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DEADLY IMPULSE
by Carolyn Arnold



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**DEADLY
IMPULSE**

CAROLYN
ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Deadly Impulse* (Book 6 in the Detective Madison Knight series)
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ISBN (e-book): 978-1-988064-36-9

ISBN (print): 978-1-988064-27-7

CHAPTER 1

APPARENTLY NOT EVEN A DEAD body could stop traffic.

Madison scanned the three-lane, westbound stream of cars. All of the drivers had somewhere to be. Even now, only a few braked to gawk at the investigation on the side of the road.

Squad cars with flashing lights cordoned off the right lane, and the officers were diverting traffic over. This was the busiest intersection in Stiles. With a population of about half a million, seventy-five thousand people passed through this section every hour. Shopping plazas with franchise restaurants and grocery stores occupied two of the four corners; the other two had health care buildings, including one of the city's three hospitals, the largest of which was on the northeast side of the intersection.

Peace Liberty Hospital sat on acres of land with chain-link fencing running its perimeter. It was outside that fence that the deceased had been found.

Cole Richards, the medical examiner, was working over the body as Crime Scene Unit investigators Cynthia Baxter and Mark Andrews were busy taking pictures and collecting anything that might be evidence.

Cynthia headed up the crime lab. She was also Madison's closest friend. Her strong genetics gave her the sexy librarian look, and she had wielded that power expertly over men until she got involved with Detective Lou Stanford of the Stiles PD. Now she was engaged. Three months had passed since the announcement, and Madison still hardly believed it some days.

Mark was the only man on the forensics team and the youngest

of its four members. Both elements served to make him the target of blame and teasing. All in good fun, of course, even if he might not think so at times. He had long, dark hair that he tied back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. His hairstyle and other mannerisms had most of his colleagues curious about his sexual preference. To date, it remained an enigma.

Madison lowered her sunglasses and took in the scene. It was midday and mid-July, and the sun was beating down with nondiscriminatory heat.

The deceased was an elderly woman, her identity unknown and age estimated to be in her late sixties or early seventies. She had a short cut of gray hair and wore a T-shirt and a skirt. She sat in a wheelchair on the side of the road, her head dipped to her chest at an unnatural angle. That position alone would disclose to anyone paying enough attention that she was dead.

It was a sad state when people were too preoccupied with their busy lives to notice an elderly woman on the side of the road like that. As it was, people would have passed in good quantity before the jogger who had found her had come along.

His name was Erik Marsh, and he was sitting in the back of a squad car providing his statement to the officers who had arrived first on scene. She and Terry would talk to him shortly. The people who found a body were always the first suspects.

The woman's chair was on the grass beside the sidewalk, placing her closer to the fence than the road. Based on her thin arms and frail frame, she would have needed help to get there. A wooden board strapped to the back of the chair read, PUT AN END TO ABORTION.

"Protesters in this area are not uncommon, but what makes an older lady come out and sit in the hot sun with a sign strapped to her?" She asked the rhetorical question of her partner, ruminating on what brought the woman to this point.

Her partner, Terry Grant, was three years younger than she was and her total opposite. He loved running, and his hair was always perfect—rarely were one of his blond hairs out of place. Madison, on the other hand, hated mornings, so she stuck with

a wake-up-and-wear-it cut. While she had a hard time making commitments, Terry was married to his sweetheart of just over five years. Annabelle was pregnant with their first child and due any day.

Madison continued. "Not to mention, why would she get involved in such an issue? Her child-birthing days are behind her."

"She could have faced this issue earlier in life, or maybe a family member had? She could have been trying to keep things the way they used to be."

"When was abortion legalized?"

"In most states, 1973. That would make her somewhere in her late twenties, early thirties, if she faced the issue herself." Terry pulled his phone out and poised a finger over the screen. Despite Madison's desire that he take notes on a lined pad, like other cops, he was adamant about embracing technology. His hardheaded determination was paying off, though, as his texting speed was improving.

"There's no way she came alone. Someone must've brought her here. But was she dead when they dropped her off, or did she die sitting in this heat? My grandmother always wore a hat on a hot day." She paced a few steps and brainstormed aloud. "I don't think this woman chose to come here."

