

**A sample of
LIFE SENTENCE
by Carolyn Arnold**

LIFE

SENTENCE

CAROLYN

ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Life Sentence* (Prequel to the Detective Madison Knight series)
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PROLOGUE

HE HATED BEING RIGHT SOMETIMES. Too bad money blinded him from following his gut instinct. He hated being so self-assured that he thought he could meet the infamous Russian mafia boss and have the option of walking away.

“He’s in here.” The officer swung the door open and stepped to the side.

Possibly it was his heightening sense of paranoia getting the best of him, but he could swear the cop didn’t even want to be in the same room with the man.

The Russian was cuffed to the table but leaned back in his chair, chest wide, as far as the chain would allow. He cupped one hand over the back of the other.

For being forty-five, he looked older than his years. His shoulder-length brown hair clung to his head as if slicked with grease. His eyes were sunken and his cheeks concave, giving prominence to his jaw bone, but it wasn’t his physical attributes that changed perception—it was the raw energy in the room.

Dimitre Petrov snapped his fingers, and Bryan was torn from his thoughts.

“Lexan, da? You’ll be my lawyer.”

Dimitre kept his eyes on him, and when he didn’t respond right away, he made a point of directing Bryan’s attention to the clock on the wall.

Bryan supposed time held a different value when facing the possibility of life in prison.

“So you had nothing to do with his murder?” The words

blurted out in a nervous reaction to the built-up media hysteria, and Bryan felt like an amateur the moment they left his lips. Guilt or innocence didn't factor heavily into the equation, but he liked to be prepared.

"Nothing—nothing is a strong word, Mr. Lexan."

There was that gut feeling, the one that told him to back away. But what this man represented—the high profile case and what winning would accomplish for his firm combined to mute his better judgment.

Dimitre's stare made Bryan's skin tingle and raised the hairs on his neck and arms.

What was it about this man's incessant gaze? His eyes contained a dark history. He had been witness to unspeakable things. His eyes provided testimony to this. Bryan preferred to be spared the details.

Calculating everything involved, he was conflicted about accepting the job, but the money and the publicity that would come from it were impossible to turn his back on.

Bryan extended his hand across the table. "I'd be honored to be your lawyer."

Dimitre clenched his hands into fists. "Now get me the hell out of here."

"You're charged with first-degree murder and based on your history—" Bryan watched Dimitre's eyes glaze over and hesitated to continue—"bail may be difficult to negotiate."

"Don't tell me I misjudged you."

"I said difficult, not impossible." He forced a smile. "I'll do my utmost, Mr. Petrov."

"Simply, Dimitre."

His voice held an insincere sweetness, but his facial expression concerned Bryan more. It conveyed a proud sense of ownership. Or did it mimic parental pride? Such as one reflected when a child reaches a goal or mile marker. Within the context of their relationship, it made him both nervous and offended. He was owned by no one. But the advantages of swallowing some of his pride were too good to ignore.

"I'll get you that bail hearing. I'll also keep the prosecution buried in motion appeals, starting with a change of venue."

Dimitre slammed his palms on the table and exclaimed something in Russian.

Bryan didn't know the meaning, but he assumed it meant something good based on the spark in the man's eyes.

"All right, I will be in touch, Mr. Petrov." The man's eyes corrected him, and Bryan addressed him by his first name. "Dimitre."

He began to rise but was directed with the motion of a hand to sit back down.

"One more thing."

Bryan's stomach tossed, albeit faint enough to try and deny it. He'd never admit to the innate fear this man elicited.

"Bonded by attorney-client privilege, da?" Dimitre probed his eyes, intently enough Bryan sensed pressure on the back of his skull.

"My being exonerated of all charges, very important to me." His broken English was evident as it came through his thick Russian accent.

Maybe he was getting in too deep. No one could guarantee victory.

The room fell silent in the way an eerie calm precedes a horrible storm.

"I have men who will ensure my—how you say—restitution, should I be convicted."

Bryan knew all too well. He had done his research before he agreed to this meeting yet still came. Curse money for being such a temptation.

The man's organization was large and encompassed more than it was possible to know. What he had found out, part of him wished he hadn't.

The man operated according to his own rules, directed by no one but himself—invincible and untouchable. Witnesses disappeared. Evidence went missing or was tainted. There was never enough to link him to his crimes. The murders, trafficking,

and possession of drugs and weapons may as well have been rumor for the amount of good it did in putting him behind bars.

