

**A sample of**  
**FOUND INNOCENT**  
**by Carolyn Arnold**

ALSO BY CAROLYN ARNOLD

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Standalone Title

*Assassination of a Dignitary*

CAROLYN  
ARNOLD

**FOUND**

**INNOCENT**

**HIBBERT & STILES**  
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**H**e didn't do it!"

The hysterical shouting pulled Detective Madison Knight's attention from her monitor to a woman rushing toward her.

*What the hell?*

Madison rose from her chair and held up her hands to stop the woman. "I'm going to ask that you—"

"Detective Knight." The woman stated this as if they had met before.

"That's me, but—"

Officer Ranson, the female officer who manned the front desk, stepped into view and mouthed, *Sorry*, to Madison.

Another officer brushed past Ranson and slipped his hands under the woman's arms. "Let's go."

He pulled on her, but she stayed still. Her eyes steadied on Madison.

"Please help me." She attempted to shake loose from the officer's grip. Her frown lines were deep burrows, her eyes were sunken, and the flesh around them was puffy. She appeared to be rough-edged, and while there was something desperate about her, Madison wasn't reading anything sinister.

"I've got this," Madison said, though begrudgingly. The only reason she was at the police station today was because it was Sunday, and typically, Sundays were quiet. She had plans to dig into her cold case.

“All right. Your call.” The male officer let go of the woman, and he and Ranson left.

“I saw your face in the paper.” The woman held up the *Stiles Times* and jabbed a fingertip to a photograph.

Madison passed a glance at the paper. It captured a moment she wished to forget. A day when she had been forced to speak in front of a crowd and take pride in the job she had done. The thing was, though, most good cops couldn’t care less about the recognition—and Madison was one of them.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” Her lashes were caked with mascara, and she blinked so slowly that Madison wondered if the cosmetic had sealed her eyes shut.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“Well, he wouldn’t have done what they said he did.”

Madison summoned patience and took a deep breath. She actually felt like she’d been making headway. A list of local printing companies—which could prove to be a vital link in the chain of evidence against the Russian Mafia—was on her monitor right now, waiting for her review.

She glanced at it and turned back to the woman. “Come with me.”

Madison kept the woman to the side of her. Her first impression was the woman didn’t pose a threat, but she still wasn’t willing to risk her back by leading the way. She took her to a soft interview room with a couch and chairs, and then gestured for the woman to enter first.

The woman dropped her red purse heavily on the coffee table and pulled off her jean jacket, which she folded and put on the cushion beside her as she sat on the couch. She was wearing an oversized pink sweater, but it still managed to display more cleavage than Madison had any hope of ever seeing on herself. The woman rummaged through her large bag and came out with a stick of gum that she popped into her mouth. She chomped on it like a cow on cud.

Madison remained standing and said, “Let’s start with your name—”

“Vilma with an ‘i.’ Thorne is the last name, or it would have been. My God, Kev!” She raised her face upward as if calling out to a greater being, her gum chewing paused momentarily.

“Vilma...” Madison tried to tune out the dramatics. She was getting a headache. “Let’s start at the beginning. Why are you here, and who is Kev?”

Vilma stuck her finger through one of the large gold hoops dangling from her ears and leaned in.

Madison inhaled a strong blend of cheap perfume and cigarettes. She risked taking a deeper whiff—maybe it wasn’t perfume but whiskey. Though Vilma appeared sober. But maybe it had been an error in judgment to give her an audience... “Okay, Vilma. If you need my help, I need you to talk to me.”

“My family is against what he did. But he didn’t do it! He wouldn’t do it. Not two days before our wedding!” Her voice rose, tears flowed. She stopped chewing and, sniffing, went rooting in her purse for a second time. Madison held her breath—just a little—wondering what was going to come out. This time, the woman held a well-used tissue and dabbed it to her nose. “And tomorrow he’s going in the ground and no one will know the truth of what really happened!”

“You keep saying he didn’t do it.” Madison’s patience had hit its limit. “Do *what?*”

A tissue still pinched on the tip of her nose, Vilma said, “Kevin didn’t kill himself. Someone killed him.”

