
◆ AN EVIE BLACKWELL GOLD CASE ◆

TRACES OF GUILT

DEE HENDERSON



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ONE

Joshua Thane

“Catch anything this morning?”

Josh Thane turned at a woman’s friendly call, smiled as he stood, and promptly decided to leave the fishing gear in the boat for later. “Hey, friend. It’s good to see you.” He stepped onto the dock holding his bucket and a stringer with two fish. “I’d give you a hug, but you don’t want to smell like me.”

Ann Falcon laughed. “Appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

“Paul with you?” he asked as he moved toward her.

“He’s tied up in meetings, so today it’s just me. I flew down from Chicago with some case files for a state cop, have plans to take her aloft to see the area this afternoon. I’ll fly back tomorrow after I touch base with a few friends.”

“Then what do you say to fresh fish for a late breakfast? A hot grill, some lemon slices, and a nice plate in front of you in about thirty minutes.”

“I’d say wonderful.”

Pleased, Josh nodded and stopped beside her. “You get prettier every year, you know. Marriage suits you.”

Ann smiled. “It’s got nice benefits. I haven’t been this relaxed about life for as long as I can remember. How about you? Seeing anyone in particular these days?”

“Can’t say there’s anybody specific, though Will seems to have settled on a girl since you were last down.”

“I heard. Karen Joy Lewis. She’s one of those friends I’m stopping by to visit.”

“Oh, really?” Josh mentally recalibrated just who Karen might actually be. “I did hear she’s from Chicago. What are the odds, you two being friends, that she just happens to end up in the small town of Carin . . . ?”

“Well,” Ann said, grinning, “I might have mentioned she would like this town when she was considering a move.”

Josh had been around Ann long enough to know the top layer of that answer was only the beginning, but he’d leave it for his brother Will to sort through the details. Will and Karen’s dates over the last year had morphed into a pretty sizable crush on his brother’s part. Given Ann’s comment about her relocating, Josh idly wondered if Karen Lewis was actually her real name.

Ann had worked mostly homicides before she retired as a cop, but she’d had her hands in a lot of different matters since then. The fact she was a pilot had her on call for just about any kind of situation needing to move people quickly out of trouble . . . or toward it. Josh had been out on several ground searches with her over the years, his two dogs being part of the statewide K-9 responders. He couldn’t say walking fields looking for a buried body was anything but grim, yet the hours spent walking with Ann had cemented a good friendship.

Ann followed as he went to the cleaning station and with deft strokes filleted the two bass, tossing the remains down the sluice chute into the lake. The gulls would have the scraps picked clean before the meal was ready.

“You do that with such skill.”

“A lot of practice.” Josh finished rinsing his knife and returned it to its holder. “It’s easier to clean a fish than dress out a deer. I’ll leave the hunting to others in the family.”

“What’s the latest on sightings of wildlife around here?”

Josh loved the question. Carin Lake and its surrounding woods covered enough territory to attract a broad array of creatures to this central Illinois area. “There’s a cougar I hear occasionally, one ranging wolf—big, beautiful silver-gray pelt. We’ve got some fox, a lot of deer, wild turkeys, rabbits, birds of all kinds. Hawks are thriving, and four nesting pairs of eagles at the north end of the lake soar this way most days.”

Josh led the way from the pier across the parking area to the trail back to his place, a comfortable five-minute walk.

“I see you’ve added on the study you’ve been talking about,” Ann noted, taking in the house as they approached. His multi-level home fit into the landscape, showcasing the skilled touch of a good designer who understood nature.

“I’m threatening to now actually write that book I’ve been talking about—*Photos and Stories of Carin Lake* as told by its most distinguished fisherman.”

Ann didn’t chuckle at his offhand remark. She swiveled half a step to view his face, then nodded to herself, looking pleased.

He knew that look. “What?”

“You’re settling down.”

“Bite your tongue,” he shot back.

