



I never intended to KILL him kill him. I mean, actually kill him. It started as a joke. Two women in a coffee shop talking about their ex-disasters. And when Carlton's name came up, the pain was so searing, so literal across my chest, I checked my stomach to see if someone had sliced me open with a knife.

That's when I told my best friend, Heather, I wanted to kill him.

'I'll hide the body,' she said, taking a demure little sip from her cappuccino. And we both giggled like school-girls. But then she did something she'd never done before. She put her hand on my shoulder and shot me a look. It was one of those pitying looks. The type of look a person gives a wounded dog before the vet puts him down. She even crinkled her eyes and said, 'Be strong, Maddy.'

And that's when I knew I was serious about killing him.

An hour later, after Heather and I parted company, I found myself browsing the gardening section of Half Price Books. I was looking for a book on poisons. And I didn't want to pay retail.

I felt angry. Angry as a tornado. Wild and swerving and unpredictable. For some reason, maybe anxiety, my eye had begun to twitch. I rubbed my eyelid and skulked up and down the bookstore aisles.

The book I plucked from the shelf had a picture of a rat on the cover. I imagined Carlton's face attached to the rat's body. And then, for a split second, I imagined Carlton's *real* body, and us having sex on the kitchen floor, like we always used to do.

Another wave of anger swept over me and I shook my head back and forth, trying to erase the image from my mind. I was an assassin on a mission, after all.

I flipped open the rat book and began browsing through the pages.

Chapter Four: How to Exterminate those Pesky Pests. 'Making your own poison: the organic alternative,' I read quietly to myself.

*Am I really doing this?* I thought. I blushed and glanced suspiciously up and down the bookstore aisles, as if half expecting a bunch of FBI guys to burst in and arrest me for Intent to Kill with Lavender-Scented Mouse Repellent.

I strolled to the register, casually, book tucked neatly under my arm.

'Cash or charge?' the long-haired clerk asked. He stroked his goatee and peered across the counter at me. I could smell the pungent scent of marijuana emanating from his clothes – particularly the hydroponic 'kind-bud' variety preferred by the closet intelligentsia crowd of East Austin.

I winked at Mr Greenleaf and slid a twenty across the counter. I'd seen enough movies to know I'd definitely be paying cash.

The first rule of killing an ex-fiancé: never leave a paper trail.



The problem was, he was beautiful. When we moved in together, I'd watch Carlton slide open the kitchen window, place an ashtray on the sill, light his cigarette and let it drop to the side of his lips. He moved with a profound grace. And when he smiled at me – that sexy, sideways smile – my thoughts dropped away and everything I was became available to him. He's one of those men I would've jumped in front of a Greyhound bus for. And he made me believe he'd jump for me, too.

We met in graduate school at one of those young professionals happy-hour events. It was designed to be a casual meet-and-greet affair. A bunch of MBA students wearing jeans and nametags and drinking beer out of plastic cups.

Not surprisingly, it was held at an Irish pub. But not the real kind of Irish pub with plucky, fat-cheeked Irish people singing their lilting up-and-down songs, and dirty floors and the smell of stale beer. It was one of those newfangled Irish pubs. The ones with all the junk tacked up on the wall. Like street signs that say Shepherd's Pie Avenue. You know which kind of fake Irish pub I'm talking about. The kind that serves nachos.

I spotted him immediately. Shirt cuffs rolled up to his elbows. One leg dangling casually off a barstool. He had a certain movie star quality. A certain fluidity. The way

he moved his hands as he spoke. The way he smiled that confident, sideways smile.

He was lounging at a cocktail table with another guy and neither of them wore nametags. I suddenly wished I hadn't plastered my own white sticker against my chest. And written MADELINE PIATRO in large, bold letters.

At the sign-in table, I apparently went to town with the black magic marker. I even put two exclamation points at the end of my name. So my tag read MADELINE PIATRO!! – as if I was excited about the notion of myself.

So, here I was. Wearing jeans and loafers. With a big, fat nametag affixed to my shirt. I mean, what a dork, right? I may as well have been wearing a pocket protector and a retainer.