## Two

**T**he next morning Madison still wondered why she'd ever agreed to look into the death of Kevin Thorne. But Vilma had pleaded and said that he'd only been twenty-seven when he'd died last month, and the ruling that it was suicide had to have been a mistake. She was probably just in denial, which was only made worse because the funeral was today. But suicide doesn't come with the same closure as a natural or accidental death. It leaves behind a myriad of haunting questions. *Did I miss seeing something? Could I have helped? If I had done this or that, would he still be here?*

Madison flicked a pen across her desk and thought about how the interaction had changed the direction of her day. She hadn't accomplished much with her cold case, and it had kept her up most of the night. She knew who was behind the murder, but she had to prove who pulled the trigger.

The victim was a defense attorney who had been gunned down in his driveway after failing to come through for his client, Dimitre Petrov, a Russian Mafia boss. Dimitre was sent away on a life sentence for a single murder, a joke since the man's hands were stained with the blood of many others. With him behind bars, she knew he wasn't physically involved, but she believed he'd ordered the hit. It was a matter of proving her theory and which of his right-hand men were responsible—and all that beyond a doubt to the district attorney and subsequent jury.

The bit of evidence she focused on these days came down to two envelopes, both with an infinity symbol woven into the stationery.



A piece of one was found next to the dead lawyer and Dimitre Petrov had sent her a letter in another just like it. She knew her partner would mock her and accuse her of reaching, but she would gather every little thing she could if it would keep the Mafia boss behind bars for the rest of his natural life and get some of his men off the streets.

“So, what did I miss yesterday?” Terry came in holding two Starbucks, and he was grinning.

She closed the internet browser with the list of printing companies. That was as far as she’d gotten again today, and the way things were going around there, she might have to work on this at home. “You heard,” she said. His grin had given him away. She took a cup he extended to her.

“Oh yeah.” He started laughing. “I’d say eccentric, but everyone said she didn’t appear to have any money.” He spun his index finger around his right ear. “Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.”

Madison laughed. “You have such a way with words.”

“You’re jealous of me.” He sipped his coffee and then put it on his desk. “Seriously though. Coming at you, all upset, and screaming, ‘He didn’t do it!’” He steepled his hands. “What didn’t he do? Spill it.”

“Kill himself.”

Terry sobered. “Oh. That’s disappointing.”

“Disappointing? A man’s dead.”

“Well, I thought maybe she was going to say the butler didn’t do it. I don’t know. I just expected something better.”

“She says her fiancé never would have killed himself.” As Madison verbalized the situation out loud, she found more empathy for Vilma.

“If I had a penny every time I’ve heard that—”

“You’ve heard that before?”

“Nope, not really, just thought I’d bug you with a cliché. Too bad it didn’t work.” He pouted.

“Terry, I’m going to kill you.” She rose and lunged toward him.

He took off in a slow jog with his Starbucks. “First you’ll have to catch me.”

She hated running more than she hated beer—and that was saying a lot—but she would catch him, and then he'd stop laughing. At least that was her goal until her sergeant, Garry Winston, rounded the corner.

He was scowling, with his hands on his hips, his round belly becoming more pronounced with the stance. "Don't you two have work to do?"

She and Terry stopped moving.

"We're a little slow this morning." She felt her cheeks heat.

"As I can see. Well, now you're not. A body was been found at nine twenty-three Weber Street."

"That's a residential area." Terry drank some coffee like they hadn't just been busted fooling around.

"You're a genius, Einstein," the sarge stated sardonically and added, "The remains were found in the backyard. Of a house." He seemed to add the latter part for the purpose of mocking Terry. "Some poor sap thought it would be a good time to turn the dirt in his garden and came up with a finger on the point of his shovel."

It seemed a little early to start on a garden, given it was only March. They often had warmer springs in Stiles than in more northern states, but she would have guessed the ground would still be hard. Cold soil could have preserved the remains though. First to verify what they were looking at... "Originally you said 'body,' then 'remains.' I'm to assume there's flesh?" Madison asked.

