

Orchid Blues (Holly Barker Novels)

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On the way to her wedding, Chief of Police Holly Barker is sidetracked by a high-tech bank robbery that results in murder, and she, along with her father and her canine companion Daisy, make a startling discovery that plunges them into the very center of psychotic criminality and political motivation.

Stuart Woods is the author of fifty novels, including the New York Times bestselling Stone Barrington and Holly Barker series. He is a native of Georgia and began his writing career in the advertising industry. *Chiefs*, his debut in 1981, won the Edgar Award. An avid sailor and pilot, Woods lives in New York City, Florida, and Maine. One

HE WAITED UNTIL THE LAST OF THE LINE HAD entered the cinema for the eight o'clock movie.

"All right, let's take a tour," he said to the boy at the wheel.

The boy drove slowly around the parking lot.

"Here," he said.

The boy stopped the car.

The man looked at the parked vehicle. It was an older Ford commercial van, well cared for and clean. "Wait a minute," he said. He got out of the car and grabbed his tool bag. "Drive over to the edge of the parking lot and wait. When you see the van's headlights go on, follow me home. I'll be making a lot of turns."

"Yessir," the boy said.

He slipped a pair of rubber gloves on, then walked over to the van and tried the door. Unlocked. It took him less than a minute to punch the steering lock and start the van. He switched on the lights and checked the odometer: 48,000 miles; not bad. He backed out of the parking space and drove out of the lot, onto the highway. In the rearview mirror he watched the boy fall in behind him, well back. He drove for a couple of minutes, constantly making turns, checking the mirror; then he turned down a dirt road, drove a hundred yards and stopped. The boy stopped behind him. He sat in the van and watched the traffic pass on the highway for five minutes; then he made a U-turn and went back to the highway and headed west. He had two hours before the van's owner would come out of the movies and discover his loss, but he needed only half an hour.

Twenty-five minutes later, he drove into the little town, and five minutes after that, he pulled the van into the large steel shed behind his business. Half a dozen men, who had been sitting around a poker table, stood up and walked over.

"Looks good," one of them said.

"It'll do. Only 48K on the clock, and it runs like a sewing machine. Let's do it."

Everybody went to work. First, they donned rubber gloves, then they washed the van thoroughly and cleaned the interior, and fastened two rough wooden benches to the floor. Two men unrolled a large decal and affixed it to the side of the van. Environmental Services, Inc., it read, and in smaller letters, Cleaning up after the world. There was a phone number, too. If anyone rang it, they'd get a pizzeria on U.S. 1. They fixed an identical decal to the opposite side of the van, then changed the license plates, tossing the old ones into the van.

Somebody looked under the hood, fiddled with a couple of things, then closed it. "Good shape," he said. "The man knows how to take care of a vehicle." He checked a sticker on the windshield. "Had it serviced last week; nice of him."

"I hope his insurance is paid up," someone else said.

"All right," their leader said. "let's go over it again." The poker chips and cards were removed from the big round table, and a large floor plan was spread out. "Number two," the leader said, "take us through it."

"We all know it by heart," somebody said.

"You will when I'm finished," the leader said. "Then you can all get a good night's sleep."

When the van was ready they went home and left him alone in the shed. He went to an elongated safe in a corner, tapped the combination into the keypad, and opened it. He removed six Remington riot guns-12-gauge pump shotguns with 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch barrels, normally used for police work-and took them to the van, laying them on the floor. He went to a locker and removed six blue jumpsuits-all the same size-took them to the van and put one where each man would sit. Back to the locker to find six yellow construction hard hats, six dust masks and six pairs of tinted safety goggles, which he laid neatly on top of the jumpsuits. He then laid a shotgun on each seat, and placed a box of double-aught shells and a pair of latex surgical gloves beside each shotgun. Finally, he went back to the gun safe, removed six 9mm semiautomatic handguns and boxes of ammunition and distributed them inside the van. The weapons had been bought, one at a time, at gun shows or from unlicensed dealers, then stripped, inspected and, if necessary, repaired. Before reassembly, each part of each weapon had been washed clean with denatured alcohol and oiled. There would be no fingerprints or DNA samples on them.

When he was done, he sat down at the table, stripped off his gloves and poured himself a drink from a bottle of bourbon. He looked at the newspaper clipping again. Eleven o'clock at the courthouse. "Happy occasion," he said aloud to himself. "And oh so convenient."

Two

HOLLY BARKER OPENED HER EYES AND FELT FOR Jackson. His side of the bed was empty, and she could hear the shower running. She moved her hand to the warm place on her stomach and found Daisy's head. She scratched behind an ear and was answered with a small sigh. Daisy was a Doberman pinscher, and she liked to sleep with her head on Holly's belly.

Holly heard the shower turn off and, a moment later, Jackson's bare feet padding across the bedroom carpet. She raised her head, tucked a pillow under it and eyed him-naked, wet hair, in a hurry. She liked him naked.