So I stared across the bar at Movie Star Guy. And he must've felt my eyes boring into him because he looked straight at me and winked.

I remember blushing. A woman of my age. Blushing like a teenager. I glanced down at my loafers, took a deep breath and thought, 'What the heck . . .'

And that's when I did it.

I, feeling full of bravado – after all, I was an MBA student! – marched right up and introduced myself.

'Hi. I'm Madeline. Madeline Piatro,' I said, pointing to my nametag. 'In case you couldn't read the billboard.'

He seemed momentarily stunned. A woman approaching a man from across an entire bar was still rare in this circle. We were at the University of Texas – not some ultra-liberal northeastern school where the women weren't afraid of anything.

In Texas, the women still played a little coy. Cats on the prowl for unwitting husbands, if you will.

‘I’m in your marketing class,’ I said, sticking out my sweaty palm. My motto, after all, had always been: *Leap Before You Look*.

‘Pleasure to meet you, Madeline. Carlton Connors,’ he said in a formal voice. He took my hand and I noticed his palm was cool to the touch – not sweaty like mine. He had a firm handshake. Solid and manly.

He grinned at me, revealing perfect white teeth, and ran his hand through his perfect, movie star hair. ‘This is David,’ he said, motioning to his friend.

David rubbed his hand against his jeans and said, ‘Sorry. I’ve got beer hands. I think this table is wet.’

I said, ‘Don’t worry about it,’ and shook his sticky hand anyway. David had a flimsy handshake. Like a wet noodle.

‘David was just talking about our marketing class,’ Carlton said.

I glance at David and see that Mr Wet Noodle is smiling. The type of smile that comes from a guy who gets to hang out with the cool kid.

‘Professor Morgan is always busting my balls, man,’ David says. ‘I’ve got a theory that she secretly hates men.’

Carlton looks from me to David, then back at me. ‘Care to comment on that, Madeline? I’m sure Dave would love to hear a woman’s perspective.’

‘Sounds like Professor Morgan doesn’t hate men, she just hates David,’ I say.

I’m pleased when Carlton throws his head back in the air and laughs.

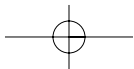
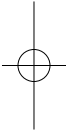
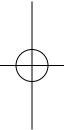
‘Care to join us?’ he asks, patting the empty barstool next to him. He’s smiling the cocksure smile of a guy who’s been around the block.



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‘Sure,’ I say, glad for the invitation.

I hopped up on a barstool and ordered a pint of pale beer that came with a lemon floating in it. And then I slept with Mr Carlton Connors that very night.





It was my usual Saturday afternoon routine. Have coffee with Heather. Check out the new paperback fiction. Maybe catch a matinee. The only difference – and it was a profound difference – was that I was alone. Carlton was no longer in my life. And I had a burning desire to kill him.

I brought the rat book home. Back to my empty townhouse. Free of Carlton's clothes, his belongings, our pictures as a couple. Once in awhile I could smell his smell. The beautiful smell of the woods lingering on a piece of furniture. And each time I smelled it, my heart would drop. As much as I hated to admit it, part of me longed for the days when Carlton and I snuggled together in our big, comfy chair. The one with the oversized pillows. Drinking ice-cold margaritas with our legs intertwined.

And so, to get rid of his smell, I sprayed lemon freshener everywhere. Kept the windows open. Burned vanilla candles. Boiled cinnamon sticks in a pan on the stove.

Killing Carlton could be a futile exercise, I knew. I didn't have that kind of brio. But at least I could practice. Who knew?

I was Italian, so my blood ran hot. And I was a Texan to the core. (And everyone knows not to mess with Texas

women.) But still. No matter what Carlton had done to me, and he'd done a lot, would I really feel better baking chocolate brownies filled with rat poison? Delivering them in an anonymous gift basket to the office we used to share? In the company we'd built? Together? Would this cheap, dirty trick make me feel better?

You betcha.

I wrestled a cast iron pot out of the kitchen cabinet. A beautiful Le Creuset twelve-quart from Williams Sonoma. No black, bubbling witch's cauldron for me, thank you very much. I'm a gourmet assassin.