"There's flesh."

"Do we know if the remains are male or female?"

"It's looking like a female based on the finger they unearthed." He paused there and let his gaze drift over them. "Don't tell me you're both still standing here. You were moving quicker a moment ago."

"Leaving now." Madison hurried to her desk for her coat.

"Damn right, you better be."

"I call the driver's seat," Terry said, coming up behind her.

"You can call whatever you want," she said. "It still doesn't mean it's happening."

## Three

**W**eber Street put them right in the middle of the shady east end, which was a popular spot for druggies, prostitutes, and gangbangers. Narcotic detectives had recently shut down a meth lab in the area, resulting in charges against three people. It was certainly the type of neighborhood where people could slip away without being missed.

But as Madison drove, she appreciated that it was also a neighborhood of contrast, with some well-maintained houses showcasing a modicum of pride, while most properties were dilapidated and hosted mini junkyards. The section they were passing now fell more into the latter category. Paint was worn off the siding, and front windows were broken and covered with plywood.

“I wouldn’t want my kid growing up here,” Terry said.

She looked over at him, and he was facing out the window. His wife Annabelle was five months pregnant.

“Speaking of it—”

“It?” Terry turned to her from the passenger seat. “Nice.”

“Well...” She didn’t have a mothering bone in her, but that was beside the fact. “How else do you refer to a baby when you have no idea which sex it is?”

“As *him*. It’s a *he*. I can feel it.”

She wasn’t looking at him, but she heard the smile in his voice. “You sound pretty positive.”

“A father knows these things.”

“Yeah, what does Annabelle say?”

“Want to stay on the topic of the baby’s gender? If not, I need to vent. Most of the time, it’s ‘pick up a burger’ or ‘get me black-cherry ice cream.’ The woman’s got the strangest cravings. You’ll never believe what she had for dinner last night.”

Madison smiled. “Amuse me.”

“Canned salmon with a little dab of mayo and pickles. That’s it. No bread, crackers, nothing else.”

“Sounds healthy.”

“Sounds like a boy.” Terry flashed a goofy grin.

Madison parked in front of 923 Weber Street behind the Stiles medical examiner’s van and the one belonging to the Crime Scene Investigation Unit. Her conversation with Terry faded under the scrutiny of onlookers. People stood on the sidewalks, arms crossed, heads tilted, seeming none too pleased cops were in their neighborhood, but too nosey to resist gawking.

The house offered no driveway, and its two stories of wood siding were pitted with dirt and the passage of time. The front yard was small and outlined by a four-foot-high chain-link fence, but a look down the side of the house revealed a long backyard with a garden along the property line.

“There’s room for more than one body,” she said.

“You’ve always been a positive thinker.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time. Right area for it.”

Officer Higgins came over to them.

“Hey, Chief.” She addressed him by her nickname for him. Reggie Higgins had been her training officer when she came to the Stiles Police Department and, as far as she was concerned, could have been police chief if he’d so desired. Truth was, he wasn’t corrupt enough to be promoted to office.

“Not too nice around here.” Higgins lassoed his hand around his head, indicating the neighborhood, and the movement drew her attention to a pair of sneakers hanging by its laces over a power line.

Higgins continued. “I’ve been called out for domestic complaints here so many times, the car knows the route. I should have known it would be for the girl’s death one day.”

“We know for sure it’s a woman?” Madison asked.

He nodded.

“Do we have an identity yet?”

Higgins slowly shook his head.

“Oh, I figured when you said you’ve been here...”

“Well, you know how it goes. Once we get here, the girl doesn’t want to press charges, claims everything was her fault.”

A ribbon of anger coursed through her. She had zero tolerance for men who used women as punching bags.

“Sadly, there’s no ID on the body,” Higgins said, “but I remember her face.”

“Has she been fully exhumed at this point?” Terry asked.