"Good deduction," Cole Richards stated matter-of-factly.

It was the only way Richards talked to her these days. Madison's friendship with him used to be one based upon mutual respect, but things had changed when she questioned his ruling on a prior case. From there, she had dug into his personal past. If she could go back and change things she would.

Richards continued. "Her forearms show bruising to indicate she was in a struggle, but the cause of death still needs to be determined."

Madison's gaze fell to the woman's wrists, marred in hues of purple. Heat surged through her, the fire of adrenaline blending with rage.

Richards's dark skin pinched around his eyes as he squinted

in the bright sun. “Based on the coloring of the contusions, they happened around the time of death.”

“And when was that?”

“I estimate time of death between twelve and eighteen hours ago. Her body is in full rigor.”

“You can’t narrow it down any more than that?” Madison asked.

Richards shook his head. “Liver temp will be off given the heat. I’ll know more once I get her back to the morgue and conduct a full autopsy.”

“When will that be?”

He shrugged. “I’ll let you know.”

Madison nodded. “So you don’t think she died here?” She hoped his answer would instill some faith in humanity. Surely if she’d been here for that length of time, someone would have seen her before Marsh.

“Again, I’ll let you know.”

“What about lividity? Doesn’t it tell you anything?” Terry asked.

Lividity was the settlement, or pooling, of blood in the body after death. If it showed in the woman’s buttocks and the backs of her thighs, she would have died in a sitting position. But that would’ve only told them she’d died in her chair, not her actual location.

“I’ll let you know once I conduct the autopsy. As for *where* she died, I will leave that up to you to determine.” Richards signaled for his assistant, Milo, to come with the stretcher and body bag. Sadness always soured Madison’s gut when the black plastic came out, ready to wrap the dead in its dark cocoon.

She turned to face the road. “Protesters against abortion are nothing new around here, but I have a hard time accepting that she was a regular. Why would a woman her age get involved with such a controversial issue?”

“No idea. All I care about is finding out what happened to this poor woman.” He put his phone away, seemingly done with taking notes.

Madison watched as the woman was sealed inside the bag. Memories of her grandmother rushed back and made her more determined to figure out all that happened to this woman. Her grandmother had been the greatest influence and supporter in Madison's life. She had died of brain tumor a couple of years ago and had left everything to Madison, overlooking Madison's mother and causing the already-existing rift between them to grow. Madison had turned down marriage and children for law enforcement, and that didn't sit well with her mother.

Madison gestured to the twentysomething man dressed in spandex who was talking with an officer and running a hand through his hair. "First, we'll speak to Marsh over there. After that, we'll show her picture to hospital personnel and see if they recognize her. If she was a regular protester or a patient, maybe we'll get an ID."

Terry opened his mouth to speak, but before he could get any words out, Cynthia called over. "Maddy," she said, holding up the protest sign in her gloved hands. "You might want to see this."

Madison and Terry stepped closer to the chair, and she followed the direction of Cynthia's pointing finger. There was an imprint on the wheelchair: PROPERTY OF PEACE LIBERTY HOSPITAL.

"We found it when we removed the sign," Cynthia said. "It looks like there is a serial number on it, too. VG235. The hospital does loan out chairs, and I bet they track it and match it to patients by those numbers."

Madison's heart sped up. Maybe this case would be an easy one to solve. In the least, having an ID was a good start. "Have Marsh brought in. We'll get to him soon."

CHAPTER 2

“THE SERIAL NUMBER VG235 WAS assigned to Elaine Bush.” Jackie, the nurse behind the emergency room desk, looked over the glasses perched on her nose.

“We’re going to need her address,” Madison said, just as a page went out over the intercom. It was in hospital code, but Madison understood every word. A patient was missing from the psychiatric ward.

Jackie listened to the announcement and then asked, “Do you have a warrant?”

Madison was aware of the blood heating in her veins. She swore she could sense every cell as it moved through her. Her earlobes warmed, too. She didn’t have the patience for a nurse on a power trip. Terry stood beside Madison, quietly letting her take the lead.

