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Standalone

*Assassination of a Dignitary*  
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An addictive heart-pounding crime thriller

# MURDER AT THE LAKE

# CAROLYN ARNOLD

A Detective Madison Knight Mystery

**HIBBERT & STILES**  
PUBLISHING INC.

Published by Hibbert & Stiles Publishing Inc.  
hspubinc.com

2024 Edition

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-998095-00-1

Paperback 4.25 x 7 ISBN: 978-1-998095-01-8

Paperback 5 x 8 ISBN: 978-1-998095-02-5

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-998095-03-2

Large Print Edition: 978-1-998095-04-9

Audiobook ISBN: 978-1-998095-05-6

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**MURDER  
AT THE  
LAKE**

In memory of Rebecca Ross Hendrix,  
who dedicated her life to serving others  
as a member of the law enforcement community.

# PROLOGUE

*24 years ago*

Life didn't get any better than this. Emily was on top of the world and didn't want this moment to end. The summer night was warm on her skin, but a gentle breeze coming off the lake cooled her down. Stars sparkled like diamonds in a cloudless sky of black velvet, and the full moon appeared oversized. Everything felt magical and inspiring. What she could do if she had her paints and a canvas...

But tonight was about letting loose and forgetting that in less than a week she'd be off to college. Then her parents would expect her to grow up. Boring, if her parents' lives were anything to go by. They were zombies, slogging themselves off to their nine-to-five jobs every morning while living for the weekends and holidays. Emily wanted more out of life.

She dropped, giggling, onto a fallen tree trunk and curled her toes in the warm sand. There were a lot of grads here tonight, and many faces she'd never seen before. The tunes pumping out of Jimmy's boombox vibrated through her. Every song was perfect. The weed was premium, but the booze was cheap.

Brooke, one of her best friends, fell beside her, laughing so hard she was crying. She bumped Emily's shoulder with hers and lifted the doobie she had in her hand toward Emily. She gladly relieved her of it and took a hit even though her head was already spinning.

She breathed it in, letting it overtake her. Surrendering. She didn't need to think tonight.

“Woo-hoo!” Melissa, her other bestie, started dancing in front of them. Her arms were flailing over her head, and she shook her hips. “I love this song! Come on, you guys. Dance!” She wriggled her hands to summon Emily and Brooke off their butts.

Emily popped up first, smiling like a moron. She would have been wiser to get to her feet more slowly. Her vision blurred, and her head spun, but she didn’t care. She rolled into it. If this was her last night of being young and free, she was going to soak up every second.

She laughed, the sound striking her ears and causing her to double over. If only she could stay right here in this bubble forever. But her damn bladder was betraying her.

Emily slipped away from her friends, who were already busy grinding up against a couple of guys, and headed toward the tree line. If she hurried, she could get back before the next song started.

She hustled along the beach, prancing in her mind, but her movements would probably look a lot less poetic to a sober observer as she rolled her ankle over some uneven ground. That might hurt tomorrow, but it didn’t right now.

She started toward a worn-down path that led into the woods. It was mostly flattened grass and sand, but there were also small stones that bit into the bottoms of her bare feet. Even high and drunk, those hurt. She slowed her steps and turned around to see if here was secluded enough to take care of her business.

Next thing she knew, she jammed her toe into something and stumbled forward. Her arms pinwheeled, and she managed to collect her balance without falling. Surprisingly she hadn’t pissed herself either.

A tree root jutted out from the ground and mocked her. She retaliated by letting loose with a string of expletives. Her big toe was throbbing, and she lifted her leg, standing there like a flamingo as she inspected the damage in the moonlight. Her toe was bleeding, and the nail had broken to half its normal length. *Ouch!*

But she couldn’t stand here forever. Her bladder was screaming at her to get a move on.

“Just get this over with,” she told herself, while hobbling a bit farther into the woods. She ducked behind a tree and squatted.

She could still hear the song from Jimmy’s boombox thumping, the bass being carried in the night’s humid air as if she were seated right next to it. She sang along for a few verses but stopped at the sound of cracking branches and twigs. Someone was coming.

Hurrying to finish up her business, she’d only just gotten herself together and stood when he rounded the tree.