Higgins glanced at him. “Yeah. It still makes me sick. I know he beat her, but there was nothing I could do. The only time I had the pleasure of hauling his white ass downtown was when he answered the door with a handgun. Turned out it wasn’t registered. Thought I really had him. Threatening an officer with an unregistered firearm. But nope, he wasn’t behind bars long and was back out to beat on her. That must have been over a couple of months ago now. That was the last time I was called out here.”

“What’s this asshole’s name?” Madison wasn’t sugarcoating the loser for what he was.

“Don’t even need to consult the records for that one. Ralph Hennessey. Unfortunate for us we can’t find him right now.”

“He’s probably in the wind,” Terry said, and when she and Higgins looked at him, he shrugged.

“I’d have to say I agree.” Madison gestured for Terry to start making notes, but he didn’t make any move to do so.

Instead he said, “Did the girl live here?”

“Not sure. I had always assumed so, but maybe she had and moved out. The only sign she had been around inside was a package of prescribed allergy medication that Crime Scene found under the couch.”

“We have a name for her, then,” Madison assumed.

Higgins shook his head. “Unfortunately, the label was torn, so we only have her first name. Lacy, no E. I know you have a niece named Lacey, with an E.”

“That’s right.” Now this case felt a little personal.

Higgins went on. “There isn’t a script number either, but we have a partial logo and the pharmacy phone number. It might help.”

“Guess it’s better than nothing,” she mumbled.

“Well, hopefully something comes together. We officers will be out canvassing soon. If anything comes of it, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks,” Madison said.

“Of course.” He moved like he was going to leave when Terry spoke.

“If Hennessey did kill her, he’d want to get rid of all the signs she was in the apartment. The pills could have just been overlooked,” he said.

“Suppose that’s true,” Madison agreed and turned to Higgins. “How many apartments are in the house?”

“Two. Hennessey lives on the main level, and a guy by the name of Elroy Bates rents the upstairs. He’s got a record too. Breaking and entering. Got out a year ago after serving three years. We’ve gone to pick him up. He works at a gas station down on Bakker Street.”

Madison rattled off another question. “Anyone contact the property owner?”

“No need. He’s the one who called us.”

“He’s the green thumb who wanted to start the garden?” Terry surmised.

“Yep. Donald Giles. He got a ride downtown. You can talk to him there.”

Madison glanced at Terry, who tapped the names into his phone. She rolled her eyes. He had discovered technology recently, and it often replaced his traditional notepad. Madison didn’t put much faith in his new system. For one, scribbling something down was much faster than pecking away. And two, what if the phone crashed?

“Terry,” she prompted.

“What?” He kept his focus on the screen.

Higgins smiled at Madison, knowing that she wasn’t the biggest fan of electronic gadgets to start with. As far as she was concerned, some things were better old-school.

She snapped her fingers inches from Terry. “By the time you’re finished there, I’ll have caught the killer.”

“And the problem with that?” He smiled at her, and she narrowed her eyes.

She should never put getting out of work past her partner. He was always ready to call it day.

“Fine.” He stuck his phone back in its holder and pulled out a notepad. He held it tight to his chest, close to his face, a black pen poised over the lined sheet. “Yes, boss. What can I do for you?”

She imagined him with small, round reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. “Don’t be a smart-ass.” She smiled. “The names are Ralph Hennessey and Elroy Bates.”

Terry wrote down the names and looked up at Higgins. “Does Richards know the cause of death?”

“It’s looking like she might have done herself in with a gunshot to the head. Such a damn shame.” Higgins toed the ground with his shoe. “Even looks like a .22 caliber. Hennessey’s confiscated handgun held .22s. Maybe he got himself another one.”

Madison patted Higgins’s arm on the way to the backyard. She didn’t say the words *It’s not your fault* but hoped her touch communicated that.

“Keep safe out there, Maddy.”

“You too, Chief.”

Terry leaned into Madison, “What about me? He didn’t tell me to be safe. Are you two involved and I don’t know about it?”

“Seriously? The guy is the same age as my father. Now, if he were at least twenty years younger...maybe.” Her partner really needed to stop prying into her love life.

