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ARNOLD

**SHADES OF  
JUSTICE**

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**SHADES OF  
JUSTICE**

## One

Madison should turn around and forget all about the meeting she'd arranged. Only she couldn't. Her feet were frozen to the sidewalk, her body facing the hole-in-the-wall diner where her contact would be waiting inside.

Her breath fogged in the chilly morning air and tiny snowflakes clung to her lashes. The weathermen were calling for heavy snow squalls today, and given the threatening gray February sky, they might be right.

She burrowed deeper into her coat and tucked her hands into its pockets as a gust of cold air whipped around her—yet she still hesitated to go inside the warm diner. Once she did, once she laid out her plan to her contact, there'd be no turning back. She had to be crazy to even consider setting into motion what she intended. After all, it had only been a couple of months since Madison's poking around where she shouldn't have resulted in her and her sister being targeted by a Russian Mafia hit man. Her sister had been kidnapped, and when Madison went to save her, they'd barely escaped with their lives, but here she was again, putting herself and loved ones at risk. She should just walk away, focus instead on the upcoming Saturday—four days away and counting. It would be Valentine's Day, but more importantly, her friend Cynthia's wedding, and Madison looked forward to being her maid of honor.

Madison pulled her phone from a coat pocket and turned it to silent. She didn't want any distractions or for her partner, Terry Grant, to call about some case. Whatever it was, it could wait until she was finished here.

She looked over a shoulder to the parking lot and her Mazda 3. A mere thirty steps and she'd be in her car and able to drive the hell

away from here, but she found herself moving toward the diner.

A bell rang when she opened the door, and heat embraced her, making her face and hands tingle.

A waitress behind the counter smiled at her and said, "Sit where you like, honey."

Madison nodded. Patrons filled the window booths, and some sat on stools at the counter. She let her gaze travel over all of them, until she found the person she was looking for.

Leland King was tucked into an interior corner booth. He looked up, and their eyes met, but he never made any move toward a friendly gesture. No smile, no waving hand. It would only draw attention to them.

Madison slipped onto the bench opposite Leland. He was nursing a coffee, while a closed menu rested on the table. There was also one in front of her, which she pushed aside. Her stomach wouldn't accept food right now. It was clenched tighter than a fist.

"I was starting to wonder if you were coming," Leland said.

"I was too," she admitted.

"It's not too late to call this off."

While she hadn't provided him much information about today's meeting, she had told him that it could have grave consequences. She'd selected him based on his knack for investigating and for his connections.

The waitress who had greeted her came up to the table with a notepad and a pencil poised over the page ready to record her order. "What can I get ya, honey?"

Madison glanced at Leland's coffee.

"It's good stuff," Leland smiled, plastering on the charm for the waitress, who flushed. Leland may have been in his fifties, average in most ways—except for his distinct wide, flat nose—but he had a way with the ladies.

"Sure, I'll take one," Madison said. Even if she never took a sip, she'd have something to hold on to, to use as a slight distraction.

The waitress pointed with her pencil to the closed menus. "Anything to eat?"

Leland glanced at Madison and answered on her behalf.

“Nothing right now, darling.” With that, the waitress left. “She’s quick,” Leland told her. “We’ll wait for your coffee before we start talking.”

Madison took a deep breath and nodded. She still had time to forget all about this, to cut and run. She was bouncing her legs under the table and wringing her hands in her lap.

The waitress returned and set a brown porcelain mug in front of Madison, then filled it from a coffee carafe.

“Cream, milk, sugar, and sweetener are on the table.” The waitress bobbed her head toward the holder that also housed napkins and condiments. “Just holler when you’re ready to order food. Keep in mind we serve the best Western sandwich in ten counties.” She winked at Leland before walking away.

Leland met Madison’s eyes and pulled out his phone. “I’d like to record—”

“No.” Madison reached her arm across the table and bumped her mug. Coffee sloshed over the rim, and she snatched a wad of napkins to clean up the mess. “No recording,” she said firmly.

“I got that.” He watched her wad up the used napkins and set them aside. “But it’s something I normally do.”

“Not this time.” She stared at him until he slipped his phone back into a coat pocket. “You promise me that it’s not recording?”

“I promise you.”

Madison cradled her mug and looked around. No one was to their left or right, or even in the booths behind or in front of them. Leland had chosen a good spot.

“Madison, you don’t have to—”

“There are corrupt cops in the Stiles PD,” she blurted out, keeping her voice low.

Leland’s eyes snapped to hers. “Why not just go to IA?”

