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CAROLYN  
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**SACRIFICE**

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**SACRIFICE**

*To Sherry, a sister whom I had lost for a time.*

*I'm blessed to have her back in my life.*

*She's a motivating force to just "be" and to let my light  
shine.*

## Prologue

**H**e equated his past deeds to shades of gray with no distinction between black and white, right and wrong, good and bad. He knew others would see things differently, but it didn't matter. Few people possessed the ability to intimidate and influence him. The man he was meeting had the power to do both.

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

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

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

A lovely Asian woman, who could have easily been a model, stood at the edge of the table. "Your regular, sir?"

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

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

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

"I'm on the job." Not Patrick's only reason for not drinking, but it would suffice for now.

"Time for that new chair, my friend."

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

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

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

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



The pungent odor hit Madison instantly upon opening the morgue doors. She pinched the tip of her nose, but it did little to save her from the smell of decomp embedding itself in her lungs and sinus cavities.

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

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

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

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

There was no wallet found on the body, nor any identifying

marks to flag him in the missing person database. He'd been wearing jeans and a gray hoodie, and the only things on him were a metal card holder that was empty except for a folded-up napkin with a woman's name and number, a wad of cash, and a cell phone. He wore a gold chain with a pendant that had the letters CC engraved on it.

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

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

"As a simple deduction based on what is before me, I would say at least two to three weeks." Richards pulled his eyes from the body to look at Madison.

*Was pain buried there?*

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

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

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

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

“Assuming he was alive when he hit the water, it is unlikely that he had a heart attack on entry. Quick results would show frothy liquid in the lungs, but because he was submerged for a considerable time, any trace of this would be gone. Tissue samples from his lungs, however, will be taken and sent to the lab for further analysis. We’ll also extract bone marrow in search of diatoms.” He must have clued into their confusion and added, “These are microscopic organisms that are specific to a region. If it made it to his bone marrow, he was alive when he went into the water. We could also find evidence of this in his kidneys, should this be the case. This will prove whether he drowned in the Bradshaw or was dumped in the river after death.” His eyes went to the body. “We’re not going to get these answers just by looking at him.”

“Anything else you can tell us?” Terry asked.

“His neck is broken, but that might simply be from the trauma the body experienced as it went down the Bradshaw. I’ll also require a full tox panel be run on him. We might be able to find out if he had any drugs or alcohol in his system, though it’s more like a shot in the dark. If he did consume, any trace might be long gone.”

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

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

Cause of death.

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

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

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

“I prefer not to speculate.” Richards’s eyes scolded Terry. “But

at this point, I would treat this case as suspicious leaning toward homicide. Look at this.” He lifted the left hand of the victim.

There was a circular impression on the backside of the hand.

“Cigarette burn, or possibly something larger.” She studied it and then glanced at Richards. “It’s almost large enough to be a car lighter or a cigar.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Bruising,” Terry said.

“Yes, contusions.”

“From what? What would cause something like that?” Madison asked.

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

Stepping out of the morgue, Madison braced a hand on her hip above her holster. “So, we’re left without an identity and only have a surmised cause of death.”

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

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

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

“Terry, what else would you be doing?”

“Hmm.”

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

“Even more fun.” He plastered on a fake smile and passed a glance to her phone. “And figures we get the case, instead of Sovereign.”

Toby Sovereign was another detective in Major Crimes, and on a personal note, Madison ex-fiancé.

“The only reason we got it is because he’s got the flu.” Or so she had heard. It wasn’t like she was in communication with him anymore. When their engagement ended so had their relationship, and all that had been years ago now.

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

Madison shrugged it off. Her phone kept ringing, bringing with

it the reminder she had to take care of something. "Gotta go."

She headed for the elevator, pushed the up arrow, and answered her phone without consulting the caller ID. "Knight."

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

She looked at her watch. 11:00 PM.

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

"I can come get you now."

"Don't worry about it. I'm home now and you're on the hunt. I get it. Just don't get on me when a case loads me down."