Then again, the fact that Dimitre Petrov was sitting in front of him, chained to a table, proved the legend was an imperfect being after all. They had him on a single murder charge, hardly the big picture, but Bryan supposed the authorities were frustrated by their previous attempts to keep the man behind bars.

For a few seconds, Bryan took solace in the fact the powerful man was on his side, but he also realized the flipside to that. The one being pointed out to him now. You wrong the powerful man, you disappear for good.

His tie constricted his airflow, but he managed to get his words out. "I understand."

"Just to make sure you do, know this." The man paused for dramatic effect—and it was effective.

Flashes of newspaper articles sparked in Bryan's brain. Should he lose the case, he would likely have the unpleasant experience of meeting Sergey and Anatolli—Petrov's two right-hand men. This stark realization made him aware of a large wad of saliva at the back of his throat.

Dimitre opened his mouth to continue, poised with the confidence of a god.

"If I pay with my life, you will pay with yours."

Bryan's stomach fully churned. This time there would be no denying it. The threat was real. Dimitre Petrov had the power to ensure the fulfillment of his words—even from behind bars.

CHAPTER 1

“I OBJECT YOUR HONOR!” Bryan shot to his feet. “Calls for speculation.”

“Sustained,” the judge declared. “Prosecution, rephrase your question.”

Judge Myles Flannigan represented the third generation of his family to sit as a Supreme Court judge, but equally important to his influence in the law community was the personal role he played in Bryan’s life.

The man had been a close friend of his father’s, and a mentor to him. They would spend hours discussing law and leave the door open so Bryan could join them. As he got older, Bryan would get into heated debates with them and clearly remembered the praise he received from Myles at an early age. While laughing heartily and patting him on the head, he told Bryan he would excel at law.

Bryan’s mind came back to the courtroom when Martin Andrews, the prosecuting attorney, addressed the witness.

“Is it true the defendant Dimitre Petrov’s fingerprints were found on the gun?” Martin pointed to the gun on the evidence table.

“Yes, it is.”

Mr. Woods, who was sent from the forensics lab, was a weak and timid man. He squirmed in his seat. Nervously trying to compose himself for the next question, he pushed his glasses higher on his nose with his left index finger.

Bryan watched him closely. He knew how to get what he needed out of this puny man to accomplish his purpose, how to

get Dimitre exonerated. He would intimidate Woods and squash his testimony. Weak people earned his disrespect and contempt. His father always taught him the world would be better off without them, and Bryan agreed.

Martin stood in front of the witness stand, hands clasped behind his back. He continued, "Were the fingerprints from Mr. Petrov located where necessary to have pulled the trigger?"

Bryan sensed the heat in the courtroom turn up due to the rage radiating from Dimitre.

Woods's Adam's apple heaved with a deep swallow. His eyes shifted from Dimitre to Bryan and back to his questioner. His eyes veered again to Dimitre, and after a prolonged blink, he opened his mouth to speak.

"Yes." His seemed to choke on the word, and his eyes cast downward.

Bryan glanced at Dimitre, who glared at Woods with murderous eyes.

"No further questions." He smiled at Bryan, his eyes disclosing a confidence that he had the case sealed up.

Bryan was not the type to back down but had he been a lesser person the prosecution's witnesses may have proven challenging to refute. The testimony given yesterday by their first witness, Detective Madison Knight, made him uncomfortable.

Her attention to detail and recollection of the crime scene hurt his case. He had chosen to address her but failed to make any headway. For a man like himself, it served to be extremely aggravating. He could normally break anyone on the witness stand, including professionals, but he couldn't attack her methods. She followed the law to the letter.

When she picked up Dimitre, she had left no room for dispute when she convinced him to sign away his rights. Even the investigative team chosen for the case had a tremendous reputation for being thorough and accurate, yet now facing a representative from that team, any anxieties he had were obliterated.

Mr. Woods is already sweating up there, wait until he finishes answering questions from me. Bryan suppressed the smirk that

wanted to give birth.

Judge Flannigan directed his attention to Bryan. "Does the Defense wish to cross-examine the witness?"

"We do, Your Honor."

Bryan stood, straightened his suit jacket, and approached the stand. His steps were slow and deliberate. There was no sense in wasting time, the earlier the exoneration, the better. Sow the seeds of doubt right away. He gestured toward the 'evidence' where it was displayed for the courtroom.

"Did you find any other fingerprints on the gun?"

