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*To Carol Bennett,  
a great friend and powerful cheerleader to have in my corner.*





## PROLOGUE

The watcher stood on the sidelines, the place to which they were always relegated. Sometimes from a greater distance than today, but it didn't matter because whatever the view, the girl's movements and timing were flawless. Everything came effortlessly to her. She could do no wrong. A natural, America's rising star. Or so the papers across the country said. That only made the watcher hate her more.

If the girl was in a gilded cage, the door was open, but she stayed of her own choosing. She loved it there, but who wouldn't? Being tended to by hands eager to offer their assistance and support. She had people to respond to her every beck and call, who were more than willing to elevate her to the height of her grand aspirations.

The watcher was pushed out, no longer needed or desired. It mattered none that they had been there from the beginning. The girl had practically spat in the watcher's face. The rejection seared an indelible mark, rendering its damage and setting things into motion.

Even so, the watcher was willing to give her one more chance to change her mind, to concede. They weren't without

mercy. But if the girl remained obstinate, the watcher was prepared to follow through. Only moments left until she'd choose her fate. If she failed to comply with the watcher's desire, they would get redemption and the final say. The girl would find out too late what her pride had cost her. By then, her cries and pleas would fall upon unhearing and uncaring ears. The watcher would observe the girl's eyes widen in terror and fill with tears as her throat began to close and her body convulsed as it fought for life. She would reach out to the watcher, but they would stand there resolute. No turning away. Not until the last breath left her body.

## ONE

The skaters glided around on the ice like prima ballerinas dancing on air, the rink beneath them an extension of themselves. Their movements were fluid and expertly coordinated as they swept in and out of each other's arms to "(I've Had) The Time of My Life" pumping through the arena's speakers.

Amanda could hardly keep her eyes off them, but one thing competing for her attention was the reaction of her daughter, Zoe, sitting beside her. The nine-year-old's mouth was frozen in a huge grin, and her beautiful blue eyes were wide and glistening with delight. Amanda hardly blamed her. This all-stars event had attracted some of the best talent in the world to take to the ice. It had sold out within a couple of days of its announcement and was being televised live.

There wasn't a more perfect way to spend a Saturday afternoon leading up to Christmas than with her friends Patty Glover and Katherine Graves and her daughter. It gave her and Patty a reprieve from their day job that centered around darkness. Patty was a detective in Sex Crimes with the Prince William County Police Department, and Amanda a detective with their Homicide Unit. Even better, the tickets were a gift

from Patty. The generosity was prompted by the fact that the show's lead attraction was Michaela Glover, Patty's niece and Olympic hopeful, born and raised right here in Woodbridge, Virginia.

As the song built to its crescendo, the female figure skater sped toward her partner and, at the last possible moment, executed a perfectly timed leap into the air. Her partner caught her with grace and continued to suspend her body above his as the two of them spun in a circle that slowly died to a stop. The woman slid down her companion's body, landing gracefully, and they pressed their foreheads together as the music faded out.

The crowd roared, rising to their feet to give the couple a standing ovation.

"Mandy, I want to be a skater!" Zoe exclaimed as she popped to her feet, pointing at the ice. "She's *soooo* beautiful. Like a princess."

The female skater was in a sequined costume with a V-shaped neckline. Her blond hair was swept into a bun and framed by a braid. "That she is," Amanda said as she stood. Seeing life through the eyes of a child was magical. Nothing else quite measured up to this level of bliss and satisfaction. At least for Amanda.

"Bravo!" Patty said, standing and clapping.

Katherine rose last and was grinning too. Though it would be hard not to. The entire show was spectacular. The only sad thing was that it was nearing its end.

The skaters who had just finished glided to one end of the rink, and the announcer came over the loudspeakers. "And now we welcome all the amazing talent who have entertained us today. Give a big round of applause as our all-stars take to the ice for one final encore."

The skaters filtered onto the rink as "Rise Up" with its powerful lyrics vibrated in the background. Watching the

ensemble share the ice in a choreographed routine was moving and breathtaking. Amanda couldn't stop smiling, and it had been a while since she truly felt this happy.

Amanda searched for Patty's niece but couldn't spot her. She had yet to meet her, but Patty had pointed her out the second she took to the ice in the first half. The young woman may be about to make a dramatic solo entrance.

