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FINAL  
BREATH

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# HER FINAL BREATH

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*Dedicated to Emily Gowers*





## PROLOGUE

Leanne's eyelids are so heavy, but there's a voice inside telling her to open them and move. She spreads her fingers at her sides. They touch a soft surface. She extends her arms and find they move freely. No restraints.

Still, tremors of fear slice through her. Something is wrong.

Her head is spinning.

*Where am I?*

Images flash through her mind. A man, a dog, ice cream...  
*Gracie!*

She jolts to a seated position, opening her eyes and recoiling at the sudden burst of light. But she fights against it, squinting as she scans her surroundings.

She's on a single-sized bed in a room decorated for a young girl, though it feels like a huge space. The bedding is a bright pink, and the walls are papered in a pale-pink nondescript pattern, with a border at the level of a chair rail.

To her left is a large window with metal bars.

The blood in her veins becomes ice.

Across the room are two doorways. She sees a vanity and a toilet through one—a bathroom. The other is shut. There is a

third door on the right side of the room that is also closed. One of these is likely a closet and the other a way out.

*But first, where is my Gracie?*

The question ricochets in her head as a sob, as she now trails her gaze along the right wall. There's another bed with a small form beneath the comforter and a little pudgy hand poking out over the fabric.

"Gracie." A plea, a cry, not much above a whisper.

She shuffles to the edge of her mattress, throws her legs over the edge and stands. Pain flares in her ankle, blinding her vision, and she crumples to the floor. She crawls to the other bed, tugging herself up by clawing at the comforter. It comes toward her in massive waves of fabric. Suddenly it's like she's drowning, trying to keep her head above water.

She swims free, and her daughter is facing her. Lying on her side, her eyes pinched tight.

*Gracie!*

She stares at her motionless daughter. If she's breathing, it's so shallow Leanne can't see her chest rise and fall.

*Oh my God! Please no!*

She shakes her daughter's arm. No response.

She tries again. This time, near violently. The girl groans.

Leanne scoops her daughter into her arms and squeezes with what strength she can muster, tears falling. "Baby, baby, it's Mommy."

Gracie turns her head and looks in her eyes—the bluest blue peering into hers and the missing pockets of time return. She trusted that man, allowing herself to be blinded by his charms. But he'd been so kind to them. Her daughter had loved petting and playing with his black Lab.

Meanwhile, he was working his agenda.

Leanne wants to tell Gracie everything will be okay, but she's feeling hopeless and responsible. This is all her fault.

She needs to get them out of here. If only she can figure how to do that. “Just stay right here, okay, sweetie?”

Gracie nods.

Leanne leaves her daughter’s side, hobbling. She discovers the closed door across the room is secured shut with screws.

She heads to the other closed door, grabs the handle, and it twists easily.

*She will get them out of here!*

She pulls on the door, but it doesn’t budge. She pushes. No give.

It must be locked on the outside.

She bangs her palms against the door. Angry, frustrated. Tears burn in her eyes, but she has to be strong for her daughter. She begs a higher power this isn’t the end for her. For Gracie.

# ONE

## TRIANGLE, VIRGINIA

The day was off to an early and interesting start. The dead body wasn't unusual, but the circumstances were.

Detective Amanda Steele drove her Honda Civic into the lot for Prince Park, joining a Kia sedan, a fire engine, the fire marshal's SUV, and an ambulance. Three young men were being tended to by two paramedics.

Busy place for six in the morning. Any other day, she'd be in bed at this time. In some ways, she wouldn't mind being there now. Even the October sun was slow to surrender to a new day. Though its rays cut through the light cloud cover and penetrated the spaces between the tree branches, they did little to cut out the damp chill of fall that permeated to the bone.

She pulled her car into a spot near the Kia and got out.

"Amanda!" Spencer Blair hustled toward her, and it had her stomach sinking. Their paths had crossed on a case a year ago, but since then she'd found out Spencer was the product of an affair her father had twenty-six years ago. Her father had come out with this last year, and Amanda hadn't spoken to Spencer since.

