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DAUGHTERS

BOOKS BY CAROLYN ARNOLD

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STOLEN DAUGHTERS

CAROLYN ARNOLD

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dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

To survivors of abuse...

PROLOGUE

Dumfries, Virginia
Thursday, April 1st, 5:25 AM

Her lifeless eyes stared up at him. All was quiet. The struggle gone.

His rage had subsided, replaced by tranquility and bliss. He had risen above his past and shown mercy when the world had shown none to him.

Inspired, he tapped a kiss to his fingers and pressed them to her forehead. “Rest in peace.”

He closed her eyelids and got to his feet.

His gaze still upon her, he felt himself to be the very embodiment of love and forgiveness. He was... The Merciful.

Yes, he liked that.

Excitement vibrated through his entire body, but he had to move. There was more work to do.

He took the jerry can and soaked her body with fuel. Satisfied he was finished with her, he continued pouring as he walked down the hall, then stairs, to the main level.

He stopped in the middle of the house, a few feet from the puddle of fuel, his gas can now empty. He pulled a matchbook and struck one to flame. He watched it dance on the tip for a second or two before tossing it onto the accelerant. It ignited with a blast of heat.

He hustled through the door into the backyard, a smile on his face. The darkness of early morning and his black clothing were

his cover. The neighborhood, too, was one in which people saw and heard nothing—and they certainly didn't talk to the police. Besides, most people would still be in bed.

And by the time anyone smelled smoke, the place would be ash. The girl along with it.

CHAPTER ONE

*Washington, DC
Thursday, April 1st, 10:00 AM*

Amanda Steele's phone rang, and she looked down at it on the conference table in front of her. She was seated in a room at a prestigious Washington law firm with her mother, and her mother's lawyer, Hannah Byrd.

Hannah stopped talking mid-sentence and looked at Amanda.

Caller ID told her it was her boss, Sergeant Malone. When Malone called, it often meant someone was dead. She looked apologetically at her mother and Hannah. "I'm sorry, but I need to take this."

"No problem," Hannah assured her with a smile.

"Thanks." Amanda answered and listened as Malone told her she was needed back in Dumfries immediately. A young woman had been pulled from a house fire in the east end, and the circumstances looked suspicious.

"Sorry, I know that you're probably in Washington right now..." Also a family friend, Malone knew about the meeting and the reason for it.

"No, don't mention it. I think we're almost finished anyway." She sought out Hannah's gaze, and the lawyer nodded. "I'll get there as soon as I can." She hung up and looked at her mother, feeling swamped with guilt. "I'm sorry, Mom."

“You’ve got a case.” A conclusion, not a question. But her mother was familiar with the demands on those in law enforcement, and it was one reason Amanda and her mother had driven there separately. If something came up, then it would free Amanda to leave.

“I do.” Amanda was torn. She wanted to get out of there but couldn’t quite get herself to move.

“Go,” her mother prompted.

“Will you be all right if I...?” Amanda pointed to the door.

“I’m a grown-ass woman, so, yes. Go. Besides, Hannah will take care of me.”

Amanda hesitated a few seconds longer, then stood and tapped a kiss on her mother’s forehead. She thanked her and Hannah for their understanding and left.

Stepping outside, she appreciated the warm, fresh air and the freedom—not that it could erase the reality that her mother was facing a murder charge. *A murder charge*, the thought repeated in her head.

She’d had a few months to come to terms with it and still hadn’t. Maybe it was really because she didn’t want to accept it. After all, Julie—Jules—Steele had been an upstanding citizen all her life... well, until this point.

She’d raised Amanda and her siblings—a brother and four sisters—and was now a grandmother to four. She was also the wife of the former police chief of the Prince William County Police Department.

