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CAROLYN ARNOLD
ON THE
COUNT OF
THREE

HIBBERT & STILES
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Prologue

THREE YEARS AGO

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

O*p-Ed columnist Pamela Moore passed away today after a violent home invasion left her for dead. Pamela was...*

The reporter droned on, sensationalizing Pamela's redeemable qualities while shoving all her faults, misgivings, and mistakes into a closet of obscurity. But it was a fine representation of Pamela's real life: she had spun perspectives to make a headline. More than that, she had been so obtuse that she had painted his family as *idyllic*.

She knew nothing!

His heart was thumping in his ears, his mind replaying the reporter's words: *left her for dead*.

As if he'd done that on purpose.

He clenched his fists and focused on his breathing, on slowing his heart rate. Sometimes he wondered why he put himself through watching the video over and over. The incident had taken place just over three years ago.

Still, he settled into his chair to journey back in time. To listen to what the newspeople had said about his victim, her masked assailant, and what had looked like a home invasion gone horribly wrong. It reminded him of what he'd done right and where he'd failed.

Pamela's fiancé came on the screen. He was the picture of calm put-togetherness in his pressed suit, standing in front of the camera with a microphone to his lips. He, too, was singing her praises and calling for justice.

But poor Pamela. There would be no justice for her. Her case was as cold now as her body in the ground.

He focused on the TV again and listened.

“Sadly, police have no suspects at this time but say the man who did this is considered to be especially dangerous. They don’t believe that robbery was the motive, and they warn women to remain vigilant.”

Her confirmed death and the reporter calling him *especially dangerous* were takeaways he rather enjoyed. He leaned forward, a smile playing on his lips as he stopped the recording and rewound the VHS tape. He was determined to dwell on the good that came with the botched murder of Pamela. He’d learned from his mistakes and his second murder had gone much better. While they say practice makes perfect, he didn’t greedily indulge. No, he only took out those he deemed worthy of his attention. It was enough to quiet the darkness inside him. But there were times that the burning need to take a life was all-consuming. He called that side of him the Night.

It was an authentic part of himself, having lingered in the background for some time, calling out to him, taunting him to listen to its petitions. And now, as a man of thirty-seven, he was no longer afraid or leery of this facet of himself. He entertained the blood-filled fantasies of the Night when it was prudent, and no more would he be robbed of the fulfillment that came with taking someone’s last breath. His preferred killing method assured that now.

The VCR whined down to a *thunk*. He got up from his recliner and ejected the tape. He returned it to its cardboard sleeve and put it back under a floorboard near the TV set. It was safe there.

He laced up his boots and headed out to the shed—where he was holding his latest victim. The Night purred within him, yearning to be satisfied. His heartbeat pulsed beneath his skin, anticipating what was to come.

He reached the shed and entered. The woman was naked and fixed into a guillotine that he’d crafted with his own hands. The woodworking skills his dad had taught him turned out to be useful after all. The blade was suspended and ready to be called into

action. There'd be no escape for her; any movement would upset the delicate balance of the apparatus. Ah, yes, he'd finally concocted the perfect murder weapon, one his victims couldn't come back from.

He crept closer to her, the floorboards creaking under his steps.

Her long, straight hair cascaded from the crown of her head around her face. She cried out in dry, heaving sobs, "Please...no." As if she knew what was coming.

He ignored her pathetic protest, went over to his tripod, clipped his cell phone into place, and started recording.

"Smile for the camera." He swiped her hair back, and she arched her head up the small amount the restraint around her neck would allow.

Terror streaked through her eyes. "Please...don't...do...this." Her mouth gaped open and shut, open and shut.

"You know why you're here," he said.

She wept, but it came out weak and pitiful, lacking conviction—merely gasps for breaths and hiccups in her throat. "I... Please forgive me."

He smiled. She was right on schedule: three days out here and she'd lost her fight to live, hope extinguished and her survival instinct gone. This was when they became boring to him. He much preferred when they clung to hope without reason.

And now, there she was, requesting absolution. But he was neither a priest nor a redeemer.

"We'll start on the count of three," he said in a singsong voice. The Night pulsed beneath his skin with a heartbeat of its own.

"No, no, please!" the woman screamed.

It pierced his ears, but he smiled, moving into position next to her. "One..." He reached out for the chain that suspended the blade. "Th—" His phone rang. His body quaked, the tremors of the Night snaking through him.

