

BLACK ORCHID GIRLS

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CAROLYN ARNOLD

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GIRLS

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ONE

She was going to die. Today.

Restraint had been shown for far too long. Now was the time for action. And the observer was ready.

She'd be easy to find. She loved the trail that cut through the woods and dipped down to the Potomac River, winding alongside it like a twirling ribbon. The observer had followed her there before and watched from a distance. This morning it would just be the two of them—up close and personal.

Privacy, solitude. Exactly what was needed.

Looking on from this vantage point, tucked within a thick copse of trees, she appeared nervous and cautious. But it was much earlier than when she normally came here. The sun had yet to wake up, leaving the woods mostly in darkness but for the fine tendrils of moonlight that reached through the towering canopy like fingers.

The girl kept looking over her shoulder, and she raised her flashlight at every small noise—an animal scurrying in the underbrush, chattering squirrels, squawking blue jays. She would startle, then freeze. Seconds later, she would look around again, sweeping the beam of her flashlight over the area.

Eventually, seemingly satisfied that she was safe, she set her light on the ground with her backpack and crouched down, her hands busy with her findings on the water's edge.

All was still. And calm.

Until the observer started to approach and stepped on a small twig, causing it to snap.

The girl snatched her flashlight, bolted to her feet, and spun around. "Oh." That was all she said as she lowered her light.

The moon's glow put her in a spotlight. Her milky-white complexion, her flawless skin. She knew no enemies and feared no one. She was the princess in the ivory tower who had been handed everything and looked down on others.

The observer stepped toward her, slowly and mindfully, imagining that otherwise the prey might catch a whiff of danger and run off like a jackrabbit. That would be a most undesirable consequence. Running wasn't enjoyable—at all—but it turned out the fear of her fleeing was unnecessary.

She let the observer get close, trusting from a blind ignorance.

In one swift and fluid movement, the observer pulled the blade from a pocket and thrust it into her gut.

She clutched her stomach and stared with bulging eyes. Shock washed over her expression, her mind trying to register what had just happened. Her mouth fell open, and she let out a feral scream as she turned to run.

The observer grabbed her arm and spun her around and proceeded to thrust the knife into her torso repeatedly, counting each stab. One, two, three...

With each penetration, the observer stirred to life. This was right—everything about it. They never should have waited so long to satisfy this craving.

The girl clung to the observer, confusion and disbelief mingling in her eyes. The observer felt nothing but justification

and continued stabbing until her screams fell mute and her body collapsed to the ground.

In that moment, all went extremely still. Silent.

The observer took a deep breath and closed their eyes, mentally processing what had taken place. They had taken a life, and it hadn't been that bad at all. In fact, it was rather liberating.

But there was still work to do.

The observer got to work on preparing her body. It had to be presented just so.

TWO

Monday morning, and there was already a murder.

Detective Amanda Steele was aware of every twig she crunched underfoot and the stones on the path that she rolled over, despite the forest floor being plastered with colored leaves. The air was moist and had that clean, crisp smell of fall that made one think of pumpkin-spice lattes and curling up on the couch under a blanket with a book. At least for some people. Amanda didn't have time for that, so even though she was headed to a crime scene, she inhaled deeply, deriving what pleasure she could from her surroundings.

She and her partner, Trent Stenson, were being led through Leesylvania State Park by Officer Leo Brandt with the Prince William County Police Department. The discovery of a young woman had been made earlier that morning, and the call had come in just as Amanda had touched her ass to her chair down at Central Station. The park's official address was in Woodbridge, putting it squarely within the PWCPD's—and Amanda and Trent's—jurisdiction.

They worked in Homicide and were called in whenever death was deemed suspicious. In this case, foul play was an

obvious conclusion—at least based on the briefing that Amanda had received. The victim had been stabbed multiple times and found deep within the park next to the Potomac River. Had the killer specifically chosen this location for its isolation—and was it where the murder had taken place, or had the woman simply been dumped there?

The park opened at six, and though time of death still needed to be confirmed, it was likely the body had been left there before then. It might also mean the killer circumvented or bypassed the normal access points to the park. Currently the park was closed to the public while the investigation took place. The only vehicle that remained in Lot C was a white Honda CR-V that was registered to a Paul and Joni Swanson—the couple who had found the body. Police vehicles and responders had parked out at the road.

