

A sample of
POWER STRUGGLE
by Carolyn Arnold



PRAISE FROM LAW ENFORCEMENT
on *Ties That Bind* (Detective Madison Knight series)

“Usually it’s hard for me to read cop books without picking them apart but once I started this one I couldn’t put it down. *Ties That Bind* was more realistic than anything I’ve ever read and for the entire book I felt like it was me. The way Carolyn wrote Madison describes me and the way I work and even my personal life to a t. I have never felt more connected to a character. Thank you for creating something so real.”

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“I related to this story immediately. It is truly believable in its writing as it is vivid. I felt a kinship with the main character and that continued throughout the story. Well written and I am looking forward to more in the series. Highly recommended.”

–**Richard Goodship, Police Officer and Forensic Investigator (retired)**, Ontario, Canada

continued...

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CAROLYN ARNOLD

**POWER
STRUGGLE**

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CHAPTER

1

DEATH WAS NOT DISCRIMINATORY, but murder was certainly selective. At least that's what Major Crimes detective Madison Knight had learned in her twelve years with the Stiles PD.

She looked down at the male victim. He was single, fifty-nine, and lying on the king-size mattress in his master bedroom. Silver sheets were covering him to his hips, leaving his upper body bare and exposing multiple stab wounds to his chest and abdomen. Blood was everywhere, staining the bedding and spattered on the walls and ceiling.

Normally, being immersed in such a messy murder scene would make Madison's stomach churn. She'd most certainly feel a burning drive to get justice for the victim. But this time, she was devoid of emotion, flatlined like the man on the bed. If anything, there was lingering bitterness and underlying anger. Because she knew the victim. Jimmy Bates. The man who had killed her grandfather.

Because of Bates, her mother had lost her father as a teenager and her grandmother had to bury the love of her life before Madison was even born. And all this because Bates's father had been the numbers man for the branch of the Russian Mafia that operated out of Stiles, and Madison's grandfather, a police sergeant, had put him away.

Madison pinched her eyes shut briefly. A darker part of her was finding some sort of redemption in the fact that Bates had exited the world not of his own volition. Just as he had snuffed out her grandfather's life, someone had taken Bates's. A working

out of Karma as it were...

"Are you all right?" asked her partner of seven years, Terry Grant. He had a light complexion and never had a blond hair out of place, always ran before breakfast, was a loving husband and father to a baby girl named Danielle. He was three years younger than Madison's thirty-six.

She turned to see that he hadn't come into the room alone. Higgins, the first officer on scene and her former training officer, stood next to him. Both men had given her time to be alone with the scene and Bates after learning the vic's identity.

"I'm fine." Her response had come out way too quickly to be believable.

She looked back at the body. Both his arms were over his head and tied to the barred, wooden headboard with zip ties. She let her gaze trail down to his ankles, to see if those were also restrained, but they were still covered. She'd have to wait until the scene was processed to find out.

Given the number of stab wounds he had, though, it was likely that both his arms and legs had been bound, which indicated that the killer knew where to strike to delay death and invoke torture. While the former indicated a professional, the latter suggested the killer may have been after something.

Madison scanned the room. A television was mounted on the wall at the end of the bed, and it was on at a low volume and tuned into a popular crime drama.

Odd how reality can mimic fiction.

"Winston should have sent someone else." Higgins sounded apologetic for the Major Crimes sergeant's decision to include her in the case.

She met his gaze and dismissed his comment with a wave. "He probably didn't even know the ID on the vic when he made the call." She returned her gaze to Bates, analyzing whether he'd paid and suffered enough for his wrongdoings. In life, he'd served a full twenty-five-year sentence, but when he'd gotten released nineteen years ago, it hardly seemed like enough punishment. Was his murder finally enough to satisfy her personal scales of

justice?

As her mind relaxed, and she took in the scene, she sensed a familiarity about it. The numerous stab wounds, the bound wrists...

