

DEATH WINS THE CROWN

Barbara Heming

CHAPTER 1

Whenever I hear the Miss America theme song, I break out in hives. Yet here I, Liz Norris, Professor of Women's Studies, of my own volition, was attending a beauty pageant on this warm May evening.

I eluded the security guard and slipped down the stairs to the hallway under the stage of the Palace Theater. The air sizzled with excitement. I got my student into this. The least I could do was to be here to support her. I shifted the weight of the tote bag on my right shoulder. A cacophony of feminine scents swirled around me. Some sixty young women, wielding hairdryers and mascara wands, were crammed into the tiny dressing rooms that lined the hall.

The words *Queen's Pageant* were magic to little girls who grew up in the shadow of the Pro Football Hall of Fame here in Canton, Ohio. Many watched the Queen and her Court in the Timken Grand Parade and said, "Someday that's going to be me."

In dressing room number three, I spotted Amanda Graves. A whirl of activity surrounded her. She looked out of place amid the colorful plastic cases scattered on the counters in front of the tall mirrors. Jars of makeup propped up tubes of lipstick and eyebrow pencils and blusher. I felt a jab of guilt for suggesting she enter the pageant. The scent of musk mingled with floral and citrus into the heady aroma of ripe sexuality. Football jerseys for the production number hung next to filmy evening gowns. As the moment of competition neared, edginess tinged the voices of the young women, often still called girls. Their chatter rose over the sound of blow dryers and squeals of dismay at misplaced curls or jewelry.

Only two circles of calm existed in the heightening anticipation. Amanda occupied her own private pool of serenity, centered and motionless, while her roommate Crystal braided her raven-colored hair for the first number. When I stepped through the door, Amanda's eyes, the color of a tropical sea, met my green ones in the mirror before her. She swung around to face me, yanking her hair from Crystal's hands.

“Dr. Norris.” She rose and stepped toward me. “What a surprise.”

I gave her a hug. “I wanted to bring you this and wish you well.” From my tote bag, I withdrew a statue and handed it to Amanda. In third century Spain, an unknown sculptor had fashioned the figure of a woman in clay. Feet solidly planted on the ground, she holds her fists before her in a double thumbs-up sign.

“The *Dama de Ibiza*.” She looked from me to the image and back again. “You can’t give this to me. It means so much to you.”

I had discovered this replica in the dusty Spanish town where I lived after graduation from college twenty years ago. That ancient sculpture of woman-strength had sustained me through some hard times, including my divorce.

“No one deserves this more than you. I am so proud of you, Amanda.” I placed the image in her hands. “You have the courage of the *Dama de Ibiza*. Choosing to participate in the pageant proved that.”

“I can’t believe I’m here, doing this,” she said.

“I know, but your paper on the effects of beauty pageants on women’s self-esteem will be much stronger with your first-hand experience.”

“I wasn’t going to take up your challenge to enter the pageant until Crystal came up with the idea to use ‘Mandy’ on the application form.” An impish smile curled her lips. “It’s easier for me to play Mandy, complete with the hairstyle and makeup Crystal devised for me.”

“Glad I don’t have to do your hair like that.” Crystal pointed at the intricate hairstyle on the statue. “Aren’t you at least a little excited, Amanda?”

“Not really.” Amanda paused. “But ‘Mandy’ is.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Amanda’s doing research.” She laughed. “It’s ‘Mandy’ who’s competing.”

As I listened to their banter, I was relieved that Amanda was light-hearted about her participation in an event which she so deeply opposed. She’d laid aside her personal feelings to gather information for her study. A memory of my own early graduate days bloomed within me. One day she would be a first-class scholar.

“Mandy, there’s been a change in the first number.” The director stood in the doorway, clipboard in hand. “Jill’s come down with pneumonia, so you’ll have to move into her spot. Think you can handle the change?”

“Sure, a piece of cake,” Amanda replied and peered at the makeup in front of her. “Good thing Crystal’s here. I don’t know what to do with all of this.”

Crystal opened a tube of lipstick and handed it to Amanda. She began to outline her lips.

“Ten minutes,” the director called down the hallway outside the dressing rooms. “Everybody—ten minutes ‘til the production number.”

