

Old Loves Die Hard

A Mac Faraday Mystery

By

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Old Loves Die Hard

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To my son Tristan,

You are the center of my universe.

PROLOGUE

Georgetown, District of Columbia—Three Years Ago

Does heavy rain affect the murder rate the same way a full moon does?

Squinting through the rain flowing down his windshield like a waterfall, Lieutenant Mac Faraday pondered this question while easing his sedan around the emergency vehicles surrounding an SUV in the downtown parking lot.

Mac hoped the patrolman in the yellow rain parka flagging him down wouldn't comment on his car's grinding brakes. Payday was Friday. Then, he could replace the brake pads. With his luck, the pads would wear down to the rotors first.

"What've we got?" Mac blinked against the raindrops splashing onto his face and into his blue eyes while calling out the window.

"Looks like a robbery gone bad, Lieutenant," the officer reported. "One shot behind the ear through the driver's side window. Wallet and watch are missing."

"M.E. here yet?"

"Not yet," the officer said. "Everyone is taking their sweet time hoping the rain will stop."

“Either that or they know something we don’t and are gathering the animals.”

Before Mac could wind up his window, the officer cleared his throat. “Uh, Lieutenant?”

“Yes?”

“You should get your brakes checked. They’re grinding.”

“I’ll do that,” the detective replied. “Thanks for telling me.”

After parking between two patrol cars, Mac climbed out of his car and pulled the collar of his raincoat tight around his neck a moment too late. His auburn hair clung to his scalp while cold heavy raindrops formed a watery path down the sides of his head and the back of his neck to send a shiver down his spine.

The forensics team parted when Mac jogged up to where they were searching the inside of a dark blue SUV that looked black under the storm clouds. The only one who didn’t move out of his way was the lifeless body slumped over the center console. The shattered glass from the window resembled a sequined baby blanket where it covered his black trench coat.

Except for the stream of blood that flowed from the hole behind his left ear, Mac guessed that in life, he had been a good-looking fellow. His black hair had been neatly trimmed. Judging from his buffed fingernails, he had been meticulous about his grooming.

The parking lot belonged to a six-story red brick office building. In a previous life, it had been an eighty-year-old tenement. After forcing the neighborhood unfortunates out, a group of entrepreneurs renovated the building to house judges and lawyers in posh office suites.

Mac asked, “Anybody know who he is?”

“Dylan Booth.” From behind his back, Mac heard one of the uniformed officers who had been the first on the scene answer. “He worked for Judge Randolph Daniels on the top floor. He was an intern.”

“He was going to graduate from law school this spring,” another voice came from behind the officer. Drenched to the

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bones by the storm, a gray-haired man with a worn wrinkled face stepped up to the detective. He wore a light jacket over his security guard's uniform.

Searching for reasons someone would want to kill the law student, Mac asked, "Would I be correct in assuming he wasn't working on any criminal cases?"

"Nah," the guard responded. "He did mostly research and stuff for Judge Daniels, and he worked hard." Noting that it was Saturday, he went on, "He came in bright and early this morning. Left about two o'clock. He signed out at one-fifty-eight. He said he was going to finish up at home."

From where he stood, the guard glanced into the back of the vehicle. "Did you all find a box?"

"Box?" Mac glanced over his shoulder at the forensics officers to see that they were also puzzled by the question.

"A document box." The guard held out his hands a couple of feet apart. "You know. The kind you carry file folders in. When he left he was carrying one. I could tell by the way he was carrying it that it was heavy. He must have had it full."

The uniformed officers and forensics team responded in unison with shakes of their heads to the inquiry about the box.

"Do you have any idea what he had in it?" Mac asked.

It was the guard's turn to shake his head. "I assumed case files, being that he worked for the judge and all. What about his computer case?"

"No laptop or case," an officer within hearing distance reported.

Mac summarized, "Looks like we have a missing laptop, watch, wallet, and mystery box. Very interesting."

He turned to the officers inside the SUV. "Did the killer leave anything behind?"

"He missed his cell phone." Like a prize, a young officer held up the phone encased in a plastic bag.

Mac examined the instrument, which contained so many features that he had trouble determining which button to push in order to find the call log. Seeing his problem, one of the

forensics officers took it and pressed a couple of the buttons until he found the log.

“What’s the last call he made?” asked Mac.

The officer read off the number. “He made the call this afternoon at one-fifty-two. Didn’t the guard say he signed out at one-fifty-eight?”

Mac noted, “Then he made this last call right before he left.”

“And he was shot shortly after two.”