The woman was laid out on the couch, her arms open wide, one resting against the back of the sofa, the other raised in the air, its wrist twisted back at an unnatural angle. Her torso was stained red with blood, which extended to the sofa and the floor. It was as if a can of red paint had been dumped on top of her.

"It looks like she was stabbed dozens of times. The killer must be a professional, too."

At the time, bile had risen in Madison's throat. The odor, the sight—it had been all-encompassing.

The woman's name had been Lillian Norton, and the man who'd killed her had been a Russian Mafia hit man by the name of Constantine Romanov—the same hit man who had almost succeeded in raping and killing Madison ten months prior. Lillian's longtime boyfriend had worked as an attorney for the mob, and she'd been tortured for information.

With Bates's father's involvement with the Russian mob, as well, it didn't seem like it could be a coincidence that Bates's murder resembled Lillian's. And all the stab wounds, the bondage, the time it would have taken, and the seeming lack of concern over getting caught fit with Constantine's personality. But if Madison was going to entertain the idea that Bates was killed by the hit man, that meant—

God, no, please don't tell me he's back.

Madison put a hand to her stomach as her eyes filled with tears. She blinked them away, willing herself to compartmentalize her thoughts. Constantine had escaped police custody and fled the country. Intel indicated that he'd returned to Russia, and he'd be flagged the moment he landed on American soil. Of course, criminals found ways to work around things like that.

She took a deep, steady breath.

It had to be paranoia that had her dragging the Russian hit man into Bates's murder. After all, the recent loss of her friend

and fellow officer, Barry Weir, had the flashbacks surging again periodically. Before his death, they had been starting to ease. Plus, a connection between Bates and the Mafia hadn't even been established.

It was definitely best to keep her suspicion of Mafia involvement to herself for now. "I'd say we're probably looking for a professional," was all she said.

Terry nodded. "Given all the blood, I'd say the vic was alive for most of these stab wounds. That means the killer knew where to strike."

"I agree." Usually the person to find a body was the first under suspicion, and Madison's mind went to the woman she'd seen talking to an officer when they showed up. She was in her twenties and beautiful with long, honey-colored hair. She could have been any number of things to the deceased—a daughter, a lover, a wife, or in this neighborhood, a housekeeper. While she didn't strike Madison as a killer, first impressions could be wrong. Madison turned to Higgins. "Who's the woman who found him? The one talking with Officer Tendum earlier?"

"That's right," Higgins said. "Name's Yasmine Stone. She worked with Bates, as well."

"As well as what?" Madison asked.

Higgins shrugged. "She claims they were sleeping together."

"*Claims?* You don't believe her?" Terry asked.

Higgins's gaze hardened. "I don't take anything at face value."

Terry pointed at Higgins, then said to Madison, "Now I see where you got your skepticism."

"She *claims* she found him just a couple hours ago." Higgins slid his glance to Terry, as if to punctuate his word choice. Maybe Terry was right and she had inherited her doubt of people from her former training officer. But in their line of work, it was better to be wary than gullible.

"She made the call to us at seven," Higgins added.

Terry nodded. "And you said she worked with Bates?"

"That's right. Berger & Stein. It's an accounting firm downtown."

Madison recalled their logo on the top of a high-rise. "Huge company."

"That it is," Higgins replied. "Bates was sort of a bigwig accountant there, according to Yasmine," Higgins began. "She reported to him."

"That could explain how he afforded all this." She was referring to Bates living in Deer Glen, a prestigious gated community, and doing so alone in a two-story house that was large enough for a family of six. Not to mention the grand entry with the curved staircase, marble flooring, high ceilings on the main level that were easily twenty feet, and the chandelier in the foyer that had probably cost thousands of dollars. But Madison couldn't help but wonder if that was the only explanation for his wealth. Was an ex-con that lucky, or was it a matter of a son being like his father? Had Bates taken after his father by cooking the books for the Russians after he got out of prison? By extension, was the accounting firm connected with the mob?

"How long has Bates been working at Berger & Stein?" she asked.

Higgins shook his head. "Don't know. I hadn't gotten that far with her. It's possible that Tendum knows by now."