The nurse accompanying Jackie kept glancing over. She had registered several patients in the time they had asked a few questions. The scowl on her face indicated she wasn’t too impressed having to handle the workload by herself. The waiting room was full to capacity with people of all ages, sporting all sorts of injuries.

Jackie must have sensed her coworker’s attitude. She quickly glanced over at her and shrugged. She looked back at Madison. “I don’t understand why you need—”

“Elaine Bush’s body was found outside of your hospital an hour ago,” Madison said.

“Help me! He’s going to die.” A woman in her thirties ran to

the counter, dragging a man behind her. Blood poured out of a head wound.

Madison averted her eyes but not before she noticed the rebar projecting from his skull. And...all that blood.

The bile rose in her throat, and her legs became unsteady. She set her hands on the counter for balance. Her head was spinning slightly.

“Here.” A nurse ran over, placed the man in a wheelchair, and carted him off. This left behind the hysterical woman, tears streaming down her face, her arms flailing in wild arcs. A second nurse at the desk calmed the woman down enough to obtain her insurance information.

When Madison looked back at Jackie, she tilted her head to the right. She wasn’t fazed by what had just transpired. Of course, for an ER nurse, she had probably seen similar, or even worse, before.

Jackie’s eyes drifted to Madison’s hands. “You don’t like blood, do you?”

Madison lifted them from the counter.

“You’re a cop and you don’t like blood?” Jackie chuckled. “How do you—”

“Never mind me. The woman in the wheelchair didn’t die of natural causes.” It might have been a push on the facts, but it was justifiable. The woman had bruising on her wrists. There had clearly been a struggle. The circumstances were strange, at best.

The grin on Jackie’s face melted. She touched her neck, which had turned blotchy from nerves, a telltale sign for some people. “You’re telling me she was murdered?”

“It hasn’t been ruled out.” Madison held eye contact. The pause allowed the smells of the hospital to permeate her sinuses—antiseptic cleaner and the fragrance of flowers, the smell of sickness and death. To think life was also brought into the world in this place...

“All right. One minute.” Jackie pushed her glasses up her nose and put her attention back to the computer monitor. “Miss Bush lives at— That’s odd.”

“What?” Madison asked.

“There’s a note on her file. The wheelchair, VG235, must have been reassigned. She ended up with another one.”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

Jackie drew her eyes from the monitor to meet Madison’s. “According to Elaine’s record, when they went to get her chair upon checkout, it wasn’t there.”

“It wasn’t there? You’re telling me it disappeared? It seems a lot goes missing around here,” Madison said, remembering the announcement over the speakers.

Jackie’s eyes glazed over in brief confusion, and then she pointed to the ceiling. “You understood the code.”

Madison nodded.

“I don’t know what else to tell you about the chair. It’s missing as far as we’re concerned.”

“Well, we found it along with a dead woman.”

Jackie’s blotchy skin was now a bright red. “From my end, there’s no way to know who she was if the chair had been missing.” Her words came out low, in an almost apologetic tone.

“We’re going to need Elaine Bush’s number,” Madison said. They needed to confirm, without a doubt, that Elaine wasn’t the one in the chair.

“Certainly.”

The other nurse glared over at Jackie. “Watch what you’re doing,” she said.

“Keri, a woman is dead.”

“Still.” The other nurse shook her head and went back to another patient.

“Here you go.” Jackie handed Madison a piece of paper with Bush’s phone number scribbled on it.

Madison dialed it immediately. After three rings, a woman answered, identifying herself as Elaine Bush. After confirming some information with the woman, Madison hung up the phone.

She stepped away from the counter, gesturing for Terry to come with her. “The woman in that chair was not Elaine Bush.”

“So we find out who she was.”

She nodded. “Unfortunately, it’s not going to be quite that simple. I’d wager she didn’t die where she was found, all things considered.”

“You want to make a bet?” There was a spark in Terry’s eyes. It wouldn’t be the first time they made bets during an investigation. The regular was twenty dollars. While she’d like to claim she won the majority of the time, it wasn’t necessarily an honest assessment. But she wasn’t in the mood.