She laughed. “It’s a fact, Josh. The youngest of you Thane brothers is no longer darting hither and yon—you have a business, a boat, a house, and now an interesting project in mind that will require time, thought, and reflection.”

“Ann,” he said, shaking his head, “I’m not that guy. Gabriel can settle down—he’s the Carin County sheriff—with a need

to be the calm, settled rock around here for the long haul. And Will might do something similar now that he's back home. Give him something that needs tending and he's fine. He'd probably like a bunch of kids, spend his days patching up scrapes and settling disputes and teaching them to care for the animals he's healing or raising. I'm the bait shop guy, with the boats, thirty miles of lake and inlets—the more time on the water, the better life is for me. Settling down to marriage and a family is impossible for me to fathom.”

“There speaks a man who hasn't met the right woman yet.”

Josh smiled, but didn't correct Ann's casual rejoinder. Actually, he'd met the right girl already. He'd grown up with Grace Arnett on the periphery of his youth. She'd moved away when she was fourteen, abruptly gone from his life. But that first passion, one serious enough even his brothers hadn't kidded him about it, had roots. His mom had wisely let him grieve his loss for a long while before gently prodding him to ask another girl to the community dance, getting him back on the path toward living. He had moved on, though he hadn't forgotten Grace. Yeah, he'd found his “right one” a very long time ago.

Josh unlocked his front door and led the way inside to the parts and pieces of his life—the books, the cameras, the outdoor gear spread about but in a fairly orderly way. Though he lived alone, he lived neat. This was home, and he kept it comfortable for himself and those of his family and friends who dropped by.

Ann perched on a stool in the kitchen and watched while he put together the makings of a meal that would land on the outdoor grill. He paused to get them both cold root beers, not bothering to ask her drink of choice. She'd been forever swiping his extra bottle of the locally made root beer, one of the better exports of Carin County.

Once the fish was searing on the grill outside, he pulled out

a medley of fresh vegetables, also for the grill, selected a sharp knife, and deftly began cutting the pieces.

“I’m in need of a favor, Josh.”

He nodded, slicing mushrooms thin. “Thought as much.”

“Am I that transparent?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Only to old friends. You’re worried.” He tapped a finger against his forehead. “If somebody knows your face well, you’ve got a little giveaway that’s easy to catch. It’s not Paul, or you would have already said something. Not Karen, or you wouldn’t have laid that hint on me about her, then casually moved on. Probably not my brother Gabriel—if you knew of trouble at that level, you wouldn’t be here. You’d be talking with the deputy sheriff or with Will about protecting Gabriel’s back from whatever it is.” He paused, tilted his head as he considered her. “So . . . process of elimination, you’re worried about something, and I’m the guy who might be able to help you solve a problem. Spill it. Let’s see what I can do.”

“I love the fact you know me so well, Josh. Just saying.”

“Have you ever added up how many hours we’ve walked and talked about life while trailing dogs on the search for gravesites? Kind of like Will and his army buddies. With hours to talk, you get to really know someone. You and I, we got past surface stuff years ago. If you weren’t too old for me,” he added with a grin, “I would’ve been testing the idea of Paul being your right guy.”

She laughed. “Easy on the age references, pal. I don’t qualify as your mother.”

Josh simply smiled again.

“I have a friend who’s going to ask you for a favor. If you can accommodate her, I’d like you to say yes. It’s mostly going to involve a lot of your time.”

Josh considered that, nodded. “You aren’t normally so cryptic.”

“She’s not ready for what she’s decided to do, and I can’t talk her out of it,” Ann replied, shook her head. “I’m a bit frustrated and worried and annoyed with myself. I should have seen this coming. If she changes her mind—and I still hope to be persuasive—I don’t want those details in your head too. I’m mostly here to see if you’re in a position to agree. I’ll direct her elsewhere if you’re taking off for a vacation or starting your book or—”

Josh lifted his hand to stop her, having already decided his answer. “I won’t turn her away if what she asks is something I can do.”