Internal Affairs.

“That’s a loaded question,” she said, not feeling much like elaborating. At the root of it, she didn’t know whom she could trust, even among the upper echelons at the Stiles PD—or within IA, for that matter. She wanted to obtain intel and discover all the players before making her move. She also wanted to make sure she



had enough to make a solid case. She didn't just want to flush out corrupt cops, she wanted them to pay.

"I see."

Leland's response was something people said when they didn't understand, but Madison would simply accept his words at face value.

Leland took a sip of his coffee. "Does this have something to do with..." He left the rest unsaid, but his gaze told her he was thinking about the Russian Mafia. It wasn't a leap on her part to make this assumption. Leland knew her history with them, and how it went back as far as her grandfather's murder before Madison was born.

"If I'm reading your mind correctly, it does," she stated sourly, still not verbalizing the Mafia.

"Maybe you're just seeing ghosts? I'd heard they'd left Stiles."

That was the word within the Stiles PD, and Madison would love to believe it, but she felt the streets had a different story to tell. Really, all the PD knew for sure was that some high-ranking associates had left town, but if you cut off the head of one serpent, more always rose in its place. She also couldn't ignore that the don, Dimitre Petrov, was still serving a sentence in a Stiles prison. There was no way he'd be left without a support system of some kind—if history were a teacher. Dimitre had proved repeatedly he had a reach from behind bars, and she was more apt to believe the Mafia was simply running operations on the down-low.

"They're still here." A cool sweat prickled her skin. It was as if she could feel their eyes on her now, waiting to exact revenge for her incessant interference in their operations. Madison went on. "And these cops I'm about to give you need to get off the street yesterday, but this isn't going to be a fast over-and-done-with-it job."

"So the long haul?"

She nodded. "Months, maybe years."

"I can handle that."

She trusted that he could, or she'd never have come to him. She questioned whether she'd have enough courage and patience to see it all through. "I'm aware of evidence that has gone missing while in the care of certain officers, but I know there's more to it than

that.” A piece of that evidence factored into a Mafia-related hit, but she wasn’t telling Leland that just yet. She continued. “If they’re no longer working for the Mafia, I’d bet money they’re available at a price, and it won’t be long before they find themselves another payday.” She had no doubt in her words. Once a corrupt cop, always a corrupt cop. It was a sweep of a brush, but evil had a way of slithering out of the cracks of darkness into the light and seeking out others of similar persuasion.

“And what do you need from me?” Leland asked.

“I need you to do some digging on my behalf.”

Leland lifted his cup and took a slow draw on his coffee. “So I’d be doing *you* a favor?”

“We’ll be doing each other one,” she countered. “I can’t go poking around without being found out by the brass. I can’t infiltrate the lives of these officers because they know who I am. You have anonymity, some leeway. You know, without my saying so much in words, what’s in it for you.”

Leland’s skill set came from being an award-winning investigative journalist for the *Stiles Times*, and she was promising him the exclusive story at the end of all this.

Leland said nothing, just scanned her eyes. Eventually, he nodded.

“Before I give you names, I need to lay out the rules. There can’t be any recording of our conversations. No paper or electronic trail. There can’t be *anything* connecting us. Whatever notes you make or things you uncover, keep them under lock and key. Now you know who could potentially be behind the scenes, you can appreciate how, if any of this gets out—”

“We could be killed.” Leland didn’t so much as blink.

“Uh-huh.”

“How do we communicate?”

Madison pulled a burner phone from her coat pocket and handed it to him. “I’ve got one, too. I programmed my number into yours. This is the only way we can communicate from here on out.”

Leland checked the phone over and then tucked it away into

the inner pocket of his coat. Silence settled into the space between them.

The waitress came over. "Have you decided?"

Leland scooped the menus off the table and handed them to the waitress. "We'll just stick with coffee."

The waitress grimaced briefly, appearing insulted, but recovered with a pressed-lip smile before leaving again.

"Hopefully, she's gone for a while this time," Leland said, turning back to Madison. "Basically, you need me to dig up the dirt and be your eyes and ears."

"Yeah, and see how far this corruption goes. When I go to IA, I want solid evidence to back up my claims against them. I want them to pay for their crimes."

Leland squared eye contact with her. "Is there anything I can say to talk you out of this?"

