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ALIVE

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# LAST SEEN ALIVE

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## PROLOGUE

The silver sedan slowed to a stop. The driver had been careful to keep his distance, but stress had stiffness building in the back of his neck. There was always the chance he'd messed up, that he'd been made. If he was going to act, it had better be soon.

But he'd never killed a kid before.

He cut the engine, and the silence of the summer night was almost deafening. He sat still, recalling the scene a half hour ago when the detective returned home with her daughter, a sweet little blond kid about six years old. The two of them were laughing as they had gotten out of the Honda Civic and walked to the front door. The girl had dropped a stuffed dog on the pavement and had nearly tripped over it, but mother and daughter found that funny and set off in a new batch of laughter.

But a scuffed and bruised knee would be the least of the girl's worries by the time he was finished with her. He'd make the mother watch while he strangled the child if she didn't comply with his wishes. And it was such a simple request he had to make of her. She just needed to drop the investigation, let the past stay buried. He'd been watching her for days as she

worked alongside her partner. They were a nuisance the way they pushed, pushed, pushed.

Well, he'd finally figured out a way to get them to stop, to force their compliance. The female detective had a weak spot, and he planned to exploit it.

That little girl.



# ONE

## SIX NIGHTS EARLIER...

This was a bad idea. The warnings sounded in Amanda Steele's head, but she was ignoring them, thinking only with other parts of her anatomy that shouldn't have any say. But it had been so long since she'd let herself fall into the arms of a man, and it wasn't like he was a stranger. He was comforting and familiar. He was a presence from her past, and she trusted him.

Logan was smiling as he fumbled with his key to open the front door. She wanted him to hurry before she got cold feet and changed her mind about this. As it was, she blamed her best friend, Becky Tulson, for things getting to this point. She'd filled Amanda's head with nonsense about getting back into the world of dating and had dragged her out for more girls' nights in the last three months than she'd had in the seven years prior. And that's all tonight was supposed to be—a night for the girls at Tippy Moose Alehouse in Woodbridge. But Logan had walked in, and the rest was history, as they say.

"There." Logan smiled at her triumphantly, like he'd won an Olympic gold medal, not just claimed victory over a dead-bolt. He moved in for his reward and planted a kiss on her that had her insides flushing hot in an instant and her toes curling.

It had been far too long...

Logan opened the door and gestured for her to go on ahead of him. She stepped inside. She was really doing this—spending the night with Logan. And while logic told her to call it a night and head home, she had needs. She'd also like to blame the small glass of wine she'd had for her lapse in judgment, but it had hardly been enough to make her drop her inhibitions. She missed being with a man and not just sexually, but the satisfying feeling of having a man's large arms wrapped around her, preferably ones belonging to a man who knew her. She'd dated Logan for a few months last year and their relationship hadn't progressed much further than being casual, but it had given her a small taste of what she had with her husband, Kevin, before he had died nearly seven years ago.

And why was she so wrapped up in her head right now? She deserved this indulgence. Just this once. And it was the right time. Zoe, her six-year-old, was with Amanda's sister Kristen and her family all night.

She spun, and Logan was right there—their chests pressed together. He put his hands on her arms, then swept them over her body. His cologne smelled like a campfire, the scent intoxicating and earthy. She made the first move and pawed urgently at his belt buckle with one hand while she wrapped her other arm around his neck and pulled his mouth to hers.

They kissed as they slipped out of their shoes and walked through the house, pieces of clothing being tossed as they moved. His shirt went first, and he fumbled with the buttons on hers before tugging it open. Buttons ripped from the fabric and pinged to the floor.

"Hey." She drew back from him just long enough to say, "I would have you know this shirt cost me eighty bucks."

"Forgive me." He nuzzled into her neck, sending her mind into a tailspin, dizzy and euphoric.

They were about ten feet from his bedroom, and she caught the whiff of something above the notes of his cologne.

An odor she knew well.

She put her hands on Logan's chest, panting. "Just..." The rest of her words were unsaid, but she was going to say *stop*.

"What the heck is that?" Logan asked, sniffing the air, his mouth turning down in disgust.

She held up a hand to him. "Stay there."

"What is—"

"Stay." Her cop instincts were at full alert. The smell was unmistakable, and she knew it heralded death.

Blood.

She stepped into Logan's bedroom and saw a woman lying on top of the comforter, sprawled out and dressed in lingerie. There was no need to check for a pulse. Her right wrist dangled over the edge of the bed, and her face was turned toward the door. Her eyes were unseeing. At least one bullet had ripped through her chest and a pool of red stained the white silk and the bedding.