Amanda got into her Honda Civic and headed to the Dumfries address Malone had given her. It would take about forty minutes, give or take depending on traffic, to get there from Washington. But she didn’t need a GPS to tell her that. She knew the route and every backstreet in Dumfries, where she’d grown up. It was a small town of under six thousand—not exactly a booming metropolis—but it was a desirable place to live given its close vicinity to Washington, DC. The flipside was that crime levels

were probably higher than what other small and more isolated communities might see.

While her father had been police chief for the PWCPD until his retirement five years ago, Amanda was currently a detective with Homicide stationed out of Central District Station in Woodbridge—another small town about ten minutes from Dumfries. Maybe one day she'd reach the position of chief, but given the trajectory of her life during the past six years, it might be a while before that happened.

She pulled down a side street, headed toward 532 Bill Drive, and had to park a block away. Dumfries PD had the area cordoned off to allow the firefighters room to work. She didn't see any sign of her partner, Trent Stenson, who Malone had told her would meet her on scene. She did see her friend, Becky Tulson, who worked with the Dumfries PD, though.

The same age as Amanda at thirty-five, Becky had her shoulder-length brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, which accentuated her heart-shaped face.

Amanda parked and got out of the car. The smell of smoke clung heavy in the air and tickled her throat.

She looked down the street at the mangle of emergency response vehicles. There were a few fire engines with the Dumfries Triangle Volunteer Fire Department, a medic's truck, an ambulance, and a police cruiser. They were all parked haphazardly in front of a two-story house that didn't look like it was in too bad of shape, considering it had been on fire.

She approached Becky, who was guarding this end of the scene. There would be another officer posted at the other side.

"Hey," Becky said, "how did everything go?" Amanda had told her about the planned meeting with Hannah this morning to discuss her mother's defense strategy.

Amanda let out a deep sigh. "Honestly? It's a long road ahead, and there are no guarantees."

Becky put a hand on Amanda's forearm. "I'm here. You know that?"

"Always." Amanda smiled. "You haven't seen Trent, have you?" She looked around again, but it was possible that Trent had parked at the opposite end of the scene.

"Not yet."

As if on cue, a PWCPD department car pulled up near Becky's cruiser, and Trent shut off the engine and got out.

"Ladies." He smiled at them both. He was a couple of years younger than Amanda, with blond hair and blue eyes. She imagined he might be a charmer when off the clock, but she had no romantic interest in him. One, having a partner on the job was complicated enough without making it personal; and two, she was seeing someone else. Logan Hunter. Their relationship was rather new, sometimes awkward, and entirely casual. Probably all because he was the first man she'd dated since her husband died in a tragic car accident almost six years ago, along with their six-year-old daughter.

"About time you got here," Amanda said. "I came from Washington and still beat you."

"Hey." Trent shrugged. "Got here as soon as I could."

"Primping takes time?" she teased.

"Well, I can't be showing up looking like riffraff."

She waved goodbye to Becky and started down the sidewalk with Trent toward 532, looking at the neighboring houses as she went. Most of them were in need of maintenance with sagging porches, chipped and peeling paint, and curled shingles. This part of town was where dreams came to die.

Two doors down from the scene, they ran into Officer Deacon with the Dumfries PD.

"I got the call," Amanda said, holding up her detective badge more out of habit than necessity. Both she and Trent had met Deacon before. He simply gestured for them to carry on.

Amanda took in 532 Bill Drive in more detail. A two-story century-old clapboard home. It was pretty much intact from what she could see from the outside, but the windows were boarded. She'd guess that was the case before the fire. The front door appeared to be lying on the grass, leaving a gaping hole in the structure where it used to be.

"Whoa, whoa. Hold up there." A man in dress shirt, tie, and slacks approached. He reminded Amanda of an old dog with his hooded eyes. He had a ruddy complexion but was trim and had an obvious exercise regimen, given the lay of his shirt across his chest and his thick arms. His hair was mostly gray with some cracked pepper.

Amanda held up her badge, and Trent followed suit. "Prince William County PD, Homicide Unit," she said. "And you are?"