Immediately, the tension intensified. Anticipation nudged voices up a couple of notes. The pace of conversation quickened. Extra words disappeared. Questions and comments became short and clipped. The excitement was contagious. Even I felt my pulse increase. The opening notes of the orchestra filtered into the dressing rooms from the pit. Final dabs of blusher and lipstick went on.

“Well, I guess this is it.” Crystal hugged Amanda. “See you out front.”

As Amanda made her final adjustments, I noticed the other calm spot in the chaos. In the far corner, Tiffany Marshal sat in front of the counter, her expression bored. Her mother, Donna, flitted around like a wren plucking at Tiffany’s chestnut curls. The odor of Aqua-net filled the air. Tiffany, a veteran of beauty pageants since age four, projected indifference. Everyone expected her to win tonight, especially her mother, who kept fussing with her daughter’s hair and the Forty-Niners jersey she wore.

Amanda caught my eye. “I feel sorry for her,” she whispered. “The pageant seems important to her mother not to Tiffany. And most of the girls are so jealous; they won’t have anything to do with her.”

I watched the pair. What would make a mother turn her daughter into an object to be ogled?

With a final flick of a curl, Donna said, “I’ll be back to help you get ready for the evening gown competition.”

“Don’t bother,” Tiffany retorted with an annoyed flip of her hand. “By now I can handle it.”

“Well, you’ll need help with the flowers for your hair.” She gestured toward the sprigs of Lilies of the Valley lying on the counter next to a tube of mascara. Wet paper towels wrapped the stems to keep them fresh.

“Whatever.” With a quick hug, careful not to muss her hair, Donna left.

Amanda smoothed her Dolphins jersey over her hips. “It’ll be good to get this over with, get back to being me.” She took a final glance in the mirror and moved toward the door.

“Well, it’ll soon be behind you.” I squeezed her hand. “And you’ll have what you need for your study.” I pointed to the statue. “She’ll help you.”

At the door I looked over my shoulder and saw Amanda consider Tiffany’s sad expression. She smiled at her. “C’mon, let’s go up together.”

Surprise flashed across Tiffany’s face. “Thanks.” She and Amanda linked arms and followed me out the door of the dressing room.

The lights had been dimmed and the orchestra was playing its final notes as I slipped into my seat. This old theater had snared my heart the night I came to a film festival shortly after my arrival to teach at Claridge College. The Palace Theater was like a time machine back to Sunday afternoons at a concert or ballet with my grandfather. His laugh, warm as a concert hall in the New England cold, made the world feel safer. He’d be shocked, though, if he knew that I was here tonight for a beauty pageant.

I pulled myself back from my memories and scanned the audience. Who else had come to support Amanda tonight? Her parents and younger sister sat three rows in front of me to the right. Charles Graves was a physician in Louisville, and his wife Elaine, a much sought-after interior decorator. Amanda’s relationship with her father was strained, especially since her move to an apartment off-campus. Nevertheless, he was delighted with her participation tonight. He had every right to be proud of his daughter, but for far more than entering a beauty pageant. Dr. Graves caught my eye and waved.

Ryan Whitney, Amanda’s boyfriend, slouched in the aisle seat on the left. He scowled in my direction, still angry that his girlfriend was competing in the Queen’s Pageant. He pushed up his glasses and returned his gaze to the stage. Apparently no change in his feelings since the snowy

afternoon he stormed into my office wanting to know how I could encourage Amanda's participation in such a sexist event. Beneath his bravado, he was so afraid of losing her that I was touched.

I recognized a group of Hall of Fame employees, including Todd Randall, near the front. Good seats for the pageant must be one of the perks. I'd heard Todd was working there. When I taught at Ohio State, he'd been in my Intro to Sociology course. With his own football career tragically cut short, I wondered how he felt being around the memorabilia of all the great players.

With the beat of a drum and the clash of a cymbal, the orchestra fell silent. My heart quickened as the theater dropped into total darkness for a moment. At the ceiling a cloud machine sent wispy, white puffs across the blue-painted starry sky. Then the HOF logo appeared on a huge screen suspended over the stage, and sixty young women dressed in tights and jerseys from the NFL teams danced onto the stage.