"No." The answer left her lips without thought, and she sat up taller, feeling confidence run through her. There was no way she could ignore what was going on. When she'd donned the badge, she'd vowed to protect and serve, and that's exactly what she intended to do. No matter the personal stakes, no matter the cost. Serving in law enforcement was a post of self-sacrifice. The people of this city put their lives in her hands—in those of the Stiles PD—and she'd root out any cops who violated the very oath she held dear.

"Okay. How many are we talking about?" Leland leaned across the table.

"A couple I'm quite sure about. There's probably more we'll uncover as we go along. I'll only be giving you one name today." Withholding from Leland would ensure he didn't just run off with the information he'd gathered. It would keep him tethered to her. It wasn't a matter of trust, but rather minimizing the possibly he'd be tempted to pursue matters on his own.

"And that name would be?" Leland asked.

Madison pinched her eyes shut for a second. Once the name was out, the ball was in motion. "Dustin Phelps."

Leland tapped a finger to his left temple. "It's in the vault. Do you

have anything you want to start me off with besides the name?"

"Well, he's a few years younger than me and holds the rank of officer."

Leland smiled subtly. "A few years younger. I should know what that is, but—"

Madison narrowed her eyes. "He's thirty-two," she said. "He's married, has two young kids. Both of them in private school."

"Private school on a cop's salary?"

"Uh-huh, my feelings on the matter," she said, thinking Phelps's money source was where she'd be looking first. "I can't exactly go pull his financials and see what's going on there."

"Leave that with me."

"You could always speak with the people at the school and find out how much it costs. Again, I'd have done it, but I just can't have it getting back to him somehow." She hated giving something so relatively simple to someone else to take care of.

"Don't you worry. I have my ways of getting everything I need."

Madison smiled. "Why I came to you."

Leland dipped his head.

"I also know that he has an aging mother who's in a nursing home," Madison continued. "A really nice one. Think Club Med of retirement communities."

"Must be nice," Leland said. "My mom's in a home, and she gets excited when she gets Jell-O for dessert."

"With your salary, I'd think you could afford someplace nice."

"Oh, I've offered, but Mom's stubborn." Leland smiled with pride. "I can dig around the nursing home angle. You mentioned he's married. Does his wife work?"

Madison shook her head. "She's a stay-at-home mom. Oh, and they live in Deer Glen," she tagged on. Deer Glen was located in the north end of the city, and one of the most prestigious neighborhoods in Stiles.

Leland's mouth formed an O. "I'd say this guy's certainly overextended, unless he won the lottery, or they came into a sizable inheritance."

"Exactly. Something stinks." Now that her suspicions were out,

it felt good to share the burden with someone else, and to know that Leland saw validity in her concerns felt even better. She hadn't told anyone else, not even Troy, and he was the man she loved and lived with and was "raising" a fur baby with. She'd especially kept Troy out of this loop. He was safer that way—so was Hershey, the chocolate lab—and she didn't need Troy talking her out of doing this, reminding her of the dangers involved with poking around.

Her eyes went to a clock on the diner's wall. Just before nine in the morning. She had to get to the station. She got up to leave and remembered the coffee. She reached into a pocket for some cash, but Leland stayed her hand.

"It's on me," he said, his brow furrowing. "Just watch your back."  
"You too."

She left the diner. On one hand, it felt like a weight had been lifted. On the other, it felt like another had been added.

## Two

Chocolate was the only thing that could help Madison's nerves. She drove to the station, a woman on a mission, and the second she got there, she made a beeline for the top right-hand drawer of her desk where she kept a stash of Hershey's bars. Good news: there was no sign of her partner, so she'd be saved the need to defend her chocolate munching first thing in the day. Bad news: she wasn't seeing any chocolate.

"Shit. Don't tell me..." She pulled the drawer all the way out and rummaged through business cards, pens, clips, elastics. "Son of a..." She slammed the drawer shut.

She must have eaten the last bar yesterday. She patted her pockets for change, holding out hope the vending machine in the cafeteria would come through for her, but she came up empty-handed. Now she wished Terry was around to mooch money from, even if it came with a lecture on healthy eating.

"Hey there, beautiful."

She turned to see Troy approaching her. Talk about impeccable timing. He'd just saved the world and didn't even know it. She smiled brightly at him. "You wouldn't happen to have a buck, would you?"

He closed the distance between them and looked around. With the coast clear, he tapped a kiss on her lips.

They'd been together for almost a year, and her heart still sped up when they came into contact. What woman could blame her? Troy had blond hair and piercing green eyes, was six-foot-three, and had six-pack abs. When he held her, she felt safe enough to

weather any storm.

She licked her lips and held out a hand. “A buck?”

