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JUST CAUSE
by Carolyn Arnold**



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**JUST
CAUSE**

CAROLYN
ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Just Cause* (Book 5 in the Detective Madison Knight series)
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CHAPTER 1

THE BULLET MEANT FOR HER head ricocheted off a stair. The thunderous ping of metal against metal rang in Madison's ears, reassuring her, along with the shooting pain in her legs, that she was still alive. But alive for how long was the question.

When the guns had fired, she dropped to the ground, slamming her knees onto the concrete.

She willed her eyes to open, despite the searing agony that made it easier to keep them closed, and she was forced to face reality.

Her bullet had found purchase in Sergey's side, and he sat on one of the steps, a hand to his wound, staring at her blankly. His eyes were clouded over and distant.

She surmised he was experiencing the same euphoric feelings as she. Her heart beat adrenaline through her system, its pulse drumming in her ears.

She was alive but was she shot?

She looked down at her body and couldn't see any blood.

Having faced a fifty/fifty chance of survival, she had come out the other end.

Anatolli pulled up on her short hair, his fingers digging into her scalp. "Get up!" He thrust the barrel of a gun to her face with enough force it skewed her jaw and her teeth bit the inside of her cheek.

A warm metallic flavoring coated her tongue and she spit out blood, the pressure of the gun was unrelenting.

"Get up! Or you die!"

Her legs were unsteady and her head spun. She couldn't go out like this. She had fought too hard for her life to end this way.

"Go to hell, you son of a bitch!" She slammed the heel of her shoe into his instep and moved to the side.

Anatolli yelped out in pain, but she heard him cock the hammer on the gun.

A revolver. Six bullets. Six opportunities to die.

The barrel was pushed against her skull.

She pinched her eyes shut and images of her life played out, interspersed with meaningless thoughts. How would Sergeant Winston spin this to the media? Would he miss her beyond their regular confrontations, for which she knew he thrived on, or would he be able to move on quickly?

Her grandmother entered her vision and spoke from beyond the grave, telling her it wasn't her time yet.

Anatolli applied more force behind the weapon. "You are going to die."

"Stop!" Sergey eased himself off the step he had been perched on.

Swallowing hard, she knew the delay in killing her meant only one thing—they would make her suffer until a bullet to the head seemed like a welcome escape.

The haze cleared. Where was her gun? She had pulled the trigger and ducked out of the way to avoid the one aimed at her head. If she could find her weapon, she'd have a chance...

As Sergey inched toward her, with gritted teeth, he swore in Russian. He resembled a rushing bull setting out after a waving red cape.

Her only chance was to reach her weapon, but the odds were stacked against her. If she were to make a bet with Terry, they'd likely both wager she'd leave in a body bag.

The gun came away from her head, but she still sensed that Anatolli held it aimed at her.

She looked around, taking in the space.

She was in the warehouse of the Russians' main business front, Homeland Logistics. Men were around when she first came in,

but now all seemed silent, except for her and her two Russian opponents.

She remembered pulling the trigger and catapulting herself to the ground.

The left side of her hand tapped a pulse. She lifted it, but it fell limp, as blinding shivers of pain raced through her arm. But with the throbbing came clarity. She had banged her hand on the metal step as she fell.

She fought the urge to cradle her wrist to her chest. She had to remain strong.

Her eyes fell to the floor just beyond the staircase, where her gun lay, at least four feet away. There was no way for her to reach it before they killed her.

She lifted her arms in surrender.

“Get to your feet.” Sergey spat in her face.

Instead of humiliating her, it fueled the anger raging beneath the surface. She would see their entire operation come down—even if she did so single-handedly.

She rose to her feet, keeping her arms above her as she moved.

“Do you want me to kill her, boss?” Anatolli pushed the barrel into her lower back. “Or we could watch her flop around like a fish.”

“Hvatit!”

Anatolli lowered his gun.

Sergey spoke more words in Russian and Anatolli linked her arms behind, in his hands. Pain from her left wrist made her want to vomit, but it hardly deterred the man. He adjusted his grip and pulled her back into his chest.

“You are going to pay.” Spittle from his mouth sprayed her cheek in a fine mist.

Anatolli pushed her up the stairs while Sergey led the way and struggled with each step.

They went into a large office, the size of the chief’s, but, unlike his, they didn’t accessorize to impress. Their focus was on necessity and usability.

The floor was a dark hardwood and contrasted with the lighter

oak of the executive desk that stood at the one end. A flat-screen monitor sat on its top, to the right, and a desk calendar was in the middle. There were hand-written scribbles all over its surface in a variety of colors.

Next to the desk, numerous filing cabinets lined the wall. The room was devoid of artwork, except for a framed map of the world on the wall behind the desk and three clocks, set to different time zones, on the facing wall.