Woods pushed his glasses up again and avoided eye contact despite Bryan being fixed on him. He took another rough swallow.

"Yes, we did, but we couldn't find them in any of our databases. They came back unknown."

Bryan glanced at the jury. The short-haired brunette in the front row exchanged interested expressions with the man on her left.

It gave him a sense of satisfaction, just the thought of Martin being uncomfortable in his seat. He must have been having a hard time concealing discouragement in his witness for elaborating on what should have been a simple one-worded answer—amateur.

"So in fact this other set of prints could have belonged to the killer, but because we don't know who the prints belong to we point the finger at my client?" Bryan expected Martin to object, but when none was raised he gestured with his right hand for Woods to answer. "Mr. Woods?"

"I suppose." He fidgeted with his hands.

"I suppose? Mr. Woods, a man could be sent away for his life—an innocent man."

Bryan stared at the witness, and it forced his eyes upward. His brow glistened with moisture, and his glasses were halfway down his nose again. Bryan found amusement with how a man like this could think he would play a part in bringing down his client.

"I'll repeat the question. Please respond with a yes or no. Could the other set of unidentified prints found on the gun belong to the killer?"

The intensity of emotion in the courtroom was tangible.

"I object Your Honor!" Martin stood from his seat. "Badgering the witness."

"Sustained."

Those in the courtroom talked among themselves.

"Order! I will have order in my courtroom." Flannigan banged his gavel three times. "Continue with another line of questioning."

The slight interruption and shift in direction did nothing to deter Bryan's purpose or diminish his poise. He stepped toward the stand.

"Is it not a fact there was also unidentified female DNA found at the scene?"

"Yes, there was."

Bryan imagined Woods mentally counting down the seconds for his release from the stand.

"Could it not be her fingerprints, *her fingers*, which pulled the trigger, thereby killing Leroy Adams?" Bryan let his rhetorical question hang for several seconds. When Woods didn't answer, Bryan said, "No further questions, Your Honor."

Woods got off the stand, pulling out on his suit jacket. His eyes met with no one's, and his face was pale. The man gave the impression he could use a drink.

Bryan tugged on his suit jacket with both hands and walked self-assuredly back to his chair. Sitting down he sensed someone watching him. Following his instinct, he turned to Martin, who had shifted his attention back to the judge.

"Would the Prosecution like to call another witness?" The judge looked over the brim of half spectacles.

"Your Honor, I would like to call a last-minute witness to the stand." Martin rose. "A Miss Stella Robins."

Bryan pivoted his neck to face Martin. Standing, Bryan said, "Your Honor, the Defense had no prior knowledge of this witness."

Dimitre's hand brushed Bryan's arm. His client's face was plastered with arrogance. He was happy that Dimitre had faith in him, but he preferred preparation, viewing it as a vital component

to a successful outcome.

“Approach the bench.”

The judge addressed Martin, “Why is she integral to this case and it better be good.” Judge Flannigan conveyed his irritation by the arching of his brow.

“She saw Dimitre go into the apartment of Leroy Adams.”

Bryan listened in utter disbelief, but neither man was concerned about his reaction.

Martin continued, “She came forward when she heard the news.”

Bryan sighed and rolled his eyes, his exasperation evident to his colleagues. “Has she been living in a box for the last few months?”

The charges against Dimitre had been littered all over the news. The local papers must have been making a fortune. Martin’s silent communication conveyed that she had been afraid up until this point. The unspoken words caused Bryan to experience a split second of fear himself as Dimitre’s words slammed into the front of his mind: *If I pay with my life, you’ll pay with yours.*

He couldn’t let this guy get to him like this. He cleared his throat. Changing his eye contact from Martin to the judge, Bryan said, “I will need time to speak to the witness and confer with my client prior to questioning.”

“Fair enough. We’ll reconvene on Monday. I trust that amount of time will be more than sufficient.” Judge Flannigan looked from Bryan to Martin and returned to rest his focus on Bryan.

Bryan conceded with a nod. Returning to his seat, he couldn’t even find relief in knowing his client took the news of this surprise witness with ease. His focus steadied on how to shift his defense strategy. She could be what sealed the case, what would slam the prison doors shut. She could ultimately cost him—his life. The thought made him cold.

Dimitre leaned over. “Enjoy your mid-afternoon cocktail. She’s my ex-lover.” A wide smile spread across his face.

With those words being spoken and the flash in his eye, Bryan surmised Stella Robins would only live as long as her testimony—

if she survived long enough to give it.

