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CAROLYN  
ARNOLD

**TIES THAT  
BIND**

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**TIES THAT  
BIND**

Dedicated to George Arnold  
My husband, best friend, and greatest supporter

## One

Someone died every day. Detective Madison Knight was left to make sense of it.

She ducked under the yellow tape and surveyed the scene. The white, two-story house would be deemed average any other day, but today the dead body inside made it a place of interest to the Stiles Police Department and the curious onlookers who gathered in small clusters on the sidewalk.

She'd never before seen the officer who was securing the perimeter, but she knew his type. The way he stood there—his back straight, one hand resting on his holster, the other gripping a clipboard—showed he was an eager recruit.

He held up a hand as she approached. "This is a closed crime scene."

She unclipped her badge from the waist of her pants and held it up in front of him. He studied it as if it were counterfeit. She usually respected those who took their jobs seriously but not when she was functioning on little sleep and the humidity level topped ninety-five percent at ten thirty in the morning.

"Detective K-N-I—"

Her name died on her lips as Sergeant Winston stepped out of the house. She would have groaned audibly if he weren't closing the distance between them so quickly. She preferred her boss behind his desk.

Winston gestured toward the young officer to let him know she was permitted to be on the scene. She signed in, and the officer glared at her before leaving his post. She envied the fact that he

could walk away while she was left to speak with the sarge.

“It’s about time you got here.” Winston fished a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped at his receding hairline. The extra few inches of exposed forehead could have served as a solar panel. “I was just about to assign the lead to Grant.”

Terry Grant was her on-the-job partner of five years and three years younger than her thirty-four. She’d be damned if Terry was put in charge of this case.

“Where have you been?” Winston asked.

She jacked a thumb in the rookie’s direction. “Who’s the new guy?”

“Don’t change the subject, Knight.”

She needed to offer some sort of explanation for being late. “Well, boss, you know me. Up all night slinging back shooters.”

“Don’t get smart with me.”

She flashed him a cocky smile and pulled out a Hershey’s bar from her pants pocket. The chocolate had already softened from the heat. Not that it mattered. She took a bite.

Heaven.

She spoke with her mouth partially full. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“The call came in, I was nearby, and thought someone should respond.” His leg caught the tape as he tried to step over it to the sidewalk, and he hopped on the other leg to adjust his balance. He continued speaking as if he hadn’t noticed. “The body’s upstairs, main bedroom. She was strangled.” He pointed the tip of a key toward her. “Keep me updated.” He pressed a button on his key fob and the department-issued SUV’s lights flashed. “I’ll be waiting for your call.”

As if he needed to say that. Sometimes she wondered if he valued talking more than taking action.

She took a deep breath. She could feel the young officer watching her, and she flicked a glance at him. What was his problem? She took another bite of her candy bar.

“Too bad you showed. I think I was about to get the lead.”

Madison turned toward her partner’s voice. Terry was padding



across the lawn toward her.

“I’d have to be the one dead for that to happen.” She smiled as she brushed past him.

“You look like crap.”

Her smile faded. She stopped walking and turned around. Every one of his blond hairs were in place, making her self-conscious of her short, wake-up-and-wear-it cut. His cheeks held a healthy glow, too, no doubt from his two-mile morning run. She hated people who could do mornings.

“What did you get? Two hours of sleep?”

“Three, but who’s counting?” She took another large bite of the chocolate. It was almost a slurp with how fast the bar was melting.

“You were up reviewing evidence from the last case again, weren’t you?”

She wasn’t inclined to answer.

“You can’t change the past.”

She wasn’t hungry anymore and wrapped up what was left of the chocolate. “Let’s focus on *this* case.”

“Fine, if that’s how it’s going be. Victim’s name is Laura Saunders. She’s thirty-two. Single. Officer Higgins was the first on scene.”

Higgins? She hadn’t seen him since she arrived, but he had been her training officer. He still worked in that capacity for new recruits. Advancing in the ranks wasn’t important to him. He was happy making a difference where he was stationed.

Terry continued. “Call came in from the vic’s employer, Southwest Welding Products, where she worked as the receptionist.”

“What would make the employer call?”

“She didn’t show for her shift at eight. They tried reaching her first, but when they didn’t get an answer, they sent a security officer over to her house. He found the door ajar and called downtown. Higgins was here by eight forty-five.”

“Who was—”

“The security officer?”

“Yeah.” Apparently they finished each other’s sentences now.

“Terrence Owens. And don’t worry. We took a formal statement and let him go. Background showed nothing, not even a speeding

ticket. We can function when you're not here."

She cocked her head to the side.

"He also testifies to the fact that he never stepped one foot in the place." Terry laughed. "He said he's watched enough cop dramas to know it would contaminate the crime scene. You get all these people watching those stupid TV shows, and they think they can solve a murder."

"Is Owens the one who made the formal call downtown, then?" Madison asked.

"Actually, procedure for them is to route everything through the company administration. A Sandra Butler made the call. She's the office manager."