“And the Swansons were here because...?” Trent asked.

“Just hiking, far as I know.” Brandt spoke as he kept walking and continued to follow the trail toward the river.

“Do they come here regularly, or know the victim?”

Brandt glanced over a shoulder. “You’ll need to ask them, but my grasp of the situation is *no* to all the above.”

Trent looked over at her, and Amanda pressed her lips and hitched her shoulders.

Did the Swansons have something to do with the girl’s fate? Or was it purely happenstance that they’d been the ones to find her? “Where are the Swansons now?”

“Still here. The wife’s a mess.”

Amanda nodded, not that Brandt could see her. “How much farther now?” She was familiar with the park but not intimate with all its twists and turns, and she was anxious to get to work.

“Just around that there bend”—Brandt pointed ahead to where the path veered right about twenty feet ahead—“and off trail for a bit. So, not long.”

Amanda had been able to see the Potomac for a while. With each step she took, voices became clearer. They took the turn off the trail, and as they came closer to the water, a cool breeze gusted around her. Amanda hugged her coat tighter to herself. They were fortunate the weather didn't get as bitter as it did farther north during the fall and winter months, but some days the chill still managed to seep into her bones.

"Right there." Brandt stopped walking and pointed about another twenty feet away toward the riverbank. Not that it was necessary to declare this was the crime scene—the evidence did that for itself.

Crime scene investigators were working around the body, snapping photographs, and yellow markers dotted the area.

From this distance, Amanda caught a glimpse of the victim's head—a halo of blond hair.

Amanda's heart squeezed at the sight. A young woman. Murdered. That part wasn't news, but somehow, being here in this place, the loss was tangible and permeated the air. It entered her with every inhale she took. Not the smell of death so much as the all-encompassing awareness that this was the scene of a horrendous crime. Something told her this wasn't a body dump—even if she didn't have the proof of that yet.

As she and Trent got closer to the body, CSI Emma Blair, who had been taking pictures, stepped back. Amanda recently found out that her father had an extramarital affair with Blair twenty-some years ago, which resulted in a baby. Though she had met her half-brother, she hadn't known who he was at the time. She hadn't confronted the elephant in the room between herself and the CSI yet, but she supposed at some point it would be inevitable.

CSI Donnelly paused her work too and greeted Amanda and Trent. Her tone was somber, succinct. For good reason.

The sight was chilling. Amanda instinctively tugged her coat even tighter to herself, her hands bunching the fabric at the

zipper as she stepped around the body—though she did so at a distance to avoid contaminating the scene.

The victim was supine, her eyes fixed blankly on the sky and her feet toward the river. Naked and on display, there was an innocent, ethereal quality that made her more child than woman. Sunlight glistened and danced on tears that had frozen to her eyelashes like tiny diamonds.

She was also pristine. No sign of blood. The killer had taken his time to stage her this way, and he had placed fallen leaves around her, as if tucking her in for the last time.

The girl could have been Sleeping Beauty with a creamy, pale complexion waiting for her prince to kiss her and resurrect her to life—if not for the numerous stab wounds in her torso.

And the black orchid that lay on her chest.

THREE

Amanda turned her gaze away, needing a break from the heartrending scene in front of her. So young. This girl couldn't have been more than twenty, just when life was becoming interesting. Her entire future had lain before her like a buffet of options... until it had been stolen. As if sensing the direness of the situation, everyone around Amanda had entered a reverent moment of silence for the girl. Eventually, Amanda blinked and swallowed the grief and regret that burned up her throat. Time to detach and be objective. Find justice for this victim.

"Were any of her personal belongings found, to provide us with an ID?" She directed the question to the CSIs.

Blair gestured to the body as if to say, *Where would she be hiding it?*

"Nothing yet, Detective," CSI Donnelly said. She was the pleasant one—always had been. "We ran her prints, but no hit in the system."