“No, I don’t want to make a bet. I want to find a killer.”

“Come on, I could use the extra money with the baby coming.”

She sighed. “Fine.”

“The regular amount?”

“Sure, why not?”

“You say the lady died elsewhere, and I say she died where she was found.” He extended his hand to seal the wager with a shake. She complied, and he was all business when he pulled his hand back. “Let’s go to the abortion clinic, see if they recognize the woman. You didn’t actually think it would be as easy as providing them a chair number and getting an ID, did you?”

“I had hoped.”

“Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay. My, oh my...” A man in a white hospital gown was skipping down the hall, a few orderlies chasing after him.

“It seems they found their missing psych patient.” Apparently, Terry had understood the code, as well.

Madison rolled her eyes at his obvious statement. “Nothing escapes your grasp, does it?” She headed toward the elevator, hiding her smirk.

CHAPTER 3

“HOW DOES A WHEELCHAIR JUST go missing?” Madison asked Terry as they shared an elevator up two floors to the abortion clinic.

“I can only imagine the traffic going through this place in a day. It might not be as hard as you think.”

“A hospital employee wouldn’t stand out pushing one.”

“Like I said, Maddy, I don’t think anyone would. You saw how crowded that waiting room was and the number of people who were being helped by the other nurse at the desk.”

Her phone vibrated, notifying her of a text message. It was from Cynthia. Richards booked the autopsy for first thing the next morning. Madison shared this information with Terry, and although he nodded, his eyes seemed distant—a common occurrence these days.

Doctors had told Terry and Annabelle that their baby could be born with spina bifida, but they strived to stay positive.

“Are you thinking about the baby?” Madison asked.

“I’m thinking of *him*, yes.” He gave her a slick smile. Despite ultrasounds not revealing the baby’s sex, Terry was convinced it was a boy.

“How is Annabelle these days?”

“She’s excited, nervous. She wants him out.” He laughed, but the expression quickly deflated.

“Good. And I bet.” Madison was thirty-five and didn’t have a mothering bone in her body. If she thought pregnancy through to birth—all the bodily fluids and the blood—it made her squeamish and just sealed the fact she would likely never have a family.

“So if you get to ask about my life...” he teased.

“Oh, no, you don’t. My relationship with Matthews is off the table.”

“Matthews? Sounds rather formal and cold.”

Troy Matthews was head of SWAT for Stiles PD. She’d known him for years, but it wasn’t until a recent case that their friendship had turned into something more. Despite her initial resistance, some things cannot be stopped. The draw she had to him was one such thing. He was an alpha male and, as such, attracted women in droves. He was into working out and ripped. But he was serious-minded and interested solely in her—or so he kept trying to convince her.

Madison took a deep breath thinking back to last night—their bodies entangled, moving together... She had to wish the images from her mind. At least for right now. They were on a case.

“I can tell by the flush of your cheeks, things are heating up.”

“Oh, shut up.” She punched him in the shoulder and then smirked. Her relationship with Terry would never change. He was like the younger brother she’d never had.

“By the way, you’re looking good these days,” he added.

She narrowed her eyes, tempted to punch him again.

“What?” He lifted his shoulders, hands palms out toward her. “I just noticed. I thought women liked this type of acknowledgment.”

But she wasn’t “most women.” She wasn’t worried about what men thought of her. After being betrayed by her fiancé in her early twenties, she’d been somewhat bitter for the better part of a decade now. It didn’t help that he—Toby Sovereign—was also a detective and currently working with Stiles PD. The greatest tragedy was how she held what he had done to her against all men who had entered her life—up until now. She still dated, of course, but she never allowed anyone to get too close. No, her heart was hers and hers alone. With that state of mind, though, the loneliness was also hers alone. She had both Cynthia and Terry to thank for helping her to see that life was too short to sit around and mope. Even Troy deserved some of the credit.

“You must be working out,” Terry said, breaking her train of thought. “Does Troy have you on a program?” Terry snickered, evidently amused with his innuendo.

“Would you just—”

The elevator dinged, interrupting as it announced their arrival on the second floor.