He slowed to a stop once he reached her, not winded from

his jaunt. But Spencer was fit and lean—something that served him well as a firefighter for the Dumfries-Triangle Volunteer Fire Department.

“You found the body?” A toss-away question. After all, he’d been the one to call her here—the unusual part.

“Not exactly. A little background first?”

She gestured for him to go ahead, wondering how he got caught up in all this. Spencer had shared little when he’d called her, just that there was a dead body buried in the woods.

“Some teens thought starting a fire in the woods was a smart idea. We got called out.”

She nudged her head toward the men with the paramedics. “Them?”

Spencer nodded. “Yep, those buttheads. They got started around three AM. The fire was called in around five. We arrived shortly after and got it under control. Thankfully, the flames never got to trees.”

“Three is a little early for a party and a fire. And it’s a Tuesday. Don’t they have school?”

“You’ll need to bring that up with them.”

“And the body...?”

“Quite sure it’s a woman. In a shallow grave.” His eyes glazed over, as if his imagination was venturing down a gruesome path.

Her thoughts immediately took her there with the delivery of his words *shallow grave*. It could be the work of a serial killer, but her mind was getting ahead of things. The killer likely had little time to dig a deeper hole, or may have wanted the victim to be discovered sooner. If the latter, why? Just one of the many questions that were sure to come. “What do you mean, you *think* it’s a woman?”

“You’ll understand once you see for yourself, but not much of the body is exposed. And we weren’t poking around. Leave that to the right people.”

It was possible the entire body wasn't there. She could have been hacked into pieces and certain parts buried. *Push that one from my mind...* The nasty crept in when a person had seen enough of it. "Good call. But speaking of the right people, where is everyone? The medical examiner, Crime Scene?"

"I figured you'd call them. I called you, thinking you might want to have a look first. Don't let that fact go to your head or read more into it."

"Uh-huh." She was curious, though. Had he called her to get close to her, establish some sort of bond? She rubbed her forehead, not eager to traipse down that path just yet.

"I mean it. After all, dead bodies are your wheelhouse."

"Can't argue there." But technically, her shift started at eight thirty. It was her strong drive—obsession—for justice that had won out over her personal desire for a few more hours' sleep. She just hated that the hour had caused inconvenience to her seven-year-old daughter, Zoe, who Amanda had to drag from bed and cart to her aunt Libby's. "Who found her?"

"That one there." Spencer indicated the young man who was wearing a yellow-and-red plaid shirt. He was tall and gangly, like he hadn't grown into his arms and legs yet. "Name's Nolan Copeland. It was his idea to drink and start a fire."

Nolan was sitting at the back of the ambulance. His friends were loud, while he was quiet. Amanda would talk to the group, but later. She preferred to be armed with seeing the site and gleaming more information before doing so. It would also be best if she waited for her partner, Trent Stenson, to arrive. What tells she might miss, he could pick up. "We need them to stick around. Will you see to that while I call everyone?"

Spencer nodded and went to the young men. She watched the interaction as she called her partner.

"Amanda?" Trent answered on the second ring, but his voice was groggy, like she'd woken him up.

“Rise and shine. There’s a situation.” She told him about the discovery at the park.

“I’ll meet you at the station? We’ll head over together...”

They worked out of Central, one of three stations belonging to the Prince William County Police Department. It was in Woodbridge, about ten minutes from Triangle, where she was now. “A bit of a story there, but I’m already on scene.”

“Really? Why are you at work already? You know what? I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She rushed out a quick “goodbye” and hung up, not wanting to face an awkward “see you later.” Blame that on a kiss that shouldn’t have happened. Four months ago. Two kisses, truth be told. He kissed her, backed off. Then she went in for seconds. Now she just wished to forget all of it. She had started seeing Logan Hunter again, and it was going on four months. Things were good between them. But still... the kisses in her kitchen with Trent clung to her, haunting her like a persistent migraine she couldn’t shake. She would, though. Eventually. Hopefully.