"Thanks, Isabelle." Naked, shamed, and without a name. The trifecta could topple Amanda's sanity if she allowed it, but she had a job to do, and she was going to do it. She cleared her throat and looked at Trent. He was watching her. "What do you

make of it?" She pointed to the woman's body. Trent was in his first year as a homicide detective, and they'd been partnered since January. He'd proven himself an excellent detective, so she'd let him start the theorizing.

Trent took a deep breath, rubbed his brow with the back of his arm, his pen in one hand, his notepad in the other. "I'm guessing you're looking for more than, 'It's not pretty.'"

"Yeah, more would be good." Like her, he was probably busy trying to process everything and make sense of it. She already had a bunch of questions and possibilities running through her mind, but there was one at the forefront. What were they dealing with here—an isolated incident, or evidence of something far worse? The precision, the obvious planning, the lack of fear on the part of the killer... The black orchid. It was left like a signature or a calling card—something that serial killers did. But she talked herself off that ledge. The flower could also be a sign of a remorse. The killer could have known their victim.

Amanda and Trent stepped back, giving the CSIs more room to work. She took in the area. Woods, a dirt path, the river, and a couple talking with a PWCPD officer farther down the trail. She'd guess they were the Swansons, the ones who'd made the discovery. The noise of the woman's sobbing carried in the air, and the man's arm was around her.

"So was she killed here or dumped?" Trent asked. "It's looking rather clean at first glance, so I'd almost think she was dumped here."

Amanda turned her attention to Trent. Though she'd originally leaned the other way—that the girl was killed here—Trent's opinion seemed logical. But by killing her *and* cleaning her elsewhere, the killer would risk trace evidence transfer during transport. Right now, though, it was too early to know exactly what they were looking at. "Maybe once we know who she is, we'll be able to figure out her last movements and what

got her to this point. Such as where she was last seen. We might even be able to answer if she came here on her own and ran into her killer, or whether it was someone she knew who she had arranged to meet.” She spitballed a few hypotheticals.

“Sick to think someone in her life could have done this to her.” Trent flicked his pen toward the body. “Leaving a flower behind, combined with the way she was presented, makes me think her killer may have experienced remorse. That could mean it’s personal, just as the number of stab wounds could indicate the murder was ruled by emotion.”

“Just not a ‘heat of the moment’ murder. The killer was prepared. Orchids aren’t native around here as far as I know. And the way she’s been posed—cleaned and naked—has to be telling us something.”

“Which would be?”

“Not sure yet.” And that was the truth. While the girl’s nakedness was certainly sending a message, Amanda didn’t want to jump to a conclusion on what that might be. Had it been to shame her, exploit her, expose her? Had she been sexually assaulted? Amanda pinched her eyes shut briefly, not really wanting to go there unless necessary. She’d faced enough of that ugliness to last her for several lifetimes when she’d uncovered an active sex-trafficking ring in Prince William County earlier in the year. Those involved had since been arrested and the ring shut down, but as her friend Patty Glover from Sex Crimes reminded her, those types had a way of rising back up again.

“And if the killer is about sending messages, why? Are we looking for a serial killer?” Trent pierced her eyes with his. They’d faced one before—not long ago, in fact—and it was safe to say neither of them were ready to go down that path again.

The CSIs both stopped moving and looked at her, stalled on the stark reality of his question.

“Let’s not make that leap,” Amanda rushed out. “Not yet. Notice how the orchid wasn’t placed in her hand but was just

set on top of her?" She flicked a finger toward the victim. The girl's arms were at her sides, not clutched around the stem of the flower. "It's almost like it was left there as a last-minute thought, which it couldn't have been. The killer brought it, which indicates planning."

"Uh, just thinking, though... don't they have orchids in the floral sections of grocery stores sometimes?"

"Not usually black ones, and the leaves and flowers on this one look rather large. Thinking this is a stem from a more mature plant." She didn't have a green thumb, but she possessed some basic gardening knowledge.

"Well, I'll take your word for it. I'm not a gardener or botanist."

She held up a hand. "I can't make that claim either."

Trent put his pen in a back pocket of his pants and tucked his notepad under his arm. He pulled out his phone and started tapping away on it.

"What are you doing?"

There was no response as he carried on with whatever it was he was doing.

"Trent?" she prompted.

"Ah, just looking up the symbolism for black orchids. We were just talking about possible messages that the killer intended, right? The flower could very well be a part of that."

