

A sample of

THE  
LITTLE  
GRAVE

by Carolyn Arnold

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THE  
LITTLE  
GRAVE

CAROLYN ARNOLD

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dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

*This book is dedicated to George, who always reminds me  
of the power and strength I possess and has been  
my cheerleader for over twenty years.*



# PROLOGUE

*Atlanta, Georgia, United States  
Five and a Half Years Ago, January*

Her past didn't sit and stay like an obedient dog. It was more a wolf that stalked her every move, breathed down her neck, and inched closer with every passing second. The hundreds of miles she'd traveled or the state lines she'd crossed in the last five months didn't matter; her hunter was there and had her constantly looking over a shoulder. She yearned to stop and catch her breath but knew the second she did her life would be over. She'd be ripped apart by the unmerciful teeth of her history.

Casey-Anne was three minutes into her set and hanging upside down on the pole when she spotted him at the back of the strip club, leaning against the bar, no drink in hand. He appeared within a haze of cigarette smoke, giving the illusion of an apparition. But he was very much real, and his gaze was fixed on her. Not in the sad, pathetic, and predictable way most men ogled her at Georgia's Peaches, pinning her with their lascivious leers. No, he had something else on his mind.

He was there to kill her.

Her heartbeat thumped, its bass reverberating in her skull. She spun around and landed on the stage, feeling more vulnerable than she had since that night she'd run away. Performing had given her a sense of power and control. Men could look but not touch. But right now all that confidence had been stripped away. She was more

exposed than ever—not because all she wore was a skimpy thong that left very little to the imagination and fine-pointed heels that added six inches to her height—but because of that man.

She carried on her routine, pretending to ignore him. She focused on her well-practiced moves and gave sultry pouts and seductive looks to every man who tossed a wadded bill at her feet. But the only thing she could think about was getting the hell out of there.

Her last song wound down and she rushed back to the dressing room. She'd have to leave the money from the stage behind. Small price if it meant her life.

Tessa, a fellow dancer who went by the stage name of Ginger and wore a wig of red curls that reached her ass, was applying mascara in a grimy, pitted mirror. "How's the crowd?"

Casey-Anne barely spared her a glance as she grabbed everything from her locker and stuffed all of it into her duffel bag.

"Hello? Ya hard of hearing?"

"I'm getting the hell out of here." Casey-Anne shucked the heels, slipped on a pair of blue jeans and pulled a sweater over her head. She pushed her feet into running shoes and threw on her coat.

"That bad, huh." Tessa exchanged her mascara brush for a compact of blush.

Without another word, Casey-Anne flew past her, out the back door and past the bouncer. She'd just swing by her apartment and pick up some things before hitting the road. She wasn't safe here anymore.

The streets were bare, and the January evening was cool for Georgia. It seeped through to her bones and turned the sheen of sweat on her body into a layer of ice.

She hustled, glancing behind her with attention on the shadows, the darkness the streetlights didn't reach. She didn't see anyone following her, but that didn't mean the man wasn't there. She could feel his eyes piercing through the night.



She picked up her speed. Her place was only a three-block walk from the club; a short distance but it always felt like a long way in the dark. Her skin pricked with goose bumps, but she couldn't give in to panic and hysteria. Or let her mind dwell on her nightmarish past.

There was the scuffing of shoes behind her and she spun around. But no one was there.

A half block to go. Maybe she was overreacting. Maybe there was no need to head out right away. She could wait until daylight. Tonight, she'd pour herself a glass of wine and take a nice, long hot shower and crawl into bed. Yes, that was a pleasant thought, and it spurred her forward. In this fantasy she could almost blink away the recollection of that man. Blank stare, hardened jaw, rigid body.

She took the stairs to her apartment building's front door two at a time and unlocked it. Once inside, she pushed against it to ensure it shut tight and the automatic lock was back in force. It was then she caught movement outside the sidelight. She jumped back.

A man was on the other side. There was a scratching noise at the knob.

She couldn't get herself to move toward the stairwell for her third-floor apartment. Her legs weren't responding.

The handle turned—the sound had been a key in the lock—and a man she recognized as another tenant stepped inside.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi.” She could barely squeeze out the tiny word as she rushed to push the door shut again.

He took off toward his apartment, leaving her in the small entry, heaving for breath like she'd run a marathon. She jogged to her apartment, threw the deadbolt and linked the chain, and fell against the door. Safe. For now she had escaped the wolf on her trail.

She dropped her bag and jacket on the floor and rushed to the kitchen. A bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon had her name all over

it. She guzzled some back, assuring herself that soon all would be better, and took some wine in a glass with her down the hall.

She ran the water hot, got undressed and under the spray, closed her eyes and let her mind drift to dreams of a future that didn't include dancing for money, and where her past was so far behind her she couldn't recall it. A time, flashing forward, when she obtained her nursing license and had a job in a doctor's office or a hospital.

A thud.