Troy looked at her hand and up to her eyes, no smile. He didn’t part with them easily, but his eyes sparkled with amusement. “Let me guess. Time for a chocolate bar, and your inventory’s out?”

“Now, who’s the detective?” she jested. Troy headed up a SWAT team, but when those services weren’t needed, he performed officer duties as necessary.

“No need to get hostile.” He reached into a pocket and came out with change. “You know the stuff is going to kill you.”

She snatched the coins from him. “If it does, I’d die with a smile on my face.” So maybe she was a little transparent when it came to her cacao-bean addiction and how she craved it like a smoker did cigarettes. Surely, chocolate was healthier than nicotine. She took off toward the vending machine, Troy following her.

“I take it your Tuesday’s gone downhill since I saw you last?” The devil danced in his eyes. The day had started off with them in a heap of sweat, tangled in sheets. Heat flushed through her at the memory, but she wasn’t letting it derail her current mission.

She popped the coins into the vending machine and made her selection. The curly metal started to turn—then it stopped! The Hershey’s bar was suspended.

“This can’t be happening.” She kicked the machine and writhed in pain. The bar stayed put, taunting her. “Stupid, fucking mach—”

“Hey.” Troy shuffled up beside her and nudged her out of the way. “It’s okay. I’ll get it.”

“I don’t need a man to—”

He’d already grabbed both sides of the machine and was in the processing of shaking it. The candy bar fell loose. He retrieved it from the bin and extended it toward her. She reached for it, and he pulled it back.

She cocked her head. “Someone’s living dangerously.”

He leaned in and whispered in her ear. “That’s what you love about me.”

Her damned heart fluttered—again. She grabbed the bar, stepped back from him, tore the wrapper, and bit off a mouthful.

She closed her eyes and let out a moan.

“You two should get a room,” Troy said, a slight smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

“Hmm, not a bad idea.” She took another bite and leaned against the machine, allowing herself a few minutes’ bliss.

“You never did answer my question.” He tilted his head, that morning’s escapades reflected in his eyes.

“You couldn’t have expected it to get better.” She narrowed her eyes seductively and planted a deep kiss on him, savoring the taste of him—*maybe* even more than the chocolate. Or was it the combination of him *and* chocolate? She’d have to remember that for the bedroom and was surprised they hadn’t already tried the combination.

Troy pulled back. “I did say something about getting a room—”

“Cut it out,” she teased.

“Hey, you’re the one who kissed me. I wish I could ignore the fact that you did so to distract me from the serious implication of my question. Is something wrong?” His gaze bored through her.

He knew her far too well. “Nope, everything’s fine.” She hated keeping secrets from him—even this one and knowing that she did so for his own good. If that fact ever changed, which she doubted it would, she’d reassess, but for now, the less he knew about her side investigation, the better. She didn’t want to think too hard about the fact she might be withholding from him for a while to come.

He studied her. “You know you can talk to me about anything.”

“I know.” Her heart swelled. Troy would willingly be her knight in shining armor, but she didn’t need him fighting her battles.

“Well, whatever it is, I’m sure you’ve got it licked, Bulldog.”

She shoved his shoulder, and he laughed. He knew she didn’t love the pet name he had for her, but he’d likely pulled it out to lighten her mood—and it worked. “I love you,” she said, the sentiment profoundly sincere.

“And I—”

“There you are. I’ve been looking for you.” Terry blew into the room and gestured with a tri-folded piece of paper he was holding toward the bar in her hand. “For some people, it’s breakfast time.”



She rolled her eyes. “Chocolate comes from a bean, so it’s technically a vegetable. We’ve been through this before.” She bobbed her head side to side. “The way I see it, I’m eating healthy.” She stuffed the last of the Hershey’s bar into her mouth.

“Uh-huh,” Terry said, not convinced.

Troy stepped back from her and passed a glance to Terry. “Well, you two have fun.” He gave one final look at Madison and, when he was behind Terry, blew her a kiss.

“What’s up?” Madison asked her partner as she bunched up the empty wrapper and tossed it into a garbage bin. It bounced off the edge and then went in. Score: three points.

“Where have you been?” Terry’s face was flushed, his nostrils slightly flared, his eyes wide, his chest heaving. Even for looking unhinged, every one of his blond hairs lay perfectly in place. She, on the other hand, resembled a blond cockatoo most of the time.

“I’m waiting,” Terry pressed. He was certainly in a mood this morning, and he was coming across as if he were the senior detective. He was three years her junior. “I tried calling you five times, left two messages. Why weren’t you answering your phone?”