Amanda made the other necessary calls to get a medical examiner and crime scene investigators en route. Her sergeant, Katherine Graves, was last on her list. She was prickly to deal with most of the time, and her voice set Amanda on edge. At least she was just a stopgap until Scott Malone returned to work. Malone was more than her sergeant; he was a family friend. Recovering from surgery to remove a malignant brain tumor had him benched for seven months already. Amanda was counting down the days until he returned. She didn’t want to consider he might decide on early retirement.

Graves sounded more flummoxed than Trent had been. “At Prince Park? And it’s just after six AM. What are you doing there, Steele? I didn’t think your shift started until eight thirty.”

Amanda bit her bottom lip, counted to three in her head. It had become a ritual so Amanda wouldn’t risk saying something she couldn’t take back. “My...” She stopped talking. It was prob-

ably best to leave out that her half-brother called her there. The sergeant was sensitive to any perceived personal connections when it came to her detectives and their investigations. "One of the firemen had my number." Since Amanda had already laid out what little she knew, her statement would make sense to Graves. "I, ah, worked with him on a past case." It was the truth, also a worthy addition to support why a fireman might have called her directly instead of PD.

There was a rash of silence. Amanda let it grow despite wanting to get on with her day. But any rush to speak might come across as her craving approval, or desiring control of the situation. Neither would gain her Graves's favor.

"Very well. I'll be there soon." With that foreboding promise, the sergeant hung up.

Spencer was looking at her, along with the fire marshal. Craig Sullivan was a pleasant man she'd met on the same case as she had Spencer. She bridged the distance.

"Detective Steele. We meet again. Would be nice if it didn't always involve a dead body." His words seemed an attempt at humor, but they came out flat and heavy.

"Wouldn't it? Spencer said you responded to a call and wound up with a surprise."

"You heard right. At the very least, the young man is facing a fine. Fires are not allowed in the park."

Amanda suspected a monetary fine might be the least of Nolan's worries. Specifically if he was why the woman was in the ground. The "discovery" might be nothing more than an elaborate attempt to cover up his crime.



## TWO

Trent was still shaking cobwebs from his mind when he arrived at Prince Park. He'd been in the middle of a dream when Amanda's call came through, rousing him to the cruel reality of the waking world—one in which dead bodies beckoned and demanded his attention.

But at seven in the morning? That's what the clock on the dash read when he cut the engine.

He spotted Amanda speaking with the fire marshal—Craig Sullivan, Trent recalled—and Spencer Blair. Trent headed over. The sound of tires crunching on the gravel slowed his steps, and he looked over a shoulder. The sergeant's SUV.

She was just what he needed before coffee—a superior on a power trip.

"Detective." Amanda waved an arm to flag his attention, as if she didn't see he was already walking toward her.

He lifted a hand, a meager, awkward attempt at acknowledging her. Things between them were charged static at times—tense and uncomfortable. It was hard to know what to say, what to do, just in case the other was offended. He never should have given in and kissed her. He'd been an idiot to think he could

and then completely forget. And it wasn't like a romantic relationship between them was possible as long as they were partners.

"Hey." Trent greeted the group as he stopped next to Amanda.

She stepped to the side, placing just a few more inches between them, as if he'd gotten too close.

"Any developments since we spoke?" he asked, clutching at the hope there would be, but the question also served as an icebreaker. Hopefully, it masked his relative unease.

Amanda shook her head. "Haven't even seen the body yet. I was waiting for you and everyone else to arrive first."

"It was one of them who found the body?" Trent nudged his head toward a group of three young men near an ambulance. They were standing in a circle, two of them kicking at stones with the toes of their shoes.

"Nolan Copeland. He's the one in the plaid shirt, dark hair."

Based on first impressions, Trent would say Nolan was the leader of the group. His friends were looking at him, while Nolan had his eyes on Trent.

A van from Crime Scene pulled in and began parking, along with the ME's vehicle. Both were stationed out of Manassas, about thirty minutes from here. But it was rare that they showed up at the same time.

