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SACRIFICE
by Carolyn Arnold**



**POLICE PROCEDURALS RESPECTED BY LAW
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“I continue to be surprised at her incredible attention to detail in the “cop” world. Starting with the interpersonal relationships between partners, then dealing with the public and media and Police Department’s Administrative bungling. Arnold masterfully portrays how more often than not solving a case in the real world is an incredible act of determination and stubbornness on the part of the detectives. Although Knight is a fictional character, the situations portrayed in “Sacrifice” are painfully real. Arnold then turns her critical eye to the evidence. The techniques and markers mentioned in the novel are also true to life. The constitutional issues of plain view, and fruit of the poisonous tree doctrine all are well addressed and accurately dealt with. I continue to be pleasantly amazed at her attention to detail.”

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continued...

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“Usually it’s hard for me to read cop books without picking them apart, but I read the entire Madison Knight series and I loved them all! The way Carolyn wrote Madison describes me and the way I work and even my personal life to a t.”

—*Deputy Rebecca Hendrix, LeFlore County Sheriff’s Department Poteau, Oklahoma, United States*

CAROLYN ARNOLD

SACRIFICE

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PROLOGUE

HE EQUATED HIS PAST DEEDS to shades of gray with no distinction between black and white, right and wrong, good and bad. He knew others would see things differently, but it didn't matter. Few people possessed the ability to intimidate and influence him. The man he was meeting had the power to do both.

He walked into the dimly lit Fairmont Club, and as he followed the maître d' to a back table, he inhaled the smells of grilled steak mingled with imported cigars. Appreciatively, he watched her hips sway as if she put extra effort into it.

"Patrick, how nice of you to join me." The man in the pressed Armani, with whom very few conversed with on a first name basis, sat at the table. A glass of Louis XIII Black Pearl, priced at fifteen hundred an ounce, was in front of him.

Patrick noticed the man's bodyguard sitting at a nearby table. He was Armani's prized stallion who instead of being stabled was toted about and showcased. The man went by Jonathan Wright, but Patrick doubted that was his real name. He was super intelligent and a former marine. Wright nodded his approval and went back to his steak and red wine.

Another young woman, a potential Asian model, stood at the edge of the table. "Your regular, sir?"

"French with a twist." Patrick smiled at the waitress remembering the feel of her skin and the smell of her musky dew. Although a married man for thirty years, he didn't think his wife had noticed him missing that night.

A few minutes later, the waitress came back with his Perrier

water and lime in a rocks glass. The weight with which she set it on the table told him her memories were back, but she had to act like a civilized woman; after all she was working. She had to know, with a body like hers, she begged men to take advantage of her. He still believed he could have her again if he were at all inclined.

Armani held up his glass in a toasting gesture before swirling it lightly and taking a deep inhale. He followed with a small draw on the cognac. "When are you going to join me and have a real drink?"

"I'm on the job."

"Time for that new chair, my friend."

"Is that why you called me here?" Patrick smiled. Maybe the time had come to be repaid for past favors?

Armani let out a laugh. "Hardly. I need your help with something."

Patrick's heart palpitated with adrenaline as it did every time this man made that statement. It was too late in his life to change to one of innocence. Should his past deeds ever require an accounting, his only option would be a bullet to the brain. "You name it."

Armani played things smart, though. He always reminded him of the stakes involved first. "You help me with this and I'll ensure you make Mayor."

CHAPTER 1

THE PUNGENT ODOR HIT MADISON instantly upon opening the morgue doors. She pinched the tip of her nose, but it did little to save her from the smell of decomp becoming embedded in her lungs and sinus cavities.

“Whoa, he’s a ripe one.” Terry, her partner, stepped through the doorway behind her. He grabbed for a cloth mask from the dispenser mounted on the wall and handed her one.

Cole Richards, the ME, stood by the body as a tall, dark guardian. “It’s the exposure to the air accelerating the putrefaction process. That is why the autopsy must be done tonight,” Richards said.

Madison noted Richards talked with his eyes on the dead, an unusual thing for him. Maybe something about this death touched him on a personal level? She looked from Richards to the body.

