

A Miranda Rae Mystery

MURDER  
BLOOMS AT  
NIGHT



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This book is dedicated to  
Aunt Ruby  
who faithfully read every word written.



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“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us...”

—Ephesians 3:20 (NASB)



## PROLOGUE

**H**e watched as the silver Honda Civic crawled toward the small parking area; it maneuvered around the potholes but still scraped the road now and then as it drove.

He was surprised to find she'd followed directions and had arrived on time. He'd taken the precaution of choosing this particular meeting place because he was going to have to get rid of her car and then retrieve his Toyota. Most of the good hiking and easy public access were on the southeast side, so few visitors used this parking lot on the northwest side of the park. He didn't worry they might run into anyone.

The full moon enveloped her—he knew her name was Valerie—in a halo of light that reflected off of the gold cross necklace she wore. Soon she would meet this Jesus she believed in. Oh, he'd done his homework and wasn't going to make any mistakes now that he'd finally trapped her.

All of the visits he'd made to the flower department in the Kroger grocery store had helped him ingratiate himself and win her trust. He'd made sure she was alone, waiting till there were no other customers present during his visits. He'd feigned interest in her floral arrangement skills. He'd lured her with his knowledge of botany like a trout lured to a fly. He'd even invited her to take one of his classes. He enjoyed teaching, but it didn't pay enough and wasn't going to let anyone interfere with

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his *other* means of making the money he needed to continue living a life of free spending. He certainly wasn't going back to surviving paycheck to paycheck.

Now, he scrutinized her movements. She got out of the car and then stuffed her car keys in the zipper pocket of the fanny pack; she looked up and around.

"Good evening," the professor called smoothly and waved his arm.

"Hello." Valerie's hesitant voice wasn't quite the enthusiastic answer he was hoping for, but her startled reaction when she looked around the remote and lonely location was pleasant to him. "Where are we?" she asked. "This doesn't look like a park."

"Didn't I explain this location is the shortest way to the flowers? It's a perfect night to see the night bloomers. I chose tonight because of the full moon. I hope you brought water and a snack, it's quite a steep hike, and you'll need the extra energy." He smiled and tried to project happiness. He did, after all, like her uneasiness.

Valerie nodded and then blurted out, "You're his brother, aren't you?"

He squirmed. How much had Jarod told Valerie? Well, it hardly mattered now that he was about to eliminate any future problems.

"Yes," he simply said. "Shall we?" The professor pointed to the trail. "We shouldn't have any problem seeing the trail with the lunar lighting, and there is not a cloud in the sky. That is unusual for this time of year, but what a treat for us! With this weather, the flowers are sure to be in full bloom."

"It is a lovely night," she stiffly agreed and then started up the trail, breathing heavily early on.

"Is something wrong?" He followed close behind her. "You don't sound like your enthusiastic self."

"I think I'm coming down with something. Maybe we should do this another day." Valerie turned and tried to walk around the professor, but he stood firm, blocking her path.

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“Nonsense. The flowers are only about a mile up the trail. After viewing them, you can return home in no time.” After she turned back around, he firmly pressed his hand to her back and directed her up the trail.

The professor mused at his perfect plan. He had already presold her car to a less-than-reputable wrecking yard owner, a guy who didn't ask questions and wouldn't demand registration. The murder weapon would be impossible to find because it'd be something common to the wilder . . .

He was shaken out of his reverie as Valerie took off, flying up the trail, cutting into the thoughts of his perfect plan. What had shaken her? He ran, pumping hard after the long-legged blond. She was making him work. She was fast, but as she turned the bend, she lost momentum. He dashed around the same bend but lost sight of her. The professor stopped and took a deep breath. Had she turned off the trail? Was she trying to hide?

*Just listen. She tired quickly for a young woman and didn't know the area. Patience.*

Ahh ... there! He heard heavy breathing ahead and soundlessly progressed toward it. He saw her to the side of the trail, hands on her knees as she tried to catch her breath, and staring into the distance. He was caught up in the exquisiteness before his eyes: the bright yellow primroses, the delicately-scented night orchid, the variety of colors of the four o'clock flower, and the chocolaty scent of the chocolate flower. All were in full bloom and emitting heavenly perfumes. He'd transplanted them a few days ago. Now his plan would be complete.

“Why did you do it?” Valerie asked between gasped breaths. “I saw Jarod suffer, and it was horrible.”

Cold crawled over him. She'd figured it out.