“Oh, it’s just you,” she told him, relieved that if it was anyone, it was him.

“Yeah. Just me.” He leered at her and smirked as he moved toward her. He grabbed her breasts, and she stepped back and swatted at him.

“It’s not happening.”

But he wasn’t listening. He was coming closer, and his eyes held a brooding intensity.

“I told you no.” Her heart was racing. The fact he kept advancing in silence was really starting to freak her out. She mirrored his steps, retreating backward, but ended up stumbling and falling to the ground.

Her head struck something hard, and a thunderous *thwack* had her vision flashing white and an instant, all-consuming headache moving in. “Help,” she tried to yell, but it didn’t reach the volume of a whisper.

Above her, the moon was now a hazy orb, and a large looming figure was coming toward her. He was fiddling around with the fly of his pants.

*No, no... this isn't happening!* She tried to speak again, but she couldn’t get the words to leave her mouth. Her eyelids became heavy and lowered as she fought to stay conscious.

He lowered himself over her and pinned her arms above her head, gripping both of her wrists with one of his hands.

She tried to squirm away, but her body wasn’t responding. Any screams for him to stop ricocheted in her head. Nothing left her lips. Her limbs were paralyzed, leaving her powerless to fend him off. Warm tears splashed down her cheeks.



She drifted in and out of consciousness as he violated her, unable to rouse a call for help.

When he finished, he relinquished his hold on her wrists but put his hands on her neck and squeezed.

She couldn't even slap him away. As her brain screamed for oxygen, the spinning in her head began to slow. *This is how I die!*

Before closing her eyes for the last time, she watched a shooting star cut across the night sky.

# CHAPTER 1

*Twenty-four years later  
Braybury, USA  
10 AM, a Wednesday in December*

The stiff was on the floor of his home office, a hole blown in the side of his head and his desk chair toppled next to him. A purported suicide, but there was something off about it. To start, the gun that was in his left hand. How had he managed to shoot himself *and* retain a hold on the weapon?

Detective Carson Snow of the Braybury Police Department was a veteran officer who was far closer to retirement than his rookie days. He'd seen a lot of death in his twenty-something year career, and what he saw before him sent mixed signals.

The victim was Dylan Graham, forty-one, divorced and living alone. He was discovered by his maid when she came in to clean that morning at nine AM. She was a mess and giving her statement to Carson's partner, Jeremy Friedman. He was nearly a decade younger and still eager to please the higher-ups. Carson had stopped trying to please everyone years ago because it wasn't possible.

"Detective Snow, you and Friedman can see this now." A crime scene investigator, one that Carson respected, handed him a sealed evidence bag.

"Thanks." Inside was the suicide note that had been found on the desk. *Suicide...* Carson rolled that around in his head again. Right away, Carson's mental reconstruction hit a snag. The gun would

have recoiled, especially since he'd need to have fired one-handed. He wouldn't have the stabilizing factor of using both hands, but even if he had, death would have had his hand releasing its grip. The gun would have fallen to the floor and been found beneath the victim.

The investigator stood there while Carson held it for himself and Jeremy to read.

*I'm sorry for past sins but take these with me now. To the grave.*

"Man of many words," Jeremy mumbled.

"It's certainly short and sweet." Carson was still holding on to his suspicions about the manner of death regardless of the note.

"Uh-huh. And don't suicide victims typically apologize to those they're leaving behind?"

*And there was that...* Carson flipped the words around in his head. "It reads like he's apologizing to himself or an audience of one."

"Okay," Jeremy said, skeptical, "but he didn't address it to anyone."

"Detectives, I found something else you'll want to see." The investigator gestured for them to join her in front of an open desk drawer. She held some printed sheets but bobbed her head toward the drawer, where there were more. "I'll leave you to it." She then moved to another section of the room.

Carson took the papers from her and collected the rest with gloved hands and shuffled through them. They were news articles that had been printed from the internet, and all of them reported on the rape and murder of a teenage girl, Emily Kane, from twenty-four years ago. His gaze snatched some of the headlines, and he gathered enough to know her attacker, a man by the name of Richie Klein, had served twenty-four years and was released from prison yesterday. After Carson was finished, he handed them off to Jeremy.