Her eyes shot open and she turned off the taps to listen. All was silent except for her breathing and the pounding of her heart in her ears. It had to simply be paranoia eating away at her sanity. She was, after all, in a locked apartment, in a locked building. But doubt gnawed on her. If someone were determined enough, they could find their way in. Pick a lock, come up with a ruse, or let themselves in on the heels of another tenant.

She squeezed her eyes shut, took some long breaths and calmed her nattering mind. There. All was better.

The shower curtain was ripped down, and the man from the club was standing there.

A scream curdled in her throat.

She scrambled to get around him but there was no way past. Her feet slipped on the wet surface of the tub and her arms sprang out to help her offset her balance, but he had a hold on her. He yanked her out of the tub and slammed her to the floor.

Her head smacked against the tile, and sparkles of white light danced across her vision.

He lowered himself on top of her, pinning her. "Where is it?" His breath smelled like stale cigarettes and whiskey.

"I..." Her eyes rolled back and there was brief, inviting darkness. A place where pain didn't exist.

He slapped her across the face and clamped her jaw in his hand. "Tell me!"

She wanted to fight, to show him that she'd learned her power since she'd escaped. But her mind wasn't working, and she didn't have the strength to move.

He stood and pulled a gun.

She couldn't get her mouth to work or she'd tell him where it was. That might give her a chance of survival.

"You want to die? Tell me where it is!" he roared.

Tears fell down her cheeks. "I—I—" Her mind went blank; her thoughts encased within a web of thick gauze.

"Stupid bitch!"

She barely had a chance to blink when the bullet hit, but her final thought was, *The wolf caught me, and now I can stop running and rest.*

# CHAPTER ONE

*Woodbridge, Virginia*

*Sunday, January 10th, 11:30 PM Eastern Time*

Amanda Steele threw her legs over the side of the bed, grabbed her underwear from the floor, and stepped into them. In the dimly lit room, she followed the trail of clothing, collecting each piece as she went along.

“Where ya goin’, darlin’?” the man, whatever-his-name, said.

First rule of one-night stands: no names.

She kept moving but pinched her eyes shut. It was January tenth, the start of a new year, and, while most people were still clinging to their resolutions, she’d resumed old habits: sleeping with strangers. But she knew better than to deceive herself into thinking she’d change. There was only one adjustment she was interested in making and it was outside of her abilities. It would require a time machine. Only she’d go further back than three hours ago when she’d picked up the handsome guy drinking beer in a Woodbridge bar.

“Come on, don’t you want to stay? We can—”

“I don’t spend the night.” Rule two. She was surprised by how often she had to tell the men that. In fact, most begged her to stay. Some even tried to lure her with the promise of breakfast. Despite men being painted as philanderers, so many were desperate for a sole, meaningful relationship.

She had found everything but her T-shirt, and a bubble of panic started in her chest as she scanned the room. *Think, think, think...*

Her shirt had been the first thing he'd taken off her as they stumbled into the motel room. Her gaze went to the air-conditioning unit by the door and she was relieved to see her shirt in a ball on the floor next to it. She snagged the shirt and set out for the bathroom, hugging her clothing to her chest. She shut the bathroom door behind her with her foot and halted at the sight of herself in the mirror. The green of her eyes had dulled over the last five and a half years, a testament to the fact she was doing nothing more than walking through life, barely a shadow of her former self. But she'd lost everything one tragic, fateful night. Her drive, her purpose, her career aspirations about following in her father's footsteps and becoming police chief. The hardest hit: she'd lost her family—in one swoop. Her love and husband of ten years and her six-year-old daughter, taken out by a drunk driver.

She gripped the sink, her knuckles turning white. She'd been robbed—they'd been robbed. But she'd also been taught the harsh lesson that there was no point in making grand plans for the future. Clinging to optimism was nothing but a cruel illusion. Life held nothing but pain and sorrow. And emptiness. Hopelessness.

A single tear fell, and she swiped it away, angry at herself for bringing them into her melodrama again. As if their deaths had turned her into a woman who slept with strangers and had her popping sleeping pills every night. They were not to blame, and she didn't need to consider their feelings. They were dead. Six feet under.

Cold. Hard. Fact.

She snapped on her bra and put on her shirt. She was zipping up her jeans when the man knocked on the door.

"You sure I can't talk you into staying? It was pretty hot."

Every guy found it "hot." So many of them had bigger egos than they had—

"One more go?" he implored.

She swung the door open. He was standing there naked with one arm overhead, elbow leaned against the doorframe, his other hand positioned on his upper thigh in a cocky pose that would make most women weak in the knees. He was a handsome man—and he was right, the sex had been hot—and maybe in another life they could have been something, but she'd had the love of her life. He'd been taken away. Maybe that's why one-night stands had become her medication, her addiction, and her punishment.

The man smiled at her and moved in to kiss her.

She stepped back and held up a hand between them. "It was fun. Now it's over."

"I've got the room for the night." Spoken as if that made a difference.

"Enjoy."