Crap. She’d been so focused on chocolate she’d forgotten to turn her phone’s ringer back on. She rectified that and saw the missed calls. “I had an appointment.”

Terry pointed to her phone. “You had your ringer off?”

“I had an appointment,” she repeated while shifting her weight to her right hip and jutting out her chin.

“While you’ve been off doing whatever, we had a double homicide land in our lap.” Terry tapped the paper he was holding, and it sank in that it was likely a search warrant. “Quite a high-profile case at that,” he added.

He already had her attention with “double homicide.” As a city of about half a million, Stiles saw its share of murders, but rarely were two bodies found together at the same time. “I’m listening.”

“A man and a woman. Don’t have an ID for him, but she’s Lorene Malone.”

“*The Lorene Malone?*” The Malones were a wealthy family that founded Malone’s, a chain of furniture stores that catered to

middle-income families. They had three locations—one in Stiles and two in surrounding communities.

“The one and only,” Terry said briskly. “Both were shot in the head and found naked at the bottom of the Malones’ indoor swimming pool.”

“*Naked*? And we don’t know who the man is? Was Mrs. Malone having an affair?”

“Too early to say.”

“Who found them?”

“The Malones’ eldest, Kimberly Olson-Malone.”

“Does she live in the house?”

“Nope. She’s forty-two, divorced, and has two young kids.”

“What was her reason for being at her parents’ house this morning?”

“Says she was there to pick her mother up for a seven-thirty yoga class.”

“Early for yoga,” she said. “What time did she show up at the house?”

“Around seven ten.”

“Does the daughter know who the man is?”

Terry shook his head. “Claims not to.”

The picture forming in Madison’s mind wasn’t a pretty one. If Lorene Malone was having an affair and that was what had driven the murders, one person would have more motive than anyone.

“What was Mr. Malone’s reaction to the murders?”

“Don’t know.”

The skin tightened on the back of her neck. “How can you not—”

“I can’t reach him,” Terry cut in. “Kimberly doesn’t know where he is but told me that her parents just celebrated their forty-seventh wedding anniversary.”

“That hardly excludes him as a suspect. We’ve got to find him *and* fast,” she said. “I assume that’s the signed search warrant you’re holding?” They’d need one before the house could be processed, as Lorene Malone wasn’t the sole occupant.

Terry lifted the paper in his left hand. “Yep. It just came through. I’m headed back to the Malones’ now, but thought I’d look for you

first.”

A moody partner, a high-profile double homicide—oh, this week would be getting a whole lot worse before it got better. “Let’s go,” she said.

## Three

They say someone's always having a worse day than you are. Who the heck are "they," and how would *they* know, anyway? Madison was pretty sure days couldn't get much worse than the one Kimberly Olson-Malone was having. Madison couldn't imagine finding her own mother dead—and naked with another man, no less. As much as she felt for Kimberly, she couldn't let it cloud her judgment. Kimberly had been the one to find them and that alone made her the first suspect.

Terry pointed to the next street as they drove. "Turn right there."

Even though Terry knew where they were going, Madison was the one driving.

She took the corner, and he pointed at a two-story, gray-brick mansion. With the exception of the forensics van and a police cruiser parked in the three-car driveway, the house had terrific curb appeal with its large front windows and double-door entry.

Madison parked out front on the street.

"Before we go in, I'm going to give you a warning," Terry said.

She glanced over at him, her hand letting go of the door handle. Was he going to tell her it was a messy scene? There wasn't much else that turned her stomach as did the sight and stench of a lot of blood. She gulped. The victims had been shot.

"Okay," she said with trepidation.

"Cynthia's on the warpath," Terry said. "She makes your bad moods look like—"

"Be careful of your next words."

"Or what?" He wriggled his fingers as if to say, *Bring it on.*

Terry really was the brother she never had. “Why’s she in a bad mood?” Madison asked but could think of at least one off the top of her head: her wedding was mere days away, and a case like this would take a lot of time for evidence collection and processing. That thought led to another. “Oh, no.”

“What?”

“We had plans for a final dress fitting tonight. We might have to push that off.”

Terry arched his brows. “I’m not a wedding planner, but shouldn’t dress fittings have been done ages ago?”

It wasn’t for the lack of trying, but it turned out that when dresses were ordered from different shops, they could be made from different dye lots. With Cynthia’s sister and bridesmaid, Tammy, living in Alabama, she’d gotten hers there while Madison ordered hers in Stiles. With take two, they returned their initial dresses and arranged to get new ones from the same bridal shop in Stiles. “It’s a long story,” was all she said.

