my shirts, her hair tousled over her shoulders. The way she was winding one strand around her finger would drive any man mad.

Forget the coffee. Forget the snoring. There were some sacrifices worth making.

“There’s a case.” God, she looked good, but I dared not touch her.

She slipped her arms around my waist, and I continued to fight the impulse to scoop her up and take her back to my bed. “But you had the day booked off. We had plans.”

“I know, but sometimes these things happen.” *Maybe a little embrace wouldn’t hurt anything.* I wrapped my arms around her and slapped her butt.

She let out a yelp. “Be careful what you’re starting.” She snuggled her face into my neck, her tongue teasing my flesh.

“We’ll have to take a rain check,” I said, then cupped her face and tilted it upward until her mouth met mine. My jaw was tight, determined, and hungry. I took her without mercy. She reciprocated with as much as I gave. Slipping my hand under the shirt she wore, I found her breasts and teased her nipples with the pads of my thumbs. She let out a moan and arched her head back.

God, I loved giving her pleasure as much as I loved receiving it. I parted from her only long enough to clear a space on the counter and then lifted her up.

Her perfume filled my head, diluting all logic and intoxicating my senses. I trailed kisses from her neck down to her chest and slid a taut nipple between my teeth.

Her deep breathing encouraged me, and the hardening of her nipple reciprocated what was happening in my pants.

Forget work.

As I parted her legs, my cell phone rang. “Son of a bitch!”

“I had a feeling it was too good to be true.” She tapped a kiss on my cheek and hopped down from the counter.

The caller ID flashed PAIGE DAWSON. I took a deep breath. No big deal. Paige was a beautiful redhead with electric-green eyes, who had me straying from my marriage while at the training academy.

It was only by a strange twist of fate that I had wound up on the same team as her within the Behavioral Analysis Unit of the FBI. When my divorce had been finalized in December, Paige and I had determined that a relationship between us wasn't going to work. The age difference between us had never mattered. She was in her early forties, and I was twenty-nine. What had interfered were our careers.

I answered with my gaze on the new woman in my life—Becky Tulson. We'd met last fall when I was working on a case in Dumfries, Virginia. The attraction had been instant and the conversation between us stimulating, but until recently, the situation had been complicated.

"Brandon," Paige said, "there's been a change of plans."

A banging came from the front door immediately after, and Becky nodded to me before heading off to answer it.

What the hell? The place was becoming Grand Central, and all I needed was another twenty minutes to fit in a quick one. Apparently I was asking for too much.

"What's going on?" I asked into the receiver.

"Brandon," Becky called to me, "Jack's here." She stood behind the opened door, shielding her body from Jack's line of sight.

"We're outside," Paige said.

"It's a little too late to tell me that." I hung up, wondering how it was possible for this day to descend downhill any faster than it already was.

I hurried to the front door, experiencing a moment of awkwardness. My boss and my lover, face-to-face. My lover wearing only a shirt. My shirt.

"Don't stand there, kid. We have a flight to catch. Grab your go bag."

"One second, Jack." I closed the door on him and worked to get my house key off the ring. I handed it to Becky. "Leave when you're ready."

She pouted but nodded. She understood. She also worked in law enforcement and could appreciate that if the job called, one had to respond.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. Heck, I’m not even sure where I’m headed.”

“No worries.” She smiled and kissed my lips. I lingered. She pulled back. “You better get going. Jack doesn’t strike me as the patient type.”

“You have no idea.” I grabbed the bag I kept by the front door—for the very purpose of last-minute trips like this—and opened the door. Jack was still standing there, and I jumped, having expected him to be in the car by now.

“I thought we were meeting at—”

Jack shook his head. “There’s a new development.”

A “new development” meant the case we were going to discuss had become urgent. It meant someone else was dead. And our cases rarely involved run-of-the-mill shootings or passionate kills in the heat of the moment.

We hunted psychotic unsubs.

CHAPTER 2

WE WERE AT THIRTY THOUSAND feet being briefed on the case. The plane was taking us to Grand Forks, the third largest city in North Dakota. It was an hour away from Fargo and had a population of over fifty thousand.