His shoulders sagged. "Ouch, you're cold as ice. Can't I get your number at least? Maybe give you a call sometime?"

She laid a tender hand on his cheek. "Now, now. You're a big boy and you know how this works."

Rule three: keep anonymity in all respects. No names *and* no personal ties. That meant no exchanging phone numbers. It was also why they'd hooked up in a motel and not at her place or his. She viewed the detachment necessary to protect her emotions but also to keep them out of her personal business. None of the men needed to be privy to her past and the baggage she carried. She didn't want to be looked upon as some damsel in distress in need of saving, and she certainly didn't need anyone's pity. She got all she needed from them: a few seconds to feel something and a distraction from her grief.

"Well, I'm not really sure what to say then. Thanks?" He raked a hand through his hair and she almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"Sure." With that she grabbed her coat and left the room.

The January night air was cool on her cheeks and nipped at her nose. Christmas lights still twinkled in the windows of the motel's

lobby; any magic spells the season tried to cast were ineffective on her. Christmas was a representation of how sad and pathetic her life had become since the accident. She used to love it, but there was no point anymore. She'd lost too much, become too hardened. The only way she'd survived this past Christmas was due to the company of her best friend Becky Tulson. They'd drunk hot apple cider, shared laughter, and watched action flicks. The rest of the world could keep their seasonal feel-good movies with their carols, gingerbread, and destined soulmates. She'd had all that, but it was gone. Just like the season and any mirage of normalcy and joy.

She got into her Honda Civic, giving a quick glance at the black Dodge Ram pickup parked in the slot next to hers. It belonged to the man she'd just slept with. She could run his plate, find out his name, but there'd be no purpose. Whatever they'd shared was over.

She cranked the heat and was rewarded with an initial blast of cold air from the vents. It still wasn't warm by the time she pulled out of the motel parking lot.

She should just go home, have a shower and wash the sex off her. After all, her shift started at eight in the morning and it was going on eleven thirty at night. But the pain in her soul was so intense, it was like its own entity. She used to cry so hard after sleeping with a man, her body would heave. Now she stuffed any emotions way deep inside, did her best to shut them out completely. But tonight, she could use something stronger than a sleeping pill. And it wasn't just because she'd slept with a stranger. The drunk who'd killed her family had just been released from prison a few days ago, giving her that final nudge toward the precipice. Maybe now she'd finally have the courage to step further into the darkness.

She drove to a sketchy neighborhood with a smattering of lit Christmas lights clinging to the eaves on a few houses. The strings sagged as if begging for reprieve. Discarded trees were lined up at the curb awaiting pickup.

She parked in front of a rundown clapboard house. It wasn't advisable for a woman—or any outsider, for that matter—to come to this area unaccompanied after dark, but she wasn't entirely alone. She opened her glove box and took out her Glock. Her detective's badge slid to the front of the compartment, resting over the registration and insurance paperwork. She held it in her hands and traced her fingers over the eagle. This piece of gold used to mean so much to her, but when Kevin and Lindsey had died it was like the world had gone from color to black and white, and she wasn't sure how to reinfuse color.

She looked at the house—no sign that Christmas cheer had ever existed there—but couldn't get herself to step out of the car. She'd never been here before, but she knew who was inside. He went by "Freddy," but his real name was Hank Cohen. He'd turned to the streets at fifteen when his mother took up with an abusive man who'd slapped him around one too many times. He had been in and out of jail for dealing, but Amanda would guess his list of crimes was more extensive than that. The reasoning behind his handle was a mystery to her.

Now, all she had to do was get out of the car, walk up the cracked pavement to the door, and knock.

*That's all*, she coached herself. But it really wasn't "all." She was a detective in the Homicide Unit under the Criminal Investigations Division and Violent Crimes Bureau for the Prince William County Police Department. She was supposed to be a role model, to lead by example.

But Freddy could give her what she needed. He offered street drugs, but she was interested in getting her hands on some Xanax. After the accident, her doctor had prescribed it for a few months but then he had refused to renew the prescription. He'd told her it wasn't healthy to stay on the pills long-term and recommended she see a therapist. He'd referred her to one, who she saw a grand total of three times. It made her feel worse talking about Kevin



and Lindsey to a stranger. Her internal dialogue nattered enough, and that's why she needed something to shut up the voices. The over-the-counter sleeping pills could only do so much. The Xanax helped her become so relaxed she didn't have the energy to feel or think a damn thing.

She gave another glance toward Freddy's house, then at the badge still in her hand, and blinked back tears. She'd already fallen so far from grace. Did it matter if she slipped further? If she took this step, would there be a way back? And if there wasn't, did she care?

She tossed her badge back in the glove box and reached for the door handle. Her cell phone rang, and her heart palpitated off rhythm. She took a few deep breaths. "Detective Steele," she answered, sinking lower in her seat and feeling shame.

"Amanda? It's Becky."