Madison nodded and made a mental note to find out.

"His old man was an accountant of sorts, too," Terry said.

She met his gaze, and her partner seemed to be prying into her mind through her eyes. Was he thinking the Russians might be involved with Bates's murder? She wasn't convinced yet based on the evidence, and she couldn't allow her past to interfere with her judgment. While she might not care that Bates was murdered, she still had a job to do, and she'd make sure his killer was caught.

"That he was," she said impassively.

"It probably wouldn't hurt to see if Bates had any connections to the Mafia," Terry suggested. "It's not often we see violent murders like this in Stiles." He raised a brow at Madison.

Was he baiting her? She glared at him. She couldn't let herself give into her paranoia; she had to remain objective. "We had

that case two Christmases ago—the woman who had her throat slashed in her kitchen.”

Terry didn't say anything. He just held eye contact with her. Was he going to bring up Lillian Norton? No, Madison wasn't going to give him the chance.

“We'll look at it from the Mafia angle, of course, but we need to dig into Bates's life,” she said, “see who would have had motive to kill him. And we should start by talking with Yasmine.”

Higgins touched her shoulder. She flinched, and he pulled his hand back. His brow creased, and his lips pressed downward in a concerned frown. “If you're not comfortable with this case, I'm sure Sergeant Winston would understand.”

“He's right, Maddy,” Terry chimed in. “As you said, he probably didn't even know the victim's identity when he assigned you. If he did—”

She jutted out her chin defiantly. “I'm staying on the case.”

The last few months had mostly passed without an altercation between her and Sergeant Winston. They were working better together than they ever had. After Barry's death, they had moved past their differences and navigated his murder investigation as a team. Even in the cases following that, things had proceeded more smoothly than before. For her to go to him now and request to be pulled from a case would be tantamount to admitting defeat. And all she needed was to resurrect his outdated mentality that law enforcement should be a boys' club. And she knew the request would somehow become about that.

“I'll be fine,” she started. “What happened with Bates and my grandfather was a long time ago. I never even knew him.” But she had seen pictures and was told that she got her light complexion and blond hair from him. He'd only been blond until he was six, but the rest of her family were brunettes with brown eyes. She'd inherited her dark eyes from them.

Terry tilted his head. “Are you sure? This one *is* personal.”

“I'm *fine*.” She turned her back to Terry then, not wanting him to see the lie in her eyes. But now she was facing the bloody side of the room, and the situation was starting to sink into her

awareness. Even still, she couldn't rouse empathy for Bates.

"Just so you two know, Crime Scene should be here any minute now, and I've made the call to Richards, too," Higgins said.

Cole Richards was the medical examiner, and the sooner he arrived, the sooner they could get some real information.

"Thanks, Chief," Madison said, using her affectionate nickname for him. She smiled at Higgins, plastering on a strong front. Inside, however, her heart was racing and her mind was whirling with thoughts, the foremost of which was that, if Constantine was back in Stiles, it was likely only a matter of time before he'd be coming after her to settle an old score.

CHAPTER

2

MADISON WAS ABOUT TO STEP out the front door of Bates's house when she noticed the security system keypad mounted on the wall. She pointed it out to Terry, who was a couple of steps behind her. "We'll have to get access to his records with the service provider."

"And that may only help us if Bates actually used it," Terry countered with a shrug. "You'd be surprised how many people have security systems but fail to arm them, especially when they're at home."

"Not much point to having one, then." Madison stepped outside, the cold December air forcing her to do up her coat. The medical examiner's vehicle was at the curb, and Cole Richards and his assistant, Milo, were headed toward them.

Richards smiled, showcasing bright-white teeth that stood out in contrast to his dark skin. "Detectives."

Madison smiled in return. Maybe if she just worked to stuff all her thoughts of Constantine deep inside, then no one else would see how truly shaken she was that he could be back in Stiles. Besides, something about Richards always set her at ease, and she respected his work ethic and values. At one point, she might even have had a bit of a crush on him. Of course, the fact that he was married nixed any possibility of a relationship there. "You beat Crime Scene."

