

WHITE SAND BLUES

AN ASHLEY GRANT MYSTERY



VICKI DELANY

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Summary: Paramedic Ashley Grant finds herself in the middle of a murder investigation while in the Victoria and Albert Islands in this work of crime fiction. (RL 3.0)

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ONE

“YOU WANT ME TO DO WHAT?”

“Start work. Now. We have to get him. No one else is going to.” Simon bent over. He began unlacing his boots.

He was wearing black steel-toed work boots. I had on sandals with two-inch heels and thin straps. This was the first time I’d worn them. They’d set me back two hundred bucks I could ill afford. I glanced around. I hoped to see someone, anyone, ready to help.

Curious faces stared back at me. Some of the faces were black or brown.

Most were shiny white. More than a few were a hideous shade of pink. Only Simon and I and the hotel staff were wearing street clothes. Everyone else wore some sort of beach attire. One guy held a sweating glass full of slices of tropical fruit and a colorful umbrella. Cameras and cell phones were lifted. If anyone told me to smile, I'd smack them.

I looked out to sea. I hoped to see a rescue boat heading to my, well, rescue.

No such luck. The water, at least, was calm.

"Ashley," Simon said. I couldn't see his eyes behind his sunglasses, but his jaw was tense. "This is the job. Can you do it or not? If not, there's a flight to Miami leaving at six. I can tell Gord you changed your mind."

That sounded tempting, but I took a deep breath. "Let's do it." I hoped I sounded like a firefighter I'd once heard as he led his

men into a burning building. They rescued two children and a cat that day.

My plane had landed on Grand Victoria Island less than an hour earlier. I'd been surprised to see that my new boss had sent an ambulance to meet me. I'd been even more surprised when a call came over the radio and the driver said we were to answer it.

I kicked off my sandals.

I couldn't do much about the sundress. It also had set me back a pretty penny. I'd wanted to start my new life looking like a million bucks. Confident, in control. Dressed for success.

No one had suggested I'd be better in a uniform or hospital scrubs.

Simon didn't look back to see if I followed. He waded into the surf.

I prefer to stay out of the water whenever possible. When I took this job I forgot

that an island is surrounded by water. I took a deep breath and followed Simon. The sand beneath my feet was soft and deep. The water was clear. Tiny fish darted around my freshly painted toes.

I kept an eye out for sharks. No fins broke the surface of the sea. No ominous music played. Perhaps these fish were too small for sharks to concern themselves with. I hoped there was no blood. Didn't blood attract sharks?

The sharks aren't the only reason I hate the ocean. There's the seaweed too. *Nothing cleaner*, my dad used to say when we vacationed on a lake in Ontario or the ocean in Nova Scotia. That did nothing to allay my fears. To me the long tendrils seemed like those of a sea monster, reaching out, eager to drag me into the dark depths. They still did.

I squeaked and tried to dodge a dangerous length of seaweed. My toe

connected with a submerged rock. I felt a stabbing pain in my right foot. I yelled, jumped and started to fall forward into the water. My arms waved wildly as I fought to keep my footing. I was in no danger of drowning. The water was about fifteen centimeters deep at this point. I spat out salty water and fine grains of sand. As I stumbled to stand, I tried to regain a shred of dignity.

Simon had turned around. He glared at me over the rims of his sunglasses. I could read his mind—*hiring this one was a big mistake.*

I gave him what I hoped was a confident grin and lumbered upright. I dug my bare toes into the sand to steady myself. “Coming,” I called.

The bottom of the sea sloped gently. They weren’t very far out, so we didn’t have to swim. A man waited for us. The water came up to his waist. He was tanned

a nut brown and wore a blue T-shirt and shorts. I guessed he was a hotel employee.

The dead man bobbed gently on the surface.

Simon grunted greetings. He—the living man, that is—nodded, his face solemn.

My three-hundred-dollar linen dress with lace edging was being ruined by salt water. My two-hundred-dollar sandals were probably being pinched by a beach urchin with excellent taste. But my training took over as soon as we reached the body. He was lying faceup, staring into the sky. His face was blue, from death and immersion in the water. No doubt he'd been flipped over by the hotel employee.