"Fire Marshal Craig Sullivan. I'm in charge of this scene, ma'am."

He was older than she was, but she didn't take offense to the term *ma'am* like some women. It did sting a little today, though, with her thirty-sixth birthday only five days away.

Fire marshals were essentially arson investigators, but they were also a bit law enforcement. Some even carried guns, but they focused on their area of expertise—the cause of fires and gathering all pertinent evidence to that end. Amanda and Trent's relationship with Sullivan would be somewhat of a unified command structure. He'd stick to matters pertaining to the fire, and she and Trent would focus on the victim.

She shouldn't have to point all this out to Sullivan, though. "We're here about the dead girl," she countered, not about to get into any battle over jurisdiction, and her stomach souring at the word *girl*. It brought back her more recent encounter with a local sex-trafficking ring.

"She's in there." Sullivan pointed toward the medic's vehicle. "Firefighters found her when clearing and hauled her out for

medical attention. The medic attempted CPR but was given permission to call time of death by the attending doctor at the hospital. Hence, the body's still here—and now an ME is on his or her way from Manassas.”

Manassas, about thirty minutes north of Dumfries, was where the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner was located.

Amanda nodded and stepped toward the vehicle but turned back to Sullivan. “When did the fire start?”

“I’d estimate around five thirty, give or take. It was called into nine-one-one at five fifty by a neighbor a few doors down and across the street. We had it out by six twenty.”

It was going on eleven now, but it would have taken time for the fire marshal to do his thing and for the death to be called. Then she and Trent had to arrive, along with the ME—who still hadn’t shown up. Two things stood out to her. “You guys have a fast response time.”

“On the high end, we can be on scene within five minutes. We strive to get out of the firehouse within forty-five to sixty seconds from the time of alarm. When it’s residential, well, our drivers might press a little heavier on the gas. We know we’re dealing with people’s homes and lives are at stake.”

That might have been a little more information than she needed, but it was interesting. Now for the second thing she’d noted. “The person who placed the call to nine-one-one did so rather quickly after the fire was estimated to have started?”

“Yep.”

“Do you have this person’s information?”

“I can get that for you.”

“Thanks.” She also wanted to get her hands on the 911 tape.

“Do you figure it was arson?” Trent asked.

Sullivan seemed to acknowledge Trent for the first time. “I’m trained to look at the evidence without any preconceived notions about intention or foul play. As homicide detectives, you’d look

at everything with an eye to murder. But, with all that said, from what I see so far, I have no doubt in my mind the fire was set on purpose. Evidence is still being gathered from inside the home, but my initial impression is that accelerant was used. I'll still need to confirm what that was, but the girl is wet and smells of gasoline. The medic noticed it when performing life-saving endeavors."

She turned to Trent. "We'll need to speak to the person who called nine-one-one. They could have seen the firebug, maybe even *been* the firebug."

"Nah." Sullivan winced and shook his head. "Not to tramp on toes here, but a firebug, by their very nature, loves to watch the fires they set. They're not going to call and have them put out."

Amanda glanced over a shoulder to some people crowded across the street. Could one of them be the arsonist?

"Before you ask, we got pictures of everyone," Sullivan said.

She slowly drew her attention back to the fire marshal. The person who called in the fire may not have started it, but they could have seen the person responsible. She gestured to the boarded windows. "Did you do that or—"

"No, it was like that."

"But not the front door?" Trent flicked the tip of his pen toward the discarded door on the lawn.

"No."

They'd have to look up the property records, but Amanda would assume it had defaulted to the bank, given the boarded windows. If so, the previous owner might have set the fire to spite the bank—the girl an unexpected casualty—but then that didn't explain the gasoline on the body. "Do you know how long the home sat unoccupied?"

"Can't say I've gotten that far." Sullivan's eyes darkened. "I can tell you that it seems squatters used the place. Not much garbage, but there are a few mattresses upstairs. The girl was found on one."