He grabbed a roll of duct tape from a nearby utility shelf and slapped a piece across her mouth. He normally didn't have to worry about their screams out there, but he wanted to answer this call.

The ringtone told him it was his girlfriend, Roxanne. She fit into his life plan—at least for now—and he didn't want to mess things up with her.

He kept his eyes on the woman as he answered his phone. "Hey, sweetie."

He listened as his girlfriend prattled on about their plans for the following evening—dinner, then a movie. Nothing new there. She said maybe dancing afterward, but they'd never make it to a club. She'd be ready for bed by ten, and he'd tuck her in. She was as predictable as drying paint and about as exciting. But she played along with his sexual fantasies without contention, and she'd do anything to make him happy.

"You'll pick me up? My place at six o'clock?" she asked.

"I can do that. I'm looking forward to spending some time with you."

"Love you," Roxanne told him.

"Love you, too." He hung up, smiling, and let the expression carry for his victim to see. He set up his cell phone to record again and walked toward the woman. "Let's pick up where we left off, shall we?"

She was screaming behind the tape and bucking her head wildly. She was clearly trying to slide back, as if she could worm her way out of the guillotine.

Yes, fight. It makes it so much more fun...

"One," he roared above her. "Two..." He wound the chain around his fingers. With a flick of his wrist, he released it. "Three."

He smiled at the camera as the woman's head fell to the floor and rolled. It settled faceup, her eyes looking right at him. He'd heard that the mind went on living for minutes after decapitation.

He got down next to her head, swept some hair out of her face. He then put his hands over her eyes and lowered her lids. "Sleep well."

APRIL, PRESENT DAY, THREE YEARS LATER
WOODBRIDGE, VIRGINIA

I sure as hell hoped there was no truth to the idea that the way a day started set the tone for everything that followed. Or I was screwed. My day had started at five o'clock—before the alarm—with me waking up to my girlfriend Becky's arm lying across my chest and my leg dangling off the edge of the bed. My phone was buzzing and dancing across my nightstand, its lights flashing like some sort of crazed disco ball. It was like trying to rouse the dead to get Becky to move, but eventually she groaned and rolled over.

My boss, Supervisory Special Agent Jack Harper, didn't even say hello, just got straight to business. "We've got an urgent case. Wheels up in twenty."

I barely grunted, but he must have taken that as agreement because he said, "Good. See you there."

I sighed and tried telling my still-asleep appendages that it was time to move. Easier said than done. I staggered out of bed, tripped on the corner of the comforter that had spilled mostly onto the floor, and narrowly avoided slamming my nose against the doorframe. Making it to the hallway unscathed had been cause for celebration, not that I had the time to revel in the accomplishment.

I was in and out of the shower in less than two minutes. Even though I ran a comb through my hair, it was as unruly as my attitude this morning. The red tufts didn't want to lie down in the back. Becky came into the bathroom and sat on the toilet while I brushed my teeth.

"Mor...ning," she said, the word fragmented by a yawn.

I continued brushing, my gums taking the brunt of my frustration. Since we had become exclusive about two months ago, I'd pretty much kissed my privacy goodbye. We didn't live together, but she was taking over my house. Her toothbrush was even in the holder.

"Where are you off to this time?" she asked.

Becky knew all about my job as a special agent with the Behavioral Analysis Unit, and as a police officer in a nearby county herself, she respected that a job in law enforcement didn't always have set hours. And with mine in particular, I could receive a call to move at any given moment. Sadly, serial killers—the type of criminal we primarily hunted—didn't adjust their schedules for our convenience.

"Did you hear me, Brandon?"

I peeled my eyes from her toothbrush and set mine in the slot next to hers. The layers of sleepy fog were finally clearing, and I realized just how brief Jack's call had been. "He didn't actually say..."

"Text me once you land? Let me know you got there—wherever *there* is—safely." Becky wiped and flushed. She inched up next to me, and I stepped back for her to wash her hands.

"Sure, but I've gotta go." I spun for the door, and she grabbed me, pulled me back, threw her arms around my neck, and kissed me.

I let myself sink into the moment for a second or two but then untangled myself from her arms. "I really have to go."

And I ran from my house—straight out into the dark morning, the pouring rain, and a puddle a few inches deep.