What had Madison's real attention was the doorway that came off the back of the room. This is where they were taking her.

Anatolli shoved her into the darkness and she momentarily lost her footing.

"Sit!" he barked.

At the same time, Sergey switched on a light. Its brightness momentarily blinded her as Anatolli pushed her toward a chair in the middle of the room. Chains were attached to the arms and legs of it, and there was a collar that would secure around their victim's neck while they worked out their sadistic pleasure on them. The floor was concrete and stained with splotches of dark crimson.

Blood.

More bile rose from her throat and mingled with the copper taste in her mouth.

Madison felt this sensation at a murder scene, and she felt it here, too. Lost souls cried out to her. Her mortality knew, beyond the sight before her, that lives had been brought to an end in this room, and that this particular road to hell had been paved with pain.

Anatolli thrust her into the chair.

"You're never going to get away with this."

Both Russians laughed.

"You are nothing special. Besides we have waited way too long." Sergey gestured for Anatolli to continue.

Anatolli secured her wrists, but when he bent to tie the shackles at her feet, she instinctively lifted her leg, connecting her knee with the cartilage of his nose.

“Bitch!”

His hand swiped across her face and torqued her neck to the side. She wanted to fight back, but her eyes faded to black.

CHAPTER 2

SHE MUST HAVE BAILED ON him again. She seemed to have an aversion to paperwork and had crafted her avoidance of it down to a fine art.

“See Madison yet today?” Terry asked Ranson at the front desk.

Ranson shook her head. “I haven’t. You check with the sarge? Maybe she called in sick.”

Terry laughed. The thought of calling in over the stomach flu wouldn’t even occur to Madison. She’d come in and puke in the garbage can before she’d succumb to a bug. Besides, he believed most infections and bacteria were afraid of her.

He pulled out his phone and dialed her cell. It rang several times before putting him to voice mail. “Where are you? I’m not doing all the reports.” He hung up but had a hard time dismissing the feeling in his gut. Something was wrong. When she had ditched him in the past, she was upfront about it.

He tried her again and this time it rang straight to voice mail. He dialed her house and got her machine. He was left with one person—Cynthia. She was head of the crime lab and friends with Madison. She answered on the third ring.

“Have you heard from Maddy?” he asked.

“No, should I have?”

“She hasn’t come in. It’s not unlike her to be late, but not this late. Add to that, I can’t—”

“You can’t reach her?”

He hated it when people finished his sentences for him. Madison

did it periodically, and his wife, but outside of those two women, it really wasn't acceptable.

"Like you said, she can be late. Maybe she just slept in. She's done that before."

Maybe he was being paranoid, but the fact he couldn't reach her nagged at him.

Then, as if Cynthia could read his mind, she said, "She's a tough girl. She can take care of herself."

"I just have a feeling something isn't right."

"She's rubbing off on you."

He detected Cynthia's smile over the phone. "Not sure if it's for the better."

"Maddy? Definitely."

"No answer on her cell or at her home."

"All right, that is weird."

"What's she up to?" The tone of Cynthia's voice had tipped him off, causing him to ask the question. She was withholding something due to her friendship with Madison. "Is she digging into that cold case of hers again?"

Chills went through him as his thoughts turned dark. Had Madison's vendetta with the Russian Mafia gone too far? The hairs rose on the back of his neck. "Tell me everything you know."

"Do you think she's okay? Now, you're getting me worked up, and I'm typically a balanced individual."

"Cynthia, I need you to focus. What was the most recent thing she had you look into?"

"Well, it was a bit ago now. Months even. But she had a..."

"Had a what?"

"If you would have let me finish." Irritation laced each of her words. "She had an envelope she wanted run against the piece found in the attorney's driveway."

"All right, I remember her mentioning it, but she's nuts. She's after them because of a stationary match?"

"I don't know for sure, but that part doesn't matter. We've got to find her—but what makes you think they're the reason she's not in?"

"I've gotta go." Terry hung up and made a few phone calls. He checked in with the kennel that took care of Hershey during the day. They said she didn't come in last night to pick him up and never called.

He stormed into the sergeant's office. "Madison's missing."

Winston pried his attention from his paperwork as if it were more riveting than his detective's latest drama. "Missing?"

"I believe so, yes. She's not answering her phone, either her mobile or home number. Her dog was left at the kennel overnight without her so much as making a call to them to explain."

Winston watched him intently. "That's not like her."

"No, it's not. She lives for this job. If she's not here, it's because she can't be. I've got a bad feeling."

"Go by her apartment. I'll get out an APB on her car."

LIGHTS FLASHING, Terry tore through the city to Madison's apartment building. He tried her intercom button and imagined her answering. He hoped that he had fabricated nothing into something. But there was no answer.

He pushed random buttons until he got someone. It was an elderly lady, based on her fragile voice.