"So, an employee is merely half an hour late for work and they send someone to the house?"

"She said it's part of their safety policy."

"At least they're a group of people inclined to think positively." She rolled her eyes. Sweat droplets ran down her back. Gross. She moved toward the house.

The young officer scurried over. He shoved his clipboard under his arm and tucked his pen behind his ear. He pointed toward the chocolate bar still in her hand. "You can't take that in there."

She glanced down. Chocolate oozed from a corner of the wrapper. He was right. She handed the package to him, and he took it with two pinched fingers.

She patted his shoulder. "Good job."

He walked away with the bar dangling from his hand, mumbling something indiscernible.

"You can be so wicked sometimes," Terry said.

"Why, thank you." She was tempted to take a mini bow but resisted the urge.

"It wasn't a compliment. And since when do you eat chocolate for breakfast?"

"Oh shut up." She punched him in the shoulder. He smirked and rubbed his arm. Same old sideshow. She headed into the house with him on her heels.

"The stairs are to the right," Terry said.

“Holy crap, it’s freezing in here.” The sweat on her skin chilled her. Refreshing, actually.

“Yep, a hundred and one outside, sixty inside.”

When she was two steps from the top of the staircase, Terry said, “And just a heads-up—this is not your typical strangulation.”

“Come on, Terry. You’ve seen one, you’ve—” She stopped abruptly when she reached the bedroom doorway. Terry was right.

The hairs rose on her arms, not from the air-conditioning but from the chill of death. In her ten years on the force, Madison had never seen anything quite like this. Maybe in New York City they were accustomed to this type of murder scene, but not here in Stiles where the population was just shy of half a million and the Major Crimes division boasted six detectives.

She nodded a greeting to Cole Richards, the medical examiner. He reciprocated with a small bob of his head.

Laura Saunders lay on her back in the middle of a double bed, arms folded over her torso. But the one thing that stood out—and this would be what Terry had tried to warn her about—was that she was naked with a man's necktie bound tightly around her neck. That adornment and her shoulder-length, brown hair provided the only contrasts between her pale skin and the beige sheets. Most strangulation victims were dressed, or when rape was a factor, the body was typically found in an alley or hotel room, not the vic's own bedroom. For Laura to be found here made it personal.

Jealous lover, perhaps?

"Was she raped?" Madison asked.

Terry rubbed the back of his neck the way he did when there were more questions than answers. "Not leaning that way. Her clothes are strewn on main level. Seems like if sex did happen, it was consensual."

"And she's in her own house," Madison added.

The entire scenario caused Madison pain and regret—pain over how this woman's life had been snuffed out so prematurely, regret

that she couldn't have prevented it. For someone who faced death on a regular basis, one would think she would be callous regarding her own mortality, but the truth was it scared her more with every passing day. Nothing was certain. And the fact Laura was only two years younger than Madison sank into the pit of her stomach.

Terry kneaded the tips of his fingers into the base of his neck. "There is no evidence of a break-in. Nothing seems to be missing. There's jewelry on her dresser, and electronics were left downstairs. No obvious signs of a struggle."

Madison moved farther into the room to study Laura and the tie more closely. It was expensive, silk, and blue striped. Her eyes then took in a shelving unit on the far wall, which housed folded clothes, an alarm clock, and a framed photograph.

She brainstormed out loud. "Maybe it was some sort of sex game that got out of hand. Erotic asphyxiation?"

"If it was something as simple as that, why not call nine-one-one? The owner of that necktie must have something to hide."

Richards's assistant excused himself as he walked through the bedroom. Madison could never remember the guy's name.

Terry continued. "Put yourself in this guy's place if things had gotten out of hand. You would loosen the tie, shake her, but you wouldn't pose her. You would certainly call for help."

"The scene definitely speaks to it being an intentional act." She met her partner's eyes. "But I'd also guess the killer felt regret. Otherwise, why cross her arms over her torso? That could indicate a close relationship between Laura and her killer."

Their discussion paused at the sound of a zipper as Richards sealed the woman in the black bag.

His assistant worked at getting the gurney out of the room and addressed Richards. "I'll wait in the hall."

Richards nodded.

"Winston confirmed you're ruling cause of death as strangulation," Madison said to the ME.

"Yes. COD is asphyxiation due to strangulation. Her face shows signs of petechiae. Young, fit women don't normally show that unless they put up a fight. And there were also cuts to her wrists."

“Cuts?” Terry asked.

“Yes.” Richards glanced at Terry. “Crime Scene is thinking cuffs. I don’t think they’ve found them yet.”

Madison’s eyes drifted to the bed’s headboard and its black vertical bars. The paint was worn off a few of them. “She’s bound, and then he uncuffs and poses her.” The hairs on her arms rose. “When are you placing time of death?”

“Thirty to thirty-three hours ago, based on the stage of rigor and body temperature.”

“So between two and five Sunday morning?” Terry smiled and shrugged his shoulders when both pairs of eyes shot to him.

