

**A sample of
In the Line of Duty
by Carolyn Arnold**



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— *Carl J. Harper, Training Officer, ERT (SWAT), Lower Merion Township, Pennsylvania*

CAROLYN ARNOLD

**IN THE
LINE OF DUTY**

HIBBERT & STILES
PUBLISHING INC.



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2016 Hibbert & Stiles Publishing Inc. Edition

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ISBN (e-book): 978-1-988353-22-7

ISBN (paperback): 978-1-988353-24-1

ISBN (hardcover): 978-1-988353-25-8

To all the fine men and women who serve or have served in law enforcement, and in memory of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice...

CHAPTER 1

I LOVE YOU. Three words that possessed the ability to change everything—your beliefs, perceptions, decisions. They also had a way of transforming whatever previously mattered to you and replacing it with this warm feeling that melts away your defenses, leaving you completely vulnerable.

Until now, Madison Knight had avoided such vulnerability at all costs. And she had been good at it. Maybe it came from her job as a major crimes detective and all the lying criminals, but it more likely had to do with the fact she'd been engaged before and it had disintegrated before she reached the altar. A bias toward men and romantic relationships was always born when the first one you gave your heart to was a cheater. Call it *once bitten, twice shy*.

To compound the issue, her ex, Toby Sovereign, was a fellow detective with Stiles PD. This should have taught Madison to date outside of law enforcement, but she'd failed to grasp that little lesson. Currently, the man in her life was Troy Matthews, SWAT team leader and hot-blooded American male who turned the heads of most women. But the good news for Madison was that he didn't seem to notice their attentions. Well, maybe he noticed, as in *he was aware*, but he certainly didn't care. He said that he only had eyes for Madison, and for the most part, she trusted him when he told her so.

There were still times that doubt about his loyalty would creep in, but she would acknowledge them and then release them. In the five months they'd been dating, he had never given her actual reason to distrust him. It was just her past recycling back, trying to tell her that all relationships were doomed to failure. In her defense, finding your fiancé in bed with another woman wasn't exactly an image that went away quickly. And really, Troy had just as much reason to be suspicious of her, seeing as his marriage ended because his

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wife cheated on him with his best friend.

She looked over at Troy lying beside her. She was in his bed, at his house. These days she was at his place more than she was at her own apartment. Even Hershey, her chocolate lab, was snoring loudly on the floor at Troy's side of the bed. It made her smile and her stomach flip-flop.

And there it was. The gushy side of her...

What had he done to her? What had those three words done to her? After Sovereign, she'd become good at keeping any man in her life at a distance. Less chance of getting hurt that way. And she'd usually put an end to things if it they got close to being meaningful. But Troy was just about as stubborn as she was. He wasn't going to let her go easily; he'd said as much. His determination and loving perseverance were actually wearing down her defenses. Maybe there was a benefit to existing in a state of vulnerability. It meant she had someone she could rely on.

She wanted to wake him up, but the sun wasn't streaming in around the drawn curtains. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. 5:35.

And it was Saturday.

She let her head fall back against the pillow, surprised that she was even awake. They hadn't turned out the light until after midnight, and she loved sleeping.

She rolled onto her side, trying to abstain from touching him. But he was so beautiful... His jaw was angular and had the hardened edges of the alpha male he was. She should have turned away from him right then, but he was lying with the sheets crumpled at his feet, wearing a pair of boxers. His chest was a work of art—six-pack abs, a speckling of dark curls across his pectorals—and lower down were groin lines.

Her breath caught and tremors coursed through her body just remembering his flesh against hers, his hands on her skin, the sex they'd had last night before collapsing into a heap of sweat. His love made her high in a way she had never experienced before—as crazy as that sounded, even to her. And maybe that's why her mind sometimes got carried away thinking Troy might be the one.

Her heart raced at the thought. Or maybe it was just Cynthia's romance getting to her. Her best friend and colleague had recently set a wedding date, and Troy and Madison had just had dinner with the lovebirds the night before.

Really, who needed marriage when everything was going so well? They had the love, the romance, and their independence. It couldn't get better than this...

Something niggled in her gut. What if it *could* get better?