"I know. That rarely happens," Richards conceded. "And I don't like it when it does because it holds me up."

Usually investigators made their way around a crime scene,

collecting evidence and snapping photos of the deceased and the immediate area around the body, before the ME could get started.

The sound of a vehicle had them turning toward the road where the forensics van was parking.

“Speaking of...” Richards made a move to go inside with Milo, and Madison and Terry stepped back to let them pass.

Cynthia Baxter, the head of the crime lab and Madison’s best friend, was a bit ahead of Mark Andrews, who was one of three employees that Cynthia oversaw. Each of them had a specialized skill set. Cynthia was great with technology, documents, prints, and other patterned evidence; Mark excelled with trace evidence; and the other two employees were trained in firearms, ballistics, and forensic serology.

Cynthia’s dark hair was swaying in a ponytail, and the pendulum kept going when she stopped in front of Madison and Terry. “He’s not going to let us live this down, is he?” She pointed toward the front door, implying Richards and the fact that they’d arrived after he had. Normally her shoulder-length brown hair was down, not that it mattered how she styled her locks. There was something about her—even Cynthia didn’t know exactly what—that made men fawn over her. She had played that to her advantage for years until Lou Stanford, another major crime detective, put a ring on her finger. Of course, they still had to officially tie the knot, but the commitment was made.

Madison shook her head. “I don’t think so. He doesn’t much care for it when it happens.”

“That I know.” Cynthia moved to the side and turned to Mark. “You go on ahead of me. I’ll be in shortly.”

Mark acknowledged Madison and Terry with a head bob as he walked inside, but his ponytail didn’t sway as much as Cynthia’s. He kept his tied low at the back of his neck. In fact, Madison had never seen his hair down.

Madison turned back to face her friend, who locked eyes with her, something Madison would have preferred to avoid because Cynthia had the ability to read minds...or so it seemed. Maybe

if Madison pressed on with the case specifics, Cynthia would be distracted enough to drop her focus from Madison. The last thing she wanted was for her friend to see her true feelings, to know that she wouldn't be solving this murder fueled by her regular drive to find justice but rather to quell her suspicions about Constantine's return.

"The victim has a security system," Madison blurted out. "That might provide us with some leads."

"Victim? So either the victim hasn't been ID'd yet or you knew them. Which is it?" Cynthia was scanning her eyes, and Madison knew she'd messed up. Madison always preferred to use names over *victim*.

Madison wet her lips, glanced at her partner, and then turned back to Cynthia. "The latter."

Cynthia's gaze became more penetrating. "Did you know them well? Are you okay?"

When Madison didn't respond, Cynthia eyeballed Terry. "She should probably pull herself off this case," he said.

"Hey, I'm right here," Madison spoke up. There wasn't anything more irritating than being talked about when one was present. "And this victim's identity isn't going to stop me from working this case. No one is."

Cynthia raised an eyebrow. "All right, now I'm curious. Who is it?"

"It's Jimmy Bates." Madison said it in the most detached tone she could muster.

"Jimmy Bates?" Cynthia's voice raised a few octaves. "Isn't that the man who—"

"Killed my grandfather?" Madison finished. "Yes."

"What happened?"

Madison hitched her shoulders. "You'll see for yourself soon enough."

"He was stabbed multiple times," Terry offered.

Cynthia didn't break her eye contact with Madison. Maybe it was best to just come out with her notion that Constantine might be behind Bates's death, but even her close friend might think

she was crazy given how little they had at this point. No, she needed some more evidence first. At least a direct connection between Bates and the Mafia.

“Stabbed multiple times?” Cynthia paused. “We don’t see that too often. The last case I remember was that woman... What was her—” Her eyes widened. “Constantine killed her.”

That didn’t take long...

“Her name was Lillian Norton,” Madison replied calmly, proud of her reserve considering the jumbled mess she was inside.

“You don’t think...?” Cynthia let her implication go unspoken, but her face paled.