Valerie turned toward the professor, her eyes first flashing anger but quickly widening in surprise as he raised the rock in one hand and held a knife in the other. She twisted but not fast enough, and cried out, “Oh Lord, not yet!” before collapsing face down into the flowers, like a rag doll might.



### SATURDAY, OCTOBER 19TH



#### 10:00 PM

The full moon's light penetrated through the leafless tree limbs, awakening the trail before Miranda. She followed Jake as he brought even more light by shining his flashlight into the thickening wilderness. The pack on her back grew heavier with each step, and they'd only started hiking up the slow incline five minutes earlier. Miranda checked the time on her digital smartwatch. It was probably too soon to ask Jake if they were close to their destination.

Miranda had grown up in a small city about 45 minutes away from Stone Ridge, where she lived now. Her parents still lived in the same house in which she'd grown up. Immediately after high school, Miranda had moved to Seattle to attend the University of Washington, and she'd stayed there till she graduated with a master's degree in counseling. Then she'd been offered a position to practice in a prestigious Seattle counseling firm. During her internship there she'd dated one of the partners; after she was hired, they'd become serious enough that Miranda had thought they would marry. She'd had no intention of leaving Seattle: it had entertainment, shopping, and the man she loved. In fact, the smartwatch had been an indulgence she'd purchased to keep in touch

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with clients who needed her on evenings or weekends. She was only a text or e-mail away from them in the city, where coverage was excellent.

Unfortunately, the watch had also been her undoing. One of her clients had e-mailed to say she was terminating her sessions, not because she was ready to move on her own, but because the client became engaged to the man Miranda had been dating.

Heartsick, and ashamed that she'd missed the signs, Miranda had decided to start over as far away from the city as possible. She'd found Stone Ridge and began a practice that was growing, adding clientele weekly. It had kept her so busy she hadn't had the time or the desire to get involved in another relationship. But now, with Jake, she thought she might have found someone worth exploring.

"Oops," Miranda gasped as she plowed into Jake. She'd been so lost in thought she hadn't seen him stop ahead of a tangle of roots in their path! She grabbed his pack to keep from falling. He reached for her arm and a warm tingling traveled up to her shoulder. *Lord, I am not ready for another relationship. Guard my heart.* She laughed and spoke up. "Remind me why I said yes to this excursion when I'm not even a member of the Search and Rescue team? I am not in good enough shape to hike on these trails. I keep tripping over the roots."

She knew that Jake *was* a member of the Search and Rescue (SAR) team and also a volunteer EMT and fireman. He'd been working on her yard for the last three months through his company, Naturescape, trying to get it in shape. Since then, Miranda had begun to feel as comfortable with Jake as if she had known him for years. That comfort level was ironic because Jake was the opposite in many ways of the men she had dated, especially the one she'd left without a word.

"Well, it could be you came with because my persuasive powers are too much to resist." Jake chuckled, and Miranda teasingly bumped him with her shoulder, giggling like a teenager as she did.

Jake sure had a way of getting under her skin in a good way. *Be careful.* Jake was the contrary to the type of man of whom her parents approved. Jake's ruggedly handsome face was covered by a beard. His

almost black hair was long, its waves tied back with a leather strip at the base of his neck, making a ponytail. Dressed for the hike, he reminded her of an outdoorsman model for one of the big sportsman stores, not the conservative corporate type that had met with her family's approval. She really shouldn't be here, but for some reason, she couldn't say no.

"It could have been your persuasive powers, but . . ." Miranda trudged on behind Jake.

"Seriously," Jake interrupted. "This Search and Rescue training has been on the schedule for a month." Jake took her hand and led her steadily up the trail. "We chose this night because of the full moon, and the night turned out to be clear as well. I want you to see how the dogs work in addition to our spending some time together." Jake continued leading them up the slope. "You know, this might be a good job for that new puppy of yours."

Miranda grinned. "That may be, but the Search and Rescue dogs I saw were hyperactive Labrador retrievers like your little puppy, Katie. My Doc is a German shepherd. He is active, but he's not over-the-top hyper. I was hoping he might be better suited to being a therapy dog and helping me at work." Miranda was breathing hard as she spoke and climbed, but kept up with Jake on the widening trail.

"German shepherds do this kind of work too; we just don't have any in our group. Your guy could be the first." Jake entwined his fingers with hers.

As he did, Miranda flinched and almost jerked her hand away from the jolt of attraction she felt, but soon calmed and even relaxed. She really shouldn't let him think she could be more than a friend to him, but what could it hurt for him to warm her hand? His stability eased the anxiety building inside her as they traveled in the dark in the middle of nowhere.