Madison often wondered how her partner could do math so quickly in his head.

“Of course, the fact that it’s cold enough to hang meat in here makes it harder to pinpoint,” Richards said.

Madison noticed the light in Terry’s eyes brighten at the recognition of the cliché. He knew she didn’t care for such idioms, and he had proven himself an opportunist over the years. Whenever he could dish them out, he would. Whenever someone else said them around her, he found amusement in it. She was tempted to cross the room and beat him, but instead, she just rolled her eyes, certain the hint of a smile on her face showed. She hated that she didn’t have enough restraint to ignore him altogether.

“I’ll be conducting a full autopsy within the next twenty-four hours. I’ll keep you posted on my findings. Tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. You know where to find me.” Richards smiled at her, showcasing flawless white teeth, his midnight skin providing further contrast. And something about the way his eyes creased with the expression, Madison couldn’t claim immunity to his charms. When he smiled, it actually calmed her. Too bad he was married.

“Thanks.” The word came out automatically. Her eyes were on a framed photograph of a smiling couple. She recognized the woman as Laura, but the man was unfamiliar. “Terry, who is he?”

## Three

He sat in his 1995 Honda Civic, sweating profusely. Its air conditioner hadn't worked for years. The car was a real piece of shit, but perfect for the crappy life he had going. He combed his fingers through his hair and caught his reflection in the rearview mirror.

He lifted his sunglasses to get a better look at his eyes. They had changed. They were dark, even sinister. He put the shades back in place, rolled his shoulders forward to dislodge the tension in his neck, and took a cleansing breath. With the air came a waft of smoke from the cigarette burning in the car's ashtray.

He had parked close enough to observe the activity at 36 Bay Street, yet far enough away to be left alone. At least he hoped so. Cruisers were parked in front of the house, and forty-eight minutes ago, a department-issued SUV had pulled to a quick stop.

All this activity because of his work. It was something to be proud of.

He picked up the cigarette and tapped the ash in the tray.

Statistically, the murder itself was nothing special. Another young lady. People would move on. They always did.

It was the city's thirtieth murder of the year. He was up-to-date on his statistics. But he was always that way; he was a gatherer of facts, of useless information. Maybe someday his fact-finding and attention to detail would prove beneficial.

He wiped his forehead, and sweat trickled from his brow and down his nose. The salty perspiration stung. He winced. His nose was still tender to the touch. That crotchety old man at the bar had

a strong right hook.

He rested his eyes for a second, and when he opened them, a Crown Vic had pulled to a stop in front of the house. He straightened up.

A woman of average height—probably about five foot five—with blond hair walked toward the yellow tape. But it wasn't her looks that captured his interest. It was her determined stride. And something was familiar about her.

He smiled when he realized why.

She was Detective Madison Knight. She had made headlines for putting away the Russian Mafia czar, Dimitre Petrov, but the glory hadn't lasted long. People like Petrov had a reach that extended from behind bars, and the rumor was that Petrov had gotten the attorney who had lost his case killed.

He must have hit the big-time to have Knight on *his* investigation. An adrenaline rush flowed over him, blanketing him in heat. Energy pulsed in his veins, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. He strained to draw in a satisfying breath.

*Tap, tap.*

Knuckles rapped against the driver's-side window.

His heart slowed. His breath shortened. Slowly, he lifted his eyes to look at the source of the intrusion.

A police officer!

*Stay calm. Play it cool.*

He drew the cigarette to his lips. Damn, his nose hurt so much when he sucked air in that he had to fight crying out in pain. He left the cig perched between his fingers, and the cop motioned for him to put the window down.

"I need you to move your vehicle."

Thank God for his dark-tinted glasses or the cop might see right through him. "Sure."

The police officer bent over and peered into the car. "Are you all right, sir?"

Following the officer's gaze to his unsteady hand holding the cigarette, he forced himself to raise it for another drag. His hand shook the entire way. "Yeah, I'm—" Her lifeless eyes flashed in his



mind. He cleared his throat, hoping it would somehow dislodge his recollections. “Sure. I, uh...I’ll get out of your way immediately, Officer...Tendum.” He read the cop’s name from his shirt.

The cop’s gaze remained fixed on him, eye to eye.

*Can he see through me, sunglasses and all? Is my guilt that obvious?*

“All units confirm a secured perimeter.” The monotone voice came over the officer’s radio.

The cop turned the volume down without taking his eyes off him. “What happened to your nose?”

What is this uniform out to prove?

He forced another cough and then took yet another drag. He tapped the cigarette ash out the window. The officer stepped to the side, but based on the look in his eyes, he wasn’t going anywhere.

He needed to give the cop an answer. His words escaped through gritted teeth. “Bar fight.”

The officer nodded. His eyes condemned him. “I need you to move your car—” he drummed his flattened palm on the roof “—and try to keep yourself out of trouble.”

*Too late, Officer. Too late.*

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