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Standalone

Assassination of a Dignitary
Midlife Psychic

A completely gripping bone-chilling crime thriller

HER DARK GRAVE

A Detective Madison Knight Mystery

CAROLYN ARNOLD

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HER DARK
GRAVE

PROLOGUE

May

A few years in the past...

He tapped his pen against his textbook, hardly listening to the homeroom teacher, Mrs. Hathaway, running through the morning announcements. His mind was on the vow he'd made to himself.

I am going to kill someone before graduation.

Murder had always fascinated him, but it was time to stop thinking about it and do it. He didn't care if this made him different than other people—all because he didn't view the world through a distorted lens of right and wrong. That didn't make him evil either. It made him unique. And since when did homicide become taboo? It had been around since the start of time, when one caveman bashed in the head of another.

A glorious, bloody, pulpy mess...

But he wanted his first kill to do more than satisfy his lust; it had to mean something to him. It certainly wouldn't be about glory or fame but rather the experience. He'd sink his blade into the flesh of a breathing person.

The anticipation alone, at drawing in the sight, smell, and feel of blood... At seeing his hands dripping red... It made him hard. It would just be him and his victim—intimate and sublime—like all those films he watched on the internet while holed up in his bedroom.

He had set up layers of encryption with passwords and hidden his IP address using proxy servers. This left him free to search the dark web and indulge his desires without restriction, without judgment. Online, he was with his own people. They understood his urges.

His parents had no idea what fantasies aroused him in the night. His mother called him “my little boy,” but it was her and him against his father. That man was the evil one—naval officer and upstanding member of society from the outside, while behind closed doors he ruled over his family in tyranny.

It was time to stop being the victim of his father’s moods, donning the black eyes and busted lips, being forced to lie about how he’d gotten hurt. “I tripped and fell...” or some other story. He was done with all of that! He was sure once he’d killed, he’d be able to put up a bolder and stronger defense against his father. Show him who was really in charge.

That was why he had to act soon. He even had his first picked out.

Mrs. Hathaway clapped her hands to recapture everyone’s attention. “Before you leave, I’ve been asked to let you know...” Hathaway droned on, something about the prom committee looking for volunteers, while he watched the object of his desire.

She was beautiful—long black hair spun like silk, slight build, curvy hips, and plump breasts—and most boys in the graduating class wanted to hook up with her. But when he screwed her, his mind was on her milky complexion and what it would feel like to pierce her delicate flesh...

CHAPTER 1

Present Day

Madison pressed the gas pedal, wanting to put some road behind her. The warm August air came through the windows of her Mazda, kicking up strands of her short blond hair and bringing in the smells of the countryside. She'd happily inhale manure if it worked to clear her mind.

The Russian Mafia never forgets...

A fact.

But the same nightmare had plagued her sleep for months now. It was her reason for being up and behind the wheel at two thirty in the morning. She had to shake the images somehow.

Each time, she was fighting for her life, facing off against two mob assassins. In real life, both were dead, but she wasn't foolish enough to think others wouldn't rise in their place. There would be repercussions for her actions. One of those assassins was Tatiana Ivanova, a cousin of the Mafia don himself.

Hence the warning that played on repeat. *The Russian Mafia never forgets...*

But Tatiana wasn't the only casualty that fateful night. Thirty-plus innocent people had also died, and closer to home, her fiancé, Troy Matthews, had been badly injured. This made it clear it wasn't just her own welfare she needed to worry about. Besides her fiancé, also her chocolate Lab, Hershey. Both of whom should be home asleep—and safe, she could only hope.

The plan was to get back before Troy noticed her missing. Then she'd slip beneath the covers and try to claim some sleep before her shift with the Stiles Police Department began at eight thirty. Futile,

though. She'd been repeating this cycle long enough to know sleep wasn't going to come.

Haunted, despite her decision to back off from her long-standing vendetta against the mob, or maybe that was the reason for it. Had her stand come too late? Were plans for her murder already in place?

If so, she'd have no clue when they were coming for her. She had relinquished her control when she called in the Feds. They were the ones watching their moves now, not her. The mob could strike when she'd least expect.

God, this is no way to live!

Her headlights bounced off the pavement ahead of her, dipping into the ruts of the road and dancing over the line. She'd never encountered anyone on these early-morning excursions. Smart people were in bed, where she should have been, where she'd left Troy. If he ever woke up to find her gone, he'd never said anything.

