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FOUND INNOCENT
by Carolyn Arnold**



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**FOUND
INNOCENT**

CAROLYN
ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Found Innocent* (Book 4 in the Detective Madison Knight series)
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CHAPTER 1

“HE DIDN’T DO IT!”

The hysterical shouting pulled Madison’s attention from her monitor to a woman rushing toward her.

The station was supposed to be quiet today. Sunday. She wasn’t required to be there, and that made it the perfect day to dig into her cold case. She was so close to getting answers.

With one more longing look at her screen, Madison rose from her chair and held up her hands to stop the woman.

“Detective Knight.” She stated this as if they had met before.

Officer Ranson, the female officer who manned the front desk, came up behind them. “Come on—”

Another officer brushed past Ranson and slipped his hands under the woman’s arms. “Let’s go.”

He pulled on her, but she stayed still. Her eyes steadied on Madison.

“Please help me.” She attempted to shake loose from the officer’s grip.

Her frown lines were deep burrows, her eyes were sunken, and the flesh around them was puffy. She appeared to be rough-edged, but there was something desperate about her, and she didn’t seem to be a threat to the lives of anyone here.

“I’ve got this,” Madison said.

“All right, your call.” The male officer let go of the woman, and he and Ranson left.

“I saw your face in the paper.” The woman held up the Stiles Times. “It’s you, isn’t it?” Her lashes were caked with mascara,

and she blinked slowly. Madison wondered if the cosmetic had sealed her eyes shut.

Madison passed a glance to the paper. It captured a moment she wished to forget. A day when she had been forced to speak in front of a crowd and to take pride in the job she had done. The thing was, though, a good cop couldn't care less about the recognition.

The woman sobbed, yet her tears didn't affect her makeup. "He wouldn't do this..."

Madison summoned patience. A list of envelope printing companies—which could prove to be a vital link in the chain of evidence against the Russians—would be on her monitor, right now.

She took a deep breath, passed another glance to her computer, and turned back to the woman. "Come with me."

Madison kept the woman to the side of her. Her first impression was the woman didn't pose a threat, but she still wasn't willing to sacrifice her back by leading the way into the room.

Inside, Madison gestured to a chair.

The woman dropped her red bag heavily on the table. It was large enough to serve as a duffel bag. She pulled off her jean jacket, folded it over the back of the chair, and revealed a pink sweater that displayed more cleavage than Madison could ever hope to see on herself. The woman went rooting through the duffel bag and she stuffed a stick of gum in her mouth. She worked at chopping it into a soft, pliable distraction. It snapped in her mouth.

"Let's start with your name—"

"Vilma with an 'i.' Vilma Thorne, well, it would have been. My God, Kev!" She raised her face upward as if calling out to a Greater Being. Her gum chewing paused only momentarily.

"Vilma—" Madison had to tune out the noise and the display of her open-mouth chewing. "Let's start at the beginning. Why are you here?"

Vilma stuck a finger through one of the large gold hoops dangling from her ears and leaned in.

Madison detected the blend of cheap perfume and cigarettes. Maybe—she inhaled deeper, trying not to be obvious—it wasn't perfume but whiskey. It was hard to discern. Her eyes appeared normal, except for the abuse of eye makeup. Besides the thick mascara, her lids were weighed with the color purple. Her pupils weren't dilated or pinpricks.

Still, she didn't respond to Madison's question.

"Okay, Vilma, if you need my help, I need you to talk to me."

Possibly this woman was on a new line of drug that disguised itself behind brilliant colors? Maybe this was a mistake and Madison should have let her get hauled away.

"My family is against what he did. But he didn't do it!" Her voice rose, tears flowed. She stopped chewing and, sniffing, went rooting in the duffel bag again. She came out with a bunched up tissue and wiped her nose.

Madison's tolerance level had almost reached its limit. "You keep saying he didn't do it. Do what?"

A tissue still pinched on the tip of her nose, Vilma said, "He didn't kill himself...someone killed him."

CHAPTER 2

SIXTEEN HOURS LATER, Madison still wondered why she had agreed to look into it. By all accounts, Vilma with an ‘i’ seemed to be either disillusioned or off her medications.

Madison had searched the database for Kevin Thorne. He had been twenty-seven. His cause of death was suicide. His body was released within the last week and his funeral was scheduled for today.