The male victim, estimated in his early twenties, lay on the metal slab, a white sheet draped over his extended abdomen to his shoulders. His skin was almost black and appeared separated from the bone as if one could peel it off like the rind of an orange. His face, like the rest of him, was distorted and bloated beyond recognition. His eyes were open and vacant, clouded by death. His arms lay above the sheet to his sides. Some of his fingers were missing nails. The skin of one fingertip had been removed. Madison deduced Richards had taken it for identification purposes and forwarded it to the lab.

There was no wallet found on the body, nor any identifying marks to flag him in the missing persons database. The only things on him were a napkin with a woman’s name and number, a wad of

cash, and a prepaid, untraceable cell phone. He wore a gold chain with a pendant that had the letters CC engraved.

The body had washed up on the shore of the Bradshaw River, which ran through the city of Stiles and fed from a lake an hour away. The property belonged to a middle-aged couple, without children, by the last name of Walker. The wife had found the body when she went to get wood for their woodstove. She said he hadn't been there the day before. They had interviewed the couple at length and obtained their backgrounds, which came up with nothing noteworthy.

"How long do you estimate he was in the water?" Madison asked.

"As simply a deduction from what is before me, at least two to three weeks." Richards pulled his eyes from the body to look at Madison.

Was pain buried there? It was as if he read her thought. He returned his attention to the body.

"I'm basing this on when he surfaced," Richards continued. "In cooler water, bacteria causing decomp multiplies more sluggishly. If this was a warmer season, and it was three weeks later, we'd have a skeleton. Stomach contents will provide the approximate time of his last meal and what he ate. I'll also be consulting with a friend of mine, Wayne McDermott. He's a forensic climatologist. He can provide us with recent temperatures so we can get a closer estimate for TOD."

"So what are your thoughts? Dead when he went in or did he drown?"

"This is still to be determined. He is young and appears to have been in excellent shape."

Madison's eyes diverted to the body. The currents of the Bradshaw River had swept away any trace of a fit male adult. His bloated features made him appear more like a character from a sci-fi movie than a once living human being.

"Assuming he was alive when he hit the water, it is unlikely that he had a heart attack on entry. Quick results would show frothy liquid in the lungs, but because he was submerged for a considerable time, any trace of this would be gone. Tissue samples

from his lungs, however, will be taken and sent to the lab for further analysis. We'll also extract bone marrow in search of diatoms." He must have noticed the expression on their faces. "These are microscopic organisms which are specific to a region. If it made it to his bone marrow, he was alive when he went into the water. We could also find evidence of this in his kidneys, should this be the case. This will prove whether he drowned in the Bradshaw or was dumped in the river." His eyes went to the body. "We're not going to get these answers just by looking at him."

"Anything else you can tell us?" Terry asked.

"His neck is broken but, it might simply be the trauma the body experienced as it went down the Bradshaw. I will require a full tox panel be run on him. We'll find out if he had any drugs or alcohol in his system. As you know, that will take at least a week."

Madison latched eyes with the ME. "Well, let's assume he did drown. How would we know it was homicide?"

A faint smile touched Richards's lips, exposing a slit of white teeth. "It is dubbed the perfect murder. But until we can establish his identity, concrete his background, and get the tox results back, I will not be finalizing COD on paper."

"He could have jumped in. Suicide?" Terry rubbed at the back of his neck.

"Possibly, but unlikely. The reason for this is the natural tendency to surface. Drowning suicides usually involve the use of a heavy object to counteract that instinct."

"Maybe he didn't think things through and acted on impulse. Most suicides are executed in the moment. He could have got caught in the current and pulled under the ice. His restraint could have broken free from the body."

"I prefer not to speculate." Richards's eye contact scolded Terry. "But at this point, I would treat this case as suspicious leaning toward homicide. Look at this." Richards lifted the left hand of the victim.

Madison noticed the circular impression on the backside of the hand. "Cigarette burn, or possibly something larger." She studied it, and a few seconds later glanced at Richards. "It's almost large

enough to be a car lighter or a cigar.”

Richards’s eyes narrowed, pinching the dark skin around his eyes.

“So our vic was definitely in some sort of struggle before ending up in the river. But intention is going to be hard to prove.”

Madison glanced at her skeptical partner. “Hard, but not impossible.” She went back to Richards. “So, you don’t have an ID and only a speculative conclusion as to the cause of death. Why did you call us down here?”

Richards pulled back the sheet and pointed to the victim’s shoulders. “This.”

There were darkened lines, a subtle contrast, two widths, a mirror image to each other, and one on each shoulder close to the neck.