Jeremy held up one piece focused on Klein. "Maybe this guy was wrongly imprisoned, and our DB was the real rapist and killer. Hence, the whole 'I'm sorry for my sins' bit?"

It was far too early to leap to their dead body being tied to a twenty-four-year-old case. And it was certainly too soon to leap to a reason why this guy killed himself. If that was even what happened.

Carson looked back at the drawer and withdrew a hardcover journal. He cracked it open. "There's only one entry in this thing, dated a few days ago. To paraphrase, Graham says he should have come forward and said something long before now. He implies that an innocent man went to prison and says it was Troy Matthews who raped and killed Emily Kane."

"And who is Troy Matthews?"

"Don't know yet, but Emily is the girl from the articles." Carson chewed on that. He already had his doubts about the way the scene presented itself, but the little treasure trove in this drawer clinched it for him.

Dylan Graham hadn't committed suicide. He was murdered. And, as it stood right now, Troy Matthews was their prime suspect.

## CHAPTER 2

*Present Day*  
*3:45 PM, Stiles*  
*Home of Madison Knight and Troy Matthews*

Madison Knight didn't even recognize her own reflection in the mirror. She wore makeup, having been applied at the hands of a skilled cosmetician who did house calls. She was lucky any other day to slap on foundation. Her hair, that was usually tousled like the crown of a cockatoo, was professionally styled. Each strand lying in harmony with the others. A tiara sat on top of her head, the cubic zirconias winking in the light as if they were real diamonds and not imposters. More of these jewels nestled against her collarbone and dangled from her earlobes. It had been a surprise her piercings hadn't closed up, as neglected as they were.

The most shocking thing was her body draped in a white gown. She wasn't a fan of formal, and she was far from a blushing virgin. If she'd had her way, she'd have walked down the aisle in a cream pantsuit. The only reason she conceded to the traditional garb was due to the petitioning from her mother, sister, and her best friend, Cynthia Baxter. Or one could call it a guilt trip. They had all said, "Can't you be a girl for one day in your life?"

So here she was all decked out, smelling of floral perfume, wearing jewelry and a gown, a garter belt, and lacy underthings. She had drawn the line at a thong, though, and went bikini.

“Just when I thought this day would never come.” Her mother came up behind her and put an arm around her.

*Jeez, thanks!*

Mothers were expected to get sentimental on their daughter’s wedding day. Cheek to cheek, looking at their reflection in a mirror and tearing up. Not Donna Knight. She was checking *marriage* off the list she’d had in mind for Madison’s life from the time she was born.

“Oh, Mom, be nice.” Chelsea, Madison’s younger sister by six years, stepped in to her defense. Chelsea was the “golden child,” wife for over eleven years and mother to three girls. If their mother was counting on grandchildren from Madison, she’d be disappointed.

“I’m not being mean. I was just saying.” Her words said one thing, her tone another. Donna presumed to know what was best for everyone. She was right while everyone else was wrong.

“Just let it go. Please,” Chelsea beseeched, adding a smile to her request, which had their mother holding up her hands.

Madison faced those in the room. Present were her mother, sister, her six-year-old niece, who was the flower girl, and Cynthia. Her friend looked the least comfortable, as she was due to give birth to her first baby in a few weeks. She complained of being bloated and said her belly was the size of an inflated beachball. Those were her friend’s words, and Madison wouldn’t dare to agree. She’d faced off with Russian Mafia hit men, but she wasn’t prepared to face the wrath of her pregnant friend.

They were all gathered in the primary bedroom of Madison’s new home, which was acting as a bridal suite today. She and her fiancé, Troy Matthews, were already living together and had been for over a year. But this house was new to them. Though it wasn’t to Madison. In fact, she had a history with the home, and it held special meaning for her. It had belonged to her mother’s parents, and Madison always had a special bond with her grandma Rose. Their relationship wasn’t formal, didn’t stand on pomp and ceremony. Her grandmother welcomed Madison to call her by her first name, and their bond was tight. It was why Madison put in

an offer without a second thought when the house hit the market a few months ago. From her first walk-through, the feeling of her grandmother's presence cemented the deal. Madison was meant to share her life with Troy in this house. She imagined Grandma Rose was smiling down at her from heaven today.