Amanda gripped the front of her shirt together to cover her chest, feeling exposed and vulnerable. *Who the hell is the woman, and what is she doing here?* She retreated from the room and ran into Logan. "Don't—"

He lunged, and she tried to stop him by holding out an arm, but he pushed through. The force of his movement jarred her shoulder and had her crying out in pain.

"Claire!" he yelled, frozen inside the doorway, looking from the bed to Amanda and back, as if torn where to go.

"You need to leave her alone and get out of that room." Her adrenaline and experience were kicking in. Amanda worked in Homicide for the Prince William County Police Department. Solving murders was what she did, but she'd never found herself in a situation like this one. Still, the basic principles applied. Touch nothing and call it in—immediately. She gath-

ered her jeans off the hallway floor, pulled them on, and swiftly took out her cell phone from a pocket.

She called in direct to dispatch and as she made the report, she wished she'd had the common sense to listen to her intuition and go home instead of here. If only she could reverse the clock and tell Logan that their hooking up for even one night wasn't a good idea. But, no, she'd had to forge ahead, full of hormones like a teenager on prom night.

"Police units will be here in a few minutes." She made one more call before she stuffed her phone back into her pocket and did up her shirt's remaining buttons. Thankfully, only two had popped off. She looked around quickly and spotted one, which she picked up. "We should wait outside." Their presence alone could have contaminated the scene, but they could prevent more damage being done.

Logan was staring blankly at the floor.

"Logan," she prompted.

His eyes were wet when they met hers. "This can't be happening. She... she's..."

"Come on, let's go outside." She put an arm around him. "The police will figure out what happened and who did this, okay?"

He nodded so subtly it was barely perceivable.

They sat side by side on the front step. She looked over at him. He was in complete shock and pale, like he'd seen a ghost. He kept blinking, and his breathing was shallow.

She wanted to console him and offer comfort, but there was a part of her that held back. It was her job clashing with her personal inclination. But she had to protect herself too—until she figured out exactly why that woman was murdered in Logan's bed. "You knew her."

"Yeah." He rolled his bottom lip through his teeth.

"You called her Claire. Who is she?"

"My wife."

## TWO

Amanda knew Logan was married, but he had told her they'd been separated for years and that he'd hired private investigators to find her—without success. “What is she doing in your house?”

“I have... no idea.” His head was hung low, his knees up, elbows resting on them. His gaze was on his feet.

“That’s not good enough, Logan.”

He looked at her. “What do you want from me?”

“The truth. You’re going to have to tell me everything because this isn’t looking good.” She was having a hard time balancing all the emotions she was feeling—two of which she hated, namely the twinges of betrayal and jealousy. “Were you back together?”

“No. I haven’t seen her since— You know what? Never mind.” He shot off the step and onto the pathway where he stood, hugging himself and periodically raking a hand through his hair.

The night was warm and humid. Except for the song of crickets, the neighborhood was quiet. It would have been a

beautiful evening if not for the dead woman inside the house behind them.

Amanda got up and went to Logan, kept at a distance to give him space. Give *herself* space. "You're going to have to talk eventually. She didn't just show up that way."

"No shit." He met her gaze, his eyes cold and his jaw clenched.

Anger flushed through her. She was just trying to help him, to get a handle on the situation herself and he was pushing her away. Well, he could suit himself then. She didn't need to defend him—and why should she if he wasn't interested in doing that for himself?

Three cruisers pulled down the street, their colored strobing lights reaching her before the hum of their engines and the crackling of their tires as they rolled across the hot asphalt. Night or not, this June was one for the record books with its high temperatures. Behind the cruisers was the SUV of the PWCPD's interim sergeant.

Amanda drew a deep breath, wishing for things to return to the way they used to be before Sergeant Malone had developed a tumor in his brain. At least he was on the mend, and while she held out hope he'd come back to the post, life had taught her to never get her hopes up too high.

"Let me do the talking."

Logan waved a hand, immersed in his own world, likely tangled in thoughts, but were they of guilt and remorse or simply shock?

Sergeant Katherine Graves was the first out of the entourage. Not that Amanda was surprised. In the last few months of working with her, she'd realized the woman was proud and domineering, and the type of boss who led with fear and intimidation instead of with a firm hand balanced with compassion and understanding.

