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CRY

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HER FROZEN CRY

CAROLYN ARNOLD

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PROLOGUE

She stoked the fire, hoping its warmth would coax the cold from her bones. She couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her. But there was no one around. Surely, she was being paranoid, her mind fed by too many horror movies set in secluded cabins. Much like the one she was in right now. Alone. Isolated. Surrounded by nothing but wildlife and trees, with miles separating her from the nearest neighbor.

Earlier, rain had battered the roof and fat drops pinged against the windows. Instead of soothing her, nature's lullaby had her on edge. She jumped at every creak of the old cabin and had to repeatedly assure herself the structure was sound. It was likely fortified by many secrets made and kept within the walls, some of which were ones she'd deposited herself since arriving yesterday. But she had needed to get away, slip out of her life, re-evaluate. Step back.

The flames in the fireplace grew and danced wildly. She watched, entranced, and felt herself let go, just a little. But the chill was still in her, as if someone's eyes were crawling over her skin.

She got up and dared to look outside. Nothing but blackness. She'd draw the curtains, but there were none in the living room. Why had she ever left her beautiful home and family for this place, even for a couple nights? She must be crazy.

But her secrets were at risk of exposure if she didn't handle things just so, and that meant facing her demons in stillness and silence. Their voices grew loud, and she could feel her day of judgment drawing near. So many regrets and fears ricocheted in her mind. There would be no escaping them any longer.

She left the fire and grabbed the blanket from the couch. Wrapping it around her shoulders, she slipped into the bedroom. She'd get ready for bed and pour another glass of wine until her mind quieted and gave way to indifference, and possibly courage. Only then would she be able to slip into a deep, peaceful slumber.

She checked everything off the list and settled back on the couch beneath the throw, sipping her wine, and looked at a photograph she'd brought with her. The people in the picture were what was most important to her above all else—they made her want to be a better person, to *do* better—but her vision blurred. She blinked deliberately a few times, but it didn't offer much improvement. And now her head was spinning.

What the...? She hadn't drunk that much.

She tried to return her wineglass to the table, but it shattered to the floor.

Her head was spinning, and she couldn't catch a full breath. It was like her heart was slowing down.

She gripped her chest, and the photo slipped from her lap.

She suddenly felt so weak, so very cold, so very tired.

Tears fell, hot against her cool cheeks.

This was it. The end—how and when she died. But this wasn't right—the timing so unfair. There was so much more she wanted to do with her life, so many things she wanted to make right.

As the darkness claimed her, a figure outside in the night moved to leave. Their mission was now complete.

ONE

The place was set back in the woods, remote. No one would have heard her screams, if there had been any. That felt like such a macabre thing to think, but it ran through Detective Amanda Steele's mind all the same.

Wednesday afternoon, and she was standing in a rustic cabin in Gainesville, a rural part of Prince William County. Her partner on the job, Trent Stenson, was next to her. The medical examiner, Hans Rideout, and his assistant, Liam Bakker, were tending to the deceased while two crime scene investigators bustled around collecting potential evidence.

The decedent was a thirtysomething woman and someone that Amanda recognized on sight. Alicia Gordon. She was one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the county—and possibly in the state of Virginia—for founding New Belle, a successful and lucrative cosmetic company.

The victim was in a seated position on the couch, an ancient number with its plaid cushions and bare pine frame. A wool blanket only partially across her lap. The rest of it had draped to the floor.

Her eyes were closed, her lips slightly parted like she'd just

fallen asleep, but the scene revealed more. A wineglass was shattered on the floor, and red wine had pooled on the pine boards and crept into the cracks.

Across the room was a wood-burning stove, the fire long run out. The cabin held a slight chill and smelled of death and something sweet. A perfume, perhaps?

Amanda noticed a folder on the side table with some papers sticking out of it haphazardly. She confirmed it had been photographed by the CSIs and picked up the folder with gloved hands.

New Belle financial reports. At a swift glance, all appeared in good order. The company fiscally profitable.

Also a few colored printouts—ads for a perfume called Abandon. Apparently, New Belle was expanding their product line.

She handed the folder and paperwork to CSI Isabelle Donnelly to bag as evidence. “Thanks,” Amanda told her. She turned to Rideout and asked, “Cause of death?”

“This one’s a bit of a mystery, I’m afraid.”

“Surely, someone her age doesn’t just drop dead,” Trent inserted. “Suicide?”

“It’s far too soon to say. I won’t even comment on COD until I have her back at the morgue.” Rideout pressed his lips. “Sorry, I can’t give you more.”

