



Cavanaugh Hero (Cavanaugh Justice Book 26)

By Marie Ferrarella



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An Entertainment Weekly Top 10 Romance Author

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A serial cop killer has Aurora's police force up in arms. And when the former chief gets hit, it becomes personal for Detective Declan Cavanaugh and his beautiful new partner, Charley Randolph.

Charley first took notice of the sexy, devil-may-care detective at the academy. Now she has no desire to get involved with a fellow officer. But as the bodies pile up and the threats grow more ominous, Charley must trust Declan not to reveal her true reason for working the case. Racing against the clock draws them closer—their forbidden attraction is as impossible to deny as the grave danger they're in.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

This USA TODAY bestselling and RITA ® Award-winning author has written more than two hundred books for Harlequin Books and Silhouette Books, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website at www.marieferrarella.com.

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She did what she could to keep the concern out of her voice, even though it steadily increased with every mile she drove.

"Look, I know that Melissa ripped out your heart, but the best revenge is living well, remember? You taught me that. You said you have to pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again. And if you don't get your butt in gear, big brother, I *will* sing the rest of that song and we all know how well I can carry a tune-but if I have to, I will and you'll only have yourself to blame if your ears fall off."

Holding her breath, she flew through the intersection, just as the light was turning red. It wasn't the best way for a police detective to act, but she couldn't shake the sense of urgency squeezing her chest more and more tightly.

"Seriously, Matt, I'm worried about you. It's not like you not to show up at work for two days in a row-and not even call with an excuse that a four-year-old could see through. I know the bottle has had a certain anesthetizing allure for you lately, but you've been restricting it to nights when you don't have work the next day. This is a giant leap forward for you and it's *not* a good one."

She sighed, searching for something reassuring to say.

"Look at it this way, at least you found out now, before you married her. What if you *had* married her? What if there were kids in the mix? 'Member how bad it was for us when the old man split and Mom got all flaky before *she* cut out on us, too? We survived that, right? We-you," she corrected herself, "will survive this, too. And this time, *you* can lean on me. It's about time that I paid you back for all your support. I know that I owe you big-time."

Detective Charlotte Randolph-Charley to everyone who knew her-had kept up a steady stream of chatter on her cell phone via the Bluetooth piece attached to her ear for the past fifteen minutes in an attempt to deny that she really was in a high state of agitation. Sergeant Matthew Holt hadn't shown up for work or called in for the past two days, neither of which were even *close* to standard behavior for the police officer.

Matt was her older half brother, a fact that they had both kept quiet. Matt's reason was because he wanted her to succeed on her own, without any possible fallout-good or bad-that might come her way because she was related to him. He wanted there to be no question that any success she achieved was hers alone.

Charley went along with the secrecy only because where Matt was concerned, she had a very soft spot in her heart and he could ask her to do anything.

If not for him putting his life on hold when their mother had taken off like that, Charley was certain things in her life might have turned out very differently. For one thing, she would have been swallowed up by the

system for three years. She was fifteen and Matt eighteen when Maura Allen Holt Randolph took off with the latest man in her life, leaving behind two offspring without so much as a goodbye note. Certainly not with any money other than what Matt had in the pocket of his jeans, money he'd earned working part-time in a hardware store after school. Their mother had even taken the small amount Matt had hidden in his shoe in the back of his closet. Maura's credo was what was hers was hers and what was yours was hers if she could find it. She was very good at finding things, Charley thought.

For the most part, Matt had raised himself and when she had come along three years later, he had raised her, as well. On the whole, he was far more enchanted with the baby sister he was charged with watching than the woman who had given birth to her. Maura made it a point to tell them more than once that there was "always more where you came from," making sure that neither one of them felt they were special in any way.

But Matt had gone out of his way to make her feel as if she *was* special, Charley recalled now with a fond smile. It was Matt who remembered her birthday and always found *something* to give her, no matter how small a gift it might seem. Like the year he found a doll someone had thrown out in the Dumpster in the alley behind their building. He'd spent days cleaning it up, making it into a presentable doll to give her. He even managed to sew up-awkwardly-the rips in Mattie's dress.

That was what she'd called the doll. Mattie. After her brother.

And she still had it, perched on the upper shelf in her closet. It was a constant tangible reminder of her brother's love.

Matthew was the reason behind almost everything she did. She'd joined the police force because that was the career that Matt had picked for himself. She would have gladly followed him to hell and back if that was the path he'd settled on, but the Aurora Police Department turned out to be the career choice for him-which was just fine with her.