Graves headed straight for them, her stride chewing up

everything in her path. Her legs were long and slender, like the rest of her near six-foot frame. For ten thirty at night, she was dressed impeccably in a black pantsuit paired with a white collared shirt and dress boots with two-inch heels. Did the woman ever let go and relax? The only thing remotely soft about her appearance was that her dark hair was wavy and left to fall over her shoulders.

“Steele?” Just her name and a nudge of Graves’s head had Amanda stepping into the driveway with the sergeant. “What are you doing here?” She crossed her arms, her face a mask of seriousness as if she were prepared to scold Amanda for her presence.

Amanda stiffened, wanting to tell this woman that what she was doing at Logan’s was none of her business, but mouthing off to Graves wouldn’t be the wise choice. “Logan Hunter is a friend of mine.”

“And that’s...” Graves looked over at Logan, who was now standing with two officers.

“Yes.”

“All right then.” Graves didn’t voice her disapproval, but her tone and eye contact passed judgment.

“What I do in my free time is up to me.” The words slipped out, and Amanda wished she could reel them back. She was defending herself, the very thing she’d just told herself wasn’t necessary.

“It sure is, Detective. Unless that’s committing a crime or abetting one.”

Amanda bit her bottom lip, trying to quell the urge to continue defending herself while pointing out how ridiculous Graves sounded. If Amanda wasn’t careful, whatever came from her mouth would be a CLM—a career-limiting move.

“Tell me what’s happened here.” Amanda got the sense there was more Graves wasn’t saying, given how she peered into her eyes.

"As I told dispatch, there's a DB—"

"Right. *As you told dispatch*. May I remind you that as your sergeant, you should also call me?"

And there it was... the true gripe. "I knew they would have informed you."

Graves tightened her arms, testing the fabric of her suit jacket.

*She must be sweating like hell!*

"There may be things you got away with when Malone was in charge, but I want to be kept current. Am I understood?"

If she was asking if Amanda realized the woman had an issue relinquishing any *perceived* control, then yes, Amanda understood her perfectly.

"Detective?" she prompted.

"I heard you, and yes, I will keep you informed."

"Now that's out of the way, run me through what happened here."

"Logan and I were here for a nightcap when we found the body."

"A nightcap?" Skeptical, and Graves didn't seem to try to conceal that fact.

"Yes." As if Amanda were going to come right out with the fact that she and Logan were going to hook up.

"And how well do you know this..."

"Logan Hunter." Amanda provided his name again.

Graves gestured for Amanda to proceed.

"We've been acquainted for a year and half but haven't seen each other in several months." She would keep her answers simple and vague. Besides, she didn't know much about what had taken place here. And as much as she wanted to rush to Logan's defense, she also had her career and future to think about. Zoe's future too, as it was linked to hers.

"Friends? Lovers?"

"I'm not sure why that matters." But Amanda knew that it



very well did where a homicide investigation was concerned. "Former lovers," she eventually offered.

"Yes, well, that explains some things then." Graves flicked a finger toward Amanda's shirt, indicating the missing buttons.

Amanda resisted the urge to cross her arms in some display of modesty. She was a grown woman and if she wanted to hook up with a guy, why should she care what anyone else thought?

"And the woman inside...? Who is she?"

Amanda gave thought to how to respond. It was always best to be forthright, but no matter how she could think to spin her response, it didn't come out sounding good for Logan—or her. But it was best she stick to the truth. "She's his wife, but they are estranged."

"Huh. Doesn't seem like they are much *estranged* now, does it?" Graves didn't give Amanda a chance to respond and charged toward the house. She stopped at the doorway to say something to Officer Wyatt before going inside.

Amanda was grateful for a few seconds alone and for being obscured by shadows. She was scowling and had one hand balled into a fist at her side. Malone really couldn't get back to the job fast enough. She took a deep breath and headed to the front door.

Wyatt held up his hand to stop her. "Sorry, Detective, but I can't let you in there."

"What do you mean you can't?"

"Just following Sergeant Graves's orders." Wyatt wasn't even meeting her eye.

"You and I know each other and—"

"I'm not sure what you expect me to do. She'll have my badge."

Amanda was practically vibrating with rage. It wasn't like she was some first-day rookie who didn't understand the fragility of a crime scene. She was with the Homicide Unit.

She pivoted to join Logan, at least feeling like she might be

useful there. But there was a voice inside cautioning her again. That same voice she should have listened to earlier. She had seen Logan's face when he saw the body; she didn't think he was the killer, but the fact remained that his wife was shot in his bedroom. And wearing very little. She needed far more information than she had before she could race to his defense in good conscience.