She'd known Becky since kindergarten, but now Becky was an officer with Dumfries Police Department, the small town where Amanda lived. Given that it was just after midnight now, she'd wager Becky's call was related to work as Dumfries PD turned suspicious deaths and murders over to Amanda's department at PWCPD for investigation, but Amanda wasn't on shift. "Is everything okay?"

"There's something you should know. Chad Palmer's been found dead in a room at Denver's Motel."

Amanda's throat constricted and her vision went black. Chad Palmer—the man who'd destroyed her world and taken her family from her. All because he'd gotten behind the wheel drunk and crossed the line in more ways than one.

She couldn't bring herself to talk. She was too busy processing this news. Denver's was a dive motel that catered to lowlifes. It was a fitting exit ramp for Palmer.

"I had to call it in, but I just wanted to give you a heads-up." Becky's voice was barely above a whisper.

“Was he murdered?” she squeezed out.

“I don’t know. I’m here now, and it’s not obvious exactly what killed him.”

Chills shot down her arms, goose bumps rising in their wake.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“Of course.”

Amanda hung up but kept her grip on her phone tight and turned her attention to the glove box, her mind on her badge. She gave one last, desperate look at Freddy’s and drove toward Denver’s. Becky’s call had saved her this time.

## CHAPTER TWO

Amanda pressed the gas and made it from Woodbridge to Dumfries in less than the fifteen minutes it would normally take. Between the time of night and her speed, it took her under ten. But for every one of those minutes she was thinking about what she was going to find once she got to Denver's Motel. Was Chad Palmer really dead?

If so, he had finally gotten what he'd deserved after all this time. The law certainly hadn't doled out justice when it had given him five years, the equivalent of a slap on the wrist. Even tacking on the additional five months he'd spent behind bars during the trial was nothing. Call it karma that he'd just been released from prison two days ago and his undeserved freedom had been snatched from him so quickly.

Denver's Motel was a single-story establishment with maybe twenty rooms, laid out in a horseshoe around an inground swimming pool that had found a second life as a garden. Its clientele would have included the shadier types.

When Amanda arrived, there was no sign of the Crime Scene Unit, but two police cruisers were in the parking lot; both had their lights flashing. An officer was in one but shrouded in darkness, making it hard to distinguish if it was Becky. There was also an SUV marked *Police Town of Dumfries*, which would belong to a sergeant with Dumfries PD, likely Lisa Greer. Amanda only knew of her through Becky and hadn't met her yet, as she'd just transferred in a few weeks ago. Hopefully, that meant she didn't

know Amanda's history with the deceased. But whether the sergeant was Greer or someone else, they'd leave once Amanda's sergeant from PWCPD arrived. Their immediate job was just to watch over the scene until it could be handed over.

Amanda parked, grabbed her badge and gun and set across the courtyard. There was a woman in slacks and a winter coat posted next to an opened door.

"Amanda," Becky called out to her.

Amanda shut her eyes for a second, then turned. Her friend's shoulder-length hair was in a ponytail, as it often was when she was on duty, and swinging side to side. She'd hustled to catch up.

"What are you doing here?" Becky asked.

"Where else would I be?" Amanda resumed walking, but Becky cut in front of her, blocking her path.

"You need to go home."

Amanda juked to go around Becky, but her friend moved with her. She was a couple of inches shorter than Amanda's five-foot-nine, but she was solid and athletic. Amanda stopped, let her arms dangle. "You had to know I'd show up."

Becky looked over a shoulder, and it had Amanda following the direction of her gaze. The woman outside the motel room was watching them closely, her brows pinched together.

"Maybe," Becky admitted, "but I'd hoped you wouldn't. Your being here really isn't a good idea."

Amanda tucked a strand of her ginger hair over her left ear and scanned the lot for any department vehicles from PWCPD. "I don't see any other detectives from Homicide on scene yet." The words were out before Amanda gave them much thought. Did she really want to get involved with the investigation, assuming Palmer had been murdered? When she'd sped over here, it had been an instinct, just to see the man who had killed her family dead, as if by doing so it would heal a part of her.

"No, but—"

“Then I’m the first homicide detective to arrive. That means I qualify to enter the scene.”

The woman waved her over. Amanda pointed her out to Becky. “I’m guessing that’s Greer?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, your boss seems to think I’m here because I was assigned the case.”

“But you weren’t.”

“Can’t help what other people think. Besides, it’s only a matter of time, and she’s looking impatient.” Amanda butted her head toward Greer. She felt like she was careening down a steep hill without brakes, unable to stop, only able to steer.

“Fine,” Becky huffed out. “But, just so you know, seeing him dead isn’t going to help. You might think it will, but it won’t.”

Tendrils of anger twisted through her, squeezing, gripping, like vines to brick, working to pry the stone loose and destroy the structure. “How could you possibly know? That man took my—” She couldn’t bring herself to finish. There were times she battled with who was truly to blame for the accident. If she hadn’t insisted that Kevin look at some stupid meme on her phone, maybe he’d have had a chance to react in time.