She hated that damn niggling. It *had* to be the fact that she was immersed in

party and wedding planning for Cynthia. Madison was the maid of honor, and the responsibility had her immersed in taffeta, cake decorations, guest favors, and flowers. And if that wasn't enough, she'd been working with Cynthia's fiancé and Sovereign's partner, Lou Stanford, and Samantha—a technician from the crime lab that Cynthia managed—on a surprise engagement party. It was something that the groom wasn't typically involved in, but Lou had graciously stepped in and initiated the plan. But with the caseload at work, it had taken them months to put together.

At least the party would be behind her come next Saturday. Until then, there were only a couple of last-minute details to work out: checking in with the caterer and making sure the florist would have Gerberas, as they were Cynthia's favorite flower. Today, though, Madison had to go dress shopping with Cynthia.

No wonder she was thinking about marriage—she was drowning in it!

"Someone's up early," Troy said groggily, opening one eye at a time as if he was adjusting to the light. He looked over at her and smiled. "Good morning, beautiful."

Madison returned the smile. "Morning."

"Why are you up already? It's Saturday. You should still be snoring," he said.

She raised both brows. "I don't snore."

"Yeah, okay," he stated drily.

She playfully hit his shoulder, and he grabbed her sides and started tickling her. She squealed and squirmed, trying to get out of his reach...but not really.

"Stop it..." It was a weak protest, but it was the best she could manage.

His hands were resting on her hips, and his green eyes were peering into hers the way they always did. It was as if the man had the ability to read her mind. And based on what he'd say and do sometimes, she wondered if he really could.

She'd never tell him how the M-word wasn't as scary *some* days, though. Why risk scaring him off? Besides, he probably wouldn't believe her anyway. Her and marriage? Laughable.

"My mind's awake," she said, finally answering his question. It was simple, precise, and honest.

"Is that all?" He moved over until he was against her, *hard* against her.

Her eyes playfully narrowed to slits, and her gaze fell to his lips. He took her mouth with hunger, yet she felt like the one feeding on him. Heat grew in her belly...and lower.

His cell phone rang, and his moan was deep-seated as he pulled back from her.

"Let voice mail pick it up," she whispered.

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Troy lifted his phone. "You know I can't."

As part of SWAT, he was on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

She dropped the back of her head onto the pillow, panting and disappointed.

Then her phone rang.

Strange... This was her day off, and she *wasn't* on call.

She reached for her phone. Her superior Sergeant Winston showed as her caller. First Troy's boss, now hers? This couldn't be good news.

She answered and listened to Winston, only the odd word making it to her ears. "...a shooting... Officer Weir is down... fighting for his life..."

Madison swallowed, her mouth thick with saliva, her eyes full of tears. Her heartbeat slowed and her chest seemed locked in expansion.

"When?" She managed to scrape the one word from her throat as she looked over at Troy. He was still on the phone, staring at the far wall.

"Just over a half hour ago."

"Where— Is he—" The question only partially formed when Winston's earlier words sank in.

Fighting for his life.

"Outside a gas station on Hamilton and Highbury," the sergeant responded. "He's at Peace Liberty Hospital."

"I'll be right there." Madison hung up, otherwise frozen in place on the bed, her heart beating fast for a different reason than before. Barry Weir was more than a fellow officer. He was their friend.

Troy ended his call.

"Barry was shot," she said in disbelief.

Troy's face was pale as he got out of bed ahead of her. "I know. We've gotta go."

CHAPTER 2

THE HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM WAS A SEA OF BLUE. Regardless of their rank, all the officers in the Stiles PD were awaiting word on their brother. Even those on duty would be taking turns stopping by. The energy in the room was one of both grief and desire for answers.

Madison and Troy walked in together and were greeted with embraces. Their fellow officers had solemn expressions on their faces, and while tears filled the eyes of almost all who were there, most were refused the right to fall. Honor and determination made that a requirement. And just as with a blood family in the case of an emergency, all their differences disappeared.

She even hugged Officer Tendum, in that moment letting go of the anger she had been harboring against him for the last six months. Tendum had accompanied his training officer, Higgins—who was also her former TO—on a call that had resulted in Higgins being shot. She'd held Tendum responsible, attributing it to his negligence, but maybe she had rushed to judgment. Tendum hadn't caused the shooting, and at least Higgins had recovered fully.

Speaking of Higgins... She looked around the room but didn't see him anywhere.

