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GIRL ON THE RUN

She was living with a dark secret.
No one around her was safe.

CAROLYN ARNOLD

A Detective Madison Knight Mystery

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**GIRL ON
THE RUN**

PROLOGUE

In the Near Future...

Her heart is racing as she steps off the bus. There's no way they'll find her here if there's a god in heaven. The hinge point is *if*. He or She, if they do exist, forgot about her a long time ago.

Braybury is only a couple of hours' drive from Stiles, but it should put enough space between her and the people who are after her—for now. And it's a huge city with a population of seven million, so she should be able to blend into the background.

This could all be a good thing—the start of a new and promising beginning.

While people continue to disembark, she stands back, catching her breath and slipping her arms through the straps of her backpack. All these faces. She checks each one with intense scrutiny to see if any of them are familiar. Not one among them.

Maybe she actually escaped their clutches after all. A giddy elation flutters through her. She even smiles, though briefly.

The man on the street corner. Tall and muscular with a thick neck inked with the abstract markings of a tattoo that means something only to him. But his face is one from her nightmares. He's with *them*. The people she fears won't just let her walk away. They have tendrils everywhere.

But how did he find her here? She'd been careful, watching over her shoulder as she's been accustomed to doing all her life. She hadn't noticed him before now.

He smirks and starts coming toward her.

How he found her really doesn't matter. He's here, and he's onto her.

She has to run! But to where?

She glances around. Maybe if she can sink into the crowd, she'll lose him. The hope shatters with a hard slap of reality. He's already found her once, increasing the odds he'll find her again.

She sets out and bumps into a person who snarls at her.

"Watch where you're going!"

She keeps moving, her feet smacking against the pavement as she weaves through the bodies lining the sidewalk. She glances over a shoulder, and he's definitely in pursuit.

She picks up speed. Now at a fast jog.

She looks back again. He's keeping up, and the smile on his face tells her he's enjoying himself.

She begins to run, faster than her legs want to move. Her torso leaning forward, urging her limbs to follow suit.

It does no good. His long legs aid him in keeping up with her.

Skyscrapers tower over her, and buses and vehicles rumble past on the street. She feels the vibration of the subway running under her feet and wishes she could just disappear. Maybe if she can get herself into the underground labyrinths, she'll lose him.

There's a sign announcing the Richmond Street subway entrance above a staircase that sinks beneath the earth. She takes the steps two at a time. At the bottom, she looks back, and there's no sign of him.

Until there is.

Her entire body trembles. If he catches her, she's dead. She hasn't done even one thing right in this lifelife. Not that life has given her much of a chance.

More people are in the tunnels and pushing through turnstiles. Every one of them is oblivious to her plight. If they knew, would they care? Her fate doesn't affect them.

Another glimpse back, and the man is in full pursuit, rushing toward her at a faster pace.

She tries to pick up speed again, but throngs of people continually hinder her progress. She rounds a corner and leans against a door, trying to catch her breath and slow her breathing.

There's nowhere she can go. Nowhere she can hide.

She wraps her hand around the door handle behind her, and she twists. It gives.

She tucks inside. A stairwell. Maybe she will get away. Just maybe.

Before she can lock the door, it opens.

The tattooed man steps inside, never taking his eyes off her. He holds a gun in his hand, and it's trained on her.

"Gotcha." He laughs, and her entire body shudders.

"Just, please, let me go." There's no point in running now. She must be brave and face her fate, her dark future.

He's still smiling when he says, "You'll be wishing for a bullet by the time she's done with you. But don't worry, I'm sure death will come nice and fast." He reaches out and snags her arm, his grip tight and unyielding, his fingers digging into her flesh even through her jacket. She shrieks in agony, but there's no one to hear her cries, no one to save her.

CHAPTER 1

Present Day

Madison's mind had her up, out the door, and in line for caffeine at seven AM. The compensation was a heady aroma of different beverages, most of them based on espresso, served with a stream of people lined up from the counter to the door. There were at least fifteen people ahead of her. At this rate, the venti caramel cappuccino she'd dreamed of might get into her hand by noon.

She tapped a foot and stepped to the side to look around the lumberjack of a man immediately in front of her. Though at five foot five, it didn't take much height to block her view.

A twentysomething woman in a pencil skirt was at the counter rattling off an order she was reading from a tablet. At least seven drinks and as many *special* breakfast sandwiches.

Scratch noon. She'd be here all day.

One cappuccino. That was all she needed, and she'd be on her way. Simple and done. No half this, half that, a splash of this, a blend of that. She had no need for a fancy sandwich either. Stress had her stomach compacted into the size of a raisin.