But she couldn't keep up this routine forever or continue hiding it. The diamond on her engagement ring sparkled in the moonlight, as if adding chastisement. She was withholding this secret from the man she was going to marry.

Her car sputtered and jerked.

What the...

She pushed on the gas pedal. No response. The lights on the dash remained, but otherwise the car was dead.

The Russians sabotaged it!

Goose bumps rose on her arms at her stupidity. She'd incorporated such predictability into her schedule, it would make it easy for them to manipulate events to isolate her in the countryside. Then they'd show up and kill her. Her body would never be found. They'd crush her car. As far as Troy and anyone else would be concerned, she'd have disappeared from the face of the earth.

Her car continued to slow, and there was still no response from the gas pedal. A close look at the dash told her the issue. The gas tank was empty.

She punched the steering wheel and guided the car toward the shoulder, applying the brake, which thankfully worked. Eventually she came to a stop.

Now she was stranded in the middle of nowhere. All around her, there was nothing but fields and deep ditches. Not a farmhouse within sight. Not a single soul to help her.

She took a few breaths, trying to steady her nerves and prevent a descent into Nutty Town. How had she become this person—terrified and cowering, looking over her shoulder? Enough was enough.

One call to roadside assistance, and she'd be back up and running in no time. She placed the call, told them her whereabouts and the issue.

"We'll get someone out there as soon as we can, ma'am," they told her.

She bristled at the address, always feeling that *ma'am* should be reserved for someone far older than her thirty-seven. "How soon is that?"

A brief pocket of silence, then, "Two hours. Possibly less."

"Two hours? Are you kidding me?" She'd never had patience, but the wait was ridiculous considering how much she paid monthly for the service.

"Possibly less."

"As soon as you—" The call was dropped. *What the...?*

She looked at the screen and pushed some buttons. Her phone was dead. Just unbelievable. Now she was more isolated than ever. She grabbed the charger from the glovebox with plans to use the car's battery for a trickle charge.

With no air conditioning, and with little breeze making its way through the windows, she was heating up. She took off the sweatshirt she was wearing, leaving herself in a tank and sports bra, and dumped it on the front passenger seat. It did little to cool her off, and claustrophobia was moving in.

She reached for the door handle, hesitated. Going outside made her more vulnerable. She should have brought her Glock.

Stop being a paranoid ninny!

Madison steeled herself and stepped out of the vehicle to be rewarded by a breeze.

She closed her eyes and savored it—for a second or two. Then her eyes popped open. Was someone out there watching her? The back of her neck stiffened. She hated herself for her overactive imagination. She was likely only kept company by the wildlife in the area—deer, groundhogs, whatever other creatures might be out roaming around. At least the Stiles countryside was nowhere north enough to have wolves and bears.

Still, she kept looking over her shoulders and pivoting at the sound of rustling grass or groaning branches, as they dipped and rose with the wind.

Two hours? If roadside assistance took that long, Troy was bound to stir awake and notice her missing. Then she'd need to explain herself.

Frick— She narrowed her eyes as she caught sight of something in the long grass of the ditch. It only revealed itself when the blades swayed sideways.

She inched closer to the edge. There was something down there. Not that she could tell what from here. The ditch fell at a steep incline and was at least five feet deep.

The moon ducked behind clouds, and she returned to the car and grabbed her phone. Thankfully it had just enough juice to turn on the flashlight. She returned to where she'd been and shone the light into the gully.

It was a suitcase. Old, canvas, zipped up, and bulging. Probably full of garbage!

She shook her head, disgusted at how some people discarded whatever they liked without any regard to the environment. Sweeping the beam, she saw that something was poking out from a corner of the suitcase.

Madison edged closer still and lost her footing. She found herself in a run, easing into the momentum so as not to tumble flat on her face. Once her equilibrium balanced out, she was at the bottom of the ditch.

Just as she reached the suitcase, a low-battery warning flashed on the screen of her phone, and the flashlight cut out. Alone in the dark, in a ditch...

A stream of expletives left her mouth. What was she supposed to do now? Stumble back to the car in the pitch black?

But luck finally seemed to be on her side. The moon came out from behind the clouds, bathing the landscape in natural light.

As her luck would have it, though, this suitcase wasn't full of garbage as she'd first thought.

A slender finger, with a long, painted nail, reached out into the night.

CHAPTER 2

Madison had to wait forty-five painful minutes for her phone to charge enough to make the call to dispatch. Now it was going on four AM, and everyone was there except the medical examiner and roadside assistance.