He wondered what would make a woman, who no doubt knew what Dimitre was capable of, willing to risk her life by pointing her manicured finger at him. He didn't find any comfort in knowing their connection, but he feigned a smile, trying to exude confidence. Not that he was a religious man, but he prayed Dimitre didn't see through it.

Judge Flannigan said, "This court is adjourned until Monday at nine AM. Council, we will meet for fifteen minutes in my chambers."

Most had left the room, but Dimitre stood there, his disappointment obvious. "And I was really looking forward to hearing from that little bitch today."

Bryan's uneasiness over this development morphed into aggravation toward his client. Surely, Dimitre would have noticed an ex-girlfriend watching him go into the apartment. Yet the man had mentioned nothing of it. Bryan shuffled files into his briefcase.

"Listen, I'm going to need you to stick around until I'm finished in the chambers. Then I'll take you out for a few drinks, and you can fill me in on anything I need to know."

"Really not much more to say." Dimitre failed to hide the haughty sarcasm behind his words.

"SHE SAW YOU, Dimitre," Bryan said with a mouthful of onion rings. "She saw you go into Leroy's apartment around the time of death."

"You sweat da small stuff." His Russian accent was thick. "That woman has had it in for me since the day I started screwing Maxine."

Dimitre sank back into his side of the booth, relaxed, arrogant, and cocky. He didn't think anything could touch him. He stretched his left arm out on the back of the bench.

He slugged back a double shot of vodka and slammed the glass onto the table.

"You think a woman is going to be what does *me* in?"

Bryan was relieved that Dimitre couldn't read minds because

then he'd know his doubts. A woman, who could place him in the apartment at the time of the murder, could do him in. His thoughts wandered back to the meeting in the judge's chambers where he was further enlightened as to the relevance of Stella Robins's testimony.

She was an eyewitness, or as close to one as possible, without being in the room at the time of the shooting. She was waiting at a bus stop across the street and claims to have seen Dimitre go into Leroy's apartment.

"SHE SAID HE LOOKED LIKE a train on tracks, or a man on a mission." Martin reiterated his witness's words. "She was terrified of him and felt he was going to do something horrible."

Bryan said, "And even though she had this feeling, she was impelled to follow a *strange* man into an apartment building?" He tested just how much Martin knew about her. Dimitre's statement in the courtroom was fresh in his mind: *she's my ex-lover*.

BRYAN WAS STARTLED BACK TO the present with the clanging of dropped plates and cutlery. A waitress had tried to carry too much at once and had failed.

"Remember the importance of winning." Dimitre let his words sink in the air. They were heavy and enclosed the omnipresent threat that hung over the trial.

"I'll always have your back." Bryan stuck the last few rings in his mouth. "Have faith in me. I know I can handle this one hands down."

He would work a woman like Stella Robins, a jilted lover left so the man could bed another, like clay in his hands. His thoughts were interrupted by his cell phone. He glanced at the caller's identity and placed it back on his belt clip without answering.

"I've really got to get going. See you Monday and dress to impress." Bryan shot him a grin while tossing a fifty-dollar bill on the table. "That ought to cover it and buy another couple rounds for yourself."

CHAPTER 2

IT WAS EIGHT THIRTY IN the morning, and the glass buildings of downtown were already magnifying the brightness of the sun. The weathermen were calling for a record high, the warmest spring day in ten years.

The office building Jessica worked at was right in the heart of the city's downtown. She had started with Get Noticed Media four years ago. Her strong dedication and education quickly saw her promoted to account manager. With the advancement, she received a windowed office and two assistants. At twenty-six, she knew she was fortunate.

Get Noticed Media's portfolio encompassed a wide segment of North American industries, from athletic wear to popular beverages and bubble gum. Their marketing genius wasn't limited to one sector, but they employed all viable means of advertising which included billboards, buses, radio, and television commercials. Jessica's team could even be credited for the vision behind a few thirty-second spots that were broadcasted during the largest televised sporting event of the year.

She stopped typing on her laptop, reached for her coffee, and swiveled to look out the wall of windows to the streets below.

She inhaled the aroma of her coffee and blew to cool it. She let the caffeine awaken her senses and was thankful to be on the tenth floor and not part of the mass outside.

People fought their way through the crowds to get where they needed to be. Cars were lined up bumper to bumper in front of the building and down the side streets. Due to the weather

projection, more were being pulled out for pleasure and mingled with the regulars who were in a hurry to transact sales and bring in money.