The property was teeming with life as Crime Scene crawled through every blade of grass. A barn-shaped shed was in a far corner, and Mark Andrews, an investigator, shadowed the doorway for a minute before returning inside.

The back door of the house opened, and Cynthia Baxter came out. She headed up the forensics lab, was Mark’s boss, and Madison’s best friend. Cynthia stood there as if she were lost in thought. She pulled her sunglasses down from her nest of brown

hair where they had been resting. Her regular studious eyeglasses were nowhere in sight, so she must have been wearing contacts today.

Madison waved at her, but Cynthia walked back inside.

“Huh, she must not have seen me,” she said.

Madison shook it off and headed toward Cole Richards, the medical examiner. He was braced beside the victim’s head—*Lacy’s* head. Madison never cared for labels. The body was on a black tarp near the side of a shallow grave.

She stopped next to Richards and took a long look at the girl. Probably in her early twenties—if twenty. Very thin. Blond hair. Pretty face despite the dried blood and dirt caked around a mouth that was agape, exposing chipped front teeth, and circled by a muzzle burn. The front of her shirt was bloodstained and dusted with dirt, as were her jeans and shoes and any exposed flesh.

“Higgins said it looked like COD was a self-inflicted gunshot,” Madison said.

Richards looked up, his expression clearly saying he was disgusted that an officer made that judgment. “I haven’t officially concluded yet.”

Richards’s personality usually accommodated for some small talk and lightheartedness. Obviously not the case today, but maybe it had been her approach. In a way, she had managed to insult his profession by relegating what should have been his determinations to a uniformed officer.

“Just a misunderstanding,” she said, backpedaling. “How long do you think she’s been in there?”

Richards rose to his feet and squinted from the sunlight. “I’d say probably not much longer than one month, but it’s hard to pinpoint exactly.”

She’d been hoping for a narrower window than that. “A month? Wouldn’t the ground have been too hard to dig?”

Richards gestured toward the body and the mounds of dirt. “Apparently not, but whoever buried her didn’t make a deep grave either.”



“It was probably just a holding spot until they could put her somewhere else,” Madison speculated. “They hadn’t accounted for someone wanting to get an early start on a garden.”

“We’ll need to find people who last saw her alive to get a better idea on timeline,” Terry said.

Madison looked down at the woman again, her heart aching for her. “First we need to figure out who she was.”

Richards bent back down and opened Lacy’s jaw with gloved hands. “I’d say the damage could have been caused by a .22.”

“If that’s the case, we might not have a bullet to trace,” Madison said. “It would have fragmented in her brain, especially at such a close range. Is that right?” It was the muzzle burn around her mouth that told her the gun had been against her skin.

“Possibly,” Richards replied.

His succinct responses and cool demeanor were message enough that their relationship was still fragile. There wasn’t a day she didn’t regret prying into his personal history and exposing a wound that still cut him deep.

“Well, if we can find the casing, we could tie it to a gun.” Terry looked around the yard.

“For that we’ll need the scene of the crime.” Madison’s gaze drifted again to the young woman. She wasn’t just thin; she was anorexic. Her hipbones protruded as knobs under her jeans. “Is there any indication she was a drug addict?” The categorization would fit with the demographics of the area.

“I didn’t see any visible signs at first—”

“At first?”

“Uh-huh.” Richards moved down the body and separated two of her toes. Between them was a definite pinprick. “I’d say she shot up here. I’ll be requesting a tox panel to determine what she was into and if that at all factored into her death.”

Madison’s gaze drifted to her ankle and the rose tattoo there.

Richards went back up the body and pointed to abrasions on the knuckles. Madison now noted the girl’s slender fingers and that some of her painted nails were broken. He said, “It looks like she may have been in a bit of a struggle.”

“I know you haven’t officially concluded anything,” she started, “but even if she did shoot herself, there’s no way she could have buried herself. So either someone wanted to make it look like she shot herself and screwed up by burying the body or...whoever buried her had found her dead, panicked, and then buried her.” Madison paused, then added, “Regardless, someone has something to hide.”

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