Vilma was having a hard time coming to grips with what her fiancé had done, and the fact their wedding was set for two days after his death wouldn’t have helped the situation. Even with that aside, in suicide there was rarely an acceptable reason to justify the action.

She flicked a pen across her desk and thought about how the interaction had changed the direction of her day. She didn’t get much accomplished with her cold case and it had kept her up most of the night. She knew who was behind the murder, but she had to prove who pulled the trigger.

The victim was a defense attorney who had been gunned down in his driveway after failing to come through for his client, Dimitre Petrov, a Russian mafia boss. He was sent away on a life sentence for a single murder, a joke when the man’s hands were stained with blood. With him behind bars, she knew he wasn’t physically involved, but she believed he’d ordered the hit. It was a matter of proving which of his right-hand men were responsible, and then this beyond a doubt to the DA and subsequent jury.

The bit of evidence she focused on these days came down to

an envelope match—the infinity symbol was woven into the fiber of the paper.

A torn piece had been found next to the dead attorney and it was a comparative match to an envelope addressed to her from Petrov himself. The contents of the letter, however, she kept to herself. She never even told her partner, Terry, what it said.

Terry would mock her, asking what she expected to solve with an envelope.

Her thoughts on the matter were that small things pile up, and when there is enough, it builds a solid case. Just as a mountain is formed, one dirt particle at a time, she would gather indisputable evidence against all involved with the murder.

“So, what did I miss yesterday?” Terry came in holding two Starbucks. He smiled as he extended one to her.

She looked up at him, disappointed there weren’t more hours in the day. She closed the Internet browser and, with it, a list of printing companies, but before she did, she sent the link to her home e-mail. “I take it you heard.”

“Oh yeah.” He started laughing. “I’d say eccentric, but everyone said she didn’t appear to have any money.” He spun his index finger around his right ear. “Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.”

Madison laughed. “You have such a way with words.”

“You’re jealous of me.” He pulled back his coffee for a quick sip and then put it on his desk. “Seriously, though. Clashing colors, screaming, ‘He wouldn’t do it.’” He steeped his hands. “What didn’t he do? Spill it.”

“Kill himself.”

“Here I thought it was going to be so much better than that.” He exhaled. “Disappointing.”

“Disappointing?”

“Well, I thought maybe she was going to say the butler didn’t do it. I don’t know. I just expected something better.”

“She says that her fiancé never would have killed himself.”

“If I had a penny for every time I’ve heard that—”

She overlooked the cliché. “You’ve heard that before?”

“Nope, not really, just thought I’d bug you with a cliché. Too

bad it didn't work." He pouted.

"Terry, I'm going to kill you." She rose and headed toward him.

He took his Starbucks and started into a slow jog away from her. "First you'll have to catch me."

She would catch him and she'd make him beg for a reprieve. At least that was her goal until Sergeant Winston came around a corner.

"Don't you two have work to do?"

Terry stopped moving. Madison caught up to where the Sergeant and Terry were.

"We're a little slow this morning," she said.

"As I can see. Well, now you're not. Remains have been found at nine twenty-three Weber Street."

"That's a residential neighborhood." Terry took a sip of coffee.

"Very good work, Sherlock. They were found in the backyard. Of a house." The sarge seemed to add the latter part for the purpose of mocking Terry. "Some poor sap thought it would be a good time to turn the dirt in his garden and came up with a finger on the point of his shovel."

It seemed a little early to start on a garden—it was March—but Madison focused on the victim. "Do we know if it's a male or female?"

"They were still working at uncovering it all, from what I know, but the finger indicates it is a female. Seriously, don't tell me you're both still standing here. You were moving quicker a moment ago."

"Leaving now."

"Damn right you better be."

"I call the driver's seat," Terry said.

Madison brushed past him. "You can call whatever you want. Still doesn't mean it's happening."

CHAPTER 3

THE ADDRESS OF 923 WEBER Street put them right in the middle of the popular east end—popular, at least, with drug users, prostitutes, and gang bangers. Narcotic detectives had recently shut down a meth lab on a nearby street, resulting in charges against three people. It was the type of neighborhood where people could slip away without being missed. It was also an area of contrasts. Some houses were well-tended to, showcasing people who took pride in what they could afford while other properties fell apart.

The houses they were passing right now were worn down. The paint was chipped off in large sections and some had broken front windows.

As Madison drove, Terry faced the window. “I wouldn’t want my kid growing up here.”