Amanda understood that in cases of suspicious death it was necessary for Homicide to be present on scene. Everything needed to be treated as if a murder had taken place. Once the scene was released, there’d be no turning back the clock to collect evidence. “Time of death?”

“Rigor is telling me anytime between nine last night and midnight. As always, I’ll conduct more tests at the morgue to determine that with more accuracy.”

The time would explain the pajamas, the blanket, and the burned-out fire. While the daytime weather in the area was

warmer than some states in March, nightly temperatures still dipped to about freezing.

Amanda signaled for Trent to follow her, leaving Rideout and Liam to their work. She went first into the bedroom.

“Something you’re looking for?” Trent asked.

“I’d like to know if Alicia had company.” She paced around the small room.

A single-size bed, a small dresser, and a simple nightstand with no drawers. On top was a deer antler lamp and a bottle of liquid sleeping aid.

“Just one suitcase,” Trent said and had her turning. He’d opened the closet door.

Amanda pulled out one of the dresser drawers. Alicia had laid out her clothing in neat, folded piles. Nothing indicated a romantic getaway or liaison. They’d get more information from the woman who had found Alicia though—the owner of the cabin. A Pamela Zimmerman. She’d be able to tell them how long Alicia had booked the place and possibly her purpose for coming there.

“Detectives.” CSI Donnelly stood in the doorway, holding a frame in her hands. “You might want to take a look at this.” She handed it to Amanda, and Trent came up next to her.

A family portrait. A young man about twenty and a boy about ten years old. Alicia was positioned next to a man relatively close to her age, possibly older—likely her husband or significant other.

Amanda’s gaze froze on his face. This couldn’t be. She blinked, scrutinized the image closer, and confirmed her initial suspicion. He had aged and now had a full head of silver hair, but she knew him. Tony Bishop. Her legs became a little weak. This investigation just got personal.

Trent was staring at her profile, his head angled. He seemed to have developed this ability to sense her shifts in mood and

read her mind. She wasn't quite sure she was comfortable with it.

She subtly shook her head, not about to get into it right now. "Where, ah, did you find this?" She could barely get herself to speak and nudged her head to the photo.

"It was under the blanket, found when Rideout removed it."

Amanda shifted her gaze back to the photo. How the lives of these people were about to take one hellish turn. She should have known it was too much to wish that this week go by without needing to notify next of kin that a loved one had died. And this time, it had to be someone she knew...

"I'll take that back if you want," Donnelly said, offering Amanda a gentle smile as she reached for the frame.

"Thanks." Amanda handed it over, and Donnelly put it into an evidence bag and proceeded to write the particulars on it—where it had been found, etcetera. "You didn't happen to find her phone, did you?"

"We did. Under the edge of the couch."

"Did you try accessing it?"

"CSI Blair told me to just bag it for processing at the lab."

Emma Blair was the senior CSI and held the transgressions of Amanda's father against her. He'd had an affair with Blair twenty-some years ago that resulted in a child. Amanda had a half-brother who was a firefighter for the Dumfries-Triangle Volunteer Fire Department. But all this was just exposed about four months ago, and Amanda was still reeling from the bombshell.

"All right. Keep us posted on that." Some battles weren't worth waging. The three of them left the bedroom. Amanda poked her head into the living room. "Anything else we should know before we head out? Any signs she may have died by suicide?" She opened that question to everyone in the room.

"No note or letter to loved ones," CSI Donnelly said.

"She have a laptop or tablet with her?" Trent asked.

Donnelly shook her head.

The absence of a letter meant nothing—not everyone left a note for loved ones. But didn't a woman like Alicia Gordon have everything to live for? Though outward appearances could be deceiving. "Keep us posted on the time for the autopsy," she told Rideout.

"Will do."

"Thanks." She stepped outside with Trent and took a deep inhale of the cool afternoon air. Was it too much to ask that it clear her mind? That photograph. His face. Chills wormed through her coat and seeped into her bones.

"So what was Ms. Gordon doing up here in a cabin—all alone? Looking at a photograph of her family?" Trent screwed up his forehead. "Reminiscing? Trouble in her marriage? Maybe we *are* looking at suicide. And what was up with your reaction to the picture? It was like you saw a ghost."

I kind of did...

"Amanda," he pressed.

"It was nothing. Just not looking forward to the notification. That's all." Only it wasn't *just* that, which Trent would find out soon enough.

"Never fun when there are kids left behind."

The portrait had been found at Alicia's feet, so it would seem she'd been looking at it before she died. Maybe it was as Trent had suggested and Alicia was depressed, possibly missing better days.

"We'll need to ask the husband about the marriage." Trent pulled out his notepad, flipped its pages. "Guy's name is Tony—"

"Bishop," she punched out, cursing her impulsiveness.

