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CAROLYN ARNOLD

JUSTIFIED

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PROLOGUE

HE HAD TO DO IT. He had no choice. Pushed into an unpleasant corner, he had no other option. How could he allow himself to be walked all over, manipulated? All that he had sacrificed for her, laid on the line.

It was pitch-black, the wind moaned, and small flakes dared to precipitate. It was a bitter cold, the type he felt through to his bones.

He knocked on the door.

He had chosen the back side of the house for added seclusion. If the cover of the night wasn't enough, surely this approach would diminish the possibility of a curious neighbor trying to play the hero. He didn't need any cops showing up. This was to be a private visit.

He knocked again, harder and more deliberate. A light came on inside followed by one on the back porch. Finally, he was getting some attention.

She opened the door the few inches the chain would allow. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to reason with you." The chills left his body and a calm, radiant heat overtook him.

The door shut. The chain rattled. The door reopened. "You can't just show up whenever you feel like it." She let him in, more likely for her own comfort given the way she was dressed. Arms crossed in front of her chest, an act of modesty over a lacy piece of lingerie. He had seen it before. Shivers trembled through her, and she gripped her arms tighter. "What is it?"

He disregarded the tone in her voice, the condescending

overture it carried. He ignored the body language that screamed for him to leave. He went to touch a ribbon that served as a strap.

She stepped back. "Please don't—"

"Claire, we're meant to be together." His lack of control surprised him; his voice had risen in volume with each word.

"You should leave."

There was more to her words. And the way she was dressed. "You move on already?" He took steps forward, heading for her bedroom.

She grabbed his arm and pulled him back. She didn't deny his accusation, and she refused to look at him when she did speak. "It was your choice. I gave you the option."

He swore her eyes misted over. "Not really much of one."

"You should go."

He shook his head as if it would bury the jealousy. But the fact there was someone else here, lying in her bed, waiting on her to come back...

He would do what he came to do, regardless. He had too much to lose.

CHAPTER 1

THE COFFEE CAME UP INTO the back of her throat, and Madison Knight swallowed hard, forcing the acidic bile back down. This was a messy crime scene, the kind she did her best to avoid. She knew Weir, the first officer on the scene, was speaking, but the words weren't making it through. Despite her revulsion, her eyes were frozen on what was before her.

The victim lay on a crimson blanket of death, wearing nothing but a lacy camisole. The blood pool reached around her body in an approximate two-foot circumference. The blood had coagulated, resulting in a curdled, pudding-like consistency. The kitchen floor was a porous ceramic, and the blood had found its way to the grout lines and seeped through it like veins. Arterial spray had splattered the backsplash like the work of an abstract painter who had fanned a loaded brush against the canvas.

Cynthia Baxter was hunched close to the body taking photos and collecting shards of glass that were in the blood. She was the head of the forensics lab, but her job also required time in the field. She looked up at Madison, nodded a hello, and offered a small smile. Madison knew her well enough as a friend outside of work that the facial expression was sincere, but the scene had dampened it from reaching her eyes.

Weir stood back at the doorway that was between the front living room and the kitchen. "Such a shame, especially on Christmas Eve."

Terry Grant, Madison's partner, braced his hands above his holster and exhaled a jagged deep breath.

"What's her name and background?" Madison asked Weir with

her eyes on the victim.

“The vic is Claire Reeves, forty-three. Lived here alone. No record of restraining orders or anything out of the ordinary. Nothing noted as her place of employment. Her maid, Allison Minard, found her. She’s over at the neighbor’s. Officer Higgins is over there with her.”

Madison managed to break eye contact from the body, glanced at Terry, and settled her gaze on Weir. His words came through as though out of context.

“Detective Knight?” Judging by the softness in his tone of voice, Weir must have read her reaction to the scene. His eyes inquired if she was okay, but the silent probing would have been squashed by the wall she had erected. He continued. “The maid’s pretty shaken up.”

Madison could understand that. She had experience in processing murder scenes, and she could barely handle this one. She did her best to keep eye contact with the officer, but her fear, her distaste for blood, kept pulling her attention to the dead woman.