“It’s too soon to tell who’s behind Bates’s murder.” Madison sounded steadier in that conclusion than she was in her gut.

“Huh... That doesn’t sound like the Maddy I know.” Cynthia angled her head. “Lillian’s name just popped right into your head when I brought up the stabbed woman? I doubt that. You’d already noted the similarities between the two murders, didn’t you?”

Terry turned to face Madison now that she’d been called out. Maybe she should just admit to that much. “I did.”

Terry’s brow furrowed. “Why didn’t you say anything about Lillian upstairs?”

“Why didn’t you?” she fired back, and Terry shook his head. “Listen,” she said firmly, “we have to look at this murder from all angles, and I’m not going to get stuck on one guess. Now, if you’ll excuse us, Cynthia, we need to question the vic’s girlfriend and coworker.” Madison stepped down the walk toward the driveway, her mind spinning and emotions cresting.

“If you think he’s back,” Cynthia called out, “you should get protection, just to be safe.”

Madison spun to face her friend. “I’ll be fine.” And there was that word again. She’d been saying *fine* a lot today. When she’d first started seeing a shrink—under mandated orders after her ordeal with Constantine—her doctor had pointed out that she used the adjective often, and that it was a means of deflecting how she truly felt.

“You’ll be fine? What if you’re not?” Cynthia’s shoulders sagged, and her face drained of color. “You need to at least remove yourself from this case. If Constantine’s back...”

Madison’s body stiffened. Hearing her friend say his name again and seeing her so visibly upset shook Madison to her core, weakening her resolve to just deal with this investigation one step at a time. Her mind was telling her to let go of the idea that Constantine killed Bates, but her heart wasn’t buying it. Bates’s murder, and what it represented from her perspective, was truly a nightmare she wished she could wake up from, but she wasn’t going to cower in a corner. She wouldn’t let him win.

“If he’s back and he’s going to come for me, he’ll do it whether I’m working this case or not. Now,” she said, “we really do have work to do.”

Cynthia waited a few beats. “Just be careful.”

“I will. I promise.” Madison walked away, and while Cynthia didn’t say anything else, Madison could feel her friend’s eyes on her back.

“She’s right, you know.” Terry stepped in line with Madison.

She couldn’t bring herself to glance over at her partner. Her body was quaking, a mixture of fear and anger. The latter won out. She met his gaze now. “What? That I should go into hiding? No. He doesn’t control how I live my life.”

Terry shook his head. “Not hiding, no. But if you really think he’s back, you should take precautions.”

Madison let out a deep breath. “How about we prove he’s back in town and go from there?” she suggested coolly, keeping her strides wide and determined.

She headed toward Tendum, who was in the car with Yasmine Stone, presumably taking her statement. Madison made eye contact with him and gestured to him with a curled finger. Tendum nodded in receipt of her unspoken message to come out and update them, and joined Madison and Terry by the trunk of the car.

“What can I help you with, detectives?” The twentysomething officer’s eyes were alert, and his cheeks were flushed with the

cold air.

Madison rubbed her hands. “How are you making out with her statement?”

“Almost finished.” Tendum’s gaze went to the car, and Madison sensed he was eager to get back to Yasmine. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

“We’ll be taking her downtown shortly.” Madison stepped farther away from the vehicle, and the men followed her. She didn’t want Yasmine to overhear them. “I just want to make sure you ask a few specific things so we can see if she replies the same way when we ask the same questions later.”

“Understandable,” Tendum said. “Shoot.”

Shoot? Sometimes the officer’s age really didn’t do him any favors.

“But first, I want to start with your impressions,” Madison said. “How does she seem? Shaken? Distant? Angry? Shocked?”

“I’d say she’s scared and shaken.”

Madison hadn’t expected that. “Have you asked her why she’s scared?”

“She said finding him ‘like that’ was unsettling and that it’s scary how we can be here one minute and gone the next.”

“So she’s analyzing her own mortality. Quite a natural reaction,” Terry chimed in.