Her thoughts dwelled on the business people, the corporate suits, as she referred to them. Most of them stepped over each other, like rats in a sewer, just to get ahead. She had determined long ago never to let herself be pressed into that mold. She would never let the coldness of the city harden her. She had respect for others, and that would never change.

Unlike the practices of other managers, her assistants were treated with a high regard for their individual and team accomplishments. They were encouraged to speak their minds and offer their opinions. They were invaluable to her continued success.

A soft knock on her office door interrupted her thoughts.

“Come in.” She turned around and placed her coffee on the desk.

Nella walked in with her own morning motivation, a decaffeinated tea.

“Hey.” Jessica smiled.

Nella was one of her assistants and a good friend. She was a beautiful and bright African-American. Her only true weakness, besides a smooth talking man, was fashion. Today, she showcased a trimming, just-above-the-knee black skirt complimented by a creamy silk blouse with long belled cuffs. A simple string of pearls accented her slender neck, and a matching set of earrings adorned her earlobes. Her long black hair was parted in the middle and sleeked back into a tight ponytail.

Jessica noticed the black high heels she wore. They must have been new. Included with Nella’s weakness for fashion was footwear. The woman had such a fascination with shoes some would consider it an obsession.

“Hey, girl, show it to me.” Nella smiled and moved forward to see Jessica’s ring finger. She pulled back when she noticed it was bare and disappointment swept over her face. “Oh, I’m sorry, hon.”

"It's okay. He will when he's ready." Jessica placed her arms on the desk, bent at the elbows, and contemplatively lifted her hand to her chin.

"When he's ready? Child, he's had months to git ready." She braced her left hand on her hip.

Jessica couldn't hold back her laughter. With Nella being such a naturally excitable person, the fact she didn't drink caffeine proved to be a good thing. Now, if only a strong enough force existed to keep her from chocolate.

"What? You're not upset? Why I oughta talk to that man and give him a piece of my mind." Nella dropped into one of the chairs opposite Jessica's desk and crossed her legs.

"It's okay. Really." Bryan instantly flashed through her mind. She smiled in her thoughts, distancing herself from the present. "He'll ask me, but he'll want everything to be perfect."

"And what could be more perfect then the man cooking you dinner?" Nella bobbed her eyebrows. "I can't even imagine Bob cooking for me."

Bob was a big guy, built like a tank, not overweight but solid. His arms were riddled with tattoos, and he was a car mechanic. It was a true case of opposites attract. They had been seeing each other for a couple of weeks.

A mental picture formed and caused Jessica to chuckle. "Yeah, that would be quite something. And if he did cook, would you eat it? That's the question."

"Quite unlikely, and if he insisted I'd make him take the first bite just to see if he survived it." Nella switched her mental gears to business. "Well, are you ready for today—a new company and a new opportunity."

With those words leaving Nella's mouth, it was like a switch had been flipped and the office became a blur of activity. Phones rang, fax machines beeped, and people began clicking away on their keyboards. Every day at nine it was the same thing.

Dominic barged in sporting a black, narrow pin-striped suit, orange shirt, and black tie. He was her other assistant. He was Italian, bold, and outgoing.

“So ladies, hope you’re ready to go. This could be just the beginning with these guys,” he said.

The presentation was to commence at nine thirty, leaving them another thirty minutes. As Dominic stated, it *could be* just the beginning with Knockturnl, but it *would be* if Jessica had a say.

Knockturnl was a newly founded beverage company whose main focus was their new energy drink T-Bolt. Derived from natural products, its main ingredient being ginseng, it didn’t carry a large label warning of numerous health dangers. It promised to boost physical energy and endurance without the heart palpitations or the jitters. It even claimed to increase mental capacity, alleviate stress, and help fight against the effects of aging. It seemed like a surefire product guaranteed of success and popularity.

Jessica would ensure T-Bolt hit the market in a fresh, young, and invigorating way. Her ultimate goal was to make this company and its product household words.

“You have the meeting room set up?” Jessica addressed this to Dominic.

“Yes. Two full water pitchers, glasses are on the table, and the proposals are in a neat stack at the end—one for each person. Six of us in there, right?” Her mouth opened to speak, but before she could talk, he said, “No, I know, eight.” He flashed those dimples.

Jessica smiled and sighed with relief. Part of her wanted to hurt him, but she fought the urge. “Yes, eight.” She shot him a dirty look while conducting a head count in her mind. It would be herself, Nella, Dominic, Henry her boss, his one assistant Lily, and the three representatives from Knockturnl.