It was turning into one big party, and he hadn't even had a sip of coffee.

Graves was the first to join them, travel mug in hand. Trent imagined it was full of coffee. Steam curled from the hole in the lid. What he'd give for one hit. He inhaled deeply and was rewarded with the robust aroma of roasted coffee beans. It would have to carry him until he could get his own.

"Detectives, we're all up a little early today. Let's make it count." Her brow wrinkled as she lifted her cup to her lips.

He was all onboard with her pep talk—if four words constituted that.

Graves took a swig, lowered her cup. “The body?” She pursed her lips and looked at Amanda.

Amanda gestured toward Spencer.

“I’ll take you now. Unless you’d prefer that someone else take care of that?” Spencer glanced at the marshal for permission.

“You go ahead,” Sullivan said. “I’m going to send the guys back to the station. You and I can go back together in a bit.”

“You got it.”

The marshal walked off to give the news to the other firemen. Coming toward them was Crime Scene Investigator Emma Blair—Spencer’s mother—and CSI Isobel Donnelly.

“Spencer?” Blair hustled to her son, leaving her counterpart to catch up.

“I’m fine.” Spencer barely opened his mouth to speak, the words slipping through clenched teeth. “The body’s this way.” Spencer led the way into the woods.

Hans Rideout, the medical examiner, and his assistant, Liam Baker, had tagged on to the group too, and they all followed Spencer.

Trent had been to Prince Park many times. There were play areas for children and walking trails. Visitors could hike or take to the water for fishing, pedal boating, and canoeing. There was a mini-golf course, a driving range, batting cages, volleyball, and tennis courts. Some activities were seasonal, but the fact remained it was a popular destination for adults, teens, and children. It would be high traffic, making it a risky place to dispose of a body—let alone a place to execute a murder.

No one said a word until Spencer stopped and pointed about six feet in front of him to a small knoll. “She’s right there. You’ll see the tip of a shoe once you get closer.”

Trent moved in, watching where he placed each footstep to

avoid contaminating the scene. Just as Spencer had said: the toe of a woman's running shoe, bedazzled with rhinestones, stuck out from the dirt. He also noticed a slash of blue going up from the ankle. He crouched down, angling his head. Blue jeans, presumably covering her leg.

"When Nolan tripped over her, it pulled more of the remains out," Spencer said.

CSIs Blair and Donnelly set down their collection kits. Blair took out a camera and snapped shots while everyone stayed back. She and her colleague continued scouring the immediate area around the grave.

Rideout and his assistant stood sentinel. They'd wait for the investigators to process the scene before moving in. Once they finished, Rideout and Liam would exhume the woman.

Trent stepped up next to Amanda. Her arms were crossed, and her face was shadowed. "Who buries a woman in the woods?"

She leveled a serious gaze at him. "Don't say a serial killer."

He held up his hands. "I never did. Besides, it's far too soon to leap there." He smiled at her, an expression she returned, even if both were dampened by the circumstances. They were standing on the edge of someone's grave. Speaking of... "It looks like she may have been put here recently. The soil appears loose, not packed down."

"I noticed that too." Amanda wasn't looking at him now, but chewing her bottom lip, her eyes on the grave.

The sergeant nudged over, her elbow grazing Trent's. "We need to figure out who she is and how she wound up here."

Silence passed, and Graves passed a look at each of them like she expected them to have those answers already.

"We got here at the same time as you," Trent said. He didn't look at the sergeant when he spoke, figuring it was best not to make eye contact and really provoke the bear.

“Well, we need to find out as soon as possible. I don’t want this hitting the press without having answers.”

Trent resisted pointing out the lack of answers was standard this early in an investigation.

“We’ll do what we can, Sarge,” Amanda said in a measured tone.

*Impressive.* Redheads got a bad rep for being temperamental, and while Amanda could be fiery, she somehow stuffed it down for the sergeant. His partner would likely vent to him later.