Nadia Webber was patched through on a video call from Quantico. There was no doubt that she was about to share information most people were better off not knowing. But this was what I had signed up for. Although I had originally seen myself in a counterterrorism unit, the first available opening was in the Behavioral Analysis Unit. But it provided me the opportunity to stop those responsible for grievous acts. The job also allowed me to tap into the minds of killers and discover what moved them to do what they did. While most people carried on unaware of the true evil in the world, I had never preferred naïveté. I favored knowledge, and second to that, action.

Loading onto the jet first thing on a Monday morning was one way to get the week started quickly, if not abruptly.

As another member of the team, Zachery joined us. He was a certified genius. Everything he read in a textbook during university was available for speedy recall. But his big brain never got in the way of his being a goof. He was eight years older than me.

Paige, Zachery, and I sucked back on coffee. Jack was the only exception.

I thought of Becky standing in my kitchen wearing nothing but my shirt. All I'd needed was another twenty minutes. God, I hated leaving her behind. We'd had plans to go out for a nice

dinner, too. Even though it had been more her idea than mine. I never understood meals equating to entertainment. I was into nourishing my body and moving on.

I caught Paige glancing at me again, and I had a feeling she was well aware that I had moved on. It was even possible she saw Becky answer my door. She had met Becky on the same investigation I had.

“This has got to be one of the saddest cases we’ve worked,” Nadia began.

“Without the commentary adlib, Nadia,” Jack said, coaxing her along.

He liked news presented without narrative flair. It was about getting the information and stopping the bad guy. Not much seemed to affect the man, but instead of envying him that, I pitied him for it.

“Yes, Jack, of course,” Nadia went on. “We have two victims. The latest was discovered yesterday.”

Pictures of a woman came on the screen to Nadia’s left: a pretty blonde with gray eyes. Her makeup was tastefully applied and a dusting of freckles graced the bridge of her nose. She wore silver hoops, and from the snapshot, I’d guess she had a love for fashion.

“This is Tara Day,” Nadia continued. “She was twenty-five. Local police arrived on scene at nine AM yesterday. They found her in her apartment after a coworker, Glen Little, called it in. He said that he was there to pick her up for work. They were putting in overtime for a client.”

“What did she do for a living?” Paige asked.

“Tara was a clerk for a local accounting firm. The overtime still needs to be verified, but the coworker’s background check was clean.”

Lack of a criminal record meant little at times. It could simply mean that he just hadn’t been caught in the past.

Another picture of Tara appeared on the screen. This one was of her in a wedding gown in her bathtub. Her hands were folded over each other in her lap, sitting in a pool of blood.

“Our unsub cuts off their ring fingers and leaves it in their laps,”

Nadia said.

"I find it strange he doesn't take them as trophies." Paige angled her cup and set it down when she seemed to realize it was empty.

"As nice as that sounds, there's no indication our guy takes a trophy. At least none we've discovered."

"You mentioned he's done this before?" Zachery prodded.

"Correct. One year ago to the day. Her name was Cheryl Bradley. Age twenty-four."

Zachery snapped the tab down on the lid of his cup. "So he kills on the summer solstice. Some religious connection? Must have some importance to our unsub. The women's ages are close, too."

"What about sexual assault?" Paige asked.

Nadia shook her head. "Nothing indicates either victim had sexual relations within twelve hours of death."

"And the cause of death?" Jack tapped an unlit cigarette against the table. I knew what his immediate plans were once he got off the plane.

Nadia fanned her pen between two fingers. "Suffocation. He gets on top of his victims and places his knee in their solar plexus."

"Compressive asphyxiation," Zachery jumped in, showing off his abundance of knowledge. "Not a nice way to go."

Nadia showed us a picture of a brunette with brown eyes. "This is Cheryl Bradley. She worked as a receptionist for a graphic design company. At first glance, the two victims seem to have two things in common besides cause of death: age range and location. They live within three blocks of each other."

The image morphed into one of Cheryl in a bathtub, and it was rather eerie the way it resembled that of Tara, despite the differences in their coloring.

Zachery leaned forward. "He's likely someone from the area, then."

I narrowed my eyes at the photo. Cheryl's hands lay on top of each other as Tara's did. "The way he poses them with care afterward speaks of a connection or bond with his victims," I added. "He chooses them for a specific reason."

"The ring finger being cut off may show betrayal or heartache."

This was from Paige. "It's also possible he could be striving to recreate an event."