Dominic sat in the chair beside Nella, and both women shared glances and were silent.

Nella exhaled in exasperation. “You’re not even going to ask the girl how her weekend went?”

Jessica raised her right hand and shook it. “It’s fine.”

Dominic, although a sweet person, was a typical male. His interest wasn’t on engagements and the detailed personal activities and agendas of his coworkers or friends. Most times he

needed prodding, but what more could be expected from a man whose longest relationship consisted of three dates?

Dominic made a sad face for Jessica's sake. "He didn't propose, did he?"

"No, but as I keep telling, Nella, it's fine. He will. I have faith in that." Jessica took a sip of her coffee. "But enough about me, let's get to that boardroom. We have to sell this baby."

THE BOARDROOM HAD A WALL of glass to the hallway with privacy tint. The outside wall was floor-to-ceiling windows, which helped to impress clients with the beautiful view of the city. A cherry-finished conference table was centered in the room with twelve leather desk chairs around it, five up both sides and one on each end.

Jessica went over everything in her mind, visually checking that all was in order. She worked on bolstering her confidence. They were going to nail this.

Then Jessica caught a glimpse of him. He followed Nella into the boardroom. He must have been Mason, the owner of Knockturnl. His demeanor conveyed self-assurance, but not arrogance.

There were three of them, two men and one woman, but he struck her as a hit to the head. He captivated her attention. She had to shake her feelings and get her composure together. She took a step forward to meet them.

"Mason Freeman, this is Jessica Pratt," Nella began the introductions. The man held out his hand to shake Jessica's, and their eyes connected.

It was as if the rest of the people in the room disappeared.

Her chest gnawed at her. She was committed to Bryan, but her instinctual emotions were pulling her to this man. The attraction was irrefutable.

Mason had an aura about him, a pleasurable charm. The outline of his jaw was strong and masculine, but it was his eyes that pulled her in. Those blue eyes were hungry.

She cleared her throat. "How nice to finally meet you in person."

They had communicated over the phone and by e-mail many

times leading up to this meeting. If only possible, maybe it would have been best to leave it that way.

“It’s definitely my pleasure, Miss Pratt. Or is it, Mrs. Pratt?”

Jessica found herself hesitating. This man was interested in her.

“That would be Miss.” She grinned and shyly glanced away.

MASON STRUGGLED TO LISTEN TO her presentation, but his focus was on her mouth, not her words, and her eyes were the most beautiful shade of green, full of intensity and passion. He guessed her to be a wild lover, carefree and uninhibited. Her blonde hair fell in soft, wavy curls over her shoulders. She was slender and had small facial features, with a faint dusting of freckles over the bridge of her nose. And her smile—it possessed such warmth and allure. He needed to find out more about this lady. This magnetism could not be ignored. He always got what he wanted. Now he desired Jessica.

CHAPTER 3

“ALL RISE. The case of the State versus Dimitre Petrov will now come to order. The Honorable Judge Myles Flannigan presiding.” The bailiff stepped off to the side.

Everyone rose, and the judge entered the courtroom. Once seated, he banged his gavel and those in the courtroom took their seats.

“Prosecution, call your witness.”

Martin rose. “Prosecution would like to call Stella Robins to the stand.”

Robins wore a tight, low-cut dress, which revealed a lot of cleavage. She appeared to be a firecracker with long red hair, bright red lipstick, and polished nails to match. Scars of her rough life were embedded in her face with crease lines around her eyes and mouth.

Martin gave the date of Leroy Adams’s murder and said, “Ms. Robins, please lead us through the events of that day.”

“I was waiting at a bus stop on the corner of Talbot and Adelaide.”

If she suffered fear of Dimitre, Bryan didn’t see it. Her body language pressed forward, implying an eagerness to pin Dimitre.

“So that is right across from Leroy Adams’s apartment, correct?” Martin shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

“Yes.” She also nodded.

“Is it true that while you were waiting, the defendant walked by?” Martin gestured toward Dimitre.

“Yes, it is. He looked intent and on a mission. He terrified me.”

Bryan could have sworn she glanced at Dimitre for a second. It seemed responsible for him shifting his position.

Martin built on the base of her answer, not the elaboration. "What happened next, Ms. Robins?"

She twisted a strand of her long hair around her right index finger. "I followed him into Leroy's apartment building."

The courtroom fell silent.