The line inched forward as Pencil Skirt shuffled down the counter.

One person closer, and the wait would be worth it. The end justifying the means. Maybe if she focused on the explosion of flavor that cappuccino would deliver to her tongue, her impatience would melt away with her problems.

She closed her eyes, and the rims burned from lack of sleep, but her mind had good reason for being overactive. The Russian Mafia. Corrupt cops in her department. Dealing with Internal Affairs.

The baby she'd lost... That was the big one, and it was something she still hadn't shared with all those she cared about. But she didn't have time to dwell on her loss or she'd forfeit her sanity. She was teetering on the edge already from all the conflicting emotions that washed over her—grief, relief, anger, acceptance. Her therapist would tell her to be with her feelings and process them, but she had a job to do. And a plan. All her focus and energy would go into the first three items on her list. Whenever they got sorted out, she'd tackle her lost baby.

The line inched forward again in response to another server asking for the next in line.

She looked out the window; the city was stirring to life. Pedestrians crowded the sidewalks, and vehicle traffic buzzed by in a blur of colors. Yellow taxis lined up across the street in front of Liberty Train Station, eager to pick up new fares or drop some off. So many people with somewhere to be, and based on the numerous scowls, most weren't eager about getting there. At least she had a purpose and drive, even if that light had dimmed in more recent days.

The line was moving more quickly now, and she was pleased to see she was next. She could practically taste that cappuccino.

"He has a gun!" A woman's scream filtered from outside and through the front windows of the coffee shop.

The woman shot past the window, frantic. More people followed her down the sidewalk. All of them were moving at a fast clip.

Damn. The cappuccino would have to wait.

Madison pulled her badge and held it up for everyone to see. "Detective Knight, Stiles PD! Everyone toward the back of the store."

Sleepy patrons became wide-eyed and confused as they stared at her like she had three heads. Finally, her message saturated their caffeine-deprived brains.

They scurried to the back while Madison headed to the door and tucked her badge away. Her hand was hovering above her holster, ready to draw her weapon if necessary.

She stepped outside. Vehicles were either stopped or crawling along. Men and women ran past her. *What is going on?*

Rounding the hood of a truck, she got her answer. There was a mass exodus from the train station.

Madison pulled her phone from a pocket and called dispatch. She gave her name and badge number. "Possible shooting at Liberty Station. Approach situation as if the perp is still there and armed." She hated not having details to provide, but life didn't always present things on a silver platter.

The communications operator confirmed units had already been dispatched to the scene and officers at the station were responding.

"Then you know what's going on already?"

"Uh-huh. A shooting with suspected casualties. But that's all I know at this time."

Suspected casualties... That was her cue as a detective with Major Crimes. Madison ended the call and rushed toward the station.

Sirens started up in the distance, their roar growing louder as they got closer.

Madison stopped a woman coming through the doors and announced herself as police. "What happened?"

"Someone... Gunfire." Her eyes were wide with shock, and she ran away before Madison could ask exactly where the shooting had taken place.

Liberty Station covered at least a square mile and was multiple stories. It offered a food court and even warranted its own police detail, though a lot of good that did today.

Madison stepped inside and looked behind her at the touch of someone's hand on her shoulder. She braced herself for a confrontation and relaxed at the sight of Officer Reggie Higgins, her training officer from back in the day.

"Tell me what's going on," she said to him.

"Shooting at the Just Beans kiosk. Understand three shot, two dead on scene."

"And this *just* happened?"

"Five minutes ago. If." Higgins passed her and rushed through a second set of doors, and she followed.

She wasn't that familiar with the layout of the station, having no need to grace the corridors herself. They wound through a few long hallways, their guns at the ready. Officers behind them worked to corral panicking and shocked civilians that remained. They'd be questioned, their information taken, then released. But one person in this crowd could be the shooter. She eyed everyone with suspicion.

"We need to shut this place down. No one in or out," she told Higgins. Not that it would do any good for those who had already managed to run to the streets.

"In the works."

"It could already be too late. We'll also need to stop all trains from leaving and arrivals from disembarking."

"Being handled." He glanced at her with a raised brow, a subtle reminder that he'd trained her.

She nodded.

They proceeded down a ramp to a lower level, and the aftermath was ahead of them—three bodies sprawled on the floor, surrounded by blood. From this distance, details were hard to make out, but their heeled shoes told her they were women. The Just Beans kiosk was positioned where two hallways intersected and wasn't part of the food court—thankfully, or there could have been more victims.

Madison rushed forward while bystanders, some who were screaming and crying into their hands, were ushered away by uniformed officers.