I spotted Amanda immediately. Her thick black braid contrasted with the loose, flying hair of the other girls as they bounced and kicked to the music. I thought it gave her a touch of an exotic bird among a flock of gagging geese.

As the young women danced, one by one the photographs of the players to be enshrined in August emerged on the mammoth screen. The final picture faded into the HOF logo. The double line of contestants in a counterpoint move exited on both sides of the stage.

The orchestra burst into another fight song. A buzz of voices filled the auditorium around me while everyone awaited the next phase of the contest. I had to admit that competition can be seductive. It was easy to be ensnared by the excitement of the moment. Despite my conviction about the negative effects of beauty pageants, as I watched Amanda on stage, one part of me was rooting for her to win. Another part longed to see her back in jeans and T-shirt with a backpack slung over her shoulder.

Murmured enthusiasm ran through the audience as the contestants reappeared on stage in evening gowns, hair piled high, threaded with beads or flowers. I searched out Amanda in the crowd, eager to see the gown she'd bought at a thrift shop.

Her throaty laugh had filled my office that day, the day she told me how she had refused her father's offer to buy her dress. "It's not like the fluffy things in the stores. Doesn't matter anyway, does it? It's all for research."

I caught sight of her on the left. Amanda was right. The dress was nothing like the pastel gowns the other contestants wore. As each one crossed the stage in front of the judges, I watched Amanda hoping that her feelings weren't as conflicted as mine.

She wore a sleek dress of shimmering blue-gray silk. It fastened high around her neck in a matching velvet choker. The fabric clung to her body revealing curves usually concealed beneath jeans and T-shirt. As she strode in front of the footlights on stiletto black heels, a hush fell over the audience. She made the other women look like children playing at grownup.

After the last contestant crossed the stage, the orchestra struck up another fight song while the judges conferred choosing the finalists. Then the head judge scaled the six steps to the stage and took the microphone. As he called each name, the woman crossed the stage to stand on his left. By the time he reached the third name, I noticed Amanda wasn't paying attention. She peered into the audience searching for her family and friends. Her stance said that her research done she was ready to leave.

"Tiffany Marshal," the judge read from his card.

Amanda looked over at her and flashed a big smile. No surprises there. Amanda turned ready to move off stage.

"Number sixteen is Mandy Graves."

A look of distress flashed across her face. There was a moment of stunned silence. Number sixteen? The judges had added a sixteenth finalist this year. My stomach twisted. "Oh my God, what have I done," exploded in my mind. "But it's only the final cut," I consoled myself as Amanda's parents and friends jumped up cheering. With a grimace, Ryan slumped deeper into his seat as if he knew the impossible was about to happen.

The sixteen finalists remained on stage to face the judges. Amanda's smile was tight, her neck rigid. One by one the finalists traversed the stage. A low murmur from the audience droned while the judges deliberated. The judges asked the contestants to walk across the stage in reverse

order. This time reverberating silence greeted the judges' conference. Only the cloud machine whispered.

The head judge lumbered onto the stage and leaned toward the microphone. "As you know the number of women chosen each year is determined by the number of players to be inducted into the Hall of Fame." Impatience rippled through the audience. "This year we will choose five young women." The rustle of people shifting in their seats increased. "With so many well-qualified young women, the decision has been very difficult."

If he doesn't read the names soon, I thought, the roof is going to blow off the theater and release those wispy clouds up into the May night sky.

He grasped the microphone, then examined the sheet of paper in his other hand.

"Fourth Runner Up." He paused. "Felicia Lopez."

Her family and friends broke into applause as she accepted a bouquet of pink roses.

"Third Runner Up, Kathleen Hennessey." The judge allowed time for cheers.

"Second Runner Up, Vanessa King."

The theater exploded in a loud ovation as Vanessa accepted her bouquet.

"First Runner Up, Tiffany Marshal."

Amanda gave Tiffany a big smile and a double thumbs-up sign as she walked past her toward the judge.

When the applause subsided, he continued, "And now I present to you your Hall of Fame Queen for this year—Mandy Graves."

Amanda's hands flew to her face. She froze. The look of horror that I saw pass through her eyes mirrored the feeling in my gut. Neither of us had prepared ourselves for this outcome. In an instant, she regained her composure, put a smile in place and stepped forward to receive the red roses, the crown, and the keys to the Queen's car which would be hers for the year of her reign. Across the crowd her bewildered eyes met mine. I hoped I hadn't made a big mistake.