“Bruising.”

“Yes, contusions.”

“From what? What would cause something like that?”

“That I’ll leave for you to figure out.” Richards placed the sheet back over the body. “But if our guy did drown due to forcible action, these marks could have come from our murder weapon.”

CHAPTER 2

STEPPING OUT OF THE MORGUE, Madison braced a hand on her hip above her holster. “So, we’re left without an identity and only have a surmised cause of death.”

“Richards seems pretty certain it was a drowning even though he didn’t want to speculate,” Terry mocked the ME.

Madison had noted that too. Richards was typically a person who ran based on facts, not assumptions. She had found it strange how he kept coming back to drowning as the COD without being certain.

“And here we are, another Sunday night spent on the job.”

“Terry, what else would you be doing?”

“Hmm.”

Her phone rang, but she said to Terry, “If he was drowned, we have to prove someone did this to him. It’s not going to be an easy case.”

“Even more fun.” He plastered on a fake smile and passed a glance to her phone. “And figures we get the case, and not Sovereign.”

“The only reason we got it is because he’s got the flu.”

“Think they’re calling it a super bug.”

Madison shrugged it off. Her phone kept ringing, bringing with it the reminder she had to take care of something. “Gotta go.”

She headed for the elevator, pushed the button for it, and answered the call without consulting the caller ID. “Knight.” She answered professionally, but she had a feeling she knew her caller.

“Don’t worry about coming for me.” It was Blake, a man she had been seeing for a few months.

She looked at her watch. 11:00.

Hours had passed since they last talked. They had been at her sister's for a dinner and get together with her parents, who were up from Florida. Originally Madison had staged a fake call to get out of it, but then the real one came in. Blake, playing the good boyfriend, stayed behind.

"Sorry. I'm caught up now."

"You said that hours ago. Besides, I'm home now and you're on the hunt. I get it. Just don't get on me when a case loads me down."

She detected amusement in his voice. That was the one benefit of dating another professional. He understood what it was to forfeit all else to focus on what needed to be done. "Who drove you?"

"Chelsea. She even wrapped you up a take home platter. You'll have to come over here to get it."

Chelsea was her younger sister, the seemingly perfect one, at least in the eyes of her mother. A family woman, a mother of three, married to the perfect man, living in the perfect neighborhood. One thing that wasn't perfect about her though was her cooking. Now Blake would know this.

"Yum." Madison laughed and it cooled rather quickly, as thoughts of leaving him there slapped her.

He must have sensed the mood shift across the line. "Are you upset with me for some reason?"

She wanted to answer him outright but didn't have the energy required for the argument. She disregarded his question and came back with her own. "How did it go anyway?"

"Not too bad."

She sensed hesitation. "And Mom?" Madison didn't know why she asked the question because she really didn't want the answer. She was sure she already knew it.

Blake's end went silent.

"She's not happy. You can say it." She felt as though a stranger had invaded her world. He didn't need to see this side of her life, the side her mother tried to dominate. *What was I thinking inviting him?*

"Well—" he cleared his throat "—things came to an impasse.

I defended you. Your father seemed to like that, with my being a defense attorney and all.”

“I don’t need you defending me.”

“I was just—”

“Don’t bother telling me. Mom told you how the service eats people alive, probably tried to talk you out of a relationship with me.” Her voice rose with each word. She turned around to face Terry who diverted eye contact.

“She’s just concerned.”

“But she doesn’t need to be.”

“Maddy, may I see you tomorrow?”

The elevator chimed its arrival. It seemed to have taken forever to reach the basement today. Terry came on beside her.

“Can I get back to you?”

“I’m sensing a brush off, and after you took me home to meet the parents?”

“Night, Blake.” She hung up without waiting for him to respond.

What did all this say about her as a person? Was she getting defensive because her mother had a point? Maybe it was selfish of her. Not when it came to her career but that she had pulled someone else in to her life. In some ways, things would be less complicated if she stayed completely unattached. What was she thinking allowing her heart a portion of an opportunity to welcome the security of a real relationship? As long as there were killers to catch, she didn’t have time for one.

“So how’s that going?” Terry gestured to the cell she held clenched in a hand.

There was only one floor. She should have taken the stairs and gotten some exercise.

“You took him to meet your parents, didn’t you? How did that go?” Their eyes matched.