Becky put a hand on her arm. “I know.” With that, she walked back to her cruiser to resume guarding the crime scene.

Amanda clenched her jaw and worked to calm her temper. She flashed a cordial smile as she approached Greer. “Sergeant,” she greeted her. “I’m Detective Steele from Homicide with Prince William County Police Department.” She held up her badge with a shaky hand.

“Sergeant Greer,” she said stiffly, glancing past Amanda to Becky, likely curious about their interaction.

Amanda tucked her badge away and peacocked her stance. She wanted to give the absolute appearance that she belonged there. “Has the medical examiner’s office been called?”

The sergeant's attention shifted back to her. "Yes, of course, and crime scene investigators from Forensics."

"Mind if I—" Amanda gestured toward the room. Number ten.

"Not at all."

Amanda stepped over an upturned running shoe just inside the doorway and stopped.

Chad Palmer was supine on the bed beside two empty handles of whiskey. A rigged hand was wrapped around one of them. His eyes were shut, but there was vomit around his nose and mouth. She turned away at the waft of stench hitting her nose, but otherwise she was unmoved. Numb, indifferent, as if she were watching a scene from outside of herself.

The man she'd villainized appeared vulnerable in death, soft, human... even harmless. A man of thirty-seven, only two years older than she. But she could never forget the evil he'd inflicted.

\*

*The black pavement is glistening from the rain, making it look like they're driving on a blanket of a million sparkling diamonds. Fat drops pitter-patter against the windshield and the wipers squeak on every other pass.*

*"I spy something that is... black," Lindsey says amid giggles.*

*I turn and smile at my baby girl. Her ginger curls fall as ringlets over her shoulders.*

*"Give me a clue," Kevin says, keeping his attention on the road. "Is it outside?"*

*"Yes." Another gaggle of laughter, the sound of a cherub.*

*My phone pings with a message from my sister, Kristen. I laugh and hold my phone up for Kevin to see. He starts to smile, but a blinding light is rushing straight for us.*

*Kevin torques the wheel, but it's not fast enough.*

*A deafening crash of metal on metal as two vehicles mangle together and spin.*

*Absolute darkness descends.*

\*

Amanda turned her back to Palmer, her heart hammering. What did she really expect by coming here? Closure? Redemption? Debt repaid? Ridiculous.

“Steele? What the hell are you doing here?”

She blinked as her boss, Sergeant Malone, came into focus. He was in the doorway, hands on hips. He was in his fifties with a receding hairline. What hair he lacked on the top of his head, he made up for with a full beard and mustache. All of it gray, supposedly to testify to his wisdom and experience, as he would happily point out. In her favor, he was looking more concerned than pissed off by her presence.

“I was nearby.” She could still back away without inserting herself in this investigation, but something about seeing Palmer dead made her feel a modicum of control, something she hadn’t felt in a very long time.

“Small town. Everywhere is nearby.” Malone scowled and jacked a thumb over his shoulder to indicate Becky. “Your being here have something to do with—”

“It has nothing to do with her.”

“Uh-huh. Detective Steele, I’d like to talk to you. Outside. Now.” Malone curled his finger, signaling for her to go with him but, when he turned, he bumped into Detective Dennis Bishop a.k.a. Cud.

He was smacking gum, as he often was, much like a cow. Hence the nickname. Except Cud was a lean, muscled brickhouse, with not an inch of flab on him. “Oh, Steele, I didn’t know—”

“She’s just about to leave.” Malone met her gaze and darted his eyes toward her car.

Sergeant Greer was speaking with Becky by her cruiser, and, given her friend’s defensive gesturing, it would seem Malone might have mentioned something to the Dumfries sergeant about Amanda’s connection to the victim. The touch of guilt she felt

for showing up there and causing a problem for Becky still wasn't enough to make her leave. It was almost like she had something to prove now; though what that might be, she didn't quite know. "I'm not going anywhere," she stamped out.

"No?" Malone angled his head, challenging her.

"We don't know what happened to Palmer yet."

"And your point?" he countered.

What was her point? Again she faced the question of whether she really wanted to get involved in the investigation, but like that out-of-control car, she didn't feel she could stop herself. Like she'd already come too far or crossed a line just by showing up here and now she had to see it through. She gave Malone's question some thought, then said smoothly, "If he was murdered, I'm going to have the most motivation to find the killer."

"How do you figure that?"

Fair question as she didn't feel sorry for the guy—not at all. So what was her motivation here? The feeling of control was something that echoed back to her. She'd had none when he'd wiped out her family; by uncovering what happened to him, in a way she'd have some power over how justice was served.

"Palmer? As in Chad Palmer?" Cud interjected, bringing his chewing to a momentary pause. "The man who—" He silenced under her glare and paled.

That was the thing with small towns; everyone knew your story. It was also something that had her going to Woodbridge to meet men. "Don't you ever mind," she slapped back.

"I was just going to say you made a good point... You know, with what you said." Cud glanced at Malone, then back to her and added, "You would have motive."