Cynthia sucked in a deep breath through her teeth and grinned. "Well, are you ready? You do look incredible."

Not that looking good was the barometer for determining readiness, but Madison graciously accepted the compliment and kissed her friend's cheek.

"Just one toast, and we'll head down." Chelsea poured champagne into three flutes and filled two with sparkling nonalcoholic cider. One of these was for Cynthia, the other for Madison's niece.

After everyone had their drinks in hand, they raised their glasses following Chelsea's lead.

She toasted, "To Madison and Troy finding a life of happiness and love."

Everyone echoed the sentiment and added, "Here, here." Glasses were clinked and generous sips taken.

Madison lowered her glass, and with the motion, it was as if the import of today was finally sinking in. This was actually happening. She was getting married. While she'd been engaged in the past, she never got this close to going through with it. Her previous fiancé had been a cheat, and it took Madison a solid decade to give love another chance. But that heartache had brought her to where she was now. With Troy. And the universe had blessed her.

Troy was so much more than Toby Sovereign had ever been. Troy understood her and held to the same values. He appreciated that honesty, loyalty, and integrity were the foundations of any lasting relationship and a code to live by. But he'd experienced Madison's pain for himself when his first wife and supposed best friend betrayed him by having an affair. Instead of letting it ruin his view on love, though, it gave him the understanding and patience Madison required from him. He offered a supportive shoulder, despite her inclination to handle everything on her own.

Chelsea gathered Madison's glass and set it down with hers. She tapped a finger to Madison's tiara. "All right, are you ready to roll?"

Madison's heart picked up speed. Her impulse was to run and hide. And she hated running. The thought of Troy waiting for her had her nodding. She tapped her clammy palms against her gown and took some calm, even breaths. "Okay, let's do this."

Her sister smiled at her, her eyes disclosing she had read Madison's fears. But she wasn't good at hiding her feelings, which was both a blessing and a curse.

The group made their way to the main level with Madison's mother leading the way. The ceremony was being held in the living room. Her mother would go in first, and Troy would walk her to her seat at the front.

The bridal party stopped midway down the steps, and her mother continued.

*Oh, this is getting real!*

When Madison and the rest of them landed in the entry, the French doors were once again closed, and the curtains they had installed would keep Troy from seeing Madison too early. This was just one change that was made to facilitate the wedding.

Their regular furniture was stored in the basement, and a rental company had brought in chairs and handled the setup of those. Another business took care of the decorating. Madison's and Troy's jobs with the Stiles Police Department didn't leave them much spare time, so they delegated what they could. It hadn't been a small feat to convince her to book two weeks off from work for their honeymoon. He sold her on a week at a five-star resort in Cancun, Mexico, followed by a week of nesting at home to celebrate a quiet Christmas. It would be them and Hershey, her chocolate Lab.

Speaking of... Hershey wagged his tail at the sight of Madison and wriggled his body toward her, but Terry, her job partner, had him on a leash and gently encouraged him to stay back. But what she would give for just a brush of his velvet ears.

"It's okay," she told Terry.

"Maddy, your dress," Chelsea cautioned.



Hershey was so excited that he was starting to whimper. Between that and the bow tie he had around his neck for his upcoming performance as ring bearer, Madison smiled. “Hey ya, fella.” She reached out, keeping some distance between herself and the dog, but she would have loved to inundate the guy with cuddles. A pantsuit would have been more conducive to that, which she’d point out, but why waste her breath? His ears were so soft, and they chipped away at her stress.

Terry wasn’t the only one in the entry. There were four other men. One of whom was Madison’s father. He did a double take when he saw her. His eyes watered, and it had her tearing up.

“You are beautiful, sweetheart.” He braced his hands on her upper arms and leaned in and kissed her cheek.

When her father pulled back, Terry stepped up in his place. They were more than work friends. He was like the brother she never had, but she was likely to lose him soon. He’d passed the sergeant’s exam and desired to settle behind a desk, where there was less risk of some psycho killing him. For the wedding, his role was master of ceremonies. He was also responsible for cuing up the music and opening the doors along with Lou Stanford, Cynthia’s husband.