“I appreciate that, Josh, more than you can know.” Ann went to brooding as she turned her root beer bottle back and forth between her palms. She eventually looked directly at him, and he stopped slicing green peppers to meet her gaze. “It’s someone you know, Josh. It’s Grace Arnett.”

He went absolutely still. A thousand questions whirled through his mind. He finally asked, “How long have you known each other?”

“Since she moved away from here . . . within a year or two. She’s been living in Chicago the last dozen years.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“Sometimes I keep secrets, especially when I’m asked.”

Her serious expression reflected what he was now feeling. Josh hadn’t seen this side of Ann so directly before, though he was aware it existed—the ability to close the door on things she wouldn’t talk about. She did keep people’s secrets, had a reputation for it. If Ann felt the need to now run interference for Grace, the favor Grace was coming to ask wouldn’t be a casual one.

He looked at the cutting board and the peppers, then back at her, thoughtfully nodded. “I can handle it, Ann.”

She gave him a small smile. “Grace needs a safe guy, and you’re the first name of a few on my list. It’s going to help that you were childhood friends.” She looked away for a moment at the call of a hawk outdoors. “Or that assumption may be my biggest miscalculation yet. She remembers you, Josh.” Ann sighed, then said, “I’ve never mentioned Grace around here because she asked me not to do so, for reasons that make sense to me also. You’ll learn those details if this goes forward, and when you do and have questions, bring them to me. Grace is dealing with too much already, and the answers aren’t easy ones.”

Josh wasn’t accustomed to being on the serious side of trouble, and that’s what this felt like. Ann was back in her former day-job mode—being a cop, carrying the weight of serious matters, and doing her best to prep him on how to handle it. “Okay.” He’d deal with it. He went back to chopping vegetables.

“She’ll probably be in the area in a few days. I’ll call if that changes.”

“If that happens, then we can talk more about Grace.” He scooped the vegetables into a grill mesh. “Trust me, Ann. Your friend is safe with me. I knew her long before you did and still care about her.” He headed outside to the grill.

She followed with their drinks, silverware, and napkins. “Be yourself with her, Josh,” she advised as she set the outdoor table. “She’ll need that—just try to keep everything at a slow speed. You’ll understand what I mean when you see her.” She pulled out a chair. “I’ve given you enough surprises for one morning. What do you say we eat and talk about the weather?”

He sprinkled olive oil and parmesan cheese over the veggies, spread them out in their holder to brown and crisp. “It’s beautiful out now and going to rain later,” he noted, glancing at the horizon. “November has been mild thus far, and the leaves are taking their time to drop off the branches. That covers the

weather.” He slid a slice of fish onto a plate and placed it in front of her. “We’ll eat in courses. Why don’t we talk about you and Paul? Any truth to the rumors he’s heading to Washington, DC?”

“I’ve heard the rumors too,” she agreed easily. “He likes running the Chicago FBI office. I wouldn’t mind the transition if he wants deputy director. I can fly back to Illinois in a few hours, and I can do my writing anywhere. But for now, he’s not looking for that move.” She motioned with her fork. “Great fish, by the way. Done just right.” She reached for her drink. “Paul’s more likely to be offered a position he can’t refuse—be asked to step in after someone resigns in scandal, or the like—an emergency overnight promotion. He has the management skills, field experience, and a deft hand at navigating political problems. He’s a heavyweight in the bureau—every year that becomes more apparent to me. It’s inevitable he’s going to end up in DC one day, which is probably why the rumor’s going around.”

“Did you expect that when you married him?”

She shrugged. “He’s a good cop. One of the pleasures of my being retired is I can flow with whatever his work life is. If he needs to be in DC someday, I’ll adapt. There’s always work that needs to be done somewhere. I’m still working cases that interest me—either cold ones with Paul on our own time or helping out wherever and whenever asked.”

Josh scooped the vegetables into two bowls and set one beside each plate. “You mentioned you were bringing case files for a state cop?”