Another vehicle pulled to a stop in front of Logan's house, and Trent Stenson was in a half-jog coming toward her. Trent was her partner on the job. Trent was the other call Amanda had made, but she wasn't feeling so confident he'd be allowed inside either. After all, Amanda and Trent worked as a team. With Amanda blocked, Trent likely would be too, but it was worth a try...

She walked down the driveway.

"You all right?" Trent stopped in front of her.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

He angled his head. "You're tapping a foot, your hand is on your hip, and you're tense like a jungle cat."

"Graves." One word should be all it took for him to get the picture.

"Ah. She's put up the wall."

"Yep. Won't let me inside."

Trent glanced over at Logan, back at her. "This is Logan's place?" They'd met, and Trent knew they were seeing each other before.

"Yep." She realized how limited her vocabulary had suddenly become, but whatever.

A few seconds passed in silence. Maybe he didn't know what to say, as no doubt, the imagery played out in his mind.

"It's not what you think," she rushed out, hoping to stop him before his imagination got too carried away.

"Well, unless you came here for book club and the other

members are just running behind..." Trent's words disappeared to nothing.

"Fine, it is what it looks like," she hissed. "But I've got nothing to feel bad about." And here she was defending herself again, like it was some knee-jerk reaction.

Trent made a funny face that had his lips pressing together, almost as if he found her rebuttal strange. "No one says you do."

"I know that. It's just... You know what? Never mind. You're here. Go in and take a good look and update me, would you?"

"I'll see what I can do, but don't be surprised if I'm tossed out."

"Just go. Give it a try." She was so uncomfortable standing there with Trent, given that she was busted with Logan. *Busted?*

"First, tell me what I need to know."

"Logan says the woman is Claire Hunter, his wife." She paused there, giving Trent the opportunity to say something as opposed to talking over her if she'd carried on, but he said nothing. She continued. "She was shot in the bedroom, on the bed."

"What's Logan saying?"

"Not much." She could have said *nothing* for the number of useful syllables that had left his mouth since their macabre discovery.

"All right, well, I'll go in, take a look around. Hang in there."

"Yep." Apparently, that was her word of choice for the moment, but it was about all she had the energy for. She was bombarded with shock, indifference, betrayal, empathy, and on the list of conflicting emotions went.

She wanted to go to Logan, stand by his side, but her legs wouldn't move. He glanced at her, even waved her over, but she couldn't move. Until she knew more, she was best to stand as neutral as Switzerland and not give her loyalty to any side.

## THREE

Trent wished he'd handled things with Amanda a bit differently, offered some reassurance, said something that might make her feel better. But he didn't know Logan, beyond being aware that Amanda had dated him for a while, and as far as he knew, they'd broken things off a long time ago. Whatever the case, it would appear their relationship had heated back up. That's if her mussed-up hair and missing buttons were any indication.

He did his best to respect her privacy, but there might come a time he'd have to push a little more. That was if Sergeant Graves didn't send him back out the front door on his ass.

He slipped some plastic booties over his shoes before entering the home, striving to preserve what he could of the crime scene. He heard Graves talking and followed the sound of her voice down a hallway. He found her just inside the door of the primary bedroom, holding her cell phone to an ear. She barely passed him a glance and ended the call.

"Detective Stenson," she said coolly.

"Sarge."

“Did Steele update you on the circumstances of this discovery?”

“She did.”

“Then you know that she’s likely sleeping with the man who owns this house.”

“I wouldn’t know.” And, God, he hated to think about Amanda and Logan together.

Graves angled her head as if she wasn’t buying his response. “Any good detective could put two and two together here. Steele’s too close to this, and by extension, so are you. I’m going to assign this investigation to Detectives Ryan and Hudson.”

Some called Ryan “Cougar” around the department, a rather juvenile nickname in Trent’s opinion. Hudson was a good guy and rather new to the Prince William County Police Department, but not new to the badge. Like Hudson, Graves was a transplant too, but she came from the big city of New York. Trent could understand why Graves would desire the peacefulness offered by a smaller community, but Trent had a feeling her reasons for moving stunk to high heaven.

He stepped into the room and noted the scene. Dead woman supine on a king-size bed, dressed in scanty lingerie, shot to the chest, female clothing scattered on the floor. Trent scribbled these details in his notepad. There was a nightstand next to the bed, a lamp on it. A length of its cord was coiled up on the tabletop.