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

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

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

"Yum." Madison laughed, but it cooled rather quickly as thoughts of Blake being left with her family slapped her.

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

She'd been surprised when he'd decided to stay but she was more mad with herself for allowing it.

"Madison?" he prompted.

"I'm fine. How did it go anyway?"

"Not too bad."

*Next liar take the stand...*

"And Mom?" Madison didn't know why she asked because she

really didn't want the answer. She was sure she already knew it.

Blake's end went silent.

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

"Well..." He cleared his throat. "Things came to an impasse. I defended you. Your father seemed to like that, with me being a defense attorney and all."

"I don't need you defending me."

"I was just—"

"Don't bother telling me. Mom told you how my job eats people alive, probably tried to talk you out of a relationship with me." Her voice rose with each word. She turned around to face Terry, who diverted his eyes.

"She's just concerned."

"But she doesn't need to be."

"Maddy, may I see you tomorrow?"

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

"Can I get back to you?" she said to Blake.

"I'm sensing a brush-off, and after you took me home to meet the parents?"

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

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

"You took him to meet your parents?" Terry pointed to the phone she held clenched in her hand.

She shoved it into a pocket. She should have taken the stairs. After all, she only had to go up one floor. She'd have gotten some

exercise and some privacy.

“So...how did it go?” Terry said when she didn’t speak, and he was grinning. “Your relationship must be progressing. Before you know it, there will be a wedding.”

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

“Did they like him?”

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

“Night, Terry.”



## Three

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

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

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

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

"The forty-ninth floor, Miss?"

She nodded, and he closed the doors.

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

In the end, loneliness had compelled her over there. Everyone else had someone to go home to. Terry had his wife; Cynthia, who worked in the forensics lab and was her best friend had her current

man—she dated a lot; and Cole Richards had his wife.

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

The elevator operator stood to the side. "Good evening, Miss."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The passion was reciprocal, and it felt so good to be wanted. But as they kissed, her defenses recalled the betrayal she felt earlier in the day. She pulled back from him.

“Why did you do that to me?”

“Do what?”

“Pick my mother over me.”

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

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

“Excuse me?”

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

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

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

She nodded.

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

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

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

“Oh, shut—”

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

...

MADISON LOOKED OVER AT THE clock on his dresser. 1:15 AM.

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

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

He rolled over and pinned her. “Not even time for a shower?”

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

“Not tonight.” She reached for the light on the nightstand, and Blake moved back to his side of the bed. “I’ve gotta go. I’m a

momma now.”

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

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

Truth was, even though Hershey demanded much of her time, she was willing to extend what she could. Maybe it had something to do with Terry’s brainwashing with phrases such as, *One day he’ll be a great friend* and *His love is unconditional*.

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

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

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

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

*Dear God, please don’t tell me he’s going where I think he is...*

“You said you loved me,” Blake said. “I love you. Why throw your money away on rent?”

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

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

“We could work something out.”

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

“Sounds good to me. Of course, I’d also expect some light domestic duties to be taken care of. The cleaning, the cook—”

The pillow she threw hit him directly in the face.

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

The ringing continued.

*Figures. I was just about to dip into an REM cycle...*

"Hello?" she answered. It hurt to speak. Just a few more hours... What time was it, anyway? She lifted her head enough to read her alarm. 6:03 AM.

"Maddy?"

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

"It's Cyn."

Madison sat up. "We have an ID?"

"Sort of."

"I don't get it."

"I've been here all night, and before you say anything about it, you know I hate loose ends."

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

"The fingerprint came back with a match."

"Who is it?"

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

"A file number?" Nothing was making sense right now.

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

"Okay. I knew about the pendant, but why would his file be locked?"

"Obviously, our dead guy has a record we're not supposed to know about."

“Crap.” She knew the fastest way to get that file unsealed, but she didn’t like it. “Looks like I’m going to have to speak to McAlexandar.”

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

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