



**VICKI
DELANY**

**BLUE
WATER
HUES**

AN ASHLEY GRANT MYSTERY

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HUES

VICKI DELANY

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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ONE

BY THE TIME we arrived, there wasn't much we could do.

Thick black smoke billowed out of the windows. Firefighters aimed their hoses at the charred and blackened building. No flames were visible, just a lot of smoke. Guests and staff milled about. Some were curious. Some wanted to help.

"Looks bad," Simon, my driver, said as he parked the ambulance next to a fire truck.

“Yeah.” I leapt out and grabbed my bag.

A firefighter stood next to two people sitting on the grass. Blankets were thrown over their shoulders, although the day was hot. He gave me a shout and a wave. I trotted quickly over and crouched beside them. A man and a woman, both in their late twenties. He wore the uniform of the hotel’s wait staff, and she was in a cook’s striped gray pants and white shirt. They looked at me through watery, red eyes. He blew his nose, and she coughed.

“Looks like you swallowed some smoke,” I said. “We’ll get you to the hospital.”

He shook his head. “I’m okay.”

She nodded. “Me too.” She coughed again.

“Why don’t I check you out?” I said. “And then we can decide.”

They nodded, and I set up my equipment. I performed some routine checks. Pulse, heart rate. All seemed okay.

The woman coughed.

“How about if I give you some oxygen?
Get your breathing back in shape.”

“Okay,” the man said.

“What are your names?” I asked.

“I’m Edward, and this is Marilee.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said. I’d taken a quick glance at the scene when we first arrived. No one else seemed in need of my help. “Was it only the two of you in there when the fire started?”

They exchanged glances. Marilee’s voice shook. “Rhonda might have been inside. I saw her earlier and then...not.”

“She must have gotten out the other door.”
Edward’s voice was rough with smoke.

“Why don’t I find out?” I pushed myself to my feet. “Wait here for the oxygen.”

A woman in the neat uniform of the Victoria and Albert police moved through the crowd. Hotel staff asked people to clear the area.

No one moved. Simon leaned against a royal palm, chatting to a man. I joined them. “Those two should go to the hospital, but they don’t want to. Give them some oxygen, please, Simon. I’ll see if anyone else needs us.”

Simon nodded and quickly headed to the ambulance.

I turned to the other man. He wore crisp blue trousers and a pale-blue golf shirt with the hotel logo on it. “Did the fire start in the kitchen?” I asked him.

“Yeah. Cooking accident maybe.” His English accent was strong. “I’m Trevor Bellings. I manage most of the food-service operations here.”

We shook hands. “Ashley Grant. Who’s Rhonda? They say she might have been inside.”

“Chef,” he said. “She would have been starting dinner prep. Maybe she went out another way.”

“Let’s hope,” I said.

At that moment the firefighters began

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rolling up their hoses. I trotted over to where the chief was standing with a couple of hotel staff. “Any news on anyone else?”

His face was grim. “Looks like everyone got out but one. They think someone might have been trapped inside.”

I grimaced.

“Bad business,” a man said.

“We’re going in now,” the chief said.

I waited by the red ambulance while Simon gave oxygen to the two workers. They repeated that they didn’t need to go to the hospital. As they spoke, they glanced at Trevor Bellings out of the corner of their eyes. It looked like they were afraid to ask for the time off work.

Hotel security tried to keep people away, but a crowd was gathering. People came up from the beach or the pool or out of the main building. Most of them were dressed for a tropical vacation. Bathing suits and sun hats, or shorts and T-shirts. One man—his huge

round belly turning a bright pink — carried a colorful drink with a paper umbrella in it. Most employees wore navy-blue shirts with white trim and dark pants or skirts. In the distance the hot sun sparkled on calm blue water. Palm leaves and beach umbrellas stirred in the light breeze. Another perfect day in paradise. But the mood here was anything but festive.

We were at the Blue Water Vista Resort, one of the nicest hotels on Grand Victoria Island. The resort was less than a year old. It sat at the top of the island's only hill. I'd seen the view as we drove up the steep cliff, and it was spectacular.