“Yes, helping out a friend.” Ann stabbed a mushroom slice, nibbled cautiously around it for the heat, and nodded her approval. “It’s good.” She stabbed another one. “Governor-elect Bliss wants a task force to take another look at unsolved missing-persons cases across the state—understandable given his

family's personal history with his sister, Shannon. The task force is going to be small, maybe four to six cops, and won't officially start work until after the inauguration in January. Sharon Noble, a cop with the Riverside PD—that's a suburb just outside of Chicago—will be leading it. She's decided they will work county by county, first taking a look at cases five to fifteen years old. Carin County has two that fit: the missing six-year-old Dayton girl, and the Florist family disappearance that you probably remember. A state cop is here to take a look at the two cases, do a trial run of sorts for what the task force will tackle next year. I brought down what the FBI has on the two cases for her."

"You're helping out? Not just transportation, but working the cases?"

Ann nodded. "Paul and I will both be involved. He's providing FBI resources to the task force, data searches, lab work, that kind of thing, when needed. I'll be coordinating things with him. Mostly I'm involved because it sounds like interesting work, and I'm between book projects at the moment."

"Dad was sheriff during both those cases, spoke of them often," Josh said. "I've lived with them for a lot of years—all the Thane brothers have. You need some info, observations, when you get into the details, find us."

"Thanks. That's helpful. The state cop is named Evie Blackwell. You'll like her. She and I are similar, only she's got a sunnier personality."

Josh laughed at the remark.

"She's good at solving puzzles," Ann added.

Josh smiled. "So are you."

"Let's hope that holds true again." Ann glanced at the horizon. "And that the weather cooperates. I'm meeting Evie at two to take her up for an overview of the county. You see a plane

flying low and slow across this lake shortly after that, wave. I'll toggle wings back."

"I'll be watching." Josh put down his fork, then touched her arm, pointed. "An eagle. The other in the pair should show up soon."

"Wow!" she exclaimed as she watched its powerful yet graceful climb. It came soaring back toward them, the mate not far behind.

Josh was pleased at Ann's reaction, for this was one of his favorite moments, living in this place. They finished the meal while watching the two eagles circle above the lake.

Ann pushed back her plate. "Thanks for a great meal, Josh. I could spend hours sitting here enjoying the view, although the lake from the air is going to look spectacular too. I'm sorry the flight might disrupt the eagles."

"Not much bothers them. I'm glad you came by. And I deeply appreciate the news about Grace." Josh set their dishes inside, grabbed his phone and keys, and walked Ann down the path to the bait shop and her rental.

"Looks like you've got steady customers," she noted, eyeing several vehicles besides hers in the parking area. "You must be pleased with the business."

"I am. It helps that I've got a captive market, and fishing has been the best on the lake in years." He held the car door for her. "Drive careful. Fly even more careful."

"Always." She waved goodbye and pulled out of the lot. Josh pushed his hands into his jeans pockets, considered going back to unload his boat or joining his two employees at the bait shop, and instead turned and walked back toward home. He wanted to sit for a while, simply think . . . remember.

Grace Arnett is coming back. He settled on his front porch, still watching the eagles, a cold soda in his hand. Ann couldn't

have rocked his world harder than she just did. He felt relieved, edging toward overjoyed. And at the same time he was wary about what had Ann so worried. She'd handled scores of homicide cases. She didn't get nervous; she sized up the problem and dealt with matters. *What is the favor Grace wants?* He'd no doubt spend a couple of days wondering until she showed up and asked him.

He made one decision in advance. Whatever the favor was, he'd handle with care in how he reacted, and he'd say yes if there was any way he could do it. It wasn't often a guy got to go back to the best days of his youth. *Grace Arnett*. Josh smiled, shook his head. He probably still had a school notebook or two tucked away with her name and his encircled by a heart. If she was inclined to take a trip down memory lane, he had some nice ones. The innocence of first love didn't get more beautiful than Grace. It was saying something that no girl since had come even close.