“I’d ask what you were doing out here—at this time of night even—but I doubt you’d tell me,” Terry said to her.

Terry was her partner but also the brother she never had. Thankfully, she had a change of clothes in her trunk, allowing her to exchange the tank shirt and her flimsy fabric shorts for something more appropriate. Otherwise, she could only imagine the inquisition. “Just accept that I was.”

“Except you found a suitcase with a body inside. Kind of makes all this suspect.”

“Yep, that’s me. You’ve got me. I’m the killer.”

“You could be. It wouldn’t be the first time a killer staged the discovery of his own victim.”

“Okay, enough.” The nonsensical banter, an attempt to detract from the severity of the find, was falling short for her. How could she ever pry that memory from her mind? “Let’s focus on this poor woman. Who did this to her?” She assumed the body in the suitcase was female based simply on the slender fingers and nail polish—though anything was possible these days.

“That will be easier to answer once we know who she is.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious. But I was just putting it out there as rhetorical for now. I also doubt her ID will be in there with her.

Call it a hunch.” She turned and walked into the ditch. Careful of her footing, she navigated the descent in a steady, organized fashion, as opposed to flailing arms and a jackhammering heart like the first time. Though the battery-operated spot lamps drowning the area with light helped in the endeavor.

Cynthia Baxter, head of the forensics lab and the lead criminal investigator, was standing next to the suitcase, awaiting Madison and Terry to join her. She was also Madison’s best friend and currently five months pregnant, her December due date well anticipated. If not for Madison’s miscarriage in March, they’d have had children close in age.

Mark Andrews, who specialized in trace evidence, was also present. He was the only male in Cynthia’s four-member team, which included herself.

“I’ve taken pictures of the suitcase from various angles and the surrounding area,” Cynthia began. “Now we just wait for Richards to show up.”

Madison didn’t want to wait a second longer for the medical examiner but appreciated that procedure existed for a reason. “Any word on when that might be?”

“Nope,” Cynthia said.

It wasn’t long, though, before the ME’s vehicle was pulling to a stop on the shoulder. Cole Richards and his assistant, Milo Boswell, got out. Since he’d been with Richards for almost a year and a half, Madison decided to remember his last name. It was likely he was going to stick around.

Richards and Milo navigated the ditch without upset, hauling a folded-up stretcher and a black bag. Brief greetings all around, and then Richards said, “Huh.”

“What’s that for?” Madison asked.

“This isn’t something you see every day.”

“Good news there.” Dumping a body in a ditch was nothing but a callous disregard for life. If she dwelled on the current circumstances too much, she’d sink into a tailspin about the state of the world. And there was no time for that.

Richards set his bag down and snapped on a pair of gloves. “Am I good to proceed?” He directed the question to Cynthia.

“You are.”

Richards hunched down next to the suitcase and worked the zipper, careful of not damaging the remains—the finger that poked out and whatever might be enclosed. “It’s a tight pull.”

Madison could barely stand the delay. She didn’t have patience at the best of times.

Seconds felt like an hour. The top was flipped back, and they looked inside.

“Oh my god.” Cynthia turned away and covered her mouth.

Mark took the camera from Cynthia and took some photographs.

A naked body, cut into pieces—head, torso, arms, and legs—and arranged in the suitcase like Tetris blocks. The decapitated head was face up, long black hair blocking her features. Richards softly swept some to the side, revealing brown unseeing marbles for eyes, high cheekbones, full lips, and a small nose. She looked so young.

“I’d say she’s all there, but...” Terry stopped talking, and no one else said a word.

The scene was beyond words but the fact it had Richards speechless was something. He was always so professional, an attribute Madison admired greatly about the man.

Eventually Richards cleared his throat and spoke. “Deceased is female, between nineteen and twenty-two.”

“Can you tell time of death or the cause?” It was always best to focus on the work and squeeze out emotions before they capsized her common sense.

“It’s hard to say from initial assessment. The remains are in a suitcase, but it has been in the elements. For how long? That would just be guesswork at this point. I’ll need to conduct some tests back at the morgue to come to the most accurate conclusion. Same for cause of death.” Richards looked closer at the body. “Yet I am seeing what appears to be multiple lacerations, possibly stab wounds. It’s quite probable one of these killed her. Again, I won’t know until I get the body to the morgue.”