With each step she took closer to the scene, her legs became heavy. *All that blood...* She swallowed the nausea that brewed in her gut. The sight and smell of it nearly overwhelmed her senses, but adrenaline came to the rescue, painting the scene in front of her with a fictionalized brush and dulling the noises surrounding her.

Two dead with holes in their chests. One woman alive and groaning. Her mumbles were barely coherent as she said, "I've... been...shot." Her eyes fluttered shut.

Higgins called in over his radio and said, "Need an ETA on those paramedics."

“Stay with me.” Madison got as close as she could to the injured woman without traipsing in the blood. “Help is on the way.”

Behind the counter, two women stood, their hands in the air. Their sudden appearance startled Madison. Their uniforms announced them as employees of Just Beans.

“You’re all right now too. Everyone will be—”

One of the workers collapsed, clipping Madison’s words.

Ah, shit!

Madison rushed around the counter, and the woman was in a heap on the floor. Passed out.

It wasn’t long before paramedics raced toward them with a few sets of gurneys, but only two at this point would be necessary. The decedents would take a different ride.

What the hell had happened here?

CHAPTER 2

“Why am I not surprised to see you?” Detective Terry Grant, Madison’s partner on the job, arrived behind crime scene investigators.

“I was getting a cappuccino across the street.”

“Uh-huh. Trouble always seems to find you.”

Fair assessment, and it wasn’t the first time she’d heard that, not just from Terry but from others as well. Her fiancé, Troy Matthews, was one of them.

“Any word on the shooter?” Terry asked.

“Vanished into thin air. Apparently, that’s possible.” Madison threw up her hands. She had a very low threshold for incompetence, and losing the trail of a shooter was a prime example of that.

“Do we have IDs on the vics?” Terry asked.

Her gaze skimmed to the two mounds covered with black tarps. Officers had quickly rushed to drape them over the bodies to prevent any possibility of onlookers capturing them on video. It was sickening that such measures had to be taken. One would think humankind would have inborn sensibilities to respect the dead, but when so many didn’t respect the living, it shouldn’t really be a surprise. Madison hadn’t gotten a good look at the dead women as she’d been distracted by the employee who had passed out. She had rifled through their attaché bags and purses, though. She noticed each woman had a cell phone, and one a tablet, but she had gone straight to the wallets for IDs.

“Maddy?”

“Yeah, we do. The decedents are Dana Ridley, thirty-eight, and Morgan Walker, thirty-six.” She paused there, the fact sinking in that Walker was the same age as her. That always hit home, not to mention how knowing the identities of the victims made the carnage that much more real. The bodies had once been living, breathing individuals with people who loved them. Madison continued. “Shannon Brennan, forty-one, was shot and rushed to the hospital. At this point, I’m not sure of her status or whether her injury is life threatening. Higgins is currently pulling the background information on all three women.” She didn’t need to say it, but the least fun part of her and Terry’s job would soon follow—notifying next of kin.

Her gaze skipped to the tarps again, her mind on what was beneath them. At this point, she’d wait until Cole Richards, the medical examiner, arrived to get a closer look at them. There’d be less chance of contaminating the scene in some way. “They were just here to catch a train...” The emptiness and meaninglessness of it all. They’d simply been going about their typical weekday, then *boom!* everything changed. “Typical weekday,” she mumbled more to herself than Terry. Did the women regularly commute and grab their coffee at the same time and place? Was the shooting as random as it appeared? She’d bench these questions for now, but the answers would be critical in solving this case.

Cynthia Baxter, Madison’s best friend and head of the crime lab, was busy with her team of three processing the scene. They were snapping photographs and placing markers and collecting whatever could be perceived as evidence. Every square inch would be processed, and by the time they finished, nothing would be missed.

Madison proceeded to fill Terry in more. “Two workers were on duty at the time of the shooting. One was taken to Stiles General. We’ll catch up with her and Brennan later. Right now, let’s find out what she has to say.” Madison nudged her head toward the Just Beans employee with Officer Tendum. They were a short distance away, down a nearby hallway. The woman was talking animatedly, her arms flailing in wild arcs.

The woman stopped all movement when she saw Madison and Terry approaching.

Tendum slightly dipped his head and stepped aside.

“Hey! Where are you going?” the woman barked at him.

“I’ll be around if you need me, but these detectives need to speak with you about what happened.” Tendum kept his voice level and professional, and Madison was almost impressed. Almost. She and the officer had a shaky history that, at one point, had her wondering if he was worthy of the badge. And now, Madison would have expected him to introduce them to the employee and not just abandon her. Another strike against him.