He moved farther into the room, looking up at the victim from the base of the bed. Her left arm was slightly curled over her torso. She had long fingers, and there was a gold band on her ring finger. *Oh, Amanda...*

At the far end of the room, there was a window, the curtains drawn. He swept his gaze right.

Graves stepped in front of him, but she didn’t block everything, even though she was almost as tall as him. He could see

over her shoulders. A long dresser, a match to the single nightstand, dark wood, chrome hardware.

"Detective Stenson, did you hear me? This isn't your case. You're excused."

Trent was about to turn and leave when his eyes landed on the corner of the dresser. A handgun. He couldn't tell what make and model, but it was all black.

"Detective," Graves said sternly.

"Ah, yeah"—he folded his notepad shut and tucked the pen in its coils—"I'm leaving."

He led the way back out of the house, but took in the layout as he went. It was like Amanda's place, with another bedroom on the right and a bathroom. The kitchen was at the rear of the home. Moving toward the front from there was the dining room, with the hallway shooting off to the right, the living room next to the entry.

He walked slowly, deliberately, even though the sergeant was right on his heels. He saw a button on the floor, but from what he'd quickly seen of the victim's clothing, it didn't belong with her. He had a feeling he knew where it had come from, and he didn't care for how the realization had his stomach turning to lead and his chest squeezing with something resembling jealousy.

"Detective, could you move any slower?" Graves urged him.

He picked up his pace. Guess that was the problem when someone transplanted from the city to the country—they hadn't yet clued in that life didn't need to be lived as a drive-by.

He stepped outside and took a deep breath, trying to cleanse his mind of what he'd just seen and the situation. Amanda was back together with Logan. One night, dating him regularly; it made little difference. He was happy for her. Or he should be.

She was standing next to Logan, but her body language was rigid, and she kept space between them. They were with two

uniformed officers, and Detectives Ryan and Hudson. They certainly got there fast enough.

Amanda turned, met his gaze, and closed her eyes slowly. Silent communication—something they had worked out, given that they'd been partners for a year and a half. In this moment, he read she was pissed by the way everything was playing out. While he understood her point of view, he also could appreciate Graves's.

He went to Amanda. "Can I talk to you a minute?"

"Yeah." She gave one look to Logan, who was watching her with these pleading eyes. "I'll be right back," she assured him, touching his forearm just before walking away.

*An intimate touch...*

Trent went to the end of the driveway and waited for her to catch up.

"What's going on? Ryan and Hudson have been assigned the case?" she blurted out.

He nodded, wishing he'd had the chance to break it to Amanda before they arrived.

"Crap."

"You must see that you're close to this one."

"Seriously?" She glared at him, her mouth tightening.

He hated being at odds with Amanda; her fiery temper lived up well to the stereotype assigned to redheads. But there were times he needed to stand his ground. He even thought she admired him when he did. "You must see it? You are involved with Logan, and the dead woman was his wife."

"You make it sound like we're together."

"Well, aren't you?" he fired back.

Her cheeks went a bright red.

"Even if it was only for tonight, Amanda, you and Logan have a history. But can I ask you this, do you really know him?"

"I dated him for a few months."

"Then you know everything about his relationship with his

wife? What went wrong, for instance?" He waited, but she didn't respond. Not in words, anyhow. Her body language and facial expression were saying plenty. She'd crossed her arms and her lips were pressed together, the corner of her mouth angled downward. Closed off, defensive. "And that's a no."

"Trent, just stay out of it."

"Listen, this is a mess."

"You don't think I know that? His ex-wife is in there—"

"Ex? I thought they were still married?" His mind went immediately to the gold wedding band on the woman's finger, but he couldn't bring himself to say it to Amanda just yet. Besides, she may have noticed it for herself. Why pour salt on her wound?

"They are... but he hasn't seen her in a very long time."

"How long?"

"I don't know... a few years."

"A guess then? You don't really know?"

"I just admitted that much."

"Then, how do you know what's happened here—with absolute certainty?"

"I don't, but no one does yet."

"Logan might."

"If he killed her, yeah, but he didn't."

"And you know that for sure?"

"You know what?" She threw her arms in the air. "I'm done talking." She left him standing there and returned to Logan.

The detectives were gone now, probably having entered the home to look around. A van from Crime Scene pulled up and parked, and investigators unloaded with their gear. Trent watched them, but his mind was on Amanda. What the hell sort of mess had she gotten herself mixed up in?

**You have reached the end of the sample.**

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