“How did you know?”

“I overheard you and Cynthia talking about it the other day.”

“I’m not sure how that concerns you. Not even sure how it really concerns Cynthia.”

Cynthia Baxter headed up the forensics lab and specialized in

documents, fingerprints, and other patterned evidence. But she was more than a colleague; she was a close friend.

“You did take him.” Terry’s face beamed. “Your relationship must be progressing. Before you know it, there will be a wedding.”

“Terry, shut up before I punch both of your shoulders hard enough you’ll lose all feeling.” She stared at him, daring him to say one more thing before she turned toward the lit floor number. She would never let the relationship get to the point of marriage. And to think she could have avoided this conversation. How long would it have taken to walk up one flight of stairs?

“Did they like him?”

The elevator chimed to notify them they had reached the ground floor.

“Night, Terry.”

CHAPTER 3

MADISON HAD BEEN TO BLAKE'S CONDO BEFORE. With its fifty floors, valet service, a lobby atrium, and front door security, it was a showy display. Blake nestled himself into the forty-ninth floor, and she was certain the only reason for that was the penthouse was purchased by an old man who had refused to sell his spot on the fiftieth. She often wondered where Blake's money came from and assumed his affluent lifestyle required more than a successful defense attorney's salary could accommodate.

The uniformed doorman opened the front door. "Detective Knight."

She nodded in response, still not sure why she ended up here.

Inside, the bellhop stood to the side of the opened elevator doors. He was all of five-five, but carried a confident air, one no doubt required when dealing with the type of people living in such a building. Except for his height, Madison could picture this man guarding Buckingham Palace with those high hats and straight faces. It seemed nothing would faze him.

"The forty-ninth floor, Miss."

The journey up was a long one on which she continued to question herself as to why she had come. She was still upset with Blake, and he was likely in bed already. It was nearing midnight.

She had debated whether she should see him or not. In the end, there was a compulsion that originated from a few veiled sources. The main one, despite the urge to silence it; she was lonely. Everyone else had someone to go home to. Terry had his wife, Cynthia had her current man, and Cole Richards had a wife.

Madison had a dog; Hershey, the chocolate lab, who would do his best to house break her into a responsible, domestic person. She would have to make this visit quick so she could get home to him. Her stomach rumbled and she found herself desperate enough for her sister's leftovers. Maybe this was a bad idea. She could just forget it, grab a burger on the way home, and settle in there. The elevator chimed their arrival.

The bellhop stood to the side. "Good evening, Miss."

Blake greeted her from the other side of the doors. "Quite a nice surprise." He extended a hand for hers and pulled her in to him.

The front desk must have called up to notify him he had a visitor. He owned half of the floor, the elevator being in the middle of it with doors that opened to either side, dependent on which the bellhop requested. If the other side was a mirror image to Blake's, a small foyer inlaid with marble tile greeted visitors. Ahead of this, a set of oak doors set a regal tone and separated private space from the lobby.

"I didn't expect to see you tonight." He swept back a stray hair from her forehead and kissed her.

The touch of his lips made her come alive, despite exhaustion. With all the death she saw on a continual basis, it came as a welcome release.

She cocked her head into the nape of his neck and walked with him into the condo. He smelled of expensive cologne. This mingled with his personal scent and drugged her thinking.

Did it mean something more substantial than simply that? She knew there were studies out there that concluded women picked their mate based on scent. Ridiculous. She was getting more analytical by the hour.

He cupped his hand behind her neck, pulled her in tighter, and took her mouth. His kiss, his taste, made her hungry but no longer for the food she had craved earlier. Rather, for him.

It felt so good, so humbling to experience the love he conveyed. But as they kissed, her defenses recalled the betrayal she felt earlier in the day. She pulled back from him.

"Why did you do that to me?"

“Do what?”

“Pick my mother over me.”

“Do you even hear what you’re saying?” A smile teased his lips. She waved her hand. “It was a bad idea to come here.”

“Actually, it was a smart one because now I can tell you to your face you’re crazy.”

“Excuse me.”

“Come on, Maddy, a choice between you and your mother? I’m not into an older woman. Simple pick.”

Madison crossed her arms. “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant—”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “You think because I stayed with your family I somehow betrayed you and your need to leave.”

She nodded.

“Do you want your family to like me?” he asked.