“Where were the teens having the fire?” Amanda slowly pivoted toward Spencer.

“I’ll show you.” He stepped off with Amanda.

A feel for the entire scene would be helpful, but Trent’s heart was with the woman in the grave. Who was she? Were her loved ones looking for her? Worse yet, had a loved one put her in the ground?

“Trent, are you coming?”

He looked up to find Amanda bugging her eyes and tilting her head. “Ah, yeah.” He wasn’t sure if she’d called his name before, but given her body language, he would guess she had. He half jogged to catch up, and thankfully didn’t see Graves on his heels. She was staying at the burial site. *One small mercy.*

Spencer took Trent and Amanda to a clearing away from the body. He didn’t need to point out the firepit. Stones circled black and charred pieces of wood.

*If it wasn’t for the fire, how long would that woman have stayed buried?*

“What are you thinking?” Amanda asked. Her and Spencer were looking at him.

“Is smoke coming from my ears?” The half-siblings didn’t appear amused. “Just happy that kid tripped over the body—not that there was one. You know what I mean. At least we can find some closure for her loved ones.”

Amanda met his gaze. Her eyes lit, and a few seconds later, she nodded.

She'd told him before she admired his optimism, but what she didn't realize was he clung to it like a buoy. To roll over in defeating thoughts wasn't how he was wired. Nothing got accomplished that way. "We should talk to the kid who found her and his friends." As the word *kid* left his lips, he felt ancient. He was only thirty-five, barely old enough to be any of their dads.

"We'll get there. But I'd like to get more information from the ME and the investigators first." Amanda turned her gaze to Spencer. "And we need to take your statement."

"I told you all I know."

"Okay, but for the record this time."

Trent pulled his notepad and pen and readied to write. Amanda covered the who, where, when, what, and why of the discovery. In summary, Nolan could be the innocent victim of the wrong place, wrong time, or a killer with solid acting ability. "Did he seem to be playing a part? Like he was pretending to be shocked?"

"From his screams, I don't think so. His reaction seemed genuine to me."

"Were you the first to come across Nolan?" Amanda asked.

"Yep." Spencer bobbed his head as if his verbal response wasn't enough.

"What was his state of mind?" Trent tapped the point of his pen to the page, the ink leaving a blot of blue.

"Distressed, freaking out. He was on the ground a few feet away, his knees tucked into his chest. Oh, and he was rocking back and forth."

Amanda bobbed her head.

"If that's everything, I should check in with the marshal." Spencer jacked a thumb over his shoulder. "It's probably about time I left."

“That’s fine. We know where to find you if we have more questions,” Amanda told him. “Thanks.”

“Ah, sure. For what exactly?”

“Reaching out.”

The half-siblings held eye contact for several seconds before Spencer left, and Trent wished he were somewhere else, affording them space.

Amanda didn’t seem fazed, though, and turned to Trent. “Early thoughts?”

“Someone needs to be missing her. At least I hope so.”

“Do you think we’re looking at a disposal site or a murder scene?”

“Given she was buried in a more secluded part of the park, it could be either. We’ll need more to go on. Her cause of death, et cetera. The grave is so shallow, if there had been heavy rain, she’d have been exposed. So was the depth because the killer ran out of time, or did they want her found quickly?”

“I was thinking the same.”

“Good to be on the same page.” He closed his notepad and tucked it away.

“That has never been a problem for us.” She walked on ahead of him in the grave’s direction.

He was left with the company of his thoughts, which were chewing apart her words. But it was best he not read too much into them—they were a double-edged sword.

## THREE

As Amanda and Trent returned to the crime scene, to her it all felt somewhat reminiscent of a case they had last fall. The one with the college student. She hadn't been buried, but left naked and on display in a wooded park next to the Potomac River.

The CSIs were snapping photographs and setting out yellow markers. Rideout and his assistant, Liam, were carefully brushing dirt away from the woman. Graves was lurking, hanging over them like a vulture seeking a meal.