CHAPTER 2

Perhaps the sight of the Pro Football Hall of Fame surrounded by the heavy July haze should have warned me as I passed it off I-77 in Canton, Ohio, last night. Perhaps I should have paid attention to the unexpected shudder that swept through me as I skirted the circular building with the football rising from its center like a steeple. Perhaps I should have heeded the swirling mist that shrouded the Hall of Fame, the full-leafed trees encircling it that appeared rootless, floating in the foggy night, and the vapor that diffused the festive lights creating an ominous appearance. And then there was the glare on the rain-slicked highway that streaked toward the building like drawn daggers. But it's my friend Margo who gets premonitions, not me Liz Norris, a professor at Claridge College.

Perhaps the strange dreams that stalked my sleep should have warned me. Or my mind this morning like cotton candy, fluffy and sticky in the heavy mid-July air.

But I was unprepared when I spread open *The Canton Repository* on the kitchen table and my student, Amanda Graves, smiled up at me from beneath the masthead. The headline shouted:

“Hall of Fame Queen Found Dead”

The air gushed out of my lungs. For a moment my brain refused to register the information. Numbly, I stroked Harvey, my lop-eared rabbit, who sat on my lap. This official Hall of Fame photo taken minutes after she unexpectedly won the Queen's Pageant last spring is a picture of “Mandy,” the glamorous beauty queen, I thought, not Amanda, the junior who came into my office in February in jeans, boots, and a heavy parka to discuss a topic for her paper in my Women's Studies class.

As I met her gaze from the front page, my stomach lurched. I swallowed the acid that rose in my throat like the night I received the call that my sister had been hit by a car driven by a drunken football player after Canton-McKinley's victory over Massillon. Amanda reminded me of my younger sister, not only physically, but also her innocence and optimism. I blinked away the moisture that had formed in my eyes. The words came into focus.

Pro Football Hall of Fame Queen Amanda (Mandy) Graves was found unconscious at 10:00 p.m. last night by her roommate, Crystal Lane, at their apartment on 25th St. NW. Graves was taken by ambulance to

Mercy Medical Center, where she was pronounced dead upon arrival.

The coroner's report will be released later today.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the suitcase I'd brought up from the basement at the foot of the stairs. I'd been anxious to get off on vacation before the fall semester began. My childhood in New England hadn't prepared me for the hot, humid Canton summers which drained my energy leaving me lethargic, a feeling I hated. I needed a break before I settled into another academic year. Two weeks of research in Boston would feed my passion for uncovering and resurrecting the voices of women long suppressed by history. Then a week on the Cape with my college roommate, Kathy—that thought alone made me feel a bit cooler. As a bonus, I would avoid the crowds of Hall of Fame Week that clogged the city. Even watching Amanda as Queen in the parade hadn't been enough to hold me here.

But, now... I ran my fingers over the picture of Amanda.

The phone rang. I put Harvey down and grabbed the kitchen extension.

"Dr. Elizabeth Norris? This is Christopher Murray of *The Canton Repository*. Do you have a statement regarding the death of Mandy Graves?"

"What?"

"I understand Mandy was your student and that you were instrumental in her participation in the Hall of Fame Pageant. Do you have a statement?" he persisted. "Do you in any way feel responsible for her actions?"

"What do you mean 'for her actions'?"

"I mean, Dr. Norris, that she committed suicide."

"Wait a minute, Mr. ... What did you say your name was?" Goosebumps sprouted on my arms.

"Christopher Murray."

"Well, Mr. Murray. I read the article in your paper, and it doesn't mention suicide. In fact, all it says is she was dead on arrival."

"You're right, but my source at the hospital told me she died of an overdose. That source heard the police say it was probably suicide. Do you have any comment?"

“No, I don’t have a comment. I don’t comment on hearsay.” I clicked the disconnect button and slid the phone into its cradle.

Overdose. Suicide. The words rang in my ears. Thoughts tumbled over each other. Someone had made a terrible mistake. Amanda didn’t do drugs. In fact, she worked on campus to increase drug awareness. And suicide. No, not Amanda. She’s intelligent and has a bright future ahead of her. She’s not the type, I consoled myself. But then neither was my father.