While the number was being read off, Mac had dialed it into his cell phone. “Let’s see who the last person he spoke to happens to be.”

He pressed the phone to his ear. After four rings, a voice mail system picked up: “You have reached the office of Assistant U. S. Attorney Stephen Maguire...”

CHAPTER ONE

Spencer Manor, Spencer, Maryland—Present Day

“Are you ready for a break?” Mac Faraday heard Archie call out before she came into view. The multi-colored leaves of the trees off Spencer Manor’s deck concealed her approach.

A half-dozen lake houses growing in size and grandeur rested along Spencer Court, which ran the length of Spencer Point. The court ended at the stone pillars marking the entrance to Mac Faraday’s multi-million dollar estate on Deep Creek Lake.

Six months earlier, Mac had inherited the stone and cedar home from Robin Spencer. The world-famous mystery writer’s sudden death from a brain aneurism had revealed the secret that forty-seven years earlier, as a teenager, she had given birth to a baby who had been put up for adoption. Her baby boy grew up to become a homicide detective named Mac Faraday.

Marking his place with his forefinger before closing the book he was reading, Mac welcomed the opportunity for a cocktail before dinner. When he saw Archie jog up the steps leading down to her cottage tucked in the corner of the rose garden, he realized that he had been waiting for her all afternoon.

Archie Monday was in faded jeans and a rose-colored cashmere sweater that fit her slender figure like a glove. With her short blond hair and bare feet with nails painted in rose-colored polish, she looked like a sensuous fairy dispatched to spread red, yellow, and gold pixie dust on the leaves surrounding the manor.

Mac had felt like the luckiest man in the world when he had discovered that his inheritance included a beautiful woman living in the stone cottage at the end of his back deck.

Archie had been Robin Spencer's editor, researcher, and personal assistant for over ten years. When the author passed away, she had left Archie the guest cottage to live in for as long as she wanted. The cottage and a generous allowance from a trust fund afforded Archie the freedom to take on freelance editorial assignments at her choosing. With a decade of being the right-hand lady to one of the world's most successful novelists on her resume, she had her pick of only the juiciest assignments.

This week, she was editing and proofing the last installment of a popular thriller trilogy. The second book in the series, which had been released the month before, ended in a cliffhanger. Now the public was clamoring for the conclusion. With the author and her agent breathing down the editor's neck to meet the publisher's deadline, and hackers lurking on the Internet to find out who had the final manuscript in order to leak the ending, Archie had been locked up in her cottage, glued to her laptop, eighteen hours a day.

"I need air and an exquisite glass of wine." She dropped down into the chaise across from him.

"I have just the thing for you." Trying not to look like he had been waiting for her, Mac casually strolled inside to the kitchen where he had been chilling a bottle of wine that matched her order and had a serving tray with glasses and shrimp cocktails waiting. "Do you think you're going to meet your deadline?"

"I always meet my deadlines," she called back. "That's why everyone loves me."

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Her face lit up when he came out carrying the tray loaded with everything she wanted for her break, only for her expression to change to horror when Gnarly, the hundred-pound German shepherd that was another part of Mac's inheritance, tore around the corner of the house and raced for the open door.

The dog cut so close to Mac's legs while darting inside that it was only due to some fancy footwork that he kept from dropping everything onto the deck.

"What was that all about?" Recalling that she had seen a large bone sticking out of Gnarly's mouth, she asked, "Where did he get that bone?"

Too preoccupied with not spilling the pinot grigio to notice anything other than a furry blur that almost clipped his legs, Mac set the tray on the table. "I'm afraid to find out."

"Where has he been all day?"

"I don't know," he replied. "It's impossible to contain that dog. He's smart. He's determined and innovative. I have actually seen him studying me to determine how best to get around me." He pulled the cork out of the bottle and poured her a taste of the wine. "It's downright creepy."

She went over to the door and looked for where Gnarly had gone inside. She saw him burying something under the cushion on the love seat in the living room. "Mac, we don't want the neighbors to get mad at us again."

"I'm trying to keep him entertained. I walk him twice a day." Offering a glass of the white wine, he went over to her.

"Why did he look so guilty when he went running into the house to hide?"

"If we're lucky, we'll never find out." They clinked their glasses together in a toast just as Spencer's chief of police, David O'Callaghan, turned the corner to come around from the front of the manor.

After giving birth to her son, Mac's teenaged mother had been sent off to college to end her relationship with Patrick O'Callaghan. By the time she had returned to Spencer, Mac's birth father had married and had a son.