"Oh." Impressive. After all, it would make sense that particular flower had been chosen for a reason.

"Here we go," Trent began. "There is actually a duality to the symbolism of this particular flower. It has negative connotations and positive ones."

"Hit me with both."

"Well, it can represent bad luck and death."

"Suitable, considering the circumstances."

"Also black magic." He lifted his gaze from his phone, and she followed the direction of it to the body. "I'm not seeing

anything that indicates she was killed in a ritualistic manner or in some way that smacks of the occult,” he added.

“Not on the surface anyway.” She’d learned from her time as a cop—which was her entire adult life—that first impressions weren’t always reliable.

“Fair enough.” He put his nose back to his screen. “On a positive note, it can symbolize strength, virility, sexual desires, and success.”

“Huh. Was our killer aware of all these associations with the black orchid? Did it factor into their choosing this flower to leave with her body? Is its presence, in fact, a message?”

Trent pocketed his phone. “So it begins.”

She angled her head. “Not following.”

“The questions. There are just so many of them.”

“I’m here. The party can start.” Hans Rideout, Amanda’s favorite ME, rounded the path and spoke only loud enough for her and Trent to hear him. He worked out of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Manassas. It was about thirty minutes from Woodbridge, and though it was no longer part of Prince William County, their MEs still serviced the area. The forensics lab was there as well.

He passed Amanda and Trent and hustled down the slight incline toward the victim. Rideout could be an acquired taste, and he had morgue humor down pat, but it was his dedication to the job that earned Amanda’s respect. He arrived with a male assistant whom Amanda hadn’t met before.

She’d give the two of them time to look at the body while she and Trent spoke to the Swansons. She started her way over there, and the officer dipped her head in greeting. Her name tag read *Cochran*. Surprisingly, Amanda hadn’t run into her before now.

“Officer Cochran, we’re Detectives Amanda Steele”—she pointed to her partner—“and Trent Stenson.”

“Traci,” the officer said, providing her first name, “and this is Joni and Paul Swanson.”

The couple were in their late thirties, not much older than Amanda’s thirty-six. Paul had a bushy, dark beard and mustache and a bald head. Joni had a round face and blond straggly long hair. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she was wringing her hands, though they were shaking.

“We heard you two discovered the body. Can you tell us what you’re doing in the park today?” Asked to simply establish the groundwork for the conversation and inquiries to follow.

The Swansons looked at Officer Cochran. “We told her everything,” Paul said.

“That’s good, but now we need to ask you questions, some of which may be repetitive for you. It’s procedure,” Amanda assured him. “Can you tell us what brought you here today?”

Paul glanced at his wife and answered on their behalf. “Just getting some exercise.”

“Of all the days,” Joni blurted out, her voice tinged with frustration.

“We can appreciate this wasn’t what you imagined when you set out today.” It was safe to assume the raw discovery would have been horrid and nothing short of shocking.

“You can say that again.” Joni palmed her cheeks, and her chin quivered. “Do you know who she is?”

Amanda shook her head. She had just been about to ask the same question—no need now. “Not yet. Do you normally walk the trails here?”

“No. This exercise thing is just something we were picking up again. Doctor’s orders.” Joni dug the toe of her hiking boot into the ground, crinkling the leaves and flaking them apart. Everything was so dry out here with the lack of rain in recent weeks.

“What time did you find her?” Trent asked. He had his pen and notepad at the ready.

Amanda had fought like hell against being paired with a partner. She'd never had a good experience with anyone—until Trent. And it was a bonus that he was meticulous about writing things down. It saved her from needing to do it all herself.

"Think it was right around six forty," Paul said as he adjusted his arm around his wife, and she snuggled in closer to him. "Joni wanted to go down to the water to see if she could spot some snails."

"Snails...?" Amanda asked, curious.

"Yeah. They're a type of mystery snail."

"They're pretty neat. They can grow up to three inches long," Joni added.

Amanda had grown up in Prince William County and had never heard of the snails before, but she wasn't a hiker, not even huge into nature. "They sound neat," she offered, hoping to relax the couple. She really didn't get the feeling they were involved with what happened to Jane Doe, and they were being very cooperative, but she still needed to obtain the full picture. "So you spotted the body around six forty, and then what?"