“Detectives?” The Just Beans employee contorted her otherwise beautiful face into an ugly mask. She was in her early twenties with blond hair in a high-mounted ponytail that reached her waist. She wore large teal hoops that took Madison back in time to the eighties when they were all the rage, but maybe they were “in” again. Or maybe this person just wore what she wanted to, trends be damned.

“Detectives Knight and Grant.” Madison gestured to where her badge was clipped on her waistband. “Your name?”

“Julie”—she knotted her arms—“Nelson.” Body language closed off. Certainly a different image than the one she portrayed to Tendum. Her gray, catlike eyes leveled at Madison.

“We can appreciate that you’ve been through a traumatic event. If you’d like to sit...” Madison indicated a nearby bench, and Julie took her up on the offer.

She sat and leaned forward, her hands braced on the front curve of the bench seat. “I can’t believe this happened.”

“Can you just run us through what did?” There was no time to be sucked into an endless loop of woes and disbelief. It niggled enough that the shooter had disappeared without a trace. Even worse was the possibility that she’d passed by him on the street.

Julie slid her bottom lip through her teeth and nudged her head in the direction of Tendum. He was now about twenty feet away, his thumbs hooked into the band of his pants like he was some sort of cowboy. “I just told him everything.”

“We need you to run through it all again with us,” Madison said firmly. “It’s procedure.”

“It’s a waste of time,” Julie hissed. “Shouldn’t you be out there finding who did this?”

Madison took a deep breath and stamped out, “Ms. Nelson, just talk and we’ll be on our way.”

“What if I don’t want to live it all over again? It was troubling enough being there when it happened. I just want to forget about it now.”

Madison’s body vibrated with indignation. “Two people are dead. One was shot and might not make it. Your coworker passed out and was taken to the hospital. None of these women have the option to *forget about it*. Neither do their families. It’s fair to say others are having a worse day, and asking you to answer some of our questions—even if you’re repeating yourself—is a small price to pay. So, I’m going to ask again: what happened, and do you know what prompted the shooting?”

Julie shook her head, and tears beaded in her eyes. She nodded.

“No? Yes?” Madison was close to shaking the girl but talked herself back from that ledge. Julie had just lived through an ordeal. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to extend some empathy, exercise a little more restraint.

“I know some of it, I guess.”

“We’re listening.” Madison was one millisecond away from tapping her foot.

“This guy came over and started yelling at the women in line.”

“This guy being the shooter?” Just to clarify.

“Yes.”

“And he just started yelling?” Terry squinted and angled his head. “All out of the blue, and about what?”

“It was because of this girl.”

“Her name?” Madison asked.

“I have no idea, but she’s always wearing an orange backpack.”

Always...? “Okay,” Madison dragged out, not sure where this was going. “Her age?”

“Early twenties, *if*, but she lifts stuff from the cooler. You know, the one at the front that’s open for customers to take what they want.”

Madison recalled the refrigerated bunker and nodded for Julie to continue.

“Well, this chick just helps herself, if you know what I mean.”

“On a regular basis?” Terry asked.

“Yep.”

“What happened next?” Madison wanted to understand how a young woman with a backpack could have triggered the shooting. She very well could be a student who commuted to Braybury or elsewhere for school.

“The women in line saw her steal and started murmuring about it. They were all in shock that she just walked over and stole, like it was nothing, and carried on. They were trying to get my attention to let me know.”

“But you already knew she did this,” Madison stated matter-of-factly.

“Yes, and there’s nothing I can do about it. Even Bob, the owner of Just Beans, says to let it go. Obviously, it was wise advice because these women started yapping about what she’d done, and next thing I know this guy comes over all bat-shit crazy.”

There was a scale of crazy, and *bat shit* would definitely score at the top. “Why do you say ‘bat shit?’”

“Oh, he just raced over and was all like, ‘What are you? A bunch of Good Samaritans?’”

“Just because they wanted to tell you about her stealing?” Madison was trying to make sense of what she was hearing, and it wasn’t clicking together just yet.

“Uh, yeah. He claimed he was a cop, actually.” Julie leveled a judgmental glare at Madison.

Madison’s blood went cold. No one could be trusted. Not even in the brotherhood of blue. She, of all people, knew that well. One had rammed her car last month, landed her in the hospital, and she was quite sure the accident contributed to the loss of her baby. He and another officer were now under investigation by Internal

Affairs, and Madison was sure more officers would be added to the list. The Russian Mafia was active in Stiles, and it had a way of reaching into the Stiles PD and finding the corrupt within the department. Her mission, or she'd die trying, was to bring them all down.

"He was lying," Terry said after a few beats of silence and with far more conviction than Madison could have.