Martin let it sit quiet for a few seconds to impress her words into the minds of the jury.

"Once inside the building, where did Mr. Petrov go?"

"I followed him until he went into Leroy's apartment." She defiantly glared at Dimitre this time, challenging him. Her long eyelashes, caked with mascara, blinked slowly and deliberately.

"Did you wait in the hall until he left?"

"Yes, I did. About ten minutes passed." Robins sucked on her bottom lip and formed a small pout.

"Anyone else leave the apartment?"

"Not that I saw." Her eyes glanced down, but she quickly regained her poise.

"Thank you, Ms. Robins." Martin returned to his chair.

Bryan witnessed contentment in Martin's demeanor. Robins had helped to solidify the prosecution's case. Now, he would maneuver things to discredit it.

Bryan approached Robins while sustaining eye contact with her. "So you followed Dimitre even though you were terrified of him?" When she didn't respond immediately, he partially repeated himself. "You were terrified of Mr. Petrov, a man who you saw posed a threat, yet you followed him into a building?" Bryan worked his craft. He would extract truths from the mouth of the witness, even if partial enlightenments, to preserve the innocence of his client. He would work the case from any angle necessary to avoid complications in his own life. He continued, "A man, you never met—or is it true, Ms. Robins, that you know Mr. Petrov?"

Martin shot up. "Objection, Your Honor! Relevance."

"Objection overruled. I'll allow the question." The judge's eyes

fixed on Robins.

Seconds of silence passed.

"Answer the defense's question, Ms. Robins," the judge said.

"I know him." She twisted a ring on her finger, and her eyes darted to the floor.

"From my knowledge, you knew Mr. Petrov on a carnal basis, is this true?" Bryan asked.

"Uh, huh." She sighed.

"Please answer the question louder." After she had confirmed it for all in the room to hear, Bryan continued. "So you were lovers, but Mr. Petrov left you for another woman. That must have hurt you, made you jealous, made you seek out revenge, so you exaggerate circumstances to fit your own—" His voice rose in volume.

"Objection!"

"Objection sustained. Continue with another line of questioning."

Bryan acknowledged the judge and addressed Robins, "So when Mr. Petrov left the apartment did you leave the hallway?"

"Yes."

"When he was in the apartment did you hear the gunshots?" Bryan pressed her.

"No, there was loud metal music."

"Then how can you conclude that Leroy was killed in the time period Mr. Petrov was in there? Maybe Leroy was already dead in the apartment?"

"It was obvious Dimitre went in there for a reason." Robins was getting annoyed that she was being put on the spot.

"Speculation, Ms. Robins. Were you in the apartment?"

"No."

"Then you cannot say with absolute certainty Mr. Petrov fired the deadly shots. You did not see him pull the trigger." Bryan paused momentarily to let that fact seep into the minds of the jury. He repeated his earlier question. "You also said you left the hallway after Dimitre left, correct?"

"Yes."

“Then it’s possible that after you left another person came out of the apartment? Perhaps the woman whose DNA was found, possibly the *real* killer?” Bryan stared her down until she answered.

“I guess, but—”

“That’s all, Your Honor.” He didn’t need to hear her response. It was rhetorical, and everyone in the room could deduce the answer.

Martin stood. “I would like to redirect, Your Honor.”

Judge Flannigan gestured toward the floor. “Proceed.”

Bryan admired Martin’s determination, but she would likely prove more detrimental, than helpful, to the prosecution.

Martin gathered his thoughts in front of the witness box and a few seconds later asked, “Ms. Robins, how long were you involved with the defendant?”

“Two years.”

“For two years,” Martin repeated her words and turned to assess the jury. “In two years then, it’s safe to say you were close to Mr. Petrov?” Martin tapped his pen in the palm of a hand, almost keeping clockwork with its rhythm.

“I knew him very well. We had even discussed children. I mean, I—”

This wasn’t heading in a good direction.

“Objection, Your Honor.” Bryan’s words came out as a roar in the otherwise quiet room.

“Overruled. Continue, Mr. Andrews.”

“So it’s safe to say you knew Mr. Petrov very well?”

“Yes.”

Martin paced the floor. “Having known him that well, you would recognize when he was angry, had determination, was planning to do something—”

“Objection.” Bryan rose. “Calls for the witness to be a mind reader.”

“Sustained. Unless the prosecution can proceed with another direction, I suggest you take a seat.”

Martin nodded. “One more question, Ms. Robins. Do you

know of any reason Mr. Petrov would have for murdering Leroy Adams?"