I don an apron that says, 'Kiss me, I'm Italian', roll up my sleeves, and go to town. I follow my mother's old brownie recipe to a tee. Blending in the chocolate, slowly, so it won't burn. Melting salted butter in the microwave. Stirring the mixture hard and fast (at least fifty beats!) with a whipping spoon.

I imagine myself as a witch. Stirring my brew. Maybe I should join a Wicca group and burn incense and frog legs and chant incantations.

Or better yet, what about those Haitian voodoo witches? Perhaps I could learn the art of sticking pins in a Carlton doll. I'd dress it in a little biking outfit – and stick pins right through its little padded biking shorts.

Would Carlton feel the pain, I wondered?

It was worth a try.

I finish the brownie mixture, and like a good witch, I lick the spatulas. Then I pour the mixture into a baking pan. And for the final touch –

*Arsenic*, I think.



The morning after I slept with Carlton Connors for the first time, I rolled over and was more than shocked to see a beautiful man in my bed. His body was perfect. A flat stomach with rolling muscles down his abdomen. Long, lean, muscular legs. Light brown, silky hair. A face like a Michelangelo. Strong nose. Dimple in the chin. And he smelled like a dream. A faint hint of cologne that reminded me of being in the woods. There was nothing offensive about Carlton Connors. Not a single blackhead on his nose. Not even a mole.

He opened a perfect eye. The color of a buttered almond – and he looked straight at me. I remember pulling the sheets up to my chin, hiding my nakedness. My itchy-bitsy flab. My poochy belly. My strong, yet somewhat stubby legs.

‘I’ll have you know, Mr Connors, this is the first time I’ve ever slept with a guy I just met,’ I say, right off the bat.

‘Sure. That’s what they all say,’ he chuckles and strokes my hair. His touch is gentle but firm. And it sends me to the moon and back. I feel giddy as this man – this stranger – brushes my cheek with his finger.

‘Good morning, beautiful,’ he whispers. He leans forward and kisses me. Not a quick good morning peck, but a long, lingering kiss. The type of kiss you imagine

might happen one day because you saw it in a movie once. But when it actually happens, you suck in your lungs because you're afraid you've got morning breath.

I pull back from Carlton, prop my elbow up on the pillow, my head against my hand. I shoot this new guy my most serious look. 'I'm serious. I've never had a one-night stand,' I protest, because I want him to know I'm not a slut. And because it's true.

'Who said anything about one night?' he replies.

I try to act cool at this point. No big, cheesy smiles or wild kisses.

I inform Carlton in my most neutral tone, 'I don't know about you, but I'm serious about getting my MBA. I don't need a messy relationship getting in the way.'

He chuckles, shakes his head, as if he can't believe my audacity.

'That rhymes,' he says.

And then he surprises the hell out of me by singing in a woman's falsetto voice: 'I'm serious about my MBAAA,' he sings, 'I don't need a guy getting in the Wa-aay.'

'I don't even know you!' I say, lightly slapping his arm.

Carlton sticks his hand out and says, 'Carlton Connors, pleasure to make your acquaintance, ma'am.'

Carlton runs his hand through his hair, which I notice looks as perfect in the morning as it did last night.

I sit up in bed and prop a pillow behind my back, being careful to keep the sheets tucked up to my neck.

'Look, this was just a fling, okay?' I say in a strong voice. And I don't know why I say this, but I do. I guess it's a pride thing. Because I know this guy will never call me.

'Hey, I'm a nice guy, Madeline Piatro. So don't go

breaking my heart,' he says, flashing me his movie star smile.

I stare at this man in my bed. A hard stare. 'You and I both know that this was just a one-night fling,' I say, in my most business-like tone.

He presses his finger against my lips. 'You're gonna need an army of bodyguards to keep me away from you, darlin',' he whispers.

I remember slapping my hand over his mouth, crawling on top of him like a rodeo cowgirl. And throwing caution to the fucking wind.

And so began our romance.