My name's Ashley Grant. I work for Victoria and Albert Islands Health Services as a paramedic. I've been here for only a few weeks, and I'm still trying to find my way around island life. I don't know many people yet, but I spotted a familiar figure crossing the lawn.

Police sergeant Alan Westbrook gave me a

nod and said, “Hi, Ashley.”

“What brings you here?” I asked.

He pointed toward the smoldering building. “This might not be a simple kitchen accident. I’m waiting for the all clear to go in and poke around.”

“Are you a trained arson investigator?”

He grinned. “No. But I’m what the V&A police have.”

“And we make do,” I said. I’d learned that rule the moment I first arrived on the island. The driver who was sent to meet my flight came in the island’s only ambulance. He’d gotten a call, and I’d started work before I’d even seen my new home or unpacked.

We turned at a shout. Two firefighters were carrying something out of the building.

The crowd murmured. An elderly man took off his ballcap. A woman in a housekeeper’s uniform crossed herself, and another began to cry. Trevor’s face was grim.

Alan and I ran toward the firefighters. They had, as I'd feared, found a body. They laid her on the ground, and I knelt beside her. She wore a chef's uniform, the name Rhonda neatly sewn above the Blue Water Vista logo.

I checked for life signs and found none. Behind me, people murmured. A man swore, and more women cried. Without being asked, Alan, Simon, Trevor and the firefighters formed a rough barrier around me to give me some privacy. The fire hadn't reached her, thank heavens, but the woman was dead. Apparently, the smoke had killed her.

"We found her behind a row of shelves," the fire chief said. "She must have gotten confused and couldn't find the way out."

"Fire moved fast," Alan said.

"Kitchen fires can do that. A line of spilled grease, an open flame — poof."

I put my hand on Rhonda's cheek. It was

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already starting to cool. She was in her thirties, with deep-black skin, dark eyes and a mass of tight curls. I was sure I'd seen her someplace before. I struggled to remember.

And then I had it.

She'd been at my hotel a few days earlier. I'd gone into the office with a question. Rhonda had been chatting to Darlene, the office manager. The two women bore a slight family resemblance. At the time, I'd thought they might be cousins.

I got to my feet. "We'll take her to the morgue," I said to Simon. "I'm pretty sure she was at my place recently. Talking to Darlene. Do you recognize her?"

Simon nodded slightly. "Might be Antonia's daughter. Antonia and my mama go back a long way. Antonia and Darlene's mama are sisters. Antonia Michaels."

"Michaels," Trevor said. "That's her name. Rhonda Michaels."

Simon's face tightened.

"So this is Darlene's cousin then," I said. "After we've dropped her off, I'd like to go to the hotel and break the news to Darlene. Is that okay, Alan?"

"Sure."

"Someone from the hotel will notify the family," Trevor said. "Contact info will be in her personnel file."

The firefighters helped Simon load Rhonda's body onto a stretcher.

"I'll talk to you in a minute," Alan said to Trevor. "Stay here."

"We'll do everything we can to help," Trevor said.

He joined a group of hotel staff gathered under a tree. Faces showed shock and dismay. Many of the women wept.

Alan spoke to the young policewoman. "Tell these people the show's over. Chief, you have any ideas as to how the fire started?"

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“Not yet. I’ll let you know what we find out.”

Alan, Simon, the fire chief and I walked beside the stretcher, keeping the curious away.

VICKI DELANY is one of Canada's most prolific and varied crime writers, and a national bestseller in the United States. She has written more than twenty-five books, from clever cozies to Gothic thrillers, gritty police procedurals to historical fiction, and novellas for adult literacy. Under the pen name Eva Gates, she writes the *Lighthouse Library Mystery* series for Penguin Random House. Her novel *Elementary, She Read* is the first in the *Sherlock Holmes Bookshop* series from Crooked Lane. Vicki is the past president of the Crime Writers of Canada. Her work has been nominated for the Derringer, the Bony Blithe, the Ontario Library Association Golden Oak, and the Arthur Ellis Awards. Vicki's first book in the Rapid Reads series, *Winter Kill*, features rookie constable Nicole Patterson. *Blood and Belonging* is the third book in the Ray Robertson Mystery series,

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