And then Matt fell for Melissa. Hard. Like the proverbial ton of bricks. When he did, she had psyched herself up to accept second place in her brother's life, thrilled that he had found someone to love. That he was finally going to have time to do all the normal things: get married, have kids, buy a house and experience the wonderfully mundane life they'd never had while growing up.

Except, Charley now thought bitterly, that the woman her brother had fallen for so terribly hard had an icicle in place of a heart. Once the novelty of their relationship had worn off for her, Melissa thought nothing of stepping out on Matt.

She took everything he had to offer her-gifts, money as well as his undying love-and then broke off their relationship, grinding his feelings into the dust as if they were no more than bothersome gnats.

Matt never knew what hit him, never knew what he had done wrong. And even though she kept trying to make her brother see that the fault was not with him but with Melissa, nothing she could do or say could help her get through to him.

That was when the drinking started.

And apparently, it still hadn't stopped even though he'd promised her that it had, that he had taken his last drink, wasted his last hour mourning the loss of Melissa.

"I won't let that little two-bit ruin you," Charley declared fiercely, her voice echoing back within the white sedan she drove. "You're too good for her and you know it!" she cried, all but shouting the words into the cell phone that was mounted on her dashboard.

A second later, she was finally pulling into the driveway of the modest two-story house Matt had bought in hopes of bringing Melissa here and starting a family with her.

To Charley's way of thinking, the house had dodged a bullet-and so had Matt. Now all she had to do was make her brother see it. She could be extremely persuasive when she had to be but this, she knew, was going to take every single trick she had in the proverbial book-and maybe even more than that.

Putting the sedan into Park, Charley ended her call, tucked the cell into her pocket and got out of the car. She pressed her lips together as she surveyed the front of the house.

"I swear I don't know what I'll do if I find you on the floor, sleeping off a bender," she muttered to both herself and the brother who wasn't there.

Charley fished out the spare key that Matt had given her but found that she had no need of it. Not only was the front door unlocked, it was standing slightly ajar, as well.

"Well, this is a new low in carelessness for you. Are you daring the neighborhood thief to come in and ransack the place-or *think* he can do it only to have you get the drop on him? Are you really that hard up for entertainment?" she asked.

Charley lightly made contact with the door and pushed it a fraction at a time until the door was open all the way off to one side.

"Matt?" she called out hesitantly. "Are you in there? Matt, it's me, Charley. I elected myself to drag your sorry butt in to work before your lieutenant gets it into his head to fire you and you decide you have no choice but to move in with me. You know you'll just wind up cramping my style."

Not that she had anything that would have remotely passed for something as structured as a "style." Charley was far too busy these days trying to work her way up the ladder, trying to make something of herself within the department.

Trying to, she secretly admitted, to make Matt proud of her.

Because they were both part of the police force, someone might have thought that Matt and she were in competition with one another, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Matt and she had always been a team, a smooth-running, entirely supportive team. If there were shots to be called, she always let Matt call them.

Quite simply, unlike most brothers and sisters, Charley adored the ground Matt walked on and she knew the reverse was true as well, even if he never said as much. He didn't have to. His actions spoke louder than any words.

Matt was her rock.

Which was why seeing him this way, consumed with sorrow because of a woman so unequal to even the dirt

beneath his fingernails was just killing her. She didn't know how to snap him out of it. She only knew she had to-because he'd obviously had a relapse.

"Matt?" she called out again, feeling her heart constrict when she didn't receive an answer. "Are you here? You'd better be, otherwise leaving this door unlocked was a really stupid move, you know that, right? And if there's one thing Matthew Michael Holt isn't, it's stupid. Except whenever you're around 'Fluffy,'" she said, referring to Melissa by the less-than-flattering nickname she'd given the woman. "Then you have the brainpower of an amoeba on drugs.

"Matt, come out, come out wherever you-"

That was when she saw him.

And that was when she stifled the scream that rose up to her throat, a scream that came from Charley, Matt's sister, not Charley Randolph, police detective.

Stunned, frightened and in a complete daze, she dropped to her knees beside the body.

This was a dream, a nightmare, right? This wasn't happening. It wasn't!

"Matt, Matt, what has she done to you? Matt, *talk to me*," she pleaded even as she felt his throat for his pulse.

And found none.

Somewhere in her horror-stricken haze, Charley managed to pull out her cell phone and press a key that was preset and quickly connected her to the necessary emergency number.

Her voice trembled as she spoke. "This is Detective Charlotte Randolph." She rattled off her badge number. "I need a bus. Officer down, I repeat, officer down. At 4832 Wayne Avenue. *Hurry*," she begged.