“Okay.” Terry dragged out the word, but quickly moved on. “Well, she’s pissed because the firemen who responded to the nine-one-one call pulled the bodies out of the pool.”

“Oh,” Madison said slowly, appreciating that her friend would be livid about contamination of the crime scene. Cynthia wouldn’t care that the firemen were wired to save lives until—or unless—they could confirm death.

The two of them got out of the car, and at the front door, Madison looked up. The place had looked big from the curb, but standing next to it only impressed just how successful the Malones were.

Officer Tendum was stationed at door. He was younger, a little wet behind the ears, and he and Madison had butted heads more than once. Then again, it was his stupidity that had resulted in her former training officer, Reggie Higgins, being shot during a murder investigation about a year ago. At least Higgins had been fortunate enough to recover and return to work.

Tendum stepped to the side to allow Madison and Terry to enter the house.

Inside, they were greeted by a grand entry with two sweeping

staircases that hugged the curves of two walls. A large, teardrop-crystal chandelier punctuated the center of the space. Abstract paintings adorned the walls with lighting mounted over them. Madison didn't know much about art, but flea-market finds didn't typically wind up in fine frames with specialty lighting.

The smell of chlorine hung in the air, and she started following her nose—and Terry—toward the back of the home.

They passed an expansive living space that could have served as a lobby for a fine hotel. A bottle of red wine sat on a coffee table as did two wineglasses, each with some wine in them. The kitchen off to the right gleamed with high-end stainless steel appliances, and a breakfast bar lined the wall.

"All this for two people," Madison said, thinking about the imbalances of wealth distribution.

"Yep, all eight thousand square feet," Terry responded.

He opened the door to an atrium with a million-dollar view of the Bradshaw River that ran through Stiles. The rectangular pool, surrounded by a tiled patio dotted with lounge chairs and tables, took center stage. A hot tub, large enough for six, was to the right end of the pool, and in the corner of the room, there was a sauna. Blood spatter was to the immediate edge of the pool, to the left of the pool ladder, along with the two bodies.

Matching bullet holes marked both their foreheads, but the water had cleaned the wounds. For a shooting, there was minimal mess.

Cynthia was next to the bodies, along with Mark Adams, one of her employees from the Stiles PD forensics lab she headed up. Sam, short for Samantha, and Jennifer—never Jenn or Jenny—were also in the room photographing and marking potential evidence.

Cynthia got up and approached Madison and Terry. "I keep thinking I'm being punked." She was scowling and shaking her head. "They tromped in here without any regard for the crime scene. Did they really think they'd find the vics alive? They were at the bottom of the pool, and they took ten minutes to get here." She swept out her arms. "*And* as if I don't have enough going on."

Any other time, Madison might have laid a reassuring hand on

her friend's shoulder, but to do so now would be at her own risk.

Cynthia set her gaze on Terry. "You have the warrant?"

"I do." He tapped it in his hands.

"Great." Cynthia's tone deflated the meaning of the word. "We're legal now," she called out to her team and then turned to Madison. "Of all the days, too, eh? It's going to take us hours to work through all this. We'll probably have to put off our plans for tonight. We might need to pull an all-nighter."

"I was thinking the same thing. I'll call Tiffany's Bridal, reschedule for tomorrow night."

"Thanks." Cynthia put her hands on her hips. "I hate that it's all coming together so last minute. Everything has to be perfect."

"I'm sure it will be." It was strange seeing Cynthia worked up like this. Normally, she had such a cavalier, go-with-the-flow, laidback approach to life—but everything about Cynthia settling down was shocking. She had long, dark hair, a slender frame, and legs that didn't end, not to mention a metabolism Madison would kill for, and men loved her. She'd dated *a lot*. Then again, play with fire for long enough and you'll get burned. She'd started seeing Lou Sanford, a major crimes detective with Stiles PD, and her black book got tossed out the window.

"I sure hope you're right." Cynthia's face softened, but it didn't last long. Her brow took on sharp concentration, and she jutted her chin toward her team. "We're doing what we can to protect the evidence, but I'm sure some of it's been washed away or trampled on." She pointed toward a lounge chair about six feet away. Next to it were two piles of clothing. "It seems likely they belong to the victims, but this will still need to be verified. No wallet in the pockets, and I couldn't find either one of their phones."