Claire Reeves. That was her name before she had been reduced to this. To be killed in this manner pointed toward an emotional assailant. Her lack of clothing was an indication that she likely had an intimate relationship with her killer.

Madison scanned the room. There was no sign of a struggle, no overturned chairs or broken dishes. The only thing standing out was a tea towel bunched on the floor in front of the stove as if it had slipped off the front bar. “Any evidence of forced entry?”

Weir shook his head.

“She let her killer in.” Madison’s gaze returned to the victim.

She was someone’s daughter, someone’s best friend, someone’s lover. Normally Madison didn’t have an issue with separating herself from crime scenes and keeping them impersonal. Maybe it had something to do with all that blood and the fact that Claire had been murdered just before Christmas.

Claire was on her back, albeit slightly twisted, from the fall to the floor. Her legs were crumpled beneath her. A large slash lined

her neck, and based on the angle and directionality, her killer had come at her from behind. Logic dictated the killing method as typically belonging to a male, but something about the maid finding the body didn't make sense.

"The maid was scheduled to work on Christmas Eve?" Madison asked.

"Supposedly she got a text message from Claire. She called us right after she—" Weir pointed toward the vomit at the far entrance to the kitchen.

Madison had noticed it on the way through. She took a shallow breath, hoping to cleanse her focus despite the stench of the crime scene having transformed to a coating on her tongue. "Did you see this text message?"

Weir shook his head. "She couldn't produce it. Said she must have accidentally deleted it."

"Anyone think to check Claire's phone?"

"I'll go check on that now." Weir's cheeks flushed. "Anyway, Higgins is with her, and Richards should be here soon." He excused himself with a wave of a hand.

Cole Richards was the medical examiner.

Cynthia rose to her feet, picked up her kit, and addressed Madison. "What are you thinking? Love affair gone wrong?"

"It looks like it could be but rarely are things that straightforward."

"Isn't that the truth? But I know you'll figure it out."

"Hey, I'm here, too," Terry said.

Both women smiled.

"Okay, *both of you* will figure it out."

"Better." Terry smiled.

Cynthia left the kitchen in the direction of a hallway that led to the bedrooms. Based on the vic's attire, it would be a reasonable progression to search there.

Madison moved toward the body. "Wonder where her underwear is."

"Maybe they were of the edible variety." Terry gave her a goofy smile.

"At a time like this, you're going to bring out that horny grin of

yours?”

“I’m only a man.”

“Uh-huh, that’s your excuse for everything.” Her gaze drifted to the backslash and then the floor around the victim. She was looking for any cast-off blood spatters that could have come from the weapon or for any voids. “She was standing in front of the sink taking a drink when her killer came up from behind her. He would have wrapped his arm around her, holding her steady, when he slashed her throat.” Madison glanced back at the body. “It looks like the cut went from right to left.” She swallowed hard. Periodically, the smell of the blood hit in intensive waves equal in scale to tsunamis.

Terry nodded. “We’re looking for a left-handed killer.”

“Someone call?” Richards entered the kitchen.

“Are you a left-handed killer?” Terry teased and received a mild glare from the medical examiner.

“Hey.” Madison smiled. The man’s presence had the ability to make her happy—ironic given his job description. Too bad he was married.

“There’s my favorite detective.” He returned the smile. His dark skin contrasted with the brightness of his teeth, which were a pure white.

“Nice to see you, too,” Terry said.

“I was actually referring to Knight.”

“Ouch. She always gets the spotlight.”

Madison laughed. “Oh someday, Terry. Someday, when you grow up, you can be a—”

“Ah quiet. You and I are not even talking right now.” Terry continued the show with a dramatic crossing of his arms.

“Moody like a female.” Richards shook his head.

“Excuse me? Moody...like a female? Are you implying that we’re moody? That I am?” Madison challenged him.

“Never.” He waved his hand in a gesture of making peace.

“Uh-huh.” She laughed, but it faded fast. Small talk was often used to ease the intensity of a scene, but doing so here caused her a few seconds of guilt.