I took a sip of the coffee. Cold. I popped it into the microwave. Amanda can’t be dead. I glanced out the window. The squirrels chased each other across the tree branches. I realized that I still thought of her in the present tense. The buzzer sounded. As I reached for the cup, I noticed my hand shaking. I heard the front door open with a click. Harvey thumped the floor.

“Liz?” Kurt Bouchard called. “Liz, are you all right?” His gravelly voice was like an anchor amid the waves of recriminations that crashed through my mind. He strode into the kitchen sporting a navy polo shirt and khaki cargo pants. The strength of his embrace washed the tension from my neck and shoulders and for a moment eased my pain.

I stepped back and looked up into concerned, blue eyes beneath a deeply creased brow. A faint scar from the attack in Yemen crossed his cheek below his left eye. Rather than mar his craggy good looks, it bespoke mystery. In the six months since he’d arrived to establish a security plan for Claridge College where I teach, we had progressed from acquaintances to friends to lovers. Nevertheless, he remained an enigma.

“Oh, Kurt, how could this happen?” I asked. “Maybe I shouldn’t have suggested that Amanda participate in the pageant.”

“Wait a minute. You’re not blaming yourself, are you?” He grasped my shoulders, his forehead furrowed, his jaws clenched.

“Well, after what that reporter said, maybe I am somewhat responsible.” I spun away from him and busied myself pouring a cup of coffee.

“Reporter?” From behind he snatched the pot from my hand and set it down. I faced him.

“Yes, I had a call about Amanda’s death.” My voice cracked. “What happened? How could she be dead?” His fingers stroked a strand of dark hair away from my cheek. “She seemed to have

accepted her role as 'Mandy.' Even wrote a proposal to expand her spring semester paper into her senior thesis, to include her experience as Queen."

"Stop it." He led me to the table next to the wide windows. "Now sit down and tell me why a reporter called you about her death?" His voice sounded more angry than curious.

"He wanted to know if I felt responsible for her suicide since I'd encouraged her to compete in the HOF pageant." I fingered the edge of the woven placemat in front of me. "Did I misjudge Amanda's maturity and ability to handle the pressure? Since she became Queen, so many people wanted a piece of her. Maybe that reporter was right. Maybe she'd be alive. Maybe I do have to share the responsibility."

"You know you're not to blame." He clipped his words as he always did when he was irritated. "He said it was a suicide? Neither the paper nor the radio report stated a cause of death."

"According to his sources, it was an overdose. And it looked like suicide."

"This doesn't sound right. More like a guy fishing around to see what surfaces. I know some officers in the police department. Let me see what I can find out." He gave me a lingering kiss which at another time would have been but a prelude. "I've got an appointment to submit my report to the College's president. Then I'll check it out. Meanwhile, I want you to relax."

"Maybe a few laps at the Y will help clear my head. Then I'll be at my office. Need to get my syllabi and class reading lists done before I leave on Saturday," I said.

"I'll stop by around 1:30 or 2:00. I should have some answers by then." Another long kiss and Kurt left.

After I rinsed the mug and put it in the drainer, I grabbed a leaf of lettuce from the fridge for Harvey. His eyes shone as he nibbled his snack. He was the perfect pet, affectionate like a dog, litter trained like a cat. With one more glance at the squirrels hanging from a branch of the maple tree, I tried to put aside the questions that were plaguing me. Time enough for them once I had more information.

As I passed through the living room, I noticed my orchids on the oak table in front of the bay window needed attention, so I filled a small watering can. One had bloomed, its curved stem of delicate white blossoms bent toward the light. Whenever I tended my orchids, I remembered the ones my father had grown and how close I'd felt to him when I helped water them. Tending his

orchids after his death helped me work through my grief. These three, a white, a pink, and a deep burgundy, were all that remained from his large collection. Two tears dropped onto a white petal as thoughts of another father, grief-stricken, and a lifeless young woman arose unbidden. I wiped them away and drained the last of the water into a pot.

I had grabbed my gym bag and briefcase and picked up Harvey to put him in his cage when a tan older model Camaro drove into the driveway. Amanda's boyfriend hopped out. I had almost reached the door when the pounding began.