"Do you know him?"

Her answer was carried on a sigh. "You could say that."

TWO

After seeing his face *and* saying his name, Amanda's world tilted upside down. Tony Bishop, a person from her past. Way, way back. One stolen moment. One kiss that never should have happened. One secret she'd been carrying around since high school. She'd been a junior, him a senior—and five years older than her because he'd been held back a grade in elementary school. They'd first met fighting over the last cheese-and-bacon bagel in the school cafeteria and had an instant connection that lasted for years even after he left for college.

Trent narrowed his eyes, a smirk toying with the edges of his mouth, as if he were awaiting some juicy tidbit of gossip. "Just how well do you know this guy?"

She nodded. Not an answer, but all he was getting.

"I see you're talkative on the matter."

"Let's just focus on what's in front of us, go from there." There was no sense getting carried away about the case being a conflict of interest. They didn't even know for sure if Alicia Gordon had been murdered. There might not even be a case for her and Trent to investigate. But until then, she wanted the chance to explore the circumstances surrounding Alicia's death.

She at least owed that to Tony, didn't she? The question curdled in her stomach with an instant reply. She didn't owe him anything.

There was a span of silence, then Trent said, "All right, then. Keep your secret, but it might complicate things."

She raised her eyebrows. "You think?" *He had no idea.* And maybe her response was a little snarky, but she was doing her best to insert some space between herself and Trent these days. Sarcasm seemed to work rather well at pushing him away. When that didn't work, she diverted to business. After all, nothing good could come from getting involved with a colleague. Not that she had time for a romantic indulgence anyhow. She had recently adopted a six-year-old girl, Zoe Parker, and the child came first.

Amanda nudged her head toward a police cruiser in the lane. Its exhaust was coming out in plumes of white smoke in the cool air.

A shiver tore through her.

Officer Wyatt was in the front with a woman, presumably the person who had found Alicia. Wyatt would be taking her initial statement in the shelter and warmth of the vehicle, but Amanda and Trent would need to follow up with their own questions.

Amanda led the way over, and Officer Wyatt got out.

"Detectives," he said. "It's pretty straightforward. Pamela Zimmerman owns the cabin, and she found the deceased at one thirty when she arrived to clean the place for the next renter. They're due in on Saturday."

"Okay." Amanda glanced at the property owner. She was dabbing her nose with a tissue. "You pull a background on Zimmerman?"

"Sure did, and nothing flags."

"Did Ms. Gordon ever rent from her before?" Trent asked, impressing Amanda. Establishing that might factor into the

investigation. If Alicia had made a habit of staying there, it could make it easier for a killer to target her here—assuming this was murder.

Wyatt shrugged. “I didn’t think to ask that.”

“All right, well, we’ll take it from here,” Amanda told him.

“Ah, where do you want to question her? You want me to take her to Central?”

Central Station was where the PWCPD Homicide Unit was stationed, but it was located in Woodbridge about a half-hour drive away. She flicked a finger toward the cruiser. “Seems she’s comfortable in your car. Could we just pick things up in there?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Wyatt glanced around, his eyes holding desperation and the look of someone who was lost. He obviously wasn’t looking forward to standing outside.

“Here.” Trent handed him the keys to their department car. “Make yourself at home.”

“Mighty appreciate it.” Wyatt held up the keys and dipped his head.

Amanda sat behind the wheel, and Trent got into the rear seat without any complaint about the hard plastic on his backside.

“Ms. Zimmerman, I’m Detective Steele, and this is Detective Stenson.” Amanda angled her body toward the console and gestured to Trent.

Pamela craned her neck to look at him.

Amanda continued. “We know you just gave your statement to Officer Wyatt, but we need to run through everything with you quickly. Procedure.” She tagged on that last bit in the hopes of quelling any grumblings Pamela might have about repeating herself. The disclosure only worked a third of the time. This instance was one of them as Pamela didn’t raise any objections. “What time did you get to the cabin?”

"It was right around one thirty. I ate lunch and came over after."

"And where do you live?" Amanda asked.

"Just fifteen minutes down the road."

"Do you know if Alicia had company?" Amanda wasn't holding out hope, given the distance between the woman's home and the cabin.

"I wouldn't know. I can just tell you that she booked as a solo."

That didn't rule out visitors, but Pamela wasn't going to be a help in that regard. "When you got here, did you have to unlock the door to let yourself in?"

"Uh-huh. Well, I knocked first." Pamela dabbed her nose with a tissue. "I could see that her vehicle was still in the driveway. She should have been gone already."

Amanda had noted the Mercedes when she first arrived on scene. She'd circle back to how long Alicia had rented the cabin for, but first she wanted to narrow in on something else. "So the door was locked?"