At the crescendo, the group of skaters bloomed out from center ice, their costumes creating the illusion of an exploding starburst before closing back in. The song ended with the group tucked together.

The announcer's voice rang out again. This time he called each skater or duo, in turn, to take a bow. Single roses were tossed onto the ice, along with some small bunches banded together with ribbon. Zoe had a rose for Michaela and was doing a good job of patiently waiting.

Patty nudged Amanda's shoulder and leaned in. "I don't see Michaela. Do you?"

"No. Maybe she's coming in last? She was a huge draw for the event."

"Could be." Patty bobbed her head, her gaze on the rink where the last of the skaters were making their way off the ice.

"And to the local star of today's event..."

Amanda smiled at Patty as if to say, *see?*

"Michaela Glover!"

Zoe widened her eyes and looked at Amanda. "Now?"

She was wondering if this was when she should throw the rose. "One minute."

The crowd's cheering became thunderous but dampened after a few moments when Michaela didn't show. The crowd started chanting her name. Some booed. Eventually, the announcer called a close to the show.

Zoe dropped her arm holding the rose. "Mandy?"

"Something must be wrong," Patty said to Amanda, panic

flooding her voice, as she bent over and rummaged under the bench for her purse.

Amanda put a hand on her shoulder. "Let's not rush to assume that."

Patty, who was now dangling her purse by its strap, looked into Amanda's eyes. At first, Amanda thought her friend was going to crumble apart, her mind straight to the worst-case scenario. There was certainly a storm in her eyes, but it started to recede, her gaze softening. She took a deep breath. "You're right. It could be anything."

"An injury in her earlier set? She wouldn't want to aggravate it further," Katherine piped in.

An injury might sound like a horrible thing, but given her and Patty's line of work, it was nothing.

"Let's go find out," Patty said. "You guys need to meet her anyway."

"Yeah!" Zoe squealed and bounced up and down. "Yes, yes, yes! I still have a rose for her."

"It sounds like someone is just a little excited by that prospect," Amanda said, grinning at both of her friends.

"Mickey! Mickey!" Zoe chanted. Patty had told her one of Michaela's nicknames, and Zoe clearly wanted to show off her inside knowledge. She raised her arm and nearly hit Amanda in the eye with the rose.

People in the row behind them were laughing at Zoe's enthusiasm. Leave it to a child to put smiles on people's faces. But when the rose almost hit her a second time, Amanda put out an instinctive hand. "Just put that down, okay? Please."

"Fine." Zoe stuck out her lower lip.

They eventually made it out of the stands into the ring of the arena but came to a temporary standstill. It didn't seem like anyone was in a hurry to leave and enjoy the rest of their Saturday afternoon.

"Where can we find this beautiful niece of yours?"

Katherine asked Patty. “The show was absolutely amazing, and the bit with your niece... above.” She smiled, letting the expression linger as her eyes danced over the crowd.

“I expected her to have a set in the second half, but I guess the others needed a chance.” Patty laughed. “But they put her up in a dressing room. The other skaters are sharing two locker rooms.”

“That’s impressive.” Amanda was happy that her friend seemed to be feeling better.

Patty claimed to know where the dressing room was and led the way through the mass of people. Amanda kept a tight hold of her daughter’s hand, possibly too tight, as Zoe squirmed and complained. Amanda released slightly. Her job gave her a front-row seat to the evil of the world, making her well aware of what miscreants would do with a sweet girl like Zoe. Not to mention Amanda already had the scare of her life when Zoe was taken by a sex-trafficking ring. Thankfully, before the unthinkable took place, with Patty’s help and the rest of the PWCPD, they rescued the girl.

“You’re hurting me.” Zoe tugged and wriggled free. Her arm with the rose swung out, and a passerby knocked it out of her hand.

The rose fell to the floor, and Amanda failed to reach it before a man walked on it, crushing the petals beneath his boots.

“No! It’s ruined.” Zoe’s eyes beaded with tears. “It was for Mickey.”

“I’ll get you a new one.” Amanda sounded more confident than she was feeling. At this point, the vendors might have shut up shop. She confirmed the location of the dressing room and told Patty and Katherine they’d meet them there in a few minutes. Then she took Zoe’s hand and walked with determination to the first cart they came to. They were out of single roses,

but Amanda bought Zoe a bunch of three roses tied with a red ribbon.