Amanda took in the property, its long grass and the gate at the end of the driveway. “Guessing there’s a back door?”

“Yeah, and it’s definitely the access point they would have used—the people crashing here and likely the firebug. A large padlock was found on the back porch, and there’s evidence it was cut off. Now, the seed of the fire—”

“The seed?” Amanda queried, not quite sure what he meant by that terminology.

“The *origin* of the fire, where it started,” Trent jumped in to answer, shrugged under their gazes. “My uncle was a firefighter before he retired.”

“Huh.” Sullivan regarded Trent, this time with respect lighting his otherwise dull-gray eyes. “As I was about to say, the seed of the fire was in the middle of the main level and seemed to follow a trail toward the stairs. That’s what the burn marks are telling me anyway.”

Amanda nodded to acknowledge Sullivan’s conclusion and said, “Could you take us to the victim now?”

“Sure.” Sullivan led the way down the walk toward the medic’s vehicle.

As they moved, Amanda’s heart thumped a little off rhythm as she prepared herself to see the burnt remains of a young woman. Her mind was also churning with what exactly had taken place at 532 Bill Drive. A body doused with gasoline, left in a house set ablaze... that sounded like murder to her.

CHAPTER TWO

“Hey, Marshal Sullivan.” A uniformed firefighter came over just as they reached the medic’s vehicle. He was dressed in full gear, his helmet in hand. Soot was smeared on his cheeks and forehead. He gave Amanda and Trent a brief look but focused on Sullivan. “Is it good for us to head out?”

Sullivan gave a small bob of his head, then said, “Actually, I’d rather you stick around for a bit.”

A small pulse tapped in the firefighter’s cheek.

“These are Detectives Steele and Stenson with the PWCPD.” Sullivan gestured toward them.

The man leveled a cool gaze at her, but he removed a glove and held out a hand. “Spencer Blair.”

He had a strong grip, not surprising, but the way he was staring through her made the seventy-degree weather feel like a cold front was moving in. “Blair?” she asked to ensure she heard him right. She knew someone else with that last name.

“Uh-huh.” He then shook hands with Trent, though he barely gave him a glance.

Amanda studied the firefighter. He was in his mid-to-late twenties. “Is your mother Emma Blair, a crime scene investigator, by chance?”

“The one and only.” Spencer kept his gaze locked on her, and it would seem he had some sort of issue with her, just like his mother did. Her interactions with Amanda were always curt and cool.

“Small world.” Sullivan gripped Spencer’s shoulder. “Spencer here is one of the firefighters who pulled the young lady out of the house.”

“You thought she was alive?” Amanda said.

“Not my call. We see a body, we clear it from the structure, hand it over to the medic.”

Sullivan clarified, “The only reason we wouldn’t is if it was obvious the victim was dead or had been murdered. Think a knife sticking out of a chest or a body riddled with bullets.”

“Or burned very badly,” she said.

Sullivan shook his head. “We’d still remove them. That is unless it was very evident survival was impossible. In the case of an obvious murder, we’d do our best to defend the area... That just means we’d preserve it or protect it from the fire.”

Amanda nodded and turned to Spencer. “Sullivan told us she was found on a mattress. Did she have any personal belongings with her?”

Spencer raked a hand through his hair, looked around. “Not that I saw, but my focus was on clearing the house of victims—and keeping myself safe.” He glanced away from her to look at another fireman who was gesturing for him. Spencer turned to the marshal. “I gave you my statement already, so I’m not sure what else you could want.”

“I’d like to walk through the scene with you again.” Sullivan’s voice was firm.

“Well, I’ll be over there.” He joined his colleague, and they engaged in a spirited conversation that had Spencer’s arms gesturing wildly.

“Gave you his statement?” Amanda asked Sullivan.