“Hey, I’m with Richards on this. Only thing is, he’s afraid of you, Maddy, whereas I’m not. If anyone can attest to the mood swings of a woman—”

“I know you can,” Madison began, “and only you can get away with that comment right now.”

Terry’s wife was two months pregnant, and according to him, she was somewhat temperamental.

“I should be a good husband and dispute what you’re implying, but I can’t. She’s driving me nuts. Drove all around town the other night looking for black cherry ice cream only to come home and be asked what took so long.”

“Nice to know they’re all the same.” Richards’s joviality ended abruptly as his focus went to the victim. “It’s pretty safe to conclude COD was exsanguination. Based on the amount of blood loss, her carotid artery was severed.”

His comment drew Madison’s attention to the red expanse on the floor. Her coffee threatened a repeat showing.

Richards continued. “The blood pressure in her brain would have dropped so rapidly that she would have lost consciousness pretty much immediately. She would have bled out in less than a minute. The blood separation testifies to the fact that it had left her body some time ago. She’s also coming out of rigor, so it puts time of death over twelve hours ago. But I’d estimate closer to fourteen or sixteen. Somewhere between two and four this morning. Of course, I’ll take her temperature and conduct other means before I verify with certainty.”

Richards bent down beside the victim, put a rubber-gloved hand on her face, and continued. “The killer was no professional, I can tell you that.” He traced a finger along the jagged edges of the slash. “He was hesitant.” Richards carefully turned the body over, handling it with care as if it were a priceless china doll. “Lividity shows she was killed here.” He pressed fingers to the skin, and even under the touch, it remained a bluish color. “This also confirms that she’s been dead for over twelve hours.”

Madison had to step back from the body just for a few seconds. She moved to the doorway near the vomit, a normally potent

scent, yet all she could smell was blood.

She looked out the window in the back door. The walkway was buried under eight to ten inches of snow, but that wasn't what had her attention. It was the boot prints leading to the door. She knew Weir had said something about which entrance the maid had used, but her focus had been on the blood at the time. "Did Weir say which door the maid came in?"

"The front," Terry answered.

She stepped aside to let Terry see out. "Let's put it this way. Either the maid's lying or we know where our killer came in."

CHAPTER 2

SAM THOMPSON AND HIS WIFE Linda owned the home next to Claire. Although a man of easily six foot four, his height seemed to buckle under the intense glare of his wife. She stood in the doorway of a neighboring room where numerous people went about their evening conversing with light chitchat and laughter.

Madison and Terry were in the dining room with the husband. "I promised Linda this won't take too long."

Madison could imagine him wiping his forehead, as if sweat formed there, or flexing his fingers on a temple to ease the concentration of his wife's controlling stare. Madison glanced at her again. The scowl, the arch of her brow, and her narrowed eyes, said it all: *Our dinner is ruined.*

The table was set for eight with full place settings. A carved turkey sat in the middle of the space on an antique platter, possibly passed on through generations and only brought out for special occasions. Mashed potatoes, stuffing, and cranberry sauce were set out in three bowls. They had all the fixings of a perfect holiday dinner. Yet despite the spread of food, all Madison could smell was the blood that was lodged in her sinuses.

"Where is she?" Madison was referring to the maid, Allison Minard.

Thompson directed them to another side room and gestured with his head, *In there.*

"I promise we'll be as fast as we can."

"I'd appreciate it."

A woman was on the couch, leaned back, arms crossed, and head shaking. Her long, black ponytail swayed with the movement. She

stopped and looked at Madison and Terry.

An officer was in the room with her and sat braced on the edge of a recliner. He quickly rose to his feet when he saw them.

Madison sat where he had been, but Terry hung back and leaned on the doorframe.

Seconds passed in silence, but words weren't always needed. Energy, body language, and facial expressions usually communicated plenty. Allison's chestnut eyes weren't puffy and her cheeks and nose weren't red, so she hadn't been crying. If she did feel bad about her employer's death, it hadn't physically manifested yet. The head shaking could have been in response to several things—recounting her shock of discovering Claire dead or in reaction to something the officer had said.