"You're alluding to a dead woman in a bathtub? It doesn't sound like a common thing. But, if so, when and who?" The question slipped out. I knew it was essentially rhetorical at this point. There wasn't an answer yet to provide. "Did our unsub witness someone carry out a murder like this or find a woman's body? Were there victims before Cheryl?"

"Nothing in the system comes back similar to these two cases," Nadia said.

"At the very least, he is selective and organized. He waits a year between victims. He doesn't need to kill but is moved to do so." Zachery expanded on the brainstorming. "He experienced a deep hurt at some point. Like Paige said, a woman may have betrayed him. He can't move past the pain and that's why he severs their fingers. These women could have hurt their fiancés. And June is the most popular month for weddings. All of this is best guess. The women might not have been engaged."

"Nadia, who did the police suspect for Cheryl's murder?" Jack asked.

"Their prime suspect was her ex-fiancé. Phil Payne broke it off."

"Did he say why?"

"He said Cheryl was a flirt."

"And his alibi for the time of her murder?"

"This is where you have to love the irony. He was with another woman. She swore under oath she spent the night with him."

"What about the latest victim, Tara Day? Was she engaged?" I asked. Maybe it was a stupid question based on the ring on her finger, but it was also possible the killer brought it and placed it there.

"Taking the ring and dress into consideration, one would assume so. Police haven't tracked him down yet, though, and there are no indications in Tara's apartment that she was in a relationship. Like I said, I'm afraid the only glaring similarities, besides their murders, are their vicinity and age range."

"Nadia, find out if Glen Little crossed paths with the first victim

during previous employment or otherwise.”

“You got it.”

“Thanks, Nadia. Make sure you send anything else on these cases our way immediately.”

The monitor went black. I observed the sharp lines of Jack’s features. His intention, like the rest of the team’s, was to find the man who had murdered these beautiful women. They were too young to die. They’d had so much of their lives ahead of them. I wasn’t much older.

My heart went out to their families, but my job wasn’t about getting sentimental. It was about bringing killers to justice.

Jack pointed the cigarette at the three of us, sweeping it back and forth. “Study your copy of the case files, and when we touch down, we’ll pick up a couple of rentals at the airport and go straight to the scene. From there, we’ll discuss our next steps.”

CHAPTER 3

TARA DAY LIVED IN A three-story apartment building near the Columbia Mall. The pattern of its brick facade made it appear as if it were freckled. The redeeming aspect to the property was the lush greenery, and each unit had either a balcony or patio. Tara's apartment was on the second floor.

A couple of crime scene investigators were working over her residence, and I suspected they'd be there for hours yet. Collecting evidence in a murder case wasn't a quick job as it was portrayed on TV. It took time and diligence.

The case file told us Tara's time of death was placed between midnight and three AM yesterday. Police found her at nine AM after receiving a call from her coworker, just as Nadia had said.

A man I pegged as the lead detective met us at the door. His attention went straight to Jack. My boss just had a way about him. His aura demanded acknowledgment. To those on the outside, there would be no mistaking he was the one in charge.

"Supervisory Special Agent Jack Harper?" the detective asked.

Jack nodded and didn't initiate a handshake. Neither did the detective.

"My name's Detective Russell Powers and—" He looked behind him, searching for someone.

A man in his early thirties hurried over, and I recognized something of myself in him. I had a tendency to run late for things, too, and sometimes it felt as if I was constantly playing catch up.

He smiled at us, his eyes shooting straight to Paige. Maybe we were too much alike. As his gaze settled on her, he bit his bottom

lip, as if he thought it made him attractive. His nose was bulbous and too big for his face, and his hair was cropped short and came to a point in the middle of his brow. He extended his hand to Paige.

“This is Sam Barber.” Powers made the introduction, but it seemed Barber was getting around fine by himself.

He ended the rounds with me. His shake was firm, and the glint in his eyes told me he was interested in staking claim to Paige. I pressed on a grin, doing my best to make it appear sincere.

“So fill us in. What are we looking at here?” Jack asked. It was part of his tactic. He preferred to be briefed at the scene. He didn’t like relying on what came to us secondhand through reports. He liked to hear it from the detective’s mouth.

“We’ve got a female victim. Tara Day. I assume you know most of what we do at this point.”