"Do you think she's all there... the complete body?" The question ripped from her throat and was accompanied by a wave of nausea that had her entire body feeling ill, not just her gut. They had exposed two feet so far, but ugly surprises could still lurk beneath the soil.

Rideout rested his hands on his thighs and looked at her. "An educated guess? Yes. But we'll need to wait to know for sure."

The macabre image of the body missing its head flashed in Amanda's mind. She shook the thought away.

"We'll get there, Detective. Just give us some time. We do



this right, and we might even unearth evidence to track her killer.”

He was right, of course. They had to handle this methodically and with a gentle touch. The smallest of trace evidence could be what nailed the son of a bitch. “I understand.”

“Why did you ask that, Steele? Whether there is an entire body?” Graves cradled her mug in one hand, her arm tucked close to her torso, as if waiting for story time.

Amanda wasn’t pulling from a grisly case in her past though. Her motive for asking about the remains came down to one sad truth. “Anything is possible at this point.”

“Huh. Okay. Well, as I said before, we first concern ourselves with finding her identity and cause of death.”

“I realize that, but those answers can’t be pulled from thin air.” Amanda’s respect for Graves had been tested four months ago when the sergeant was ready to close a case prematurely to look good to the chief. Amanda drew herself taller, prepared to stand her ground. Even shoulders squared, chest out, her five-foot-nine frame felt small next to Graves’s nearly six-foot height.

“And I realize that,” Graves hissed in return.

Amanda would move on. Otherwise, she’d likely be pointing out how rhetorical statements didn’t get the investigation anywhere. “CSI Blair,” Amanda called out, and the investigator slowly lowered her camera.

“Yes...?” The subtle hint of a smile. Their relationship had changed since they had met for coffee and cleared the air in the spring. Before that, Blair had harbored animosity toward Amanda’s father, which she took out on Amanda.

“Any signs that the murder happened here?” Amanda asked.

“No blood or biological trace. We have shoe prints, though.” Blair pointed toward a few markers. “Just partials, two different

designs on the sole and two different sizes. Both suggest men's footwear."

"One likely belongs to Nolan Copeland, the young man who tripped over the vic's leg," Amanda said, stepping toward the closest flagged print to her. It was set in the soft earth and clearly visible. Circles of varying sizes, transected by a slash the shape of a lightning bolt.

"I'd say the ones that look like that." Blair gestured to the marker next to Amanda's foot.

The skin crinkled around Trent's eyes. "What makes you so sure of that?"

"There are quite a few that look like that, and given the direction they lead, but..." Blair indicated a marker next to a partial which, by the look of it, was the heel portion of the sole. It had deep grooves with a thin swipe arched toward the inseam. Blair added, "There's only one that looks like this."

"What are you saying exactly?" Graves spoke up.

"The killer may have taken his time to cover his shoe prints."

"Or they wore away over time," Graves said. "Still, if this partial ties back to the killer, lucky for us, he missed one."

*Some* luck. They'd still need to find Cinderella.

Blair went on. "Databases may tell us the make and style of shoe, but I'd say this lone partial belongs to a man's work boot or hiking boot. The other pattern is likely a running shoe."

"Estimation on foot sizes?" Trent asked, his notepad and pen in hand again.

"Eleven for the boot, size ten for the shoe."

Amanda nodded, appreciating Blair's confidence in her assessments. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Oh, there's one other thing. Over here..." Blair pointed out a section of ground where the grass laid flat. "Not certain what to make of it yet, but we flagged it."

The overall size would be right for a person's ass. "Ah, well,

the person who tripped over the woman was found sitting on the ground rocking back and forth.”

“That could explain it.” Blair returned to work.

While they had spoken with Blair, the ME and his assistant had cleared up the woman’s right leg to her knee. At the current rate of progress, it might be awhile yet before they had her fully exposed. Amanda faced Trent and nudged her head down the trail in the direction of the parking lot. “Let’s go talk with Nolan Copeland.”

“And check out his shoes.” Trent closed his notepad and stuck it and his pen into the back pocket of his pants.