She glared at Cud, hoping he received her silent sarcastic *thanks for your support, buddy*. "If he was killed, there's at least one other person with motive, because I didn't kill him."



“Hold up. No one’s saying you did,” Malone groaned but seemed to hesitate.

“You can’t honestly be considering assigning her the case.” Cud flailed his arm toward Amanda.

“Excuse me,” she barked. “I’m more than capable of setting aside my personal connection here.” But her internal voice was calling her out on that claim. *Did* she have the ability to set it aside?

“More accurately, conflict of interest,” Cud volleyed back.

“Sarge,” Amanda said, wishing Malone would step in. “Give me the opportunity here.”

Malone rubbed his jaw.

Cud smacked his gum. “You can’t really be considering letting her take the lead, boss.”

“What’s it to you?” Malone snapped at Cud. “I give it to her, and you and Detective Ryan catch the next one.”

That would be Natalie Ryan, nicknamed Cougar, for reasons any knowledgeable adult could imagine.

“Whatever,” Cud mumbled.

“Give us a minute alone.” Malone snapped his fingers at Cud when he didn’t move.

“Fine. I’ll be over there.” He walked about ten feet away.

Small flakes started coming down and Amanda glanced up: overcast and no visible stars. Nothing to wish on. Story of her life these days.

“You sure you could handle this?” Malone asked.

“Absolutely.”

He leaned down, leveling his gaze with hers. “If you have any doubt about it, speak now. You know you can talk to me.”

Scott Malone had been a good friend of her father’s, and still was, as far as she knew, and it earned her special treatment. Other detectives under Malone couldn’t talk as freely to him as she could.

“No doubts,” she lied. How had things escalated to this point: her fighting for the case? Her heart wanted to run, but her legs wouldn’t move.

He scanned her eyes and straightened back up to full height and rubbed the top of his head. “I’m probably going to regret this— And if I catch a whiff of drama, so help me, you’ll be off the case so fast your head’ll spin. Got me?”

“That means—”

“Yeah, I’m letting you work it.” The way his mouth contorted, his permission must have tasted like bile. “If Lieutenant Hill finds out, my head will roll, so I’m being very serious when I say don’t let me down.”

The sergeant really was putting himself in a precarious spot, and a flash of remorse rushed through Amanda. Sherry Hill was no-nonsense and not one to mess with, and, as much as Malone was a fan of her father’s, Hill was not. The lieutenant made no secret of holding a grudge against her dad. Keeping drama out altogether would be a challenge, but she’d do her best. “I won’t let you down.”

“Good. Now I have other conditions.” Malone hooked his thumbs on his waistband. “You need to call your father, tell him that Palmer’s dead. And who knows, maybe you’ll—”

“No.” She shook her head. “You don’t get to tell me to talk to him and leverage this case to make that happen.” She hadn’t spoken to any of her family since not long after the trial had ended. Not her mother, father, her four younger sisters, or her older brother. It had been her decision to pull away from them, and even though they still reached out to her at Christmas and on her birthday, it just felt far too difficult. Being around her parents, her siblings, and her nieces and nephews amplified all that she had lost.

“It would just be nice, is all, if you could reconnect,” Malone said. “I know your father would love nothing more.”

She wanted to tell him he’d crossed a professional line with this request, but if she pointed that out, he’d likely reciprocate

with the fact that her working this case was technically crossing that same line. Then he'd assign it to Cud, and now she'd been given the go-ahead, she wanted to keep it. "You said you had conditions plural?"

His face darkened, and she feared her effort to redirect the conversation had him changing his mind.

"What else?" she asked, afraid to take her next breath as if it would alter his response.

"You realize my letting you work this case at all is a huge conflict of interest."

"I do."

"For that reason, I can't have you working this one sol—"

"Oh no," she griped, dreading what was coming. He was going to give her a partner. "Haven't we talked this topic to death?"

"Yes, but apparently it hasn't sunk into your thick skull that it's happening."

She groaned. He was going to give her a partner, but every one she'd had pried into her business, thought they knew her, tried to mind-shrink her. To date, all of them had been homegrown and acquainted with her tragic story. They treated her with kid gloves, like she was some sort of fragile china doll about to fall off a shelf. They missed the fact that she'd already smashed into a million, indiscernible pieces. "Who?" she shoved out. "Don't tell me it's Cud."

"It's not Cud. It's a new guy." He added that tidbit under his breath.

"A new guy?" she parroted. Surely he was joking.

"And I suggest you make it work. You might be the former police chief's daughter—"

"And good at my job," she cut in, now longing to be out from the shadow of Nathan Steele. She'd kept her maiden name after marriage because for the longest time she'd wanted to be her dad, and his name was powerful as she worked up the ranks. After

Kevin's death, there had been many times she'd wished she'd taken his surname, James.

"Sure, but you need to play by the rules like the rest of us," Malone said, disregarding her interruption.