The shooter had fled the station. It was as if he'd disappeared into thin air. If he wasn't a cop himself, did he have the help of some? Same now went for the girl with the backpack. Where had she gone? They'd need to speak to the officers on duty at the time of the shooting.

"I don't know about that." Julie paled. "One of the women, one with red hair, she's like, 'You're not a cop.' That's when he pulled the gun."

"And he fired right away?" Madison asked.

"No. She kept going at him, telling him he wasn't a cop, no way he was a cop. That's when he started shooting." Julie's body shook, and she pinched her eyes shut. Tears squeezed from them, down her cheeks.

"And after that...?" Madison felt for Julie's situation but couldn't afford to get weighed down by emotion.

"He ran off."

"Which way?"

Julie pointed straight across from them, past the Just Beans kiosk that was positioned where two corridors intersected.

"And you told this to Officer Tendum?" Madison asked.

"Yes, and he told others over his radio thingy." She gestured to the top of her arm, indicating where Tendum's radio was attached.

Madison pulled her gaze from the hallway. "Has this happened before—the guy coming over and acting threatening? Surely other customers would have reacted like the women did today?"

"I've never seen him before."

Not exactly an answer to her question, but Madison had an inkling Julie was holding something back. "Okay, so the girl is a regular thing, but the guy isn't?"

"Him? No."

Tingles laced down Madison's arms. "But there's usually a man hanging around—what? Watching over the girl?"

Julie pointed across the way. "He stands over there. I think he's the girl's handler or something."

Handler? Madison assembled what she'd been told, starting with a young woman who regularly passed through the station *always wearing an orange backpack*. On its own that wouldn't raise any red flags. But a man watching over her on a routine basis certainly did. Putting both together, it suggested the girl was transporting something on her person, such as drugs or weapons. The handler would be there to protect her as an asset and see to it that she wasn't apprehended, that she reached her destination. But why would the girl put herself at risk by stealing? And what happened to the girl's regular shadow? "Why do you leap to him being a handler?"

"Call it a feeling."

Madison trusted feelings more than her partner did, but there seemed to be some merit to Julie's suspicions. "You said the girl steals regularly. How often exactly?"

"About two to three times a week."

Madison was trying to understand what had granted the girl with the backpack immunity, though she had a feeling it had to do with the man who watched over her—or the people he worked for. Julie had mentioned the owner of Just Beans told his staff to let the robberies go. He must have feared retaliation to allow that. She wanted to see Julie's reaction, so she asked, "Do you know why your boss never wanted you to stop her or report her?"

"She, ah, wasn't really hurting anything." Julie's gaze dipped briefly to the floor, and she pressed her lips together.

Julie was definitely afraid—and probably for good reason. The shooter had claimed to be a cop. Whether he truly was or not, the damage was done, and the integrity of the badge was called into question. It was, at minimum, a claim that intimidated. If a person accepted that he was a cop, they'd be less likely to approach a uniformed officer. They'd fear corruption. At the worst, there actually was something going on in the train station that involved bad cops. "And the guy who is normally here, the one you believe is her usual handler, has he ever come over to confront people?"

“Sure, the odd time, but it’s never escalated like it had today. As I said, today it was a different guy. If it’s all the same to you, though, I don’t want to talk about either of those guys or that chick anymore.”

“I’m sorry, but we need to know more,” Madison said. “Did you see where the girl with the backpack went? What direction?”

“She had already walked away before the shooting.” Julie pointed down a hallway that would have had the girl passing the shooter.

So she stole, carried on her merry way, the shooter—possible new handler—steps up and gets into the confrontation with the women. Meanwhile the girl with the backpack is long gone...? But surely, she heard the gunfire and ensuing chaos. If she was moving drugs or something equally as illegal, did she fulfill her original mission? If Madison were the girl, she’d have run. “We might need you to work with a sketch artist on the shooter, the regular guy who hangs around, and the girl.” It couldn’t be assumed she was innocent in all that transpired. Madison also couldn’t assume that video surveillance captured their faces.

“I’ll do what I have to.” Julie leaned back and rubbed her arms.

“One more question before we go. Did you ever see the three women from the line before?” she asked.

“Uh-huh. They usually get a coffee in the morning. Not always at the same time, though. Thinking they probably catch the train to Braybury for work.”

That made sense as Braybury was significantly larger than Stiles, which only had a population of three hundred thousand. “Okay. Thank you.” Madison pulled her card and gave it to Julie. “Call if anything else comes to you, and stay in town in case we have more questions.”

Julie nodded.

Madison and Terry left her sitting on the bench, and Officer Tendum approached them. They compared stories, and they lined up. One small mercy, but they still had more questions than answers. And Madison was twitching for more than a caffeine fix—she craved justice.

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