"What's the word on Barry's condition?" Madison asked Tendum, aware of Troy's hand on her lower back and finding comfort in his touch.

"He's..." Tendum's chin quivered and he bit his bottom lip.

Madison squeezed the officer's shoulder.

Tendum swiped a finger under his dripping nose and sniffled. "It's not looking good. He hasn't come to since the shooting. We're all trying to be optimistic, but the doctor said it's too soon to tell. He's in the operating room now. The bullet hit his lungs." Tendum's gaze fell to the floor briefly. "That's

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all we've been told. He was wearing his vest...but they're not one-hundred-percent—" Tendum locked his gaze with hers, apparently thinking better of trying to educate her, and took pause.

Vests only helped so much. Bullets could still penetrate the Kevlar despite the fiction of movies, and even in the cases when they didn't, the impact alone could cause fatal internal bleeding.

"The bullet entered the meaty part under his left arm," Tendum added.

Madison swallowed, suddenly aware of Troy's silence, and pressed on. "Did they catch the guy who—"

Tendum shook his head. "He even hit the panic button. The closest cruiser to his location was five minutes out."

Every police radio had a red button that would clear all radio traffic and alert dispatch that an officer was in trouble. They could tell who and where with that one push.

"Weir didn't say anything in that time. It's believed he didn't have the strength." Tendum cleared his throat and then went on as if trying to assign some sense or reason to what had happened. "He was just filling the gas tank." He shook his head. "A car pulled up and fired off rounds."

Madison's mind snapped into investigative mode. Had this been random or targeted? That was one of the first things they would need to figure out. "And his family?"

Barry Weir was married with three daughters, ages six, twelve, and fifteen.

"Joni's over there." Tendum pointed to Barry's wife, who was seated at the edge of the waiting area closest to the doors that led to the operating rooms. She was surrounded by officers, leaning forward with her head in her hands, her dark hair falling to the sides, hiding her face. Joni sat back as if she sensed new eyes on her and connected directly with Madison's gaze. Joni's eyes were bloodshot, her cheeks streaked with tears.

"Where are the girls?" Madison asked Tendum.

"Officers are with them at the house."

Madison nodded and then looked over her shoulder at Troy. His eyes were glazed over, his focus on Joni. It was rare to see emotion etched into Troy's features, but it was clearly visible now.

"Excuse us," Madison said to Tendum.

When they were a few feet away from Tendum, she put a hand on Troy's arm. "I'm sure he'll be fine. We have to think posi—" His cold gaze quieted her. The pain in it was tangible. She swallowed roughly and nodded. He wasn't in the mood to be placated.

They silently walked over to Joni, Madison leading the way.

Joni's eyes were full of shock and confusion, and while they had been

looking in Madison's direction, she didn't really seem to see Madison until she squatted in front of her.

"We came as soon as we heard," Madison said softly.

Joni's gaze went from her to Troy and back to Madison. She wrapped her arms around Madison's neck, and in that moment, Madison nearly lost it altogether. Tears did fall, but to hell with it.

She cupped the back of Joni's head. "I'm so sorry, Joni." Madison's chin quivered as she struggled to regain control of her emotions. Joni was sobbing, and Madison just held her until Joni pulled back.

She swiped her palms down her cheeks, wiping away the tears, only to have more fall in their place. "I need to be strong—" the hiccup of a sob—"think positive. The girls..." Joni broke down for a while and then managed to get out, "They need their father." Joni held out a hand for Troy to take.

"Anything you need, we're here for you," Troy reassured her, his voice gravelly as he squeezed her hand.

Joni nodded, chewing on her bottom lip.

At least Troy could speak now. Madison didn't have confidence in herself at the moment. All she wanted to do was take Joni's worry away and guarantee that Barry would pull out of this. But she couldn't. There was, however, one thing she could promise. "I'll make sure we find his shooter and bring them to justice."

Joni's gaze latched on to Madison's, and in that moment there was only purity—a vow spoken that Madison would ensure was fulfilled.

She took a deep breath, exhaling from her mouth as she tried her best to pull herself together. Detachment was the toughest part of the job—the separation between the job and what was personal was hard to distinguish. Madison didn't even like to refer to murder victims by that label, preferring to use their actual names. But Barry was blood... Rage, the desire for vengeance, and heartbreak blurred together. She dried her cheeks with her hands.