"Leroy always owed him money."

"Thank you, Ms. Robins." Martin addressed the judge, "That will be all."

Bryan watched Martin take his seat, but the man refused to return the eye contact.

"Does the prosecution have any further witnesses to call?"

"No, Your Honor, the prosecution rests."

"Does the Defense have any witnesses they would like to call?"

"No, Your Honor. However, Defense requests to have all charges against my client dropped. These charges have been filed with prejudice and are based upon speculation and circumstantial evidence."

"Ludicrous, Your Honor. Forensics can put the murder weapon in Dimitre Petrov's hand," Martin said.

"Motion to dismiss—denied." The judge briefly glanced at Bryan. "This court is now in recess until nine tomorrow morning when we will hear closing arguments." He banged his gavel and left the room.

As everyone stood up to leave, Dimitre patted Bryan's back. "Well done."

Bryan hesitated to celebrate victory. Closing arguments tomorrow would be a real clincher. The true strength of his defense would have to be summarized and powerfully played. He needed to sway the jury to reasonable doubt, and he hoped to play out this role successfully. Dimitre's innocence weighed in the balance of fifty-fifty, and Bryan needed to tip the scale in his favor.

Bryan smiled. "That's my job." He shook Dimitre's hand. "Tomorrow morning at nine then."

Bryan wanted out of the courtroom. He needed fresh air. His necktie was suffocating him. He had made it to the door before Martin caught up with him.

"Bryan, quite the defense. It must take a lot out of you knowing your client is guilty, leaving you only one card to play."

Bryan would never expect a man like Martin to understand him.

“Innocent until proven guilty isn’t that the American way, Martin?” Bryan picked up his pace, not caring about a response. He needed a stiff drink—at minimum a couple shots of whiskey.

Bryan came out the front door of the courthouse and had to work his way through a crowd of reporters. He hurried down the stairs for the freedom of the street. His cell phone rang, and he hoped it was Jessica. He needed some time with her. It had been less than twenty-four hours, but he craved her mouth, her hands, and her warmth. He answered without looking at his caller’s identity.

“Hello.” He heard a woman’s voice, but it was low. “I can’t hear you. Speak up.”

“Bryan? Bryan Lexan?” Her words were anxious and out of breath.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“I’m Maxine.” The hushed, hurried tone of her voice caused Bryan to picture her glancing over her shoulders, making sure no one was within earshot. “I’m Dimitre’s girlfriend. I need to meet with you.”

Bryan’s instinct told him this wasn’t a good idea. Anything she would have to say, he could live better without knowing. “I don’t think that would be wise.” He pulled his phone away from his ear ready to close it and hang up on her.

“Please. At the bar Sneaky Pete’s, corner of Eighth and Springdale, tonight at nine o’clock.”

Her entreaty had become stale in the air before Bryan answered her. She sounded so desperate. Maybe he would meet with her. At least, he could sip a good drink while listening to her. Possibly what she had to say would help his confidence for tomorrow’s closing argument. His gut told him otherwise, but he ignored it.

“Okay,” he said.

“I’ll be in the back corner booth.” She hung up.

Shaking his head, he went to put his cell phone back on his belt clip, but it rang on the way down. The thought of it possibly

being Maxine again angered him. He answered. "If this is you again, forget it."

"Bryan, are you okay?"

He was relieved to hear Jessica's voice. It was calming to his soul. "Well, it's so nice to hear from you, stranger."

She laughed, igniting his curiosity.

"What's going on over there?" He asked.

"The meeting with the new account went great this morning. We're going out to celebrate, even though that could mean bad luck."

Bryan heard Nella prompting her to hurry and wrap up the call.

"I'm treating Nella and Dominic to a night out and was hoping you could come."

"I'd love to." Bryan's smile quickly faded with the memory of his prior plans. "But I can't tonight."

"Okay, another time."

He picked up on the disappointment in her voice.

"I promise I'll make it up to you, but I have to be in court first thing tomorrow and give my closing statement. I have work to take care of tonight." Those words held enough truth he could justify saying them. "What about Friday night, just you, me, and take out?"

"Sure, or I could cook."

Her disapproval was evident, but it was out of his control.

"I love you, and I miss you."

"I love you too," Bryan said, convincingly to soothe her, but his thoughts were otherwise occupied. They had traced back to Maxine. She had ignited his curiosity. He wondered what she had to tell him that was so important.

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