I fought a smirk. Powers wasn’t one to play the game, either. He and Jack must have been separated at birth. Like Jack, Powers had a hardened gaze and scowl lines around his mouth. Powers seemed to be in his forties while Jack was in his early fifties. Powers’s hair was receding on the sides, leaving a rounded patch of hair in the middle of his head. Jack had a full mop of hair.

“Hmm.” Jack brushed past Powers into the apartment. The rest of us followed. It was clear that Jack wasn’t impressed with Powers’s lack of cooperation.

The layout of the place was simplistic with a galley kitchen to the left of the entry. A living area was straight ahead. The furniture was basic and low-end. Maybe even used.

Powers guided us down a side hallway. “She was found in the bathroom.”

The bedroom was on the left, and the bathroom on the right. Powers stopped outside the door. It was compact with the sink and toilet squeezed next to a regular-sized bathtub.

“It’s a tight space,” I said, verbalizing my observation.

“It is. The killer didn’t have much room to work with, but as you know, she wasn’t killed here,” Powers said.

“She was suffocated in her bed,” Zachery pitched in. He knew this from the case file.

“Based on the state of the bed—the sheets were all tangled up—that’s the way we’re leaning.”

“So, afterward, he dragged her lifeless body to the tub?” I asked.

“Your name again?” Powers’s eyes were sharp and lasered in on mine.

“Special Agent Fisher.”

The hint of a simper twitched Powers’s lips. It wasn’t hard to surmise what he was thinking—possibly career envy. After all, detectives never had *special* added to their job titles. It wasn’t just that, though. In this case, there was derision and judgment painted on his expression. Too bad if the man thought it was egotistical. I had worked hard for the title and had two months before my probation period was over and it was officially mine.

“Well, *Special Agent* Fisher, first he dressed her in a wedding gown, then he placed her in the tub.”

“And the dress was hers?” Paige asked.

Barber entered the conversation. “It seems to be. We found the box it would have come in.”

“While the gown and ring were hers, the veil wasn’t a match to the dress,” Powers said.

“Something borrowed?” Paige asked.

“I noticed that in the case file. Its design was different from the dress,” Zachery said.

“That’s right. The veil had a rosebud wreath, and while her dress had intricate lace rose patterns, there were no buds. It also had a tinge of yellow to it.”

I glanced at Paige. “Sounds more like *something old*. It also goes back to what was mentioned about him recreating what he had seen.”

Jack shot me a look to keep quiet. There would be plenty of time to discuss the case once we left here.

Powers looked between Jack and me. He caught Jack’s glare but didn’t bother pressing for more about what I had said. I was thankful to him for leaving it alone.

“Have you found her fiancé?” Paige asked.

“Not yet, but we are looking into that,” Barber answered.

“We’ll take it from here,” Jack said to the detectives. “Has the family been notified?”

“They will be this morning. We weren’t able to get in contact with them yesterday,” Powers responded. “The medical examiner is expecting you tomorrow for the autopsy. He’s quite confident on the cause of death, though. The killer got on top of Tara and suffocated her.”

“Compressive asphyxiation,” Zachery added.

Powers appeared about as pleased to be interrupted as Jack did when it happened to him. “That’s right. He’ll also have all the forensic evidence cataloged for you then.”

“Detective?” An investigator came toward our group, her gaze on Powers. She held a plastic bag with a slip of paper inside. “We just found this.” She paused, acknowledging the rest of us. Her cheeks flushed, seemingly shy around new people.

“These people are special agents with the FBI.” Powers looked at me as he gave the generic introduction. He wanted to make sure I didn’t miss the *special* part. “This is Tammy.”

“Hi.” Tammy rushed to continue. “This receipt was found in her kitchen garbage can. It’s dated for last night at seven.”

Powers took the bag from her and examined the receipt. He then extended it to Jack, and Jack passed it on to us.

I read the name of the bar, Down the Hatch. The cashier number was 007. Tara’s tab came to fifteen dollars. It was a detailed receipt showing two apple martinis. The time stamp, as Tammy had noted, was seven o’clock at night. Early by most standards. Did she meet the unsub at the bar?

I handed the evidence bag back to Tammy, and she left to file it.

Jack addressed me and my colleagues. “Let’s see what we can find out at that bar.”

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