Simon grabbed the dead man's collar. I put my fingers to the neck. I felt for a pulse. Nothing. I glanced at Simon and shook my head. The dead man was white, in his sixties maybe. Belly like a nine-months-pregnant woman. His thick hair

was so jet black that it had to have been dyed. His fingers were long, his nails manicured. A fat gold band encircled the third finger of his left hand. A ring with a big red stone decorated the pinky of his right. His stomach hung over a baggy, knee-length bathing suit. His feet were bare. He hadn't been in the water for too long. Sea creatures hadn't had time to begin making a meal out of his tender bits.

I led the way back to shore. Simon and the hotel employee followed. The body bobbed between them. I wondered where the police rescue boat was. Simon asked the man helping us, Mark, how his son was getting on in school.

"Very well," Mark said. "Thank you for asking."

"This is the Club Louisa," Simon said to me. "One of the best hotels on the island. And on Grand Victoria, best means expensive."

“You got that right,” Mark said with a laugh.

We’d parked the ambulance on the lush emerald grass of the hotel grounds. That was as close as we could get to the water without getting the wheels trapped in sand. We’d left the gurney at the edge of the water. The men laid their burden onto it. Mark lifted the front and Simon the rear. We didn’t stop to put on boots and shoes before we walked up the beach. The onlookers stood quietly and respectfully. One pink-chested guy held his baseball cap over his heart. A woman crossed herself. I hurried ahead to open the ambulance doors. The crowd of onlookers closed in behind us. More pictures were snapped. I tried to ignore them. A woman waited for us by the ambulance. She was well dressed in a khaki skirt cut at the knee. Her blue shirt had the hotel’s yellow sun logo over her breast.

She stepped forward and glanced down at the man on the gurney. He looked past us into the expanse of brilliant-blue sky. I've seen that look often enough that it doesn't bother me. Not anymore.

"Recognize him, Elaine?" Simon asked.

"I think so." Her accent was upper-crust British. "One of ours, I fear."

"I'm sure the police will be around to talk to you about it later," Simon said. His rolling Caribbean accent was soft and gentle.

"Julian! No! Julian." A woman came running up the beach, struggling in the deep sand. Spectators stepped out of her path. A gorgeous sapphire-blue beach gown dotted with gold beads streamed behind her. She wore sexy, barely there gold sandals and a large-brimmed straw hat with a gold scarf wrapped around it. I guessed her to be in her midforties. Following her was a younger woman in a pink-and-white

bikini and large sunglasses. Her hair was pulled back into a high ponytail. The older woman took one look at the staring blank face on the gurney and moaned. She crumpled to the ground in a delicate heap.

“Ashley, look after her,” Simon said. “She’d better come with us. Let’s get outa here.”

I crouched beside the woman. Her eyelids fluttered and then opened. “Julian?” she whispered.

“Let me help you.” I put one arm around her shoulders and guided her to sit. Her eyes were dark, almost black. Her lips were painted a soft pink, and the studs in her seashell ears appeared to be genuine diamonds. She blinked and touched my chest lightly. Her long nails were painted to match her lipstick. The sun caught the diamond on her finger. The light it threw back was so strong, it could be used to send signals into space.

I helped her to her feet. She swayed slightly, and I kept a grip on her arm.

“Do you know this gentleman?” Simon asked.

“My...my husband. Julian.”

“You can come with us. Ashley, you go in the back. Mrs....uh...?”

“Hunt. Christina Hunt.”

“The widow Hunt,” a sharp voice said.

We all turned. The younger woman who'd followed Mrs. Hunt spoke. “It didn't take long for you to get what you wanted, did it, Christina? The sad, tragic widow. The *rich*, sad, tragic widow.”

“Sally, my poor sweet thing,” Christina murmured. “You don't know what you're saying.” She shook me off. She stretched out her arms. She took a step toward the girl as if to give her a hug.

Sally's body stiffened. “You killed him, Christina. I know it. And I intend to prove it.”

“You’re overcome by grief, my dear.”
Christina glanced around. The crowd of spectators was growing, pressing closer. Murmurs began at the word *killed*.

“Sort it out later,” Simon said. We loaded the late Mr. Hunt into the ambulance. “Get in,” he ordered me.

I was the medic. Simon was my driver. But I was the new one here. I turned, ready to obey.

“Hey, Ashley,” Sally said. “How’s things?”

VICKI DELANY is one of Canada's most prolific and varied crime writers. She is the author of more than twenty-five crime novels, including standalone Gothic thrillers, the Constable Molly Smith series, the Klondike Gold Rush Mysteries and the Year Round Christmas Mysteries. Under the pen name of Eva Gates, she is the national bestselling author of the Lighthouse Library cozy series.

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