Multiple stab wounds... Constantine Romanov... He had been the first Russian Mafia hit man she'd sent to the grave, but he had loved using a blade. What they were looking at was certainly carnage worthy of the mob. But she talked herself back from that ledge. There was no point going there unless there was absolute reason. "Is there any ID with her?"

"I'd prefer to leave her and the suitcase as much in situ as possible," Richards said.

Mark held up a hand and shook his head. "I think I know who she is."

"You think?" Madison bristled. "We should confirm if we can."

"It's Tara Jackson." Mark squared his shoulders. "I *know* it's her."

"And who is Tara Jackson?" Terry asked, beating Madison to the same question. The name meant nothing to her.

"She's the daughter of Randolph Jackson..." Mark looked at all of them, and Madison gestured for him to elaborate. "He's a renowned neurosurgeon at Peace Liberty Hospital. Lots of family money to boot. You must have seen his pictures on hospital billboards around the city."

Peace Liberty was in Stiles. Madison could remember a silver-haired fox depicted on the building, standing with his arms crossed and looking serious. She'd just figured he was a model brought in to promote the hospital. "And how do you know his daughter?" She was curious if the mystery of Mark's sexuality was finally going to be solved. No one was sure of his preferences, with his ponytail of long brown hair and slightly feminine mannerisms—no judgment either way, though.

"Nothing... uh, romantic or anything. Tara was in the news last week for donating money to the children's ward of Peace Liberty."

"You mean daddy's money?" Madison kicked back.

"No," Mark said. "Tara's not what you'd expect. At least according to the article. She supports local causes financially and by volunteering."

They could provide a valuable lead. "Which ones?"

"It wasn't said, rather intuited. Something about her preferring to keep her philanthropic efforts private."

It would seem Tara Jackson was more about the causes than the notoriety. Respectable, and even more so for a young woman.

“I know her father,” Richards said. “Though that might be stretching things. I met him at a medical conference years ago.”

“But you don’t know Tara?” Madison asked.

Richards shook his head.

A mercy, as the sight before them was hard enough to process. To have personally known her would have made it a thousand times worse.

“She seems young to have made such an impact,” Terry said. “What is she, eighteen, nineteen?”

“Twenty-one, if I remember right,” Mark corrected.

“Still, just a young adult with her whole life ahead of her.” Cynthia laid a hand over her belly. While she’d always been empathetic, her pregnancy seemed to have intensified that characteristic.

Madison was doing her best to catalog the personal aspects of Tara’s life as simple facts, to defuse any inclination toward letting her emotions blind her. Tara Jackson needed her objectivity, demanded it. And Madison would give her that and find her justice. To start, they needed to figure out how Jackson had gone from philanthropist to murder victim.

Richards motioned for Milo to move into action, and he closed up the suitcase again and grabbed a black body bag.

“That’s it?” Madison would have expected something from the ME while he was here.

“That’s it. We’ll get her back to the morgue straightaway and minimize the risk of contaminating the scene and the evidence any further.”

There was logic in that, but she would have appreciated some answers now. “When will you be conducting the autopsy?”

“I’d say within the next two hours.”

“Okay, we’ll notify next of kin and request they make a formal ID,” Madison said, impressing upon Richards that the faster he could tend to Tara Jackson, the better.

“I’ll make sure she’s ready for them when they come,” Richards said.

When a body was dismembered, the ME would position the available remains beneath a sheet, with pillows if necessary, to give the impression of a complete and intact body. No one deserved to be scarred with the mental image of seeing their loved one in pieces.

“Um.” Mark held up a hand again.

“It’s not school, Mark,” Madison told him. “Just talk.”

“Tara’s next of kin would just be her father. The article said her mother died seven years ago.”

“Good to know.” And it was, but her heart felt for Randolph Jackson, who had lost his wife and now his daughter.

Madison turned to Terry. “Let’s go talk to Mr. Jackson. We’ll take the department car you arrived in.”

“What’s up with your Mazda anyway? And you still haven’t told me why you were out here.” Terry raised his eyebrows.

“Must have been an oversight.” She rolled her eyes. “Let’s go.” She led the way up to the road, and the amber strobing lights of a tow truck were coming toward her. Roadside assistance had finally decided to show up.

The driver hopped out of the cab with a jerrican. “You need gas, ma’am?”

“Yeah, the Mazda.”

He dipped his head and went about filling the Mazda’s tank.

Terry started laughing, and she punched his shoulder.

“Hey.” He pulled back and rubbed his arm, but his mouth was twitching like he still wanted to laugh.

She held a finger in his face. “Not another word.”

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