"Come in, Ryan." I recognized his anger for what it was. Grief. The least I could do was give him a place to express his pain.

His brown hair was tousled and his Hard Rock Café T-shirt and jeans disheveled. Pain and anger etched his dark eyes behind his glasses.

"You heard what happened, what happened to Amanda?" His limbs hung loose like the arms and legs of a marionette. They seemed to move on their own without any purpose except not to be still.

"Yes, I heard." I motioned toward the living room. "Come in. Sit down."

He lumbered in, then stopped one foot frozen in front of the other. I waited unsure of what to expect following his forceful entrance. After a moment, he shook his head as if trying to clear it, stomped down the room, and plopped into a green overstuffed chair near the fireplace, back straight, feet planted firmly on the floor. I eased onto to the edge of the sofa across from him.

He pushed his glasses up and took a bent nail from his pocket and toyed with it. I'd seen him do the same thing in the past. Amanda told me that Ryan believed the nail brought him good luck.

"It can't be true that Amanda's dead. But it is." He flipped the nail from one palm to the other. I noted the scratches on the back of both hands. I was about to speak when with a contorted mouth he spit out, "And it's all your fault."

I felt like one of those big hands had struck me. "My fault?"

"Yeah, if you hadn't convinced her to enter that pageant, this wouldn't have happened. We'd be taking summer classes like we'd planned, and she'd be alive."

“Wait a minute, Ryan, slow down. I didn’t push her to enter. I suggested it, but the decision was hers.” I picked up the gray rabbit. “In fact, I was surprised when she told me she’d sent in the application.” I paused and stroked the long silky ears. “But I was proud of her for taking up the challenge. Going beyond the books is a sign of a true researcher, and you know she wanted to go on to grad school.”

“Yeah, but look what’s happened.” His voice became husky. He cleared his throat, then turned his whole body toward me and punctuated each word with a jab of the bent nail. I shrank back on the sofa. “But she didn’t do drugs, and she didn’t commit suicide. Just because we had a fight.”

“What do you mean drugs and suicide?” Given his frame of mind, I wasn’t about to tell him I had heard the same thing. “It didn’t say that in the paper.”

“A reporter called me this morning. Chris something. He told me.”

“Well, we don’t know for sure that it’s true.” I tried to calm him. “Do you want to tell me about your fight?” I asked softly. First-hand experience taught me that regrets for things done or not done could torment a person. Bottled inside they fester. Expressing them was the first step in healing.

“Amanda changed. Started wearing makeup and doing her nails. Went places with Tiffany and the other girls. Guys were always hanging around.” His eyes narrowed and his fists clenched.

”That’s not unusual, but there were only a couple more weeks of this.”

“She was excited about HOF Week, especially that she was going to escort Dan Marino. Yammered on about what a famous quarterback he was. And she never even liked football. Always said it was too violent. And she went out with Todd Randall. You know, that guy who works at the Hall of Fame.”

Although I hadn’t seen Todd since he moved to Canton several years ago, as a jock at Ohio State, he parlayed his position as quarterback into a lot of bedrooms. A favorite to win the Heisman Trophy, a freak tackle shattered his leg, ending his dreams of playing pro ball. I’d been in the stands and could still hear the snap as his leg broke. I brought my attention back to Ryan.

“Last week I asked her to go to the symphony at Blossom,” he said. “She turned me down to go out with Todd. When I got mad, she said I didn’t own her. We had a big fight and I left.” He took a deep breath.

“Oh, Ryan.” As I gazed at his bowed head, a weight pressed on my chest.

“You’ve got to do something, Dr. Norris. She didn’t do the things they say. You’ve got to find out what really happened.” Although Ryan’s voice was angry, his eyes pleaded.

“I’m not a detective. The police will investigate.”

“Not if they think it’s a suicide.”

“Listen, you know Kurt Bouchard who’s been working on the security plan at the college? He’s made some friends in the police department. Let’s wait until we find out what he learns from them, okay?”

“I guess..., but if they aren’t going to do anything.” He drew his eyebrows together and peered at me. “You have to...”

I started to shake my head to stop him before he continued.

“You owe it to Amanda.”