She stepped out first. Not that she’d admit it to Terry, master of the treadmill, who ran ten miles every morning, but she *was* exercising. And eating healthier. Before her shifts, she’d walk Hershey, her chocolate lab, at a brisk pace for an hour. Thanks to the obedience classes she was able to fit in every other Saturday, he was a pleasure to walk. She had started with one block and kept building herself up.

She hated to concede that the new lifestyle had anything to do with Matthews—Troy. She still slipped sometimes, but it was beginning to get easier to refer to him by first name. She was doomed. Whenever she sensed the trepidation setting in, the hesitancy over accepting their relationship, she’d blurt out *Matthews* to establish focus again.

But life had taken her through a lot in recent months. She had almost died at the hands of the Russian Mafia and came close to being raped by one of them, too. Faced with the muzzle of a revolver to her head, she had promised herself that she would forgive past hurts and try to love again with a full heart. The latter was really tough. It equated to vulnerability, the very thing she always did her best to avoid.

The elevator started to close, and Terry was still in it. She stuck her hand out to hold back the doors. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

There was a small waiting area in the clinic with three patients waiting for their turn. One woman was by herself. The other two had someone with them—one a man, the other seemingly a female friend.

Madison and Terry approached the front counter. The blond receptionist’s smile faded when Madison held up her badge.

Then she brought up a photograph of the dead woman on

her phone and extended it to the nurse. "Do you recognize this woman?"

She leaned forward and squinted as if she needed glasses but refused to wear them. "I do."

"Do you know her name?"

"No. Sorry." She sat back in her chair and Madison noted her name tag: MARY ELLEN.

Mary Ellen had just looked at the picture of a dead woman she recognized, and there was no evidence that the news shook her.

"She was found outside the hospital perimeter."

"Someone killed her? That's why you're here?" Tears beaded in her eyes as if everything was just sinking in.

"You knew her, but you don't know her name?" Madison was struck by the conflicting responses and emotion. First, no reaction, and now she seemed distraught. But Madison could relate to how the woman was feeling. Not that she ever cried at a crime scene. It was bad enough that she hated the sight of blood and had vomited in front of Troy Matthews once because of it. But there had been exceptional circumstances.

"I pass the protesters on the way home in the evening," Mary Ellen replied, "and I have seen her out there before."

"Was she normally in a wheelchair?"

Mary Ellen shook her head. "Even though I work in here and she stands against abortion, she was inspiring. Here was this delicate, gray-haired woman, standing tall for what she believed in."

"She was out there on a daily basis?" Terry asked.

"Come to think of it, she hasn't been out there in some time."

Madison glanced at Terry. It was likely that whoever left the woman outside the hospital knew that she protested abortion.

"Some time?" Madison prompted for a precise answer.

"A couple months, I think."

"Was she ill? Did she have an operation?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know."

"Did you happen to notice the sign she held?" Madison asked.

"Yeah, it said, 'Put an end to abortion.' Simple and direct."

“A wood sign, painted lettering?” Terry inquired.

“Yes.” Mary Ellen’s eyes squeezed shut and then opened again. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“She was found with that sign strapped to the back of a wheelchair,” Madison said. She thanked Mary Ellen for her insights, and after they spoke to some other nurses, Madison and Terry headed back for the elevator. It was apparent they were missing key aspects to this case already. No ID on the woman. No apparent motive. Was she disposed of because the family couldn’t afford burial? Had her death been an argument taken too far? It likely wasn’t elder abuse, as Richards had said the bruising happened around the time of death. She factored in, as well, that it was possible the person who left her there was the one who found her. Remorse could have set in afterward.

“We need to see what Marsh has to say,” she said. Part of her expected Terry to defend the man’s innocence, how he probably just happened upon the older woman. “You have nothing to say?”

“Nope. I agree with you.”

“You what?” Terry was rarely in quick agreement, and while it was an obvious next step to what was before them, he’d been overly accommodating since her recent situation with the Russians. In some ways, she’d rather he go back to his regular, snappy nature that had her defending herself at most intervals along an investigation.

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