"Who's there?"

"Stiles PD. I need access to the building."

"No way, creep. I know what you want. You have a granny fetish, you sick bastard. Go away or I'll call the police."

Terry rolled his eyes, tried another button, and received a more favorable reply. The door buzzed and unlocked for him. He was in.

He pounded on Madison's apartment door loud enough it could have roused the dead.

The last two words replayed in his head. *The dead*. What if something happened to Madison and he was too late?

He fell back against the door. The moment he made contact with it, he had his answer.

How could he have been so blind?

It took him thirty minutes to reach the harbor when it should have taken at least forty-five. He saw her Mazda across the street

and his heart sank.

He parked the department-issued sedan a block away and hoofed it to her car. He confirmed the plates and called it in. He would need backup.

CHAPTER 3

THE DOOR OPENED AND THEN slammed shut. It would have been enough to jar her if she hadn't been awake. She knew night had passed and morning had come along. Her hand maintained a steady, thrumming heartbeat and she wondered if it were broken.

"They're going to come looking for me." The words slit from her throat, her tongue and mouth were so dry.

"We're planning on it." The voice came from the shadows, but she recognized it as Anatolli's.

The light came on and he moved closer.

"They've been calling all morning." He held up her cell phone and tossed it into her lap. It fell off and landed on the floor at her feet.

"Let me go and we can work out a deal."

He didn't say anything but moved closer to her. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Taking a deep drag, he exhaled the smoke into her face.

She coughed on reflex.

"You shot my friend." He scowled.

As Madison's eyes adjusted, she observed the wildfire in his gaze and feared for her life.

He grabbed a handful of her hair. White flashes of pain limited her vision.

"Listen, we can make a deal if you let me go now." Her sentence came out fragmented, carried on bursts of breath. Maybe if she could somehow appeal to him. She had always considered Anatolli the weaker of the two.

“You are in no position to make deal.” His Russian accent cut the air and his warm breath cascaded over her face, delivering the stench of nicotine.

What if she died here? This could be the last thing she remembered before she left this world.

Her cell phone rang again, vibrating across the floor.

“What will all of your friends think when you’re dead and they were too late to save you?”

The way he was talking, she wondered if Sergey hadn’t made it, but the door opened again and Sergey came through, walking with a gimp and favoring his right stride.

“You can’t kill the devil.” Sergey lifted his shirt and showed her the sutures that sealed up the bullet wound.

“Next time I’ll be sure to finish the job,” she said with more confidence than she felt.

Sergey’s teeth clenched so tight, his jaw bones protruded in sharp, jagged lines. He nodded his head toward Anatolli, who released his hold on her hair, but drew his gun and put its barrel to her forehead.

She went to move to the side but found her motion limited. They had placed the collar around her neck. Panic stole her breath.

“But we won’t kill you right away.” Sergey gestured to the revolver in Anatolli’s hand. “You like to gamble with your life, so how about we play a game?”

Her breathing stalled, her heart splintered in her chest, and her stomach tightened and heaved, tossing bile up the back of her throat.

“We simply call it roulette when we play. The Russian part would be redundant.” Sergey paced the room and Madison didn’t miss the flicker in the man’s eyes.

“Anatolli’s going to pull the trigger. If you live, we will take our time with you. If you die,” he shrugged, “well, I suppose, game over.”

Both men laughed, sending chills through her.

Her entire life didn’t flash before her eyes, but moments of it

did.

Images of kissing Toby Sovereign haunted her, dredging up the feelings she harbored for him, but if she got out of here, could she look beyond the past to a future with him? He had challenged her to say she didn't love him anymore and to look into his eyes while she did so.

A deep breath escaped her lungs.

Cynthia. Would she understand? Cynthia knew how much solving this case meant to her. She had been supportive, but would she understand why she risked her life?

Her mother would never see her happily married with children, and their relationship would never be mended. She could envision her father grieving as if she were already gone. Tears fell over a daughter who was always just out of reach.

She wouldn't have a chance to say good-bye to them or to her sister, Chelsea. She wouldn't see her nieces grow up.

Terry would be disappointed in her and she would never meet his baby, his son, as he was so certain it would be.

The ache knotted in her chest with the realization that she'd devoted her life to the job to the point of isolation. She had one best friend, a partner who was like family, and a dog. Hershey. Who would look after the chocolate lab when she was gone?

For an instant, she imagined her fingers caressing the soft velvet of his ears. She witnessed the spark of life and a dancing reflection of love in his irises.

These thoughts occurred to her in fractions of seconds.

If she had a chance, she would do things differently.

Tears hit her cheeks and a part of her soul submitted to the inevitable. She was going to die in this room with no one by her side but the two Russians who would carry out her murder. Her only hope was that fate would intervene before her death became a reality.

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