“Standard procedure. Everyone who had contact with the victim needs to help me rebuild what happened. How the fire looked at the time, where the body was found, how it was positioned, etcetera. In an empty house, we’re at least not dealing with the possibility

of furniture being moved around, but still the conditions change due to the fire.”

She could appreciate all of what the marshal had said. “We’ll want to read those statements.”

“Of course. I’ll get them to you. I’ll also get you sketches and photos of the interior and where the body was found.” Sullivan knocked on the back of the medic’s van, and the doors swung open.

The smell of gasoline wafted out of the vehicle and had Amanda taking a few steps back.

“I’m not too late, I hope,” a man’s voice said behind her.

Amanda turned to find Hans Rideout. He was one of her favorite medical examiners. He was in his late forties and had a passion for working with the dead—as wrong as that might sound. But he never let his macabre job darken his spirits. More the opposite. He was quick with light humor and possessed a contagious smile. Rideout flashed one now and accompanied it with a small salute.

“Oh no, not you.” The medic, a forty-something man himself, groaned, but his expression quickly gave way to a large smile.

“You son of bitch,” Rideout countered, and the medic jumped out of the vehicle and gave the ME a huge hug. “How have you been?”

“Good, good. You?” Back pats and shoulder squeezes.

“Doing good.”

Amanda glanced at Trent, then Sullivan. It would seem the medic and Rideout were longtime friends who hadn’t seen each other in a while.

“Something tells me you’re acquainted,” she said, smiling.

“Very astute, Detective.” Rideout grinned at her. “Jimmy Wood and I go back to childhood. He married my high-school sweetheart.”

“And you’re still talking to him?” Sullivan asked. “Better man than me.”

Rideout laughed. "Turns out he did me a favor."

Jimmy nudged Rideout in the arm and hopped back into the vehicle.

Rideout went in after him, then Amanda and Trent. It was a tight squeeze, but they made it work. The ME and medic were on the victim's right, Amanda and Trent on her left. Sullivan stayed outside and left the back doors open.

The deceased was on a stretcher, and Amanda's chest ached at the sight of how young she looked. Was she even eighteen?

She had a round, cherubic face, and her hair was long and blond and fanned around her head like a halo. Her skin was a bluish gray from decomposition, but she'd had a fair complexion that would have stood in contrast to her black eye makeup. She didn't appear to have even been touched by the fire.

She was clothed in a black, short-sleeved shirt with a crew neck, blue jeans, and a matching jean jacket. On its collar was a dragonfly pin. It was gold, about an inch and a half in height and two inches wide, and its wings were iridescent teals and purples. It seemed like quite a nice piece of jewelry for a person her age and contradicted the gold stud in her nostril.

Rideout leaned over the girl, angling his head left and right.

"Something you're noticing?" Amanda asked him.

"She was doused with gasoline." He paused his inspection and looked at Amanda with a sardonic smile. "I'm sure you can smell that."

"Yes."

"No evidence she was stabbed or shot that I can see. There is petechiae in her eyes." He snapped on some gloves, pulled a camera from his bag, and took some pictures of her. Afterward, he returned the camera to the sack and grabbed a flashlight. He opened her mouth and shined the beam inside. "Some petechiae on her gums too. She was deprived of oxygen. What time was the fire believed to have been started?"

Amanda glanced over a shoulder at the marshal but answered for him. “We were told in the neighborhood of five thirty.”

Rideout studied the girl and looked at his wristwatch. “It’s eleven thirty now, and based on the amount of rigor present, and that it’s beginning in her face, I’d say somewhere between five and seven hours ago. Factoring in the estimated time that the fire began, I’d say she died anytime between four and five thirty this morning.”

“So before the fire?” Amanda couldn’t help but think that was a small mercy compared to being alive and suffering the excruciating pain of flames snacking on her flesh.

Rideout nodded. “Absolutely. I’m not seeing anything to make me assume she died due to the fire or from smoke inhalation.” He proceeded to lower the collar of her shirt and pointed to light bruising on her neck. “And I’m quite sure I just found out how she was starved of oxygen.”