Terry’s wife, Annabelle, was five months pregnant.

“Speaking of it—”

“It?” Terry turned to her from the passenger seat. “Nice.” He laughed.

“Well.” She didn’t have a mothering instinct in her. “How else do you refer to *it* when you have no idea which sex it is?”

“As him. It’s a he. I can feel it.”

Her focus was on the road, but she heard the smile in his voice. “You sound pretty positive.”

“A father knows these things.”

“Yeah, what does Annabelle have to say?”

“Still staying on the topic of its sex? Because if we’re going

off topic, most of the time it's pick up a burger, or get me black cherry ice cream. The woman's got the strangest cravings. Last night you'll never believe what she had for dinner."

Madison smiled. "Amuse me."

"Canned salmon with a little dab of mayo and pickles. That's it. No bread, crackers, nothing else."

"Sounds healthy."

"Sounds like a boy." Terry flashed a goofy grin.

Madison parked in front of the house. Their light conversation faded as the eyes of onlookers fixed on them. They stood on the sidewalks, arms crossed, heads tilted, seeming happy the spotlight was on someone else. For now, whatever crimes they had committed would go undiscovered.

Cole Richards, the ME, was already there along with the Crime Scene Investigation Unit. Their vehicles were parked in front, on the road.

The house offered no driveway. The two stories of siding were pitted with dirt and the passage of time. The front yard was small and outlined by a four-foot high chain-link fence, but Madison could see down the side of the house that the backyard was long.

"Maybe there's more than one body. There would be room."

"You've always been a positive thinker."

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time. Right area for it."

Officer Higgins came to them.

"Hey, Chief." Madison addressed him like that sometimes. It made the man's face flush and his cheeks ball with a full smile. Higgins could have been the Chief if he'd aspired to be, but he preferred staying at a lower rank of officer. As Madison saw it, the man wasn't corrupt enough to be promoted to office.

"Not too nice around here." Higgins traced his fingers through the air directing their attention to the neighborhood, its implied reputation.

Madison looked back and noticed a pair of sneakers hanging by its laces over a hydro wire.

Higgins continued. "I've been called out on domestics to this

house so many times, the car knows the route. I should have known it would be for the girl's death one day."

"Do we have an identity yet?"

He slowly shook his head. "Well, not a full anyway. You know how it is. Neighbors hear fighting and call it in, or the girl does, but when we get here, the guy's done nothing wrong. It was her fault. I can just remember a first name. Lacy."

"She never pressed charges?"

"Nope, and we can't make 'em. There's no ID on her. Richards said she hasn't been there too long. But I remember her face."

"Have the entire remains been excavated at this point?"

Higgins nodded. "The guy living here used her as his own punching bag. There was nothing I could do. The only time I got to haul his white ass downtown was when he answered the door with a .22. It wasn't registered." Higgins smiled. "But it didn't keep him behind bars long. He was back out to beat on her. That must have been ten weeks ago now. He got two months' probation. Speaking of which, I haven't been called out here since. Until now."

"What's his name?"

"Don't even need to consult the records for that one. Ralph Hennessey. We can't find him right now."

"Sounds like he's running." Madison glanced at Terry and gestured for him to start taking notes. He didn't make any move to.

"Had the woman lived here?" Terry asked.

Higgins shook his head. "I thought she did, but there's no sign of it inside, except for a package of prescribed allergy medication. Crime Scene found it under a couch. Unfortunately, the label was torn and her full name wasn't there. We just have Lacy, what we already knew. There isn't a script number either, but we have a partial logo and the pharmacy phone number. It might help. We'll also be getting out canvassing soon. If anything comes of it, we'll let you know."

"If Hennessey did kill her, he'd want to get rid of all the signs she was there. They could have even slipped out when he grabbed

her purse to dispose of it," Terry said.

"It's possible," Madison said. "A lot of things are possible." She addressed Higgins. "How many apartments are in this house?"

"There are two rental properties. Hennessey lives on the main level, and a guy by the name of Elroy Bates rents the upstairs. He's got a record. B&E. Got out a year ago after serving three years. We've gone to pick him up. He works at a gas bar down on Bakker Street."

"Anyone contact the property owner?"

"No need. He's the one who called us."

"He's the green thumb who wanted to start the garden?" Terry asked.

"Donald Giles. He got a ride downtown. You can talk to him there."