"I put in a request to trace Lorene Malone's phone and am waiting for the result," Terry added. "Should have it soon, I'd imagine."

"You probably saw the wine on your way back here?" Cynthia asked.

Madison nodded, trying to keep up with Cynthia's updates, which seemed to be all over the place.

"We'll be bagging and tagging it, of course, and now that the

paperwork's out of the way, we can really dig in," Cynthia said. "At quick inspection, there aren't any signs of forced entry."

"So, the killer could have been someone either Mrs. Malone or our John Doe knew and let in," Madison suggested. "We're sure that robbery didn't factor in at all?"

"Nothing indicates that so far," Cynthia started. "I mean his wallet's missing and both cell phones, but as you can see, he's wearing a watch. It's not a Rolex, but it's still not cheap, and she's wearing one, too, as well as her wedding rings."

"They got undressed but didn't take their watches off?" Madison mused aloud and let her gaze go to the bodies. "They weren't planning to take a dip."

"I wouldn't say so," Cynthia agreed.

"But they are naked. Was this an affair gone wrong?" Madison turned to look at the clothes. They were on the floor as if the victims had just stepped out of them. Was there some sort of clue in that? Surely in the throes of passion, the clothes would have been discarded haphazardly, strewn about everywhere, possibly more in a trail than in a couple of piles. An affair would present strong motive for Lorene's husband or Doe's wife—assuming he was married—if they'd found out about their mate's infidelity. The lack of a wedding band on Doe's hand wasn't proof he was single; a lot of married men didn't wear them.

One flaw in the theory that one of the spouses killed them was the missing wallet and phones. Still, they needed to talk to Mr. Malone and get a feel for their marriage. By extension, they'd ask anyone close to the family about the Malones' relationship. It just as well might have been John Doe who'd attracted the killer, but without an identity, they'd start by focusing on Lorene's life.

"We need to talk to the daughter and find out what she can tell us about her parents' marriage," Madison said. "Do you know where she is, Cyn? I didn't see her as we came back here."

Cynthia slid a glance to Terry.

"What is it?" Madison asked, turning to her partner. She didn't care for the way Cynthia and Terry were looking at each other, as if the two of them shared a secret.



Eventually, Cynthia said, "Sergeant Winston took her home."  
"He what?" Madison spat.

Cynthia held up her hands. "I'm just the messenger."

A responding officer should have taken Kimberly's statement, and she should still be here for Madison and Terry to question. At the very least, she should have been taken to the station and set up in a soft interview room, nestled on a sofa.

"Tell me you at least swabbed her hands for GSR," Madison said.

"I did," Cynthia replied, "but it will take a bit before we'll be able to process it and get the results."

Madison had a feeling Cynthia would tell her that, yet the sergeant still let Kimberly go home. Not that testing negative for gunshot residue should have been enough to excuse her, either. GSR findings were fickle and didn't rule out guilt.

"What about bullet casings? Did you find any?" Terry asked.

*Leave it to Terry to carry on like nothing's wrong.*

"None." Cynthia shook her head. "No sign of the murder weapon, either."

She shook aside her fury at the sergeant and redirected her thoughts to the case. If Lorene had been cheating, Madison could somewhat understand where Mr. Malone was coming from if he'd been the one to kill his wife and her lover. After all, she was familiar with the pain of being cheated on, all because of Toby Sovereign. He had been her fiancé at the time she'd found him in bed with another woman. That image and resulting heartbreak took her over a decade to purge. Toby wasn't her favorite person on the planet, but they'd at least made peace. It still didn't mean she was looking forward to walking down the aisle with him at Cynthia's wedding. He was Lou's best man. Lucky her.

But if Malone was behind the murders, it's likely he would have acted in the heat of the moment, so he would have lacked the necessary wherewithal to clean up after himself. Then again, a person of means didn't need to dirty their own hands. He could have hired someone for the murders, the removal of the wallet and phones a ploy to mislead the investigation.

"Does the husband own any guns?" Madison asked.

“One of the first things I looked up. He has several registered to him,” Terry replied.

Madison’s gaze went to the bodies, to the wound on their foreheads, and it was hard to tell exactly what caliber was used. Once Cole Richards, the medical examiner, arrived, he’d have that answer.

Mark set down a marker by a drop of blood to the side of Mrs. Malone and took a photo. He then proceeded to pull out a swab, mark the case number and assign an evidence number, put it beside his find, and take another photo. Next, he swabbed the blood and sealed the sample.