She'd requested an ambulance rather than the coroner's wagon because maybe she was too numb to find the pulse, maybe he was still alive, his pulse reduced to a reedy whisper of a beat, hardly detectable at all.

The pulse Charley was praying that she had somehow missed.

Detective First Class Declan Cavanaugh turned in his swivel chair as he both listened to and watched his about-to-be-ex-partner Hollis Spenser give him the big news. Two years his senior, Hollis was leaving. Leaving the partnership, the department, the force. Leaving Aurora, California, for greener pastures.

"You're kidding."

Hollis moved the thatch of blond hair out of his eyes. "Nope. My new father-in-law thinks his daughter deserves a husband who comes home at night still breathing."

Cavanaugh frowned, regarding the man. "You look like you're breathing to me."

"You know what I mean." Hollis futilely pushed the hair out of his eyes, subconsciously knowing it would be back to position one in seconds. "Detectives who work in the private sector don't get shot at."

"Usually," Declan corrected. They all knew exceptions to *that* rule.

"Better odds," his partner of the past fifteen months corrected his almost-ex-partner's correction. Some habits died hard.

"Boring odds," Declan allowed. He shook his head as if he really pitied the man-and, in a way, he did. Hollis had just agreed to go willingly to serve a life sentence-unless this was his tradeoff, what he intended to do until something better struck his fancy.

Still, Declan didn't back off right away. "You're going to be doing what, taking photographs of cheating husbands cheating on their wives, wives cheating on their husbands? Is that *really* what you want to be doing with your life ten years from now? *Trying* to do with your life?" he amended in case the battle wasn't going to be won with just one major skirmish.

"The pay's a lot better," Hollis confided with a triumphant air. "I'm going to be earning at least three times as much as what I get here. And no more 2:00 a.m. calls. I can sleep in."

"You sleep in half the time now," Declan pointed out to the man, his expression completely deadpan.

Hollis snorted as he went on packing up his desk. Eighteen months amounted to three boxes-full to capacity. "You're just jealous."

"Hey, you've got a pretty girl there, no doubt about it," he acknowledged, referring to his partner's new wife-everyone in the department had been invited to the reception and he had seen the woman up close and personal-or as personal as an ice cube could get. "But if *regular hours* means I've got to get married first, then you're welcome to regular hours.

"As for me, I'm never settling down just to constantly keep finding the same warm body next to me in bed morning in, morning out. I'm just not made that way. Can't think of anything worse," he admitted, adding in a shiver to underscore his feelings.

"Suit yourself," Hollis told him with a shrug. "But loving the same woman for the rest of your life, it has a lot going for it. I should know."

Yeah, Declan thought, he should. But it was obvious that his ex-partner didn't. He'd been brainwashed by a pro, if he knew his women.

"Enjoy it for both of us," he said philosophically, then sighed. "I guess this means that I've got to break in a new partner-again."

Hollis grinned. The look didn't suit him. It made him appear a little goofy, as if his energy was just flowing away. "Operative word here being *break*?"

"Hey, if they're not tough, they've got no business being a detective in Major Crimes," Declan pointed out. He had no patience with weakness of any kind and a police officer displaying those traits was worse than useless, no matter how charming this partner could be on his own.

"Yeah. Well, go easy on whoever the new partner they send up is. The department's only got so many detectives to go around." Hollis put his hand out to Declan. "It's been an experience, Declan. Keep in touch-

and let me know if you ever want to start keeping regular hours. I'm sure the old man can find something for someone like you."

Declan supposed that was meant to flatter him.

It failed, through no fault of his well-intentioned about-to-be-ex-partner. "Not me. I like things to be unstructured," Declan told him. "Listen, I'll buy you a drink after hours-provided something else doesn't come up."

Hollis nodded. "You're on."

The acting lieutenant for Major Crimes stuck his head into Declan's tiny cubicle. "Hey, Cavanaugh, we got a call just now. Some officer got shot inside his own house."

"Domestic dispute?" Declan asked, saying the first thing that came to mind. He was already reaching into the drawer for the weapon he'd placed there.

"No details yet, just that another one of our detectives went to check on him and found the body in the living room. Check it out. And when you come back, come see me. We've got to look into getting you a new partner now that this one's making a break for it." He jerked a thumb in Hollis's direction.

"Just making plans to live the good life, Lieu, just making plans to live the good life," Hollis told his superior innocently.

"Yeah, well, come tell me that in six months," the lieutenant said. He stopped listening to the exchange between the two men the moment he turned away from them and headed back to his office.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gracie Davis:

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