“She was strangled to death,” Trent said.

“Well, at the very least, someone squeezed her neck pretty hard and cut off her air for a while.” Rideout turned off his flashlight and tucked it into a pocket.

She recalled how Sullivan had said that she and Trent were wired to think murder first, and he’d been correct. But the evidence in this case—coincidental or otherwise—was indeed stacking up in support of homicide. An abandoned house set on fire, this girl, presumably a runaway, doused with gasoline, bruising on her neck indicative of a chokehold... “So what is your initial response here? Are we looking at murder?”

Rideout glanced once more at the girl. “I’d say it’s quite likely given the circumstances, but before I rule manner and cause of death, I want her on an autopsy table.”

Trent tapped his pen against his notepad, and everyone looked at him.

Rideout arched his brows. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“Often fire is used to destroy the body and evidence...” Trent was starting to get a good rhythm going, mapping out his own musical beat. She put her hand over his to still his movements.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be, but what else? I have a feeling you have more to say...”

“Well, if that was the point here, why pour accelerant on her and then start the fire elsewhere? Why not ensure that her body was destroyed?”

“Setting the fire where they had would have allowed the person time to get out.” It was Sullivan who suggested this; he must have overheard Trent’s question. “Remember I said it’s looking like a trail was leading straight to the stairs, likely to the room she was in, though I have yet to confirm that latter bit. But the person who set this fire might not have expected that we would arrive so quickly. Probably figured the fire had time to reach her. They might not have known that old houses burn slower. Also gasoline doesn’t burn as fast as people believe.”

Amanda turned her attention back to the medic and Rideout. “Is there any ID on her?”

Jimmy shook his head and responded. “No, I checked all her pockets after I pronounced. Sad, too, because the poor girl can’t be much more than sixteen.”

Amanda’s gaze fell upon the adolescent Jane Doe, her heart aching. *Who are you, sweetheart?*

CHAPTER THREE

Amanda and Trent left Rideout and Jimmy. She took some deep breaths as she stepped out of the van. The outdoor air was still tainted with the smell of smoke, but it was a welcome relief from the gas fumes she'd been inhaling inside the vehicle for the last while.

She headed down the driveway and stepped through the gate into the backyard. A six-foot-tall privacy fence lined the property. The seclusion would make it easy for trespassers to go unnoticed.

"Sixteen," Sullivan mumbled from behind her. She turned, and he appeared like he'd spent time in a boxing ring and had the wind knocked out of him.

"It's always worse when it's a kid." Amanda's own statement drilled an ache in her chest as her thoughts first went to her sweet, beautiful Lindsey, then to the young girls she'd rescued recently from a sex-trafficking ring.

"You've had cases like this before?" Sullivan asked.

Amanda glanced at Trent, back at Sullivan. Three months ago, she and her family's tragedy had been regurgitated publicly—as well as the fact she'd saved those girls. It had made front-page news in the *Prince William Times*. She was surprised he hadn't heard. Usually word got around in a small town.

"I have," she eventually said, her throat tight and her mouth suddenly dry. The flashbacks were attempting to align into focus with color and clarity, but she refused to allow them to take hold.

She squeezed the memories from mind; it was best they remain fuzzy. “Well, not exactly like this, but...”

“With young people?”

“Yeah.”

Trent cleared his throat and prompted Sullivan, “You said you had the info on the person who called nine-one-one.”

“Yeah, let me get that for you. It’s in my truck.”

They followed Sullivan to an SUV. He ducked in the passenger door and pulled a notebook out of the glove box. He flipped pages and said, “Shannon Fox.”

“Address?” Amanda asked.

“Six-oh-two.” He nudged his head, drawing their attention across the street and down a few houses.

They’d pay Fox a visit, but Amanda would prefer to hear the call first. “Thanks,” she told Sullivan and pulled out her business card and handed it to him. “Everything’s on there. Phone, email...”