"It was, and that's why I hesitated to go inside. But something inside me was pushing me to do so." Pamela laid a hand over her stomach. "Guess it was a good thing I did."

Locked door. All alone. Perhaps Alicia Gordon *had* died by suicide? Then again... "How does the lock on the cabin door work? Does it require a key to lock it from the outside?" Some locks could be engaged with a simple twist and pulling the door shut. The answer could go a long way to determining if someone else had been in the cabin with Alicia.

"It's a single deadbolt and requires a key."

Which meant either Alicia had locked it from inside or someone had taken the key. "I assume she was given just one copy?"

"Yes."

They'd need to verify it was still in the cabin.

"Did Ms. Gordon ever rent from you before?" Trent practically had his face pressed against the Plexiglas that separated the front and back seats.

"This was the first time."

"And how did she find out about the cabin? Do you know?" Amanda asked.

"Harold Armstrong. He works for Alicia, and he recommended the place. He actually called on her behalf, told me she'd be calling. I did her a favor..." She stopped talking there, her eyes taking on intensity. "Some favor."

"How did you do her a favor?" Amanda asked.

"I usually only rent the place out on a weekly basis."

"You made an exception for Ms. Gordon?" Trent said, beating Amanda to the question.

"Yes." She glanced at Trent, and somehow it emphasized how strange a sight it was seeing a cop in the back of a squad car. "She was booked for just a couple of nights. She checked in on Monday, and she was supposed to leave today."

Today was Wednesday, and Alicia had died last night. "Do you know why she planned such a brief stay?" Another question in Amanda's mind was why Alicia had even come here. Assuming Alicia lived in Woodbridge that was so close. Was she seeking solitude for some reason? Or had there been marriage problems, as Trent had suggested? Had she come out here to rendezvous with a lover—one who didn't leave a trace? One who killed her and made it appear as if she'd just fallen asleep? Had she come to end her own life, out of sight from her family?

"I don't know all the details. Just that she wanted a quick getaway. Ah, she did mention something about clearing her head."

Someone in Alicia's position would probably have a lot weighing heavily on her. There'd be a lot of responsibilities—not only on the professional front but personally. The younger

boy in that picture would likely live at home with her. Amanda was relearning what it was like to have a young child to care for. It was almost seven years ago that she'd lost her husband, Kevin, and daughter, Lindsey, in a car crash to a drunk driver. Adopting Zoe Parker had reminded Amanda that balancing work and family was tough to pull off. It seemed one or the other always suffered.

"Did she mention why she might need to clear her head?" Trent asked.

Pamela shook her head. "No, she wasn't telling me that. I was a stranger to her."

Amanda was thinking the two people they should start with were Tony Bishop and Harold Armstrong.

Trent was scribbling in his notepad but paused long enough to ask, "Did you happen to be here when she arrived?"

"I was actually. Normally it doesn't work out that way."

"How did she strike you?" Amanda interjected before Trent could speak again. Often when people sought a getaway, there was something pushing them to do so whether that was stress, depression, or just the need to relax.

Pamela eventually said, "Distracted. Confused possibly." She flicked a hand in the air. "Probably explains her needing to clear her mind."

Amanda nodded, but she needed more to explain it away. In fact, depression could be a factor, as well as the feeling of being overwhelmed. Amanda gave her card to the woman. "My partner and I may be in touch with you again, but feel free to call me if you think of anything else that might help our investigation."

"Will do, but before you leave, I have a question for you. Was Alicia murdered?"

Amanda stiffened. "Her death is being treated as suspicious. We would appreciate that you keep what happened here to yourself to respect her family's right to be the first to know."

Not that Amanda saw Pamela as the type to run off and blather to the media, but the latter had a way of slinking out of hidey-holes when talk of a death hit emergency response radios.

"No problem there. It's not exactly something I'd want to advertise." Her eyes blanked over and settled on the cabin. "If she was, uh, killed here, I might end up selling the place. But it's going to break my heart to do it. That cabin's been in my family for three generations."

"Well, there's no need to rush into any decision." Amanda smiled gently at her.

"Yeah, suppose you're right."

Amanda and Trent thanked Pamela for her cooperation and got out of the squad car. He was hobbling a bit and seemed to be struggling to stand straight.

"You all right there?"

"I will be."

"Uh-huh. But how's your ass?" The words slipped out, and her cheeks burned. "You know, because those seats in the back are molded plastic..." She was desperately trying to backpedal.

Trent smirked. "It's a bit tender, if you must know."

There was yet another victim on this property. Her. Cause of death: embarrassment.

You have reached the end of the sample.

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