“I’d say there’s more to it,” Tendum ventured. “She’s shaking and biting her bottom lip quite often and fidgeting with her hands.”

Those traits could indicate shock, nervousness, or guilt. After all, she had the attention of Stiles PD and not in a good way. The person to find a dead body always fell under suspicion.

“Did you push her further on why she’s so scared and unsettled? Try to break her?” Madison asked.

Tendum nodded. “I did, but I didn’t really get anywhere.”

Hopefully Madison would be able to apply enough pressure to squeeze something more out of the woman once they got her downtown. “When did she last see him alive?”

“She said she came over last night for a booty call at about

eleven and left before midnight.”

“And then she came back early this morning? Why didn’t she just spend the night? Did you ask her that?” Madison snapped at Tendum without meaning to. She had to be on edge about the prospect of Constantine being in town.

Tendum fumbled with his notepad and thumbed through it. A moment later, he looked up, eyes blank. “I didn’t think to...” Tendum seemed embarrassed as he scribbled something down.

“Maybe the guy just preferred to sleep alone,” Terry interjected.

Madison glanced at her partner, defender of the newbies. She pointed to Tendum’s book. “Make sure you ask her.”

Tendum tapped the end of his pen to the page. “I will, Detective. I’ve written it down.”

“And the house has a security system,” Madison added. “Did you ask her anything about that? Whether it was armed when she showed up today? If she has a code and a key for the door?”

Tendum was just staring at her.

“You did see the system, right?” she pressed.

“I...did,” Tendum admitted. “But I didn’t think to ask her either of those questions.”

“Well, add that to your little list, then,” she responded.

Tendum winced and scribbled in his notebook again.

Madison took a few staggered breaths to bring her rising impatience under control, and then asked, “And was he all right when she left him last night?”

“Yeah, he was fine.”

“So you asked?”

The young officer flushed. “Yes.”

“What about how long she’s been seeing Bates?” Madison asked, keeping the questions coming.

“For a few months now,” Tendum responded without consulting his book. “She couldn’t remember exactly when but figured they started seeing each other around October or thereabouts. Before you ask, she’s worked with Bates for a year.” He squared his shoulders as he regained his confidence.

Good work, Newbie, but it will take more to impress me...

“Have you run her background?” Terry asked before Madison could comment aloud.

“Yeah, of course. Nothing of interest there, though. Like, no criminal record anyway.”

Like? Tendum’s youth sprouted through the cracks.

“Is there anything else or should I finish up?” Tendum asked.

“Finish up. Ask her those questions—” she pointed to his notebook “—have her sign off on what she’s told you, and then we’ll take her downtown.”

Tendum nodded and headed back to the cruiser.

A few minutes later, the car doors opened and both Tendum and Yasmine got out. Tendum gestured for her to stay next to the car, but he headed over to Madison and Terry. Yasmine pressed a cheek to her shoulder as she waited.

“I asked about the security system,” he said when he approached Madison. “She says she has a code and a key.”

“And why did she leave at midnight only to return this morning?” Madison asked.

Tendum glanced at Terry but directed his response at Madison. “It was as Detective Grant said: he likes to sleep alone.”

“All right. Tell her to come over,” she directed.

Tendum gestured for Yasmine to join them. When she did, he made the introductions. “These are detectives Madison Knight and Terry Grant.”

Yasmine tucked a stray hair behind an ear but didn’t say anything. Her eyes were wet with unshed tears, and her complexion was blotchy.

“We’d like to take you downtown, ask a few more questions,” Madison said gently but without room for negotiation.

Yasmine gave Tendum an uncertain glance before following Madison. “I’m not sure why I have to speak with you now.”

“It’s standard procedure,” Madison assured her.

“But I didn’t do anything.” Yasmine stopped walking, her words full of panic as she rubbed her arms.

Madison turned toward the girl. “As I said, it’s standard. It shouldn’t take too long. We just have a few questions.”

A tear fell down Yasmine's cheek, and she wiped it away before continuing to follow Madison.

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