"Allison Minard," Madison began, breaking the silence.

Allison matched her gaze to Madison's, and while her looks could have pegged her as midtwenties, the wisdom in her eyes spoke to late thirties, maybe even early forties.

Madison went on. "You're the one who found Claire Reeves?"

"Yes." She exhaled, sinking further into the couch and crossing her legs. "I've been through this with the other officers." She twisted a wrist, looked at her watch. "And I've got to go." Her crossed-over leg bobbed up and down, fast, without a set rhythm.

"You have something more important to do?"

"Actually, yes, I do." She offered no further explanation and her posture stiffened.

"I'm sure that whatever your plans were, they can be postponed a little longer—"

"Always whatever Claire wants. Even in death she's a conniving bitch." Allison crossed her arms tighter, adding height to an already well-endowed bosom.

"Why were you working tonight?"

Allison remained silent.

"Claire is dead. She was someone who you knew, Miss Minard, someone with whom you had regular contact. And if you take it from our viewpoint, short of a spouse, the last person to see someone alive or the first person to report the find is the first

suspect—”

“I’m not the killer!”

Madison leaned forward like the officer had, yet she was not anxious to leave; rather, she was desperate for answers. She placed two hands on her thighs. “Prove it to us. Help us by reconstructing everything as you found it.”

Allison broke eye contact and looked around the room. “I don’t see why I have to go through it again. I have a party to get to.”

Madison couldn’t help but contemplate how selfish and single-minded people could be. If anything came up to interfere with their agenda, the mentality was, *How dare it?*

“I’m sure they’ll wait on you to get things started.” Madison’s disgust over the woman’s priorities couldn’t be masked. “A woman’s dead—”

“Like I said, I had nothing to do with it.”

“Miss Minard, Claire Reeves was murdered.” Madison placed emphasis on *murdered*. “I would hope that you could find it within yourself to see the bigger picture.”

“Maybe you should know the *full* picture. Any number of people would have wanted her dead.”

“Were you one of them?”

“I’m not going to answer that.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“I didn’t kill her. Why would I? She gave me a job when I had nothing.”

Quite the contrast to *she’s a conniving bitch...* There was something hidden deep within Allison’s eyes, something she was holding back. Guilt perhaps? And if so, on what scale?

“You don’t seem really shaken up by her death. Maybe more by what you saw,” Madison ventured.

“Do you think you can read everyone?” There was a flash of defensive anger in her eyes. “You can’t read me.”

“On one hand, you give me the impression you didn’t like Claire, and on the other, you seem to have a soft spot for her, saying that she helped you out when you had nothing. What made you resent her despite the fact she helped you?” Madison glanced at Terry.

“Normally I admire those who help me out—”

“Well, she was a very anal-retentive person. Meticulous. She had a way she wanted things done, and you had to do it by the book. She had a list of what she wanted cleaned weekly, monthly, and bimonthly. She’d leave it on the kitchen table and expect that I work through it, checking off the items as I went along. Like I was an idiot.”

“So that’s why you hated her?”

Silence.

“You said a number of people would have wanted her dead. Who specifically?”

“She made a lot of enemies—” she loosened her crossed arms, then retightened “—but I’d start with Darcy Simms.”

“Who was she to Claire?”

“Her best friend.”

Madison and Terry shared a look. “Her best friend wanted her dead?”

“Hell, I wouldn’t put anything past that woman, but there’s more. Claire was very active. Sexually.” The last word came out tagged with disgust. “Although, I’m sure your CSI people have already confirmed that. I was always cleaning up used condoms from the wastebaskets.”

It was possible Claire was caught in the crossfire of a love triangle...

Allison continued. “Let’s just say Darcy wasn’t as good a friend as she portrayed herself to be. I know her well enough.”

“How do you know Darcy?”

“Claire recommended my services to her, and I ended up cleaning for her once. She made up a reason to fire me after what I saw.”

“Which was?”

“She was sleeping with one of Claire’s men.”

“Do you know his name?”