They caught up with Patty and Katherine just as they reached Michaela's dressing room.

"I never imagined we'd get here at the same time," Amanda said to them.

"You must have elbowed your way through that crowd better than us," said Katherine with a smile.

"We got extra roses for Mickey!" Most of what Zoe had said since the first skater took to the ice flew from her with the exuberance of an exclamation mark. She lifted the bunch and nearly hit both Patty and Katherine in the face.

Amanda gently swept the roses aside. "Watch what you're doing before you poke someone's eye out." She enlarged hers while making a silly face, and Zoe laughed before lowering the flowers.

"I'm so excited to introduce you guys." Patty knocked on the door.

A few seconds passed. No answer.

Patty rapped again and leaned toward the door. "Mickey, it's me. Open up."

No response.

Patty drew back. "That's strange. She wouldn't just leave." She turned the handle and pushed the door open.

Then she let out a blood-curdling scream.



## TWO

The next moments were pure adrenaline and chaos. Amanda had Katherine take Zoe outside while she called dispatch. Zoe had protested some, wanting to meet Michaela and give her the roses. Amanda told her to take them with her for now. She'd explain why later.

Amanda had closed the door on Michaela's dressing room, but not before seeing enough to know the Olympic hopeful was gone. No longer the vibrant, young woman who had taken to the ice as an apparition floating over the surface. Her skin no longer held a glow. Her eyes were widened like she'd been terrified in her last moments and were marked by petechiae. A clear tell that she had been starved of oxygen and suffocated. Never an easy way to go. And while there was no visible ligature or bruising around her neck to indicate manual strangulation, there was a pool of vomit. Not exactly a smoking gun, but it supported asphyxiation as well.

There were signs of a possible altercation, or at least a struggle for survival. The floor was a mess. Several roses were scattered about, including trios tied with ribbon. A purse was tipped over on its side. Cream-colored liquid had seeped from

the lid of a sports bottle next to it. A card lay just outside the reach of Michaela's left hand.

Amanda would look at everything in the room in more detail soon enough. But the gist was a young woman, in prime health, doesn't usually keel over on her own. That alone made her death suspicious, making the dressing room and everything inside it a potential murder scene. And that meant taking the necessary precautions to avoid contamination. The clock couldn't be reset and evidence restored if the determination of homicide was made later.

Officer Brandt was posted outside the dressing room, while other officers collected names and statements from as many people as possible before allowing them to leave the arena. Amanda was most interested in knowing if anyone suspicious was seen hanging around Michaela's dressing room.

The arena staff and those traveling with the show were sequestered to the two locker rooms. Officers would take their information, but they'd be on hand for more detailed questioning if it became necessary.

The television network that had covered the event was fast to catch the news that one of the skaters was dead and was making the lives of some uniformed officers hell. The threat of arrest barely had any effect on getting them to vacate the arena.

Amanda hung up after finishing her slew of calls. In addition to dispatch, who would request a medical examiner and crime scene investigators, she had called her detective partner, Trent Stenson, and her boyfriend, Logan. She let Logan know the situation and that Zoe would be coming home. He'd offered to come get her, and she'd taken him up on it. That would free Katherine to take Patty home and possibly stay with her. Amanda had one more call to make, that being to her boss, Sergeant Scott Malone, but Patty's loud sniffing had her pausing.

Patty was seated on a chair in the arena manager's office,

eyes blank and distant. She'd open her mouth wide in agony and slowly close it. Rarely did a sound utter from her lips.

Amanda dropped into the chair next to her and put her arm around her friend. She was trembling beneath her touch.

"This can't be happening. It's... it's like a bad nightmare, and I want to wake up."

Amanda's heart broke for Patty. After all, she knew the cutting pain of deep loss, having buried her husband, Kevin, and six-year-old daughter, Lindsey. The fact it was nearly ten years ago did little to remove the ache that lived in her chest, ready to be poked and revived with little provocation. "I know, sweetheart." She rubbed her friend's arm.

"What happened in there, Amanda? I saw Michaela and then I couldn't take much more in. It's like my brain shut it all out." For Patty to use her full given name was rare. Family and friends typically dropped the formality and called her Mandy. Amanda surmised Patty was bracing herself, trying to erect a shield around her heart, going into cop mode.