“I’m going to make sure PIO is briefed on the situation,” Graves said.

The Public Information Office was the point of contact for the media and represented the PWCPD.

Graves shook her head and turned her chin downward, her gaze on the body. “A woman buried in the woods... I doubt it will take long before the media vultures arrive.”

Amanda smiled, feeling a teeny tug of a connection to the interim sergeant. It might have been the first since her arrival in the spring. Amanda didn’t much care for journalists and reporters either. They had a knack for crossing lines and smearing the PWCPD whenever they got the chance. It was easy to judge the actions of others when not in their shoes.

Graves left the site ahead of Amanda and Trent, but they followed close behind.

Amanda wished they were armed with more before speaking with Nolan, but that was how murder investigations worked. They unraveled in stages and often much slower than desired.

Dumfries-Triangle Volunteer Fire Department had cleared out, but there were PWCPD cruisers accompanied by four officers.

Graves got into her SUV, and shortly later, it was kicking

exhaust out of the tailpipe. Probably to give the sergeant a little warmth while she made her phone calls. Amanda watched for a moment, then turned her attention to the group of friends.

Nolan Copeland was sitting on the hood of the Kia sedan, his two friends standing near him. They were a good-looking bunch and appeared harmless, but appearances were often deceiving.

Officer Wyatt was with the young men and dipped his head in greeting. He had his notepad out and would have been taking preliminary statements. Amanda and Trent would pose questions of their own, some of which might be repetitive. But if they uncovered the smallest of discrepancies, it might prove integral to solving the case.

"We can take it from here, Officer," she told Wyatt.

"As you wish." Wyatt closed his notebook and walked toward a cruiser.

"Nolan Copeland?" Amanda directed toward the young man in the plaid shirt. She had her badge held up, as did Trent.

"I am, but we just answered a bunch of questions. Can't we go now?"

Noland struck her as a guy's guy, life of the party, the goof. "We're detectives Steele and Stenson. And you two are?" She leveled her gaze at Nolan's friends. They'd need to give their version of events too.

"Chet Farley." He repositioned his black-frame glasses on his nose and wouldn't hold eye contact. He ended up tucking his hands into his jeans pockets. Possibly shy, but more likely he was uncomfortable, as his bright-yellow knitted sweater spoke more to a vibrant personality.

"And you?" Trent prompted the third friend.

"Jared." Spat out as if it was of little consequence.

His harder edge spoke to a person who thought it was him against the rest of the world. His black hair was cropped very

short, and his face was unshaven. He wore a black hoodie and stood with his shoulders rounded forward.

“Your last name, Jared?” Amanda asked pointedly.

“Hart.” It came out like a hiss.

“Well, Jared Hart, why don’t you tell us what happened here?” She didn’t care for people with chips on their shoulders, no matter their age.

“Nolan just told you. We told that cop.” Jared flailed a hand toward Wyatt, who was now sitting in his cruiser.

“And now, you’re going to tell us.” Amanda met his gaze, held it. She’d stare the defiant kid down until his legs buckled. She hadn’t lost a stare-down contest once.

“Fine,” he huffed. “We wanted to have a little fun, let off some steam.”

“On a Tuesday morning. Strange day of the week, isn’t it?” The timing had bothered her from the start. Surely these kids would have school today. They couldn’t be any older than twenty.

“No.”

“You don’t have anywhere to be today? School perhaps?”

Jared kicked some stones.

“We’re taking an in-between year.” This from Chet, the timid one—at least around her and Trent.

She wasn’t about to lecture them on how their time could be better spent than drinking and having illegal fires in public parks. “I get that. You’re still deciding on the direction of your lives.” She put it out there non-judgmentally, appreciating that Chet had spoken up. She also wanted to relate so they would be more open to talking.

“Yep,” Chet said.

“Not that it’s any of your business.” Jared’s mouth set in a scowl.