She shook her head, her ponytail swaying the way it had earlier. “Not going to say. All I know is Darcy will sleep with anything that has a pulse. Male or female.”

With the last word from her mouth, Allison had erected a

barrier. The energy was tangible, and they wouldn't be getting any more from her right now. But Allison had already said plenty and brought up the possibility of a love triangle. Darcy could have confronted Claire—or the other way around—and things got out of hand. But that didn't fit with the lack of evidence to indicate a struggle or the kill method typically belonging to a man.

Madison pulled out a notepad and pen for Allison. "Please write your name and phone number here."

"Don't see why I should have to."

Madison kept the notepad and pen extended.

Allison let out a heavy breath, scooped the pen from Madison, and scribbled down the information.

Madison observed which hand she used: her right.

"Now may I go?" Her head tilted to the side.

"One more thing. Where were you between two and four this morning?"

Allison stared blankly. "I was at home."

"Can anyone else verify that?"

She avoided eye contact as she tossed the notepad onto the coffee table in front of her. "Want anything else, talk to my lawyer." Allison rose to her feet and snatched her purse from the couch cushion.

"Why a lawyer? Guilty of something?"

Allison stopped moving and faced Madison. "The smart ones get a lawyer, Detective."

"Thanks for your help," Madison muttered sarcastically to Allison's back as she left the room. Madison picked up the pen and notepad and said to Terry, "Well, I guess she *could* be innocent. She's right-handed, unlike our killer, but she does seem to be holding something back."

Terry nodded.

Sam Thompson came up beside Terry in the doorway. "Detectives, I'd like to talk with you."

"Sure."

The man's hands clasped and unclasped. He twisted his wedding band. "I saw someone at her back door in the wee hours. About

two or so.”

That was the estimated time of death. He could have seen the killer. “What did they look like?”

“Her light back there is bright enough to illuminate a football stadium. And that’s what woke me up.” He was dancing around the meat of his discovery.

“You said you saw someone?”

“Well, I didn’t see anyone at first. Figured the light was one of those motion-sensor ones and triggered by a cat or something. I just got back into bed only to have the damn light come on again. I threw the sheets off and looked out. That was when I saw someone.”

“A man or a woman?” Madison didn’t know whether to laugh or scream. She struggled for control. *Please get to the point.*

“Not too sure, but they walked like they were in a hurry. But at the same time, they took deliberate steps.”

“So this person was in a hurry but deliberate?” Not intended, but her tone mocked his message. “And you’re not sure whether it was a man or a woman?”

“I’m only telling you what I saw.”

“At the time you saw this person, didn’t you say the light was on?”

“The surrounding area was quite dark, and the glare from the light made it hard to see clearly. The person was more of a hazy silhouette, but they wore a puffy jacket.” He mimicked the bulge with cupped hands pulsing from his shoulders.

“Which direction were they going, toward the house or away?”

“Toward.”

It could have been the killer, and it would explain the boot prints in the backyard. She wanted to verify the view, and she was also curious how a bright light hindered clarity. “Show us this window.”

He directed them to the bedroom, pointed toward the window, but stayed in the hallway.

Madison and Terry looked outside. A CSI worked in Claire’s backyard but physical distinction was hard to ascertain. It was only due to their size and mannerisms that she could identify the investigator as Mark Andrews. The light was just as bright as Mr.

Thompson had said. “So we have a witness who could have seen our killer but can’t identify them. Still no further ahead.” When she turned back to look outside, the CSI was gone.

CHAPTER 3

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Madison's cell rang and she answered without noting the caller's identity. "We'll be right there." She hung up and turned to Terry. "That was Mark. He's found something."

Terry glanced at his watch, disappointment washing over his expression. And for a moment, she was envious of what he had and she didn't. He had someone waiting for him.

Maybe it was the giving spirit of the season, or the fact she couldn't stand it when someone didn't emanate the same enthusiasm as she did on a case, but he should be at home with his wife tonight. "Go. I'll take care of this."

"You sure? I can stay a bit longer—"

"No, get out of here. Go. Tell Annabelle that I'm sorry I answered the call." She had been at Terry's house for a dinner party when the call came in. He waved a hand in the air with his back already to her.