"So," she said, "where am I going on my honeymoon?"

"Same place as I am," Jackson replied, stepping into his boxer shorts and selecting a white shirt from a drawer.

"I'm relieved to hear it," she said. "And where is that?"

"Someplace you'll probably like," he said.

"Probably like? You're not even sure I'm going to like it?"

"I think you will," he said, "but, in the immortal words of Fats Waller, 'One never knows, do one?'"

"This is how you treat your wife?"

"I don't have a wife."

"You will by high noon, or my daddy will shoot you."

"Ham wouldn't shoot me; he's too nice a guy."

"He would, if he knew you wouldn't tell me where I'm going on my honeymoon."

"He knows, and that's enough for Ham."

"Wait a minute," she said. "My father knows where I'm going on my honeymoon, and your wife doesn't?"

"I told you, I don't have a wife."

She sat up on one elbow, and the sheet fell away from her breasts. "How will I know what to pack?"

"You packed yesterday," he said, "and I told you what to pack, remember?"

"Men never know what to pack. What if you screw up?"

"I'll just have to take that chance." He pulled on his trousers, found a necktie and started to tie it.

"You're driving me crazy," she said, falling back onto the pillow.

"If you don't pull that sheet over your breasts, you're going to drive me crazy," he replied, looking at her in the mirror.

She kicked the sheet completely off, disturbing Daisy's sleep. "Take that," she said.

"I intend to," he said, "when we arrive in . . . whatchacallit."

"Why are you rushing off?" she asked seductively.

"Don't point that thing at me," Jackson said. "I've got a closing in half an hour, then I have to do some dictating before I leave the office and then, on the way to the courthouse, I have to pick up the tickets at the travel agent's and stop at the bank for some travelers' checks."

"Why didn't you have the tickets sent here?" she asked.

"Because you would have ripped them open to find out where you're going on your honeymoon."

He had her there. She fumed.

He slipped into his suit jacket, adjusted his tie, came to the bed and bent over her.

"Why didn't you dry your hair?"

"I'll put the top down." He kissed her on one nipple, then the other.

She giggled. "Sure the closing can wait a few minutes."

"Would you muss my wedding dress?" he asked. That was how he referred to the white linen suit he had had made for the occasion.

"No, you're too beautiful."

"Tell you what, if you'll call yourself Mrs. Oxenhandler for the rest of your life, I'll tell you where you're going on your honeymoon."

"Jackson, I keep telling you: nobody would choose to be called Mrs. Oxenhandler. You're stuck, you were born with it. Can you imagine my cops calling me Chief Oxenhandler? They couldn't keep a straight face."

"I think that's a very dignified name for a chief of police," Jackson said, trying to look hurt.

"It's a very dignified name for someone who handles oxen," she said.

"Well," he sighed, "I guess you'll find out where you're going on your honeymoon when you get there."

She pulled the sheet over her head. "You won't even tell me then!" she cried. She pulled down the sheet again, and he was standing in the bedroom doorway, looking splendid in his new suit.

"See you at the courthouse," he said.

"In Judge Chandler's courtroom, and you'd better be there early!" she called after him. She

fell back on the bed. She would always remember that picture of him, standing in the doorway in his white linen suit and gold tie, with his hair still wet.

Holly got out of bed, brushed her teeth and got into the shower, reaching for the shampoo. She had let her hair grow, and it was nearly down to her shoulders, though she wore it up when she was in uniform, which was most of the time. She was allowing herself two hours for the process—washing, rolling and drying her hair, putting on a little makeup, which she rarely wore, and getting into the short white sheath that would be her wedding dress. Daisy lay on the bathroom mat, watching her through the clear glass shower door, waiting patiently for her breakfast and to be let out. Holly laughed. Daisy would be her maid of honor; Holly had trained her to carry the bouquet all the way to the front of the courtroom before handing it to her. Daisy could do anything.

Holly felt that she could do anything, too. She was bursting with happiness and expectation and with trying to figure out where Jackson was taking her on her honeymoon.

She got out of the shower and called her office's direct line.

"Chief Barker's office," her secretary and office manager, Helen Tubman, said.

"Hi, it's me. What's happening?"

Other Books

Insatiable Appetites. Secrets and seduction are temptations Stone Barrington can't resist, and in this action-packed thriller in the #1 New York Times bestselling series, he encounters plenty of both... It's a time of unexpected change for Stone Barrington. A recent venture has achieved a great victory, but is immediately faced with a new challenge: an underhanded foe who's determined to wreak havoc at any cost. Meanwhile, when Stone finds himself responsible for distributing the estate of a respected friend and mentor, the process unearths secrets that range from merely surprising to outright alarming. And when a lethal beauty from Stone's past resurfaces, there's no telling what chaos will follow in her wake...

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