"We're almost to the cutoff for our hiding place. See that group of tall cedars ahead?" He pointed the beam of the flashlight at the trees. "We'll turn off there and wind around to find a place where we are hidden from any angle. Usually, I find fallen logs to lean up against, and then crouch

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low so as not to be seen when I hear the dog coming.” He dropped her hand as they approached the trees and she felt a chill once more.

After passing through the trees, they slogged through dense salal and tall sword ferns and then crawled over fallen logs stacked high enough to reach up to her waist. Jake kept waving the flashlight from side to side; she supposed he was looking for the perfect hiding place. An owl hooted and Miranda jumped. She stopped when a coyote howled at the same time a gust of wind blew the last of the leaves from the alder trees toward her.

Jake turned around and slowed his pace; he seemed to realize she wasn't right behind him and allowed her to catch up.

“Why don't you hang on to my pack the rest of the way? We're moving into a thick part of the forest where it's darker.” He waited until she clutched his pack before moving forward.

Jake kept the branches from slapping her in the face and helped her over the last couple of logs before declaring that they had arrived.

A sliver beam of light allowed Miranda to see a small clearing surrounded by dense brush and a couple of fallen trees. She wondered if Jake had been here before. She prayed the dog would find them quickly. She was not only physically cold but also getting cold feet concerning the wait in this “cozy” little setting. How much did she really know about Jake?

“We're here.” Jake unclipped the radio from his vest. “It could be as long as an hour before they will find us so you'll probably want to put on another jacket and some gloves. I'm going to call into the base, so they know we've reached our hiding place.”

Miranda swung her pack off, pulled her jacket out and rummaged through the pack to find her gloves. She watched Jake slip two folding chairs from his pack, along with his jacket. “How did you find a place like this? It seems too perfect.”

“Well, actually, I've hidden here before for a different dog because it *is* perfect. Take a seat. I like to be comfortable while I wait. When we do this during the daytime hours, I read a book or work on some of my landscape architectural drawings. Now we wait until Anne's dog finds us. Speaking of which, how did you meet Anne?”

“She made me feel at ease when I attended the church service the first Sunday I arrived in town. She even invited me to sit with her family.” Miranda smiled as she remembered Anne’s young son leaning over his mother to shake hands and say “Howdy” to Miranda. She’d come to learn that the young man looked a lot like his dad but had the outgoing personality of his mom. Anne was one of the reasons Miranda had agreed to this training. Anne knew Jake and trusted him, but she had told Miranda that she wasn’t sure what Jake believed, spiritually. Miranda had assured Anne that dating was the last thing on her mind—especially after the fiasco in Seattle. Anne also knew the other reason Miranda had moved to Stone Ridge. Miranda hadn’t told anyone else.

“Anne does have a way about her that makes anyone feel relaxed in her company, as if she’s known you all her life,” Jake agreed. The radio crackled and both fell silent, but no voice came across the wire.

Jake whispered. “I’m not sure what that was, but we should probably be silent for a little just in case the dog is near. We want him to find us by our scent, not by our voices, during the training.” He continued explaining, “Anne will use a grid, moving the dog into the wind so he can find our scent. Once the dog finds the scent, he will follow the scent cone by zigzagging toward us. When he sees us, he’ll run back to Anne and bark, so she knows to follow him. He will probably run between Anne and the two of us a few times before Anne gets here.”

Even in the dark, Miranda could see Jake’s grin as he finished his thought. “I say he can make the trip faster and more times because he has four legs and she only has two, but Anne claims she needs to be more careful of terrain than her dog does, that’s why she’s delayed.” Both laughed quietly.

“I’m with Anne on that count. I sure wouldn’t be trying to get somewhere fast around here,” Miranda whispered back.

Branches snapped, and a rustling sound came through the brush behind, causing Miranda to draw her knees up and tightly grab them. Jake’s arm slipped around her shoulders, drawing her close, releasing the tension.

“What was that?” She stretched out her legs.

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“Probably a deer or some other creature avoiding us. Let’s keep quiet now.” He withdrew his arm.

Miranda immediately missed his warmth and crossed her arms over herself instead, determined not to show any disappointment at his withdrawal. After all, she wasn’t in the market for a relationship, right?

During the quiet her mind drifted to Jenny, as it often did in the dark.