His absence left her with a brief sense of nostalgia and loneliness. She couldn't help but pity her current situation. Instead of being with family and friends tonight, she was working a murder investigation.

Her sister, Chelsea, was probably laughing around a tree, stringing up ropes of popcorn while sipping on eggnog, all while insisting it wasn't laced with liquor. Her family always decorated the tree with this last-minute touch, a tradition. Of course, they would have eaten a meal of her sister's cooking, which Madison didn't envy her nieces or brother-in-law suffering through. Chelsea could do pretty much everything perfectly, but cooking wasn't one of those things. The thought caused her to smile and inflicted another stab of homesickness.

And Madison's mom and dad were likely duking it out over which

game show to watch, *Wheel of Fortune* or *Jeopardy*. She'd even gladly exchange this moment for that one.

Then there was Blake, a defense attorney by profession, the man she was currently dating from a personal standpoint. The situation there was becoming too complicated. For the number of times she told herself to back off and take things slow, it was of no consequence. Whenever he entered her mind, she felt warm. But he had left her alone for the holidays and was off on a seven-hour road trip to see his parents and siblings, none of whom she had met yet. In fact, she didn't even know their names. He was an expert at changing the topic whenever his family came up, likely a resultant crossover from his occupation.

"Detective?" It was Mr. Thompson.

He broke her from her thoughts and reminded her that she was still in the Thompsons' house. She turned to him and said, "I'm leaving."

Thompson gave her a nod. "Thank you."

As she moved past him, a moment of weakness battled with her commitment to finding a killer—a moment of wanting a *normal* life consisting of loved ones within reach and a Christmas tree.

SHE STORMED INTO CLAIRE'S HOUSE as if she were a woman who had everything under control—and there was that smell again. It threatened to ground her feet to the floor. Instead, she hurried through the kitchen to the side hallway, then into the master bedroom, but it wasn't enough to prevent a reaction. Recycled coffee burned the back of her throat.

In the bedroom, Cynthia Baxter was rummaging through a trash can and Mark stood near a closet. His cheeks were bright red, likely still kissed by the chill of the winter night. He rubbed his latex-gloved hands together.

Madison addressed him, "Okay, whatcha got for me?"

Cynthia intercepted, speaking over a shoulder. "No Terry?"

Madison pressed her lips. "I took pity on him, sent him home."

"Talk about having the Christmas spirit." Cynthia smiled at her and went back to the contents of the garbage bin.

Madison turned to Mark. "You get around fast."

The statement resulted in Mark lifting his eyebrows. Was it confusion or was he flirting with her? It was hard to tell. Everyone loved Mark, but the circulating rumors were undecided as to whether his sexual preference was for men or women. Not that it really mattered.

Madison jacked a thumb toward the hallway, opting to side with his reaction having to do with confusion. "I just saw you outside."

He stared at her blankly.

"What do you have for me?"

"Maybe it's nothing, but it stuck out to me. Maybe, somehow, it's involved with a motive for the murder."

That was a lot of maybes. Mark was the newest member of the crime lab and always eager to not only please, but to exceed expectations. His confidence hadn't quite grown a thick skin yet. "Show me what you found."

He opened both hands, palms up, gesturing for her to look inside the closet. He stepped back, an unsure smile on his lips.

"A filing cabinet?"

"It's not just any cabinet." He moved toward the two-drawer unit and pulled on the top drawer. Instead of it sliding out, it was a hinged door that opened to the left. Behind it was a safe door that required a key.

Cynthia rose from her haunches, hands to thighs, stretching out. "Not bad work for a newbie, is it?"

Madison looked back at her. "Not bad at—"

"Knight." Weir stood in the doorway. "I found the vic's phone."

"Well, I found it," Cynthia said. She smiled at him.

"There's nothing on it."

"Nothing?"

"Pretty much nothing. There are two contacts. A Darcy Simms and Allison Minard, the maid you've met. No text messages at all, sent or received."

"What about call history?"

"Nothing. It's clean."

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19

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