More officers came up to Joni, and Madison put her hand on Troy's back. Others wanted to speak with her. Troy was hugging Joni when Madison turned to see Sergeant Winston stepping through the doors. Their eyes met, and she found herself moving toward him, regardless of their history, which usually saw them blending about as well as oil and water. Madison stopped about a foot in front of him.

They stood there facing each other for less than a few seconds before Winston hugged her, and she found herself reciprocating. A flood of emotion now made it almost impossible to swallow the tears, to refuse them free rein. But she managed. She held them back, tamped them down with righteous indignation.

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“We’ve got to find this guy, Sarge,” she said.

“Oh, we’ll get this son of a bitch.” Winston’s voice took on a gruff edge.

She felt relief at his choice of words. “So we’re going to handle this?” In some cases, line-of-duty deaths were investigated by nearby police departments due to how emotionally taxing it could be on the fallen’s colleagues.

“Yes. Officers are on scene now, of course. But there will be a briefing downtown in thirty minutes. Every detective-grade officer is expected to be there. We can’t miss a thing, Knight. That means keeping everyone up-to-date.”

“You got it.”

He blinked slowly, almost as if he expected an argument. Normally, she’d buck at his requirements for communication, but not this time. They were going to catch the bastard who shot Barry, and the best way to go about that would be to approach the investigation as a team, in an organized fashion, armed with knowledge.

Winston bobbed his head. “What’s the update?”

She relayed what Tendum had told her, finding her training and experience kicking in as she went, her heartbreak for Joni now superseded by the drive to not just get answers but to pin whoever did this to the wall.

In the midst of her mental planning, a quiet fell over the waiting room. A doctor was standing next to Joni, who had gotten to her feet. He was talking to her, his face pale, his shoulders slumped, and he was moving his hands around, restless, as if he couldn’t decide where they should go—in his pockets, out of his pockets, in his pockets, out of his pockets.

Joni wailed suddenly, and her legs buckled. The officers near her buoyed her and helped her back to her seat.

Madison rushed over to her and stood next to Troy, who was still there. Other officers had their arms around Joni’s shoulders as she cried.

The doctor scanned the crowd, then spoke a bit louder even as he directed his words to Joni in a tender voice. “We did everything we could to stop the internal bleeding.” The doctor paused. “I’m sorry that it wasn’t enough.”

A heavy, suffocating silence fell over the room like a cloak, stealing Madison’s breath. Suddenly, it was as if she were watching everything from a distance. The adrenaline was kicking in, attuning her senses to what was around her. People became still, and words were spoken in whispers, sentiments were offered. Then everything fell silent. An impromptu and instinctual moment of silence, in remembrance of their fallen brother.

In this solemn state, the inherent scents of the hospital became noticeable—antiseptic and the faint hint of flowers. The smells transformed into an unpleasant coating on her tongue. She sensed pain all around her, blossoming

within her.

Troy's green eyes were glassy, and it didn't seem like he was focused on anyone or anything. Madison touched his arm, but he felt cold beneath her hand. Without looking at her, he pulled out of her reach and left the hospital.

CHAPTER 3

TROY GRIPPED THE SINK IN the men's washroom at the Stiles police station with both hands and stared at himself in the mirror. He'd lost men close to him before. The last one was two years ago, and the officer had been killed in a car accident while off duty. He'd left behind two kids and a wife. But Barry...he was different. Life always equaled death, of course. It was a simple equation to accept until it touched close to home. And that's what Barry's death was for him—personal.

Losing Barry made it clear just how dangerous this job could be and how fragile life was. One minute here, the next gone. Barry had just been pumping gas, a routine thing, something people did all the time without any thought to their safety. Those on the outside would say that's the risk he took being in law enforcement. Yes, there was the chance any one of them wouldn't return home from a shift, but it wasn't something Troy consciously thought about before heading to work.

In fact, when serving in a SWAT capacity, he'd say it was one of the safest positions within the Stiles PD. SWAT had the toys, and when they showed up to manage a situation, it was often brought under control rather quickly. Even the majority of criminals didn't want to tango with an AR-15 and armored vehicles. Besides, dwelling on one's mortality wasn't healthy. But when something like this happened to one of their own, it spurred on such self-reflection. It could have easily been him in the morgue, or one of his team members. Or Madison...