Sullivan smiled and gave her his card from the front of his notebook. “I’ll get everything over once I get it compiled, Detective.”

“Thank you.” She started toward the sidewalk, turned, and shrugged. “Actually, if you wanted to send it in chunks that would work for me.”

He held up her card as if to show he’d heard her but didn’t make any promises.

She proceeded to take out her phone and, with it, captured pictures of the crowd across the street as discreetly as possible. She knew Sullivan had taken photos, too, but there could never be enough. “Sullivan mentioned there were a few mattresses upstairs. Sounds like more than Doe was squatting there—and that’s assuming she was.”

“You don’t think she was?”

“Too early to say yet. What I do want to know is where the other squatters are now.” She flicked a finger toward the gawkers. “Maybe one of them will know.”

“There has to be thirty people or so.”

“You have something better to do?” she deadpanned. His complexion was pale, and his mouth opened, shut, opened, shut. She smiled. “I’ll call in for backup to help, but we need to get started.”

“Sure.”

She motioned for him to get moving while she called Malone. “Hey, we need unis down here for canvassing and to question onlookers.”

“I’ll get on it.”

“Thanks, Sarge. Oh, could you also get me the recording of the nine-one-one call?”

“Consider it done.”

She thanked him again, hung up, pocketed her phone, and set off across the street. Trent was talking to an older man, but it was a man in his twenties who caught her eye. He was wearing a navy-blue hoodie and avoiding eye contact. She held up her badge. “Prince William County PD, Detective Steele.”

He was twitchy and kept looking at the ground. He was either high or nervous—maybe both.

“What’s your name?” She pulled her notepad from a back pocket. She often went back and forth between using an app on her phone to the old-school method of pen and paper.

“Simon.”

“Well, Simon, how long have you been standing here?” She pulled the pen out of the book’s coils.

“Dunno.”

“Since the fire started?”

He met her eyes now. “After I heard the sirens.”

“So since early this morning?”

“Yeah.” He glanced away again.

He must not have a job to get to during the day. “Do you live along here?” She pointed down the street with her pen.

“Next block over.” He pushed back his hoodie and revealed spiky, teal-colored hair. “I’m a light sleeper.”

“Can anyone confirm that you were at home and in bed before coming here?”

“My girlfriend, Cindy.” He looked around the crowd. “She just went to get us coffee.”

Amanda nodded. It would seem neither of them held a day job. “So why have you been here all this time? Do you like watching fires?” The comment Sullivan had made about firebugs loving to watch their creations wasn’t far from her mind.

“Not particularly. Suppose I’m still here because... well, someone died in there, right?” He swallowed roughly, his Adam’s apple heaving. “I watched the medic get the body from the firefighters, and now you’re here asking all these questions. Was the person murdered?”

“It’s an open investigation.” She was about to ask if he’d seen anyone around the house, particularly any squatters, when a woman called out Simon’s name.

She looked to be about the same age as Simon. She wore large dark-lensed sunglasses, and her hair was blond with teal highlights. To match her boyfriend’s hair? She stepped through the crowd holding two coffee cups. She handed one to Simon and, with a bit of a scowl, faced Amanda. “Who are you?”

“Detective Steele with Prince William County Police. And you are?”

“Cindy.”

“Where do you live?” Amanda asked.

Simon’s brow scrunched up. “I told you—”

Amanda held up a hand. “If Cindy could answer...”

“Just a block over.” Cindy slurped back some coffee.

“An address?”

Simon rattled it off, and Amanda noted it in her book, then looked at Cindy. “Where were you when you heard the sirens?”

“I just—”

Amanda leveled a glare at Simon, and he stopped talking. She wanted to hear Cindy’s response.

“In bed.” Cindy nestled into Simon’s side, and he put an arm around her.

“Are you familiar with the house at all, maybe the people who squatted here?” Amanda flicked a finger toward 532.