Madison glanced at Terry, who tapped the names into his new phone. She rolled her eyes. He had discovered the technology age recently and it replaced his traditional notepad. Madison didn't put much faith in his new system. You could scribble something down so much faster.

"Terry."

"What?" He kept tapping on the screen.

Higgins smiled at Madison. The older guy knew her enough to know she wasn't the largest fan of electronic gadgets. Some things were better done the traditional way. She snapped her fingers. "By the time you're finished there, we'll have caught the killer."

"And the problem with that?" He smiled at her.

She narrowed her eyes.

"Fine." He snapped his phone back into its holder and pulled out a notepad. He held it tight to his chest, close to his face, a black pen poised over the lined sheet. She could picture him with small round reading glasses perched on the end of his nose.

"Yes, boss. What can I do for you?"

"Don't be a smartass." She smiled. "The names are Ralph Hennessey and Elroy Bates."

Terry wrote the names down.

“Does Richards know the cause of death?”

“Based on the hole in her head—”

“Gunshot wound?”

“Seems like it. Maybe even a .22. The .22 that had originally landed Hennessey behind bars was confiscated, but they’re easy to get on the street.”

“Hopefully there’s still a bullet.” Madison patted Higgins’s arm on the way to the backyard.

“Keep safe out there, Maddy.”

“You too, Chief.”

Terry leaned into Madison, “What about me? He didn’t tell me to be safe. Are you two involved and I don’t know about it?”

“Seriously? The guy is the same age as my father. Now, if he were at least twenty years younger...maybe.” She laughed.

The property seemed alive as Crime Scene crawled through every blade of grass. A barn-shaped shed was in a far corner. Mark Andrews, a CSI, was working through its contents.

The back door of the house opened and Cynthia Baxter came out. She stood there as if she were lost in thought. She pulled her sunglasses down from her forehead where they had been positioned. The regular studious eyeglasses may have been replaced by contacts today, which meant she must have had a good night’s sleep.

Madison waved to her, but her friend’s thoughts must have transported her focus. She didn’t respond but walked back inside the house.

The shallow grave was in a garden that lined the property’s perimeter. The remains were on a black tarp to the side of the hole. Richards was braced beside the vic’s head.

Madison addressed him. “Higgins said it was a gunshot to the head that may be the cause of death.”

Richards looked up at her long enough to communicate his disgust that an officer would make that judgment. “I haven’t concluded yet.”

Richards’s personality usually accommodated for some small talk and lightheartedness. Today he didn’t seem to be his normal

self, although, Madison realized her approach could be what had changed the outcome. She had managed to insult his profession—something she had had no intention of doing.

“How long do you think she’s been in there?” She remembered Higgins had mentioned Richards’s assessment, but she would hear it firsthand.

Richards rose to his feet and squinted from the sunlight. “I’d say probably no longer than one month, but it’s hard to pinpoint exactly.”

“Which means we’ll need to find last witnesses who saw her alive,” Terry said.

Madison looked down at the woman. “First we need to figure out exactly who she is.” There was dried blood caked with dirt around her mouth. “Gunshot to the mouth.”

“Appears that way.” Richards bent back down and opened the vic’s jaw.

Madison looked inside her mouth. A few of the front teeth were broken off, likely from impact. “It looks like a small caliber. Like a .22.”

“Possible.”

“If that’s the case, we probably won’t have a bullet to trace. It would have fragmented in her brain, especially at such a close range.” Madison noticed the muzzle burn around her mouth.

“Hopefully we can find the casing.” Terry looked around the yard.

“First, we’ll need the scene of the crime.” Madison kept her eyes on the woman. She appeared anorexic. Her hipbones extruded from under her skin. She made an assessment based on the demographics of the area. “Drug addict?”

“My first thoughts on the matter, yes, but I didn’t see any visible signs at first. Until...” Richards moved down the body and separated two of her toes to expose the center of them. There was a definite puncture mark. “This is where she shot up. I’ll be requesting a tox panel on her to narrow in on exactly what she was into.”

Madison noticed a rose tattoo on her ankle.

Richards pointed to abrasions on her knuckles. “It also looks like she may have been in a bit of a struggle. I don’t typically like to speculate. I’d say it looks like a suicide, but—”

“So she killed herself.” Madison glanced at the hole in the ground and back to Terry. “But how did she bury herself?”

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