His insides quivered with rage as his heartbeat slowed with his grief. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"I've got Dad's car tonight," Barry says. "We'll take it out on the back roads

and see what she's really capable of."

"Your dad's a cop, Barry," Troy reminds him.

"So? What he doesn't know won't hurt him." Barry takes a few steps down the hall of their high school but stops and spins when Troy doesn't follow. "Come on, man. Don't make me take Lyman."

Troy came back from his thoughts and opened his eyes to find himself staring at his reflection.

That night had been one of the best ever. Barry had sent the car airborne by racing over the railway tracks on the outskirts of the city. They'd even conned some seniors into getting beer for them and drank it by the tracks later that night.

Barry had made Troy feel alive...

Pain knotted in his chest, the regrets over skipping drinks with Barry last week paired with losing a part of his childhood somehow.

Troy pinched the bridge of his nose as the memories continued to rush over him.

"I just got my acceptance letter." Barry holds the envelope in his hand. "This college has the hottest chicks... Not that it would matter to you."

"What does that mean?"

"It's Lauren and Troy sitting in a tree..." Barry sings.

"Seriously? You're like a girl sometimes, you know that? A big, emotional girl."

"Hey!" Barry punches him playfully in the arm.

Madison punched him in the arm sometimes, too...

God, what would he have done if Madison were the one who'd been killed? His heart knew the answer, and his mind willingly accepted what it meant. He had fallen for her hard and fast—at least as it might be seen from the outside. But he'd had a soft spot for her ever since he'd helped out with one of her cases eight years ago, one involving a young defense attorney who had been targeted by the Russian mafia.

Another memory churned.

"We're in the academy together!" Barry dances around Troy. "It doesn't get better than this."

"Graduating might."

"Ha-ha. You always have something smart to say."

Troy's eyes grew wet with this recollection, and he swallowed the grief that threatened to destroy him. Entering the police academy was the point when the two boys became men.

Troy needed to go see Joni at home, he knew, but he couldn't face her. Not like this. And the girls? He needed time to compose his emotions, to pillar himself against the wind of this tragedy. But there was someone he needed

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to call first.

He pulled out his phone and hit the quick key to dial his older sister, Andrea Fletcher, who also happened to be the police chief. She should be back from her vacation this morning, and she'd probably already heard what had happened. He just didn't want to initially discuss this with his sister face-to-face. Talking about it over the phone would make it easier.

One ring.

Two rings...

The washroom door opened, and Sanchez came in. He slipped into a stall, and Troy took that as a good sign to get out of there. Sanchez loved Mexican food.

In the hallway, Troy leaned against a wall and waited as the ringtone drilled into his ear.

Answer the damn phone...

"You've reached the voice mail for Chief Fletcher..."

He hung up and redialed. She should be back from her vacation by now. What time had she said her flight was getting in?

Someone picked up on the other end of the line. "Chief Fletcher here." She sounded groggy, as if he'd woken her up.

"Where are you?" he rushed out.

"Hotel near the airport. We just got in. What's going on?"

"Something has happened." The words came out soft-spoken and dry.

"That doesn't sound good." He could imagine his sister sitting up in bed and turning on the light on her night table.

"It's Barry..." His throat constricted. This would be his first time verbalizing what had happened.

His sister's voice was gentle and caring. "What about Barry?"

"He's dead." He delivered the news directly, unable to water it down no matter how much it hurt.

"What? How?" she asked, her tone switching quickly to one of shock.

"He was shot this morning while on duty." He got through telling her the basics, the facts draining so much from him.

"Wake up, Robert," his sister said distantly. He heard his brother-in-law moan in the background.

"We're leaving now. I'll be in as soon as possible. Has there been a briefing yet?"

"In ten minutes."

"Has the shooter been caught?"

At his sister's question, his insides pulsed with adrenaline and determination. No matter what it took from him, he would find Barry's killer.

“Troy? Has the shooter been caught?” she repeated, a subtle beep in the background of the line.

“Not yet.”

Another beep. “Someone’s calling. I better let you go.” Her voice was withdrawn, and Troy imagined her pulling her phone out to consult the caller ID. “It’s Winston. See you soon.” His sister hung up before he could say anything else. He put his phone away, the ache in his chest now almost unbearable.

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