She wouldn't be doing Patty any favors by sugarcoating her response. Her friend would see through it anyway. But there wasn't a reason to mention the petechiae. "There may have been a struggle..."

"Are you telling me that someone killed her?" Patty's voice cracked with the question. Her chin quivered.

"All I can say is I promise to get to the truth of what happened to her. You have my word." It niggled that she hadn't seen Michaela's phone, though it could still be at the bottom of her purse.

Patty's eyes were pooled with tears as she nodded. "I saw that she'd been sick... There was vomit on the floor."

Amanda was impressed Patty had absorbed that much. "There was. It was alongside a sports bottle. Maybe her drink didn't agree with her." Though the puke could have come from another person who had been in the room.

Patty straightened and twisted her body to face Amanda. “She loves her protein shakes, has them every time after coming off the ice. But...” Her chin quivered, and her eyes pooled with tears. “Mick is deathly allergic to peanuts. If she ingested any... Oh my God. But wait, that makes no sense. She should have had her EpiPen. Unless...” Patty sobbed, sniffled, and eventually shook her head. “Did someone take it so she couldn’t use it?”

Amanda hadn’t seen an EpiPen either, though it too could still be inside Michaela’s purse. It was also entirely possible Michaela lost consciousness before she was able to reach it. But there was a darker possibility, as Patty suggested. That someone had deliberately taken her EpiPen and phone so Michaela would die. Amanda rubbed her friend’s back. “As I said, I promise I’ll find out what happened.” She’d vow justice in the event of murder, but it was a fallible system. “Do you know of anyone who had an issue with Michaela?”

Patty pulled some tissues from her purse and dabbed her cheeks, sniffled. “I thought everyone loved her.”

If this was murder, sadly, the truth was on the flip side of that statement. Unless they were looking at someone who had been obsessed with Michaela and harbored a warped view of love. “Does Michaela have any other family that I could reach out to? You don’t need to carry all this on your shoulders.” All Amanda knew about the family was Michaela’s mother was long out of the picture.

“Both her parents were never part of her life, but Mickey has a brother. They’re not close, though.”

“What’s his name and where can I reach him? I can let him know.”

“If the news doesn’t beat you to it. They’re probably swarming all over this.”

“Don’t you worry about that, okay?” She’d make banishing the media her personal problem if she had to.

“Her brother’s name is Tyson Bolton.” Patty pulled her phone from her purse, tapped away on it, and said she’d forwarded the contact card to Amanda. Her phone pinged in confirmation. Patty added, “Oh, there’s one other person you should talk to. I’m surprised I haven’t seen her since all this... My mind. I just can’t think clearly.”

Her resilient friend didn’t need placating, but empathy would always be welcome. “That makes sense, Patty. Who is it?”

“Tara Coolidge, Mickey’s agent. She was supposed to be here today. She might be able to direct your attention to someone, but she lives here in Woodbridge. Mick’s coach would likely know more about what’s going on in her day-to-day life, though. She’s based in Colorado Springs. That’s why Mick lived out there.” Patty fussed on her phone again, and a second later, Amanda’s device was beeping with the notification of two more text messages.

Amanda looked at them this time, noting the coach’s name was Jolene Flynn. “You said Tara was here. What about Jolene?”

Patty shook her head. “Not here today, far as I know. She’s more focused on the competition side of things, rather than shows like this one.”

“All right, well, I’ll track them down and have a talk with them.”

Patty palmed her phone. “What am I going to do? What’s going to happen now?” As a seasoned detective with Sex Crimes, Patty would be trained to keep calm in a crisis and remain objective. She’d know exactly what needed to be done, but all her training understandably dissolved when the victim was her niece.

“I’ve made the phone calls. I’m just waiting for everyone to show up, but Katherine’s going to take you home. She’ll stay with you too if you’d like.”

Patty stiffened. “No way I’m leaving Mick. Please don’t make me.”

Amanda squeezed her friend’s hands. “She’s gone, Patty. There’s nothing more you can do here. Trust me, okay?”

Heaving sobs rocked Patty’s body, and Amanda pinched her eyes shut, trying to tune out the pain emanating from her friend in massive waves. She just sat there holding the space until Patty calmed a little.

Thoughts of the agent provided some distraction. If she was supposed to be here today, where was she now? And was her seeming disappearance connected with Michaela’s untimely death?

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