"I called nine-one-one," Paul said. "Well, after calming Joni down some."

Joni tapped a hand over her chest. "It's my heart. It's not in the best of shape. Hence the recommended exercise."

"Sorry to hear that, ma'am," Trent said.

"Thanks." Joni dipped her gaze to the ground, and her body swayed slightly.

"Do you need to sit down?" Amanda stepped forward.

Joni drew back some and shook her head. "I'll be fine."

"As long as you're sure." Amanda studied the couple. Absolutely nothing about them screamed "killer." In fact, the opposite. She imagined they were rather pleasant and down-to-earth people when they weren't forced to deal with something as messy as murder. "Just a few more questions. Did you come

across anyone else in the park? They could have just been walking the trails like you?”

The Swansons looked at each other, their lips curled downward, and they shook their heads in unison.

“Anyone in the parking lot? See any other vehicles when you pulled in?” Trent asked.

“The lot we’re in was empty,” Paul said.

“Actually”—she stared at her husband’s profile, then looked at Amanda—“we did run across that ranger in the park, not long after we started on the trail. Remember him?”

Small tingles traipsed across Amanda’s shoulders. A park employee would be familiar with the terrain, and that could prove advantageous when executing a murder or even dumping a body. “Did you catch his name? Usually it’s noted on a patch on the uniform, like the officer’s here.” She gestured to Cochran, who pointed at her name, as if showcasing it like a prize up for bid on a TV show.

“Nah, we didn’t get that close,” Paul said.

“He was on the trail that leads down here, to the water?” she asked.

“That’s right.”

“And just to confirm, he was headed from the direction of the water, back toward the entrance?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell us what he looked like?” Trent beat her to the question.

“Six feet, give or take?” Paul consulted his wife, and she bobbed her head.

It always bugged Amanda when witnesses sought to verify their stories with another party. It didn’t exactly instill confidence, but she understood that stress could toy with the mind and color recollections. She’d experienced that herself when she had to sit with a sketch artist and describe the man who had shot her—*grazed* her arm, more specifically—a couple of months

ago. The whole process probably took twice as long as it should have because she second-guessed herself the entire time. "Any distinguishing features? Hair color, eye color, tattoos, build?"

"He had brown hair, cropped short," Joni tossed out, but when she looked at Amanda, she dropped her head and shrugged. She must have realized how generic the description was.

"Age range?" Amanda asked as Trent's pen was coasting over the page in his book.

"Say forties."

Say... Again, not exactly a confidence booster. "Was he carrying anything, a bag or backpack?" She was thinking that the girl's clothing had to be somewhere. If this ranger was the killer, he could have been carrying it out of the park. Then again, he could have stashed the girl's possessions within the park.

"No, nothing."

"Okay. Well, we appreciate all your help. We're just going to need all your information in case we have more questions for you."

"Detective"—Officer Cochran spoke up—"I have that already."

Amanda dipped her head in acknowledgment, having almost forgotten she'd been standing there the entire time. "All right." Back to the Swansons, Amanda said, "You can go home now if you like."

Neither of them moved.

"Would you like to speak with a counselor? I can make arrangements," Amanda offered.

Paul puffed out his chest and tightened his hold on his wife. "No, we'll be all right."

"If you change your mind, or if you think of anything, call me day or night." Amanda handed her card to Paul, and he glanced at it before stuffing it into his coat pocket.

“Will do.”

Amanda and Trent left the couple and returned to the body, but stayed back to allow Rideout and his assistant lots of room to work. While Rideout was hunched near the young woman, his assistant stood close and at the ready for any of his boss's requests.

“Here's the Swansons' information, Detective Steele.” Officer Cochran stepped up next to Amanda, extending a piece of paper toward her.

Amanda smiled. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

A patch of silence fell, and the officer worried her bottom lip and didn't move.

“Something else, Officer?” Amanda asked.

She nudged her head toward the body. “What do you think is going on here? Murder, obviously, but do you think she knew her killer? Is this an isolated incident or something more?”

“Answers I intend to find out.”

You have reached the end of the sample.

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