“Not really,” Cindy replied and put her lips to her coffee cup.

“You ever see anyone go into the house or around it?”

She shook her head. “No reason. I mean, we don’t live on this street.”

“And you, Simon?”

“Nope.”

“All right, then. Before I leave, I’ll just need your full names and a number to reach you in case I have any more questions.”

“Sure.” Cindy provided the information, and Amanda recorded it in her notepad.

She left the young couple and went on to interview several more in the crowd. Most weren’t that interesting. Everyone was curious. One or two waxed philosophical on how all humankind was connected and thereby affected by the loss of anyone—stranger, friend, or foe.

When two uniformed officers arrived to assume responsibility for interviewing those in the crowd, Trent came over to her.

“I want to go speak with the immediate neighbors,” she said to him. “I want to hear firsthand if any of them witnessed any activity around that house.”

“You got it.”

She led the way to number 534, the house next to their crime scene, and knocked on the door.

“Hey!” a man called out.

Amanda and Trent turned, and a forty-something man with a bad comb-over was headed toward them. They held up their badges, and the man groaned.

“Detectives Steele and Stenson with the Prince William County PD,” Amanda said. “And you are?”

“Ted Dixon.”

“You live here, Mr. Dixon?” She jacked a thumb over her shoulder.

“Uh-huh.” He chewed on his bottom lip, and she expected to see blood drawn.

He was clearly uncomfortable, and she’d get to the root of why that was, but first she had some procedural questions to ask. “How long have you lived here?”

“Ah, five years.”

“Did you know your neighbors next door?”

“Not by name. But they’ve been gone a while now.”

Between the boarded windows and now this, she was really leaning toward the likelihood the bank had repossessed the property. “Was it a family or a couple or...?”

“Just a couple. Say, in their forties. No kids that I saw.”

“And when did they leave?”

“Several months ago.”

That surprised her. Amanda had expected it would have been longer ago than that given the boarded windows. It would seem something kept it from going on the market. She scribbled in her notepad, *Why not for sale?*

“Hey, whatcha writing there?” Ted jabbed a finger toward the page, and Amanda held it toward her chest to take it out of his view.

“Nothing you need to worry about.” She offered him a small smile.

“Okay,” he said, not that he sounded convinced.

“You ever see anyone hanging around the place after that couple moved out?” Trent interjected.

Ted looked at him. “Yeah. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Amanda asked, skeptical. “It’s a *yes* or *no* type of question, Mr. Dixon.”

Ted glanced over a shoulder, then back at her, and stiffened. “No. I never saw anyone.”

She didn’t have to spend any time studying him to tell he was lying. He just wasn’t about to talk to the police, and she couldn’t force him to—yet. She handed him her card. “Call me if your memory returns.” She turned and left.

Trent matched her stride. “I think he saw something.”

“Makes two of us.” She faced him. “People were squatting at five thirty-two. We know that because of the mattresses, but who are they and where are they now?”

“And did they kill Jane Doe?”

Amanda considered this and shook her head. “You know what? Probably not. Why burn down their shelter?” She glanced at a cruiser posted in front of 532. The place would have surveillance on it for a while, and if anyone suspicious came around, they’d be brought in and questioned. She had faith in that. Just as she trusted canvassing officers to talk to all the neighbors. “I’m thinking we head back to the station, pull the property records, and see if we can get our hands on that nine-one-one recording. Then we’ll come back and talk to the person who placed the call.”

“Works for me.”

“I’ve got my car here, so I’ll meet you back there, but I may be a little delayed. I’m dying for a coffee and something to eat. Want me to grab you anything?”

Trent gave her his order and went on his way, leaving her with her thoughts, which were focused on Jane Doe. Someone out there was probably missing their daughter, but she’d been stolen from them, her life wiped out before it really began. Amanda would do everything in her power to make the person responsible for that pay.

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