And he didn't need to lay them out to her. At every homicide it was desired to have a primary detective and a number two. Maybe she should be grateful she'd gotten along solo as often as she did. "Okay, fine, have it your way. But what am I supposed to do now? Sit around and wait for the new guy to show up?"

"His name's Trent Stenson, and you won't need to wait for long. I was going to tell you in the morning, but it seems like Christmas has come again, or early, however you want to look at it."

"Yippie," she mumbled, picturing some backwoods type in a cowboy hat and chaps with grass hanging out of his mouth, but a face popped into her mind. "Wait. You said Trent Stenson?"

"Uh-huh. You know him?"

To say that she knew him would be stretching it, but she'd met him at a barbecue Becky had hosted one summer several years ago. He had boyish good looks—blond hair, blue eyes—but his starry-eyed approach to life made him seem younger. He had been a uniformed officer with Dumfries PD at the time and had rambled on about how he'd helped the FBI with a serial-rapist-and-murder case. He declared then that he wanted to be a homicide detective for Prince William County PD one day. Guess some people had stars to wish upon and grant their dreams.

"Amanda?" Malone prompted.

"I've met him."

Malone smiled. "Yeah, small world, law enforcement is round here."

Trent had been so cheery and just the thought of being around that... "I don't know if this is a good idea. And you said he's new to the department."

“Sure, and as you just said, you’re good at your job, so you’ll be a good mentor for the kid.”

She hardly felt qualified to be anyone’s mentor, and “the kid” was probably only a couple of years younger than she was.

Malone went on. “For the record, Stenson is now officially your partner.”

“Let me guess. He’ll take over Turner’s old desk?” Russell Turner didn’t deserve the badge and had been a huge pain in the ass, though his true failing was his outright bigotry against people of color. There was no room for that in any capacity, on any force.

“Why not?”

Some days it felt like everyone was sitting on everyone else. “No reason,” she said.

“Good, it’s settled. And I also want to make it clear that I’m giving the lead on this case to Stenson.”

“The lead,” she blurted out. “To a rookie detective?”

He raised his eyebrows, the arches serving like upward-pointing arrows. “On paper,” he added, holding eye contact with her. “It’s the only way I can get this to fly. As it is, I’m not going to advertise it.”

“You want me to be his number two? Report to him?” She didn’t do well with being managed, let alone by an underling.

“You report to me. The rest is just on paper—for this case.”

She took a few deep breaths. “Fine.”

“So we have an understanding?”

“Yes, we have an understanding,” she mumbled.

Malone turned his head and put his left ear near her mouth. “Can you say that again? I didn’t quite hear you.”

“I’m on board,” she said, raising her voice.

Malone cringed and pulled back, cupping his ear. “No need for that. I’m doing you a favor here. And I’m not deaf—or at least I wasn’t.”

She mouthed, *Sorry*.

“All right, I’ll call Stenson and give him the good news.”

He pulled out his phone and headed for his vehicle but stopped after a few steps and turned. He looked at her for a long moment and said nothing. Whatever he was about to say was going to kill him if his sagging shoulders and hooded eyes gave any indication.

“In case this thing truly does turn out to be a murder, you need to get your alibi in order immediately. Without that... Well, I’m going to have to pull you from the case.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.” After all, she knew she hadn’t killed him.

“One more thing, and I mean it. Don’t touch a thing until your partner gets here.” Malone pulled out his cell phone and put it to an ear as he walked away.

Amanda looked heavenward again. After losing her husband and daughter, she’d blamed God, but if there was any chance that He or She could intervene and give her strength to see this investigation through, she just might try prayer again.

## CHAPTER THREE

The smaller the town, the harder it was to keep secrets. It had been the bane of Amanda's existence since she was a little girl, but she'd always managed to dismiss the murmurings and gossip. After the accident though, it came to define her. She was the "poor thing" who had lost her husband and daughter. She was marked, unable to escape the repercussions. While other people moved on with their lives, she was locked in the past. Even the rare times she caught a glimpse of the horizon, she couldn't seem to advance toward it.

She stood outside the motel room and blinked away snowflakes, gripping her coat to herself. They didn't get much snow in Dumfries and it was sort of magical when it did happen. Lindsey used to squeal with delight and come running to Amanda. *"Mommy, Mommy, can I play outside?"*

"Amanda? Hello."

"What?"

"Where's the sarge going?" Cud nodded toward Sergeant Malone, who was getting into his vehicle.

"Not his keeper," she replied as Malone drove off. He probably wanted to remove himself as far as possible from this investigation. Normally he hung around crime scenes longer.

"You get the case?" Cud asked.

"I did."

“Figures. And I’m your number two?”

“A shit? Yeah.” She didn’t really have a problem with Cud, not normally anyway. She just didn’t appreciate him accusing her of being unable to remain objective with this case.

He frowned. “Very funny.”

“And no, you’re not the number two. I am.” *At least on paper*, she thought.

“You—” Cud laughed. “I’ll be. Steele’s getting a partner. Still not me, I’m guessing?”