“Yes.” The response was instant and said aloud so she couldn’t reel it back.

“Well, I couldn’t exactly just leave. You were called away; I wasn’t.” He ran fingers through her short hair. “Even if the first call was a fake. You’re such a bad actress.” He smiled.

“Oh shut—”

He put his mouth on hers. She didn’t fight it, but let herself melt into him. She excused her weakness as a natural hunger that needed satisfying. He led her to his bedroom.

MADISON LOOKED OVER AT THE CLOCK ON HIS DRESSER. 1:15.

It was time for her to leave, get some sleep in her own bed, and spend time with her new four-legged responsibility.

She leaned across the bed and kissed Blake’s lips. “I’ve gotta go.”

He rolled over and pulled her to him. “Not even time for a shower?”

It sounded wonderful. His shower had seven jets, which covered every part of the body in a massaging pulsation that rid the body of stress, but there wasn’t time.

“Not tonight.” She turned a bedside light on. “I’ve gotta go. I’m a momma now.”

“A momma? I wish I had recorded that.”

She narrowed her eyes, yet played along. “You’ve just got to know where you stand. You can’t have all my free time.” She was smiling. “Besides, he’s not that bad.”

Truth was, even though Hershey demanded much of her time, she was willing to extend it. It could have been Terry’s brainwashing at every opportune moment. *One day he’ll be a great friend. His love is unconditional.*

Maybe she put too much faith in her partner’s words, but when her relationship with Blake went down, which they always had a way of doing, at least her chocolate lab would be there to lick her wounds. Right now, though, all the thinking was only further exhausting. She had to get home before she fell asleep in Blake’s bed.

He must have sensed her hesitation to leave and poked her side. “Get going then.”

She kissed him on the lips, wishing she had time to stay, time to savor him again. She pulled herself out of the bed.

“You know if you lived here, you wouldn’t have to leave.”

Did he just say what I thought I heard?

She couldn’t formulate words to make a coherent response, even though she felt him waiting her out, hoping she’d break the silence. But she could be stubborn, and this would be one of those times she’d win.

“You said you loved me. I love you. Why throw your money to rent?”

Her first reaction was that she didn’t need anyone to take care of her. The second thought went to what her share of a place like this would amount to.

“My portion here would be more than what I spend now. I couldn’t afford it.” She pulled a sweater over her head and pulled up her jeans, while doing her best to keep her eyes off him.

“We could work something out.”

She detected the smile in his voice. “So you’d cover the monthly expenses, and I’d put out in exchange?” She found amusement in his proposal.

“Sounds good to me. Of course, I’d also expect some light

domestic duties to be taken care of. The cleaning, the cook—”
The pillow she threw hit him directly in the face.

HER RINGING PHONE ON THE nightstand felt like part of a dream. Only, in a dream you could turn it off. This noise was insistent and through slit eyes, she could see the blue glow shrouding her bedroom. By the time she settled into bed after going out with Hershey, it was past two and she remembered seeing three thirty on the clock. Thoughts of Blake’s proposal kept her mind going.

The ringing continued.

“Hello?” It hurt to speak. Just a few more hours... What time was it anyway? She lifted her head enough to read her alarm. 6:03.

“Maddy?”

“Yes.” She didn’t have patience at the best of times, let alone when she was waking from a deep sleep, one that morphed her ringing phone into a distant church bell. Why a church bell? The implication gave her a headache.

“It’s Cyn.”

Madison sat up. “We have an ID?”

“Sort of.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I’ve been here all night, and before you say anything about it, you know I hate loose ends.”

Madison smiled into the receiver. That was just another aspect of Cynthia’s personality that drew her in.

“The fingerprint came back with a match.”

“Who is it?”

“The file number is eight-three-four-five-seven-nine-two-three.”

“A file number?”

“Here’s the thing. The file is locked. I don’t have a name to give you. The vic was wearing a gold chain with a pendant. Initials CC.”

“Okay, I knew about the pendant, but why would his file be locked?”

“Obviously, our kid has a record we’re not supposed to know about.”

“Crap.” She knew the fastest way to get that file unsealed would be to go straight to the top. Maybe he could use his position to expedite legal proceedings. “Looks like I’m going to have to speak to McAlexandar.”

Patrick McAlexandar was the chief of police, and they never saw eye to eye, but if she was going to get her answer he would be the best place to start.

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