“It *is* our business, actually.” Amanda pointed her finger between herself and Trent. “In case you haven’t figured it out

yet, we're with Homicide." She paused there, letting that sink into their skulls. They likely deduced that already, but she felt it necessary to stress their purpose at the park and the importance of the situation. "Your friend found a dead woman buried in the woods."

"You make it sound like I did it. I didn't!" Nolan protested.

"Never said that."

Nolan licked his lips and glanced away.

"But you never saw her before?"

"What?" Nolan spat. "No way." His hands were trembling, and he set them on the edge of the hood.

"What time did you arrive at the park?" Trent asked.

"Three AM, thereabouts," Nolan mumbled.

"Before that?" Amanda wanted a picture of their night.

"We were just hanging out playing video games at Jared's." Chet jacked a thumb toward his friend.

Trent glanced at Amanda briefly and picked up the questioning from the timeline of the friends' arrival at the park. "After you got here... then what?"

"We started a fire, had some beers." Nolan rubbed his arms. "That's it."

"Then what?"

"We heard the sirens and ran into the woods," Chet said.

"In different directions," Nolan amended. "That's when I, ah, found that woman." His face paled, and he put a hand over his stomach. "I was using the flashlight on my phone but got turned around."

Amanda imagined it was possible to become disoriented, especially buzzed and in the dark. "We need to see the bottom of your shoes. All of you."

Each of them lifted their feet for her and Trent to look at the soles. They were all wearing running shoes, and Nolan's were a visual match to the many prints near the grave, just as they had suspected.

“Okay, thank you,” Amanda told them.

“Who is she... the dead woman?” Chet asked and met Amanda’s gaze.

“We don’t know yet.”

“Was she, ah, *was she*—” Nolan covered his mouth, swallowed roughly, his Adam’s apple bulging. “Was she being buried while we were—” Nolan rushed to a thicket of bushes next to the lot and emptied his stomach.

That was a good question. The victim hadn’t been buried for long, but they didn’t know how long she’d been dead. Just more blanks that needed filling in. “Did you see anyone else in the park?”

Chet and Jared met each other’s gazes and shook their heads.

“No,” Nolan said between bouts of retching.

She highly doubted these young men were responsible for the woman’s fate. Nolan, specifically, didn’t have the stomach for murder. Rather these boys were just victims of circumstance.

With them in the clear, though, it raised another point. Who had called about the fire? Had it been the killer? If so, why risk drawing attention to himself? So many questions...

“Detective?” Chet prompted, bringing her back to the question that Nolan had raised.

“When was she buried? At this point, we don’t know.” She could have tagged on *much* but that had her feeling so powerless. She pulled out her business cards and handed one to each of them. “Call me if you think of anything that might help the investigation.”

“Does this mean we can go?” Nolan pried himself from the bushes, his cheeks now flushed.

“Yes, but stay in the county. I assume you all live in Prince William County?” Wyatt would have taken all their information, but she asked anyhow.

The trio nodded.

“Did you all come in this car?” She pointed to the Kia.

“Uh-huh. It’s mine,” Nolan said.

“Before you leave, I want you to check in with Officer Wyatt.” She waved him over.

Nolan’s eyes enlarged. “What? Why?”

“This is messed up, man,” Jared griped. “He didn’t do anything.” His volume tailed off as Amanda spoke to Wyatt.

“The boys are good to leave, but please run a Breathalyzer test on Nolan Copeland to ensure he’s in a good state to drive.” He wasn’t showing signs of intoxication, but the discovery of a dead body would sober a person’s mind quick. It didn’t mean the consumed alcohol had left his bloodstream. And she’d had an up-close snapshot of what happened when a drunk got behind the wheel. She squeezed out thoughts of her husband, Kevin, and six-year-old daughter, Lindsey, who had died over seven years ago because of a drunk driver.

“Will do. Come with me.” Wyatt and the boys headed toward his cruiser, just as Liam was jogging toward her and Trent.

“You’ve got to come quick... back to the burial site.” Liam was winded, like he’d run the whole way.

“What is it?”

“The woman isn’t alone. There’s a young girl with her.”

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