My socks were still soaking wet as I stood under the hangar looking out at the government jet on the tarmac. Its door was open. That was the good news. The bad news was that I was late, and Jack had very little tolerance for tardiness.

Fat drops of water bounced off the pavement a good four to six inches and pounded the metal roof overhead as if we were under fire. Given the whole "April showers bring May flowers" adage, the city should be blooming beautifully by next month. Not that that

helped me right now.

It was a good fifty yards to the plane, and looking up at the black sky, I didn't see a break coming soon. But the longer I took, the later I'd be, and the more furious Jack would become.

I took a deep breath. *Here goes nothing...*

I put my go bag over my head and ran out from the hangar. Pellets of rain hit my skin like shards of ice, but I kept pushing forward, comforted by thoughts of the dark roast coffee they'd have on the plane. I ran up the stairs and boarded the plane, mentally savoring the robust flavor while bracing for a verbal lashing.

Jack was standing next to the coffee maker, which was near the doorway, and my colleague—and ex—Paige Dawson was seated at one of the tables, sipping from a cup.

Paige was just another example of the universe's warped sense of humor. Of all the beds I could have fallen into, it had to be hers. And then I found myself on her team with the BAU a couple of years later. Nothing like being in a pressurized cabin with an ex-lover. At least we were amicable—for the most part. We'd be far more than that, truth be told, but the Bureau wasn't a fan of mixing business with pleasure, and Jack would have no problem enforcing the policy. He wasn't a fan of emotions in the first place, and his people needed to walk a fine line between intuition and emotionally charged observations.

I understood where the man was coming from, though I constantly struggled to meet his standards. He'd served in the military before the BAU, and then a divorce saw his ex getting custody of their son. His tough-guy persona wasn't for show; it was him. And his salt-and-pepper hair distinguished him as a man of the world.

"You're late." Jack looked right through me.

"There was traffic and—"

"*Both of you* are late." Jack's gaze went past me, and I turned to see Zach Miles, the fourth member of our team.

I beat *him* here? Maybe this day had a silver lining after all.

"I'm sorry, Jack." Zach brushed past me, and I took that as my cue to get that first cup of coffee.

I dropped my bag on the floor and rummaged in the drawer for a pod of dark roast. There was only light. I picked one anyhow.

So much for my day looking up.

I held the pod, staring at it, as if by doing so, it would change the flavor. But there would be no point in complaining. As the machine gurgled to life and sputtered out the brew, I expected to hear Jack's voice over it all, laying into me and Zach for being late. But no one was speaking. If it had just been me who was late, I'd still be getting an earful from Jack and being teased by Zach. I know that for a fact because I'd been in that situation more than once.

I grabbed my coffee and joined the rest of the team at a table. Jack gestured a go-ahead to one of the crewmembers, and they closed the cabin door.

Jack tossed three folders onto the table, one in front of each of us, and held on to a fourth for himself. "We've been called by Miami PD to look into the case of a missing woman."

My mind froze on *Miami*. I grew up in Sarasota, about 230 miles from Miami, but I considered the whole of Florida my old stomping ground.

"Miami?" It felt like my collar was tightening around my neck.

Jack narrowed his gaze on me. "Yes. Is there a problem?"

"No." *Only that if my parents find out how close I am to them, they'll want a visit.*

It wasn't that I had a bad relationship with them, but my pops and I never quite saw eye to eye. No matter what I accomplished in my life, he wasn't impressed.

The plane started moving, and I looked out the window beside me to the hangar, longing to return there. I'd at least still be in Virginia, a suitable distance from Pops, a long way from Florida, and—

"Wait, you said Miami?" I asked, an idea sparking in my mind.

Jack pursed his lips. "I think that's clear by now."

"There's an FBI field office right there," I said, sitting up and stretching out my neck. "Why aren't they—"

"We've been specifically asked for," Jack cut in. "Now is there anything else or can I continue?"

“There’s nothing else,” I said, apologetic and remorseful, not sure why I was provoking the man.

“There’s reason to believe that a serial killer has abducted the woman.” Jack tilted his head to the case files in front of us as the plane rocked violently, speeding down the runway. “Look it over and we’ll discuss. We’ve got a meeting with the locals when we land.”

I opened the file and immediately wished I hadn’t. The pictures on top were of two decapitated heads. Today was about to get a whole lot worse.

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