“Where are they?” It was Sergeant Winston’s voice, and with each word, he sounded as if he was getting closer. If that wasn’t enough to give it away, she felt a cold front moving in.

She and her boss rarely saw eye to eye, but sometimes, when the moons aligned, they could tolerate each other. The greatest fissure between them was the fact Winston was old-school, and to him, law enforcement would always be—and should have always remained—a boys’ club.

The atrium’s door swung open, and Winston entered. He pointed immediately to the bodies but put his eyes on her. “We need this solved yesterday, Knight.”

“I agree.”

“Don’t be smart with me.”

“I’m not, I swear.” *Cross my heart and hope to die.*

“You do know who she is, don’t you?” Winston was panting, practically grunting.

“I do.” To Madison, *who* Lorene was didn’t matter as much as finding her—and John Doe—justice.

“Then give me some answers.” Winston puffed out his chest. His slightly rotund belly expanded, and he placed his hands on his hips.

She took a deep breath. It was like the man had forgotten his days in the field and that answers didn’t come immediately. They took time. Summing up her first impressions for the man was always a case of “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.” He

wanted *something*, but then he'd hold it against her if her initial assumption turned out to be wrong. Sometimes, it was best to swerve and avoid. "I'm just arriving, but once I have more to go on, I'll let you know."

"They were shot," Terry put out there, drawing Winston's gaze. "It's not looking like a murder-suicide. No gun and no casings."

"A professional hit?" Winston speculated.

The location of the gunshot wounds would support that. Meat of the forehead, between the eyes, instant death. "It's possible." Madison's stomach tossed with the admission. Verbalizing the prospect touched far too close to her near-death encounters with the Russian Mafia.

"But?" Winston drilled his gaze in on her. "I'm sensing there's a 'but.'"

He had a way of teeing things up for a smart remark, and she had to bite down the urge to counter with one. "It's too soon to conclude anything."

"You've given me your initial impressions before."

*And they bite me in the ass—every time.*

"Even if this was a run-of-the-mill hit, we don't have motive," she began. "We don't even know the true target or whether both of them were."

"The victims' phones are missing, as well as Doe's wallet," Terry chimed in.

"At least one of you is talking to me."

*Ever the drama queen.* "Fine, you want to know my first thoughts?"

Winston stared at her blankly.

*Here goes.*

"It's possible they were having an affair. Mr. Malone found and put an end to—"

Winston's expression hardened. "Must I remind you that the Malones are highly respected in the community?"

As if that made an ounce of difference where infidelities were concerned. Affairs found themselves within the walls of the White House.

Winston went on. “The Malones are also one of the largest contributors to the Stiles PD, and we owe it to Steven to find his wife’s killer immediately.”

*One of the largest contributors to the Stiles PD? Steven?* Now it was also abundantly clear why the sergeant was so concerned about the murders being solved quickly: it was to impress a benefactor. She hated that Winston had cast John Doe aside as if his life had meant nothing.

Winston rambled on. “If you’re going to point a finger at Steven Malone, you’d better have something solid to back it up.”

She hitched her shoulders. The impulse to be sassy was too overwhelming to ignore. “Well, no one seems to know where he is at the moment. That’s a little interesting, in my opinion.”

Winston scowled. “Not solid.”

She looked away to hide her amusement. She’d gotten under his skin.

“Before you got here,” Terry started, “we were discussing Kimberly Olson-Malone.”

Madison faced Winston again. “We’ll need to ask her about her parents’ marriage.”

“I’m warning you, Knight. Handle the situation with discretion.”

“I’ll do my job.” That was all she could promise. Justice rarely came without a struggle, without ruffling feathers and making enemies.

“I’m not sure if that’s supposed to comfort me, but I guess it’s where I’m at. Just keep me posted every step of the way.”

“Sure,” she said.

“I want to hear you tell me that you’ll communicate with this case.”

“I’ll communicate with this case,” she parroted in the tone of a rebellious teenager who says whatever necessary to appease a parent.

“Good.” Winston left the atrium.

She leaned in toward Terry. “That man bugs the hell out of me.”

“I’d say the feeling’s mutual.”

She shrugged that off as a victory. At least she wasn’t the only

one suffering in their imposed relationship. Regardless of their feelings toward each other, she wasn't going to let the sergeant tie her hands with political bullshit. She'd do whatever it took to find the killer and get justice for *two* people—even if it meant getting on Winston's bad side. She'd been there, done that, and she'd be there again. She might even live there. Conflict with the male brass was the circle of life.

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