“You, wearing a dress?” Terry teased with a wink. “You actually look like a—”

“If you say *girl*, I might...” Madison narrowed her eyes and formed a fist. She drew her arm back as if she were going to hit his shoulder. He juked out of the way. It was a long-running schtick between them. Though she usually made contact, and he’d make a show of pretending to be wounded. Just further proof they were more like brother and sister than simply colleagues and friends.

The two of them started laughing, but it rang somewhat hollow. It wasn’t far from mind that everything between them was about to change.

Terry hugged her, firm yet not too tightly, to not crush her dress.

Lou was the next to step up. He smiled and dipped his head. It was Madison who opened her arms for a hug. He was her best friend’s husband, and a good friend and family by extension.

Marc Copeland and Nick Benson, who were standing up for Troy, waited there in their tuxedos, hands clasped together in front of them like they were bouncers at a bar. They had known Troy for over a decade and reported to him in the Special Weapons and Tactics division. Like him, both were muscular and over six feet. Marc was especially built like a tank, and his primary task on the SWAT force was breacher. Nick was a shield operator.

They hugged her and kissed a cheek, having grown close to her over the time she'd been with Troy.

"You ready?" Terry asked her.

She eyed the front door, then looked at him. "If I wait any longer, I might take my cold feet and run out of here." An empty threat. As nervous as she was to take the step of marriage, she hadn't been this sure about anything in her life.

"You? Run? By choice? That would be a first."

This time she did hit Terry's shoulder. He pretended it hurt. But he deserved the potshot. Terry showed her up by running miles on his treadmill every morning. What sick bastard *chose* to do that? Meanwhile, she found ways to avoid the activity. If a suspect ran, she set Terry free. Thinking of that, her new partner better be a runner too because she wasn't taking it up anytime soon.

Tears stung her eyes as she nodded to everyone, and the wedding party got into position.

Chelsea and Marc stood side by side in front of the doors. Cynthia and Nick were behind them.

Terry hit the music, and he and Lou each got a door.

As Madison watched the couples disappear, her nerves had her heart pounding. Not long from now, she'd be saying "I do." A cold sweat blanketed her arms.

Her father smiled at her as he held out his arm, and she slipped hers through.

Brie, her niece, was in front of them and turned around. "Now?"

"Yes." Madison smiled at her. They'd had a rehearsal last night, but Brie's nerves must have been getting to her too.

"Okay." Brie grinned and disappeared through the French doors into the living room.

Seconds later, the music was changed to the “Bridal Chorus,” and Madison’s mouth went dry, her head faint.

“You’re up,” Terry whispered to her.

*No turning back, Knight. Deep, slow, steady breaths...* Deliberate, conscious breathing, just like her therapist would recommend.

Madison and her father paused in the doorway. Brie had done a great job of sprinkling rose petals onto the long runner ahead of them. The room also looked incredible, with ribbons and bows on the chairs and the large urns full of flowers. She made these observations quickly before her gaze went to Troy at the other end of the room. Locked on him, her chest heaved, her lungs froze mid-inhale, and her legs weakened as if made of jelly.

Maybe if she focused on the sea of familiar friendly faces of those nearest and dearest to her and Troy, she’d regain her strength. They were standing with their eyes on Madison.

Terry’s wife, Annabelle, and their infant daughter, Danny; Chelsea’s husband and her two other daughters; Officer Higgins aka Chief, Madison’s training officer and someone she highly respected; Joni Weir and her girls, Troy’s goddaughters; Cole Richards, the area’s medical examiner, and his wife; Jennifer Adams, Samantha Reid, and Mark Andrews from the crime lab, who worked with and reported to Cynthia; Andrea Fletcher, who was Troy’s sister and the Stiles PD police chief, and her husband, Robert. Absent from Troy’s side were his parents, who had died years before he and Madison had started dating.

As Madison approached the front of the room, she couldn’t avoid Troy any longer. Seeing him made her breath catch again. His broad shoulders filled out a tux to perfection. His blond hair was trimmed short, and his green eyes were electric and piercing.