“Seeing as Malone never said a word to you? Wow, you should make detective.”

“Whatever. Guess I’m out of here then.” Cud trudged toward his vehicle, head into the wind.

Amanda walked over to Becky, who was stationed next to her cruiser. Sergeant Greer must have left while Amanda was talking to Malone.

“You okay?” Amanda asked Becky.

“Yeah, of course.”

“It looked like Greer was laying into you a bit.”

Becky rolled her eyes. “She can be a piece of work.”

“What was it all about?”

“I left my post for a millisecond, but Greer overheard Malone asking why you were here and she got the sense you shouldn’t be here, so she blamed me for letting you on scene. Anyway, enough about me. Malone give you the go-ahead?”

“If it’s a murder.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised. You have Malone wrapped around your finger.”

“Correction: my father has him wrapped around his. I just get to benefit.”

“Whatever way it goes,” Becky said. “I’m still worried about you.”

“No need. I’ve been through more than this.”



“I’m just afraid that ‘this’ is going to trigger the past.”

Amanda didn’t know how to respond. After all, what didn’t trigger the past? She was mired there. But maybe by investigating Palmer’s death, she could put all the guilt and the feelings of turmoil behind her and start to heal. What she knew for sure was there certainly wasn’t any way she could watch the case from the outside. She’d go crazy wondering where things stood.

“Why aren’t you in the room, doing your thing?” Becky asked.

“I need to wait for my partner to show—”

“Whoa, hold up. *You* are getting a partner?”

“Yep. Trent Stenson.”

Becky grinned, showing teeth, the expression touching her eyes. “What a great break for him. He must have just been transferred to Homicide.”

“He was.” She couldn’t conjure any enthusiasm at his dream coming true.

“He’ll be great. You’ll see.”

“Maybe.” She hitched her shoulders.

“Okay, what’s the problem? I know you don’t like working with a partner, but—”

“He’s the primary on the investigation.”

“Oh.” Becky’s mouth dropped open. “He’s—”

“Yeah, new, a rookie. Apparently, he’s the lead on paper. Only way Malone would let me work the case at all.”

“I see.”

“At least one of us does. So while I wait, I’m not to touch anything, but you can bring me up to speed. Who found him, for starters?”

“The hotel manager, guy by the name of Ronnie Flynn. He was headed down there”—Becky pointed to an ice chest against the motel—“for some cubes for his drink. He saw the curtains were open, said his eye was naturally drawn to look inside.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Blamed the flickering lights from the television. Anyway, that’s when he saw Palmer lying on the bed, eyes wide open and unblinking. Called it in.”

“He never went into the room?”

“Claims not.”

“And where is he now?”

“With Officer Deacon.” Becky pointed to the motel office. “He’s giving his statement.”

Two figures were inside, but the colored lights blinked in the window, taking her back to the Dreamcatcher Inn where she’d had her one-night stand. She really needed a shower. She’d speak with Flynn herself, but not yet. She turned back to Becky. “Anyone else staying in the motel tonight?”

“Yep. Five rooms were rented out in addition to Palmer’s. Everyone’s been asked to stay put and told to expect an officer to come by and question them, but that’s about as far as that’s gotten. I called you the minute I saw who it was.”

“I understand. All good anyway, as I like to talk to potential witnesses firsthand.”

Becky licked her lips, her gaze intent on Amanda.

“What?” Amanda asked.

Becky toed the accumulating snow on the ground with her boot. “It’s just that a lot of people aren’t going to be too thrilled you’re on the case. It could cause some problems for you.”

“I’m aware, but I can assure you no one wants this case wrapped up like I do.” As much as she struggled with her personal feelings toward Palmer, investigating his death had to bring her some closure. If not, she was at a loss for what would.

Becky squinted, the snowflakes larger and more plentiful than before. Why it bothered to snow when it would be melted by morning was beyond Amanda.

“You want this case wrapped up?” Her friend put it out there gingerly, but the enclosed implication still stung. “Are you sure there’s not a small part of you that might be happy he’s dead?”

Amanda glanced toward the road. There was no way she could look Becky in the eye and claim that wasn’t true. After the accident, she’d thought about his death a million times over, even contemplated taking his life herself.

“There is,” Becky concluded. “How can you investigate—”

Amanda bristled. “I never said that I was happy about this. You’re putting words in my mouth.”

“Am I though?” Becky punched out and with that turned toward her cruiser.

Tears beaded in Amanda’s eyes as she stared at the back of her friend’s head.

“Here, you’ll need these.” Becky lifted a pair of gloves and plastic booties out of the trunk of the car. “Looks like you could use them,” she said and pointed at Amanda’s now-wet boots.

Amanda took them and offered, “Thanks.”

“Uh-huh.” Becky got in the driver’s seat of the cruiser and shut the door.

Amanda felt her friend’s judgment coming through, despite the nice gesture. But there wasn’t time to dig into that conversation. She had a job to do and she was about finished waiting on Trent Stenson.

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