Miranda had been praying about her future since the Seattle fiasco, and as she did, she had begged God’s help in finding her sister, Jenny, who had deserved a future of her own. Six silent years had passed since Jenny and Valerie, Jenny’s best friend, had run away. Miranda had felt responsible ... and had been carrying the guilt for those long years. When Miranda had heard a rumor that Valerie had been seen near Stone Ridge, Miranda had decided to check it out. She’d hoped to find Valerie and her sister, or at least maybe Valerie, who might know where her sister was hiding.

She hadn’t found Valerie but had felt at home in Stone Ridge and felt comfortable with the people she had met. She’d left Seattle for Stone Ridge, and her practice had grown.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Jake whispered, his warm breath caressing her ear.

“Oh, just thinking of all the reasons I like this community. I really believe God had a part in bringing me here.”

“I hope I’m one of the reasons you like this community.”

She was glad it was dark because she was sure her face blended nicely with her red jacket!

“I’ll have to think on that,” she said before quickly changing the subject. “Have you been on any searches where someone lost has been found?”

He took the bait. “Yes, a couple. One was a woman who’d strayed from her group, and they left before realizing she was missing. We located her by calling out, and she was able to answer; unfortunately, she had broken her ankle, and we had to bring her out on a gurney. My EMT skills were pretty handy on that one. I was able to stabilize her ankle so we could transport her to the base.” His voice took on an empathetic

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tone, showing his compassion. “The hardest one I’ve ever worked on was a recovery. We found an older lady, who’d wandered from her house, face down in the water of a swampy area.”

Loud barking jolted Miranda out of her seat, and she almost landed in Jake’s lap. He reached out and steadied her, but they both jumped when his radio crackled to life.

“Jake, we need you further up the trail—now! How fast can you get there? The dog indicated an injured woman and Anne has just radioed in the coordinates.”

Miranda shooed him with arm motions, *go, go*, even though she didn’t want to be left alone. He nodded to her before answering.

“It’ll be a few minutes, but I’ll hurry. I have to get Miranda on the trail and then I can run.”

An answer came back over the radio. “Great. We’ll have someone meet Miranda at the trail and take her the rest of the way.”

Miranda quickly folded the chairs and put on her pack while waiting for Jake to finish talking.

“Let’s go.” Jake led the way toward the trail.

Miranda was glad he’d remembered to arrange for her because she would have needed the SAR team to find her if she’d been left to her own navigation. But, when they made it to the trail, no one was there to meet her. She urged Jake to run anyway.

“I’ll be fine; the moon is bright enough to light the trail. If I’m careful, I won’t trip on the way up. Now, go!” She pushed him on his way and then started a much slower trek.

With every noise, she shuddered. Was a mountain lion watching, or a bobcat ready to pounce, or a bear to charge? *Take a deep breath and relax. Protect me, Lord.* She needed to stop the catastrophic thinking and concentrate on the path ahead.

She soon heard a clamor of voices and noticed beams of light. Following the noise and the light, she continued to traipse up the trail. She didn’t know how Jake could have run up this incline; her pack felt as if it was filled with rocks and she was breathless, even at this slow pace.

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She came to a fork in the trail and didn't know which way to go. The lights seemed to be in the middle. Did they both end at the same place?

Both the overwhelming scent of pine and the tough decision on which trail to take caused her stomach to roil. *What do I do, Lord?* Peppermint came to mind. Peppermint tea had relieved her nauseous stomach more than once. She remembered having thrown some peppermint candies into her pack and rifled through it to find them. Slipping one on her tongue, she savored the sweet flavor as it slowly settled her stomach and cleared her sinuses.

All right. She could now make a rational decision and resolved to go left. That trail seemed wider which she thought meant a more heavily used trail. Starting slowly, she picked her way along it. To her relief, she found she had made the right decision—there were people approaching her from just ahead. Not wanting to be alone anymore, Miranda walked faster, almost jogging, and breathing heavily as she approached the scene.

Everyone seemed to be suspended in time, staring at Jake and the prone figure he was assessing with his gentle hand movements.

Miranda studied the figure and even from ten yards away she recognized something familiar. What was it? The long blond hair indicated that the figure was probably a woman. Miranda found herself drawn to the woman and began walking closer. As she approached the body on the ground, she noticed a metallic smell and saw blood staining the light-colored pants. There was another odor, too. More of a floral scent. Miranda looked around, but she didn't see any flowers.

Jake brushed the blond tresses away from the woman's face, and as he did, Miranda froze. A tingling originated in her hands and quickly took over her body. Miranda's past hit her full force, and she whirled, stumbling to the nearest log where she plunked down, dropping her head between her knees.

The woman on the ground was Valerie! Her sister Jenny's best friend.