Her father put her hand in Troy’s and kissed her cheek before taking a seat by her mother.

Troy was smiling, an expression he rarely showcased, and her heart was at risk of beating out of her chest. He was so much more than the spectacle before her. His character and personality completed the package, and he was all hers.

*This man wants to marry me, accepting all my strengths and faults. How did I get so lucky?*

She smiled at him as they turned to face David Murphy, who was acting as their wedding officiant. He also worked with Troy in SWAT. His specialty was explosives.

David offered her an encouraging smile and said, "Troy and Madison want to welcome you to their home and their wed—"

A commotion of raised voices from the entry interrupted David. One man distinctly called out, "Braybury PD!"

Madison spun around as two police officers crashed into the living room and headed right toward her. Terry and Lou were standing there, arms raised in frustration and surrender.

Her father stepped into the aisle to play interference and block them from reaching the front of the room. "You need to leave now. You have no business being here."

"You need to get out of our way, sir, or I will be forced to arrest you," one of the officers said as he and a colleague skirted past her father.

"Excuse me, but what the hell is happening here?" Andrea Fletcher closed the distance to the officers. "I'm Police Chief Fletcher, and I demand an answer."

A man in a suit stepped through the opening of the French doors. He sauntered toward Andrea and stopped mere inches in front of her. He was looking past her to Troy when he said, "Troy Matthews, you're going to go with these fine officers."

"Who are you?" Andrea spat.

The man held up a gold badge. "Detective Snow, Braybury PD."

Braybury was a large city a couple of hours away from Stiles. Madison turned to Troy when he put a hand on her lower back. "What's going on?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "I have no idea."

The officers each grabbed one of Troy's arms and attempted to pull them behind his back. Troy resisted their efforts.

"Let go of me," Troy said. "You have no right to—"

"Oh, we have every right." Snow was right in Troy's face. "You're under arrest for the murder of Dylan Graham."

"What?" Madison spat, her voice high-pitched and panicked. Her shocked mind couldn't make any sense of what had been said. *Who the hell is Dylan Graham? Why would Troy kill him?*

“Please just let us do our jobs, ma’am,” one of the uniforms said.

Madison detested being addressed as *ma’am*. She formed a fist at her side, but Cynthia stepped up and tapped her hand. It was a poor time to try to calm her down. Her fiancé was about to be hauled off like he was some criminal. On their wedding day, no less. No number of deep breaths was going to calm her down. Hitting this guy might. Though the pleasure would be temporary and likely land her in a jail cell too.

Andrea stood next to her brother. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but you have no right to storm in here and do this. This jurisdiction belongs to the Stiles PD, and as I told you, I’m the police chief. There’s a way of doing things, and this isn’t how it’s done. You intend to cross the boundary lines, then you give the governing PD the courtesy of a phone call. My brother isn’t a criminal. He’s a reputable officer of the law.”

“Your brother,” the detective pushed back. “That fact right there is why we didn’t clear this past you. You’re too close.”

Andrea glared at him and crossed her arms. “Who did you put this past?”

“Listen, lady, if you have problems with people in your department, that’s on you to figure out. I’ve got a murder, and all the evidence is pointing at him.” He nudged his head toward Troy and signaled for the officers to apprehend him.

Andrea clenched her jaw, and her cheeks were bright red with anger. She gestured for Troy to go along and told him, “We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Madison retreated inward, observing all that was going on. But this couldn’t be real. She must be dreaming, and she’d surrender to that if it wasn’t for Cynthia, who kept touching her. But her caresses went from offering comfort to flurried and persistent finger jabs. Then Cynthia squeezed Madison’s hand and cried out in pain.

“I think... *I think* I’m in...lab... Ouch!” Cynthia’s legs buckled, and Madison rushed to hold her upright. Lou pushed through wedding guests and Braybury officers to get to his wife. In the

commotion, Troy was disappearing down the aisle, being carted away in cuffs. She had to go after him. Once Lou got to Cynthia, Madison made a move in that endeavor.

Andrea popped in front of Madison and shook her head. “You stay with your friend. I’ve got Troy.”

Madison nodded, but in her head, she was screaming, *What the hell just happened?*

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