David followed in his late father's footsteps to become the chief of police. Mac had learned from his mother's journal that over the years, Robin had come to love David like a son, to the point of providing a trust fund to care for his elderly mother, the woman who happened to marry the love of her life.

"Well, if it isn't Spencer's finest," Mac called out.

Without a word, Archie fetched a third wine glass.

David's attention wasn't on Mac and his greeting so much as it was on Gnarly, who was belying out onto the deck to hide behind Mac's legs. "There you are, you canine thief."

"What did he do?" Mac wanted to know.

"I got a call from the market in town."

"What town?" The closet market Mac knew of was across the bridge in McHenry, which was over three miles away.

"McHenry," David answered. "Forty-five minutes ago, someone walked into the market, went to the pet department, selected a large rawhide bone valued at eight dollars, and walked out the front door without paying for it."

Aware of the wet snout pressed against his ankle, Mac pointed out, "McHenry isn't your jurisdiction."

"But our perp lives in my jurisdiction," David argued. "Three and a half feet tall. One hundred pounds. Black, brown, and bronze hair. Brown eyes, and of German descent. We have three eyewitnesses who swear they'll be able to pick Gnarly out of a line-up."

Archie was doubtful. "He walked in, took a bone, and walked back out with it."

"How?" Mac asked.

David answered, "Automatic doors."

Mac pointed out, "But the pet department is all the way in the back."

"Yeah. They said he actually nosed through the inventory to pick just the one he wanted."

"Why didn't anyone stop him?"

"By the time the manager and clerks got over their stunned disbelief, Gnarly was long gone." David pointed his

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finger at the shepherd hiding his face against the back of Mac's legs. "You need to do something about your klepto dog."

Before Mac could respond Gnarly jumped to his feet, went on point, and barked to signal the arrival of a visitor. As if on cue, the doorbell sounded.

"We have visitors," Archie said.

"Probably the FBI to pick up Gnarly for robbing the Bank of America," David said.

Grateful for the interruption, Mac went inside. From the back deck, he had to cross the dining room, up three steps and across the living area to the front foyer. Months after his windfall, he still had to get used to the vastness of his inheritance. The granite floors, antiques passed down through generations, authentic paintings including a Monet, leather furniture, stone fireplaces in each room, they were all his.

He was still in awe of the painting above the fireplace mantle of Mickey Forsythe, Robin Spencer's chief detective. The image was that of a man, dressed in stylishly casual clothes, sitting in a wing-backed leather chair. Gray touched the temples of his auburn hair. His facial features included chiseled cheekbones and a strong jaw. His blue eyes seemed to jump out of the painting. Mickey's German shepherd sat at attention by his side.

Mac wasn't the only one who had noticed the similarities between Robin Spencer's fictional detective and her long-lost son. Like Mac, Mickey was a homicide detective when he came into a multi-million dollar inheritance. Retired from police work, he spent his time solving murder mysteries with Diablo, his faithful canine companion.

Sometimes the painting over the fireplace would make the hair on the back of Mac's neck stand up. So much so that he had considered sending it up to the Spencer Inn on the top of Spencer Mountain to hang in the lobby across from Robin's portrait.

Mac sensed that Gnarly followed him more in need of his protection from the authorities than to protect his master

from any potential danger that might be waiting on the other side of the door. As they passed the love seat in the living room, Gnarly, who had taken ownership of the chair, jumped up and peered over the back of it to the foyer.

Through the beveled cut glass in the door, Mac could make out a woman smoothing her hair and straightening her clothes in anticipation of his greeting her.

A forced grin filled her face as soon as her eyes met his. "Mac!" she sang out as if no time had passed since their last meeting in divorce court when the judge had ended their twenty-year marriage with the single pound of a gavel. The year before that, she had thrown him out of their home.

Feeling as stunned as the market manager when Gnarly walked in and walked out with his stolen goodie, Mac uttered her name in two disjointed squawks. "Chris—tine?" After staring at her long enough to determine that her presence on his doorstep wasn't a nightmare from his imagination, he asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I decided to come out for a visit." When she craned her neck to see beyond him into the manor, he caught a whiff of the alcohol on her breath. She was wrapped in her decade-old blue trench coat. Under that, Mac saw she wore blue jeans over white athletic shoes.

She had to be curious about what he had inherited on the day their divorce had become final. Out of spite, he wanted to tell her to ask their two children, both college students who had inherited large trust funds from their grandmother for their education. Since the home she had won in their divorce was over three hours away, she had to have driven quite a way to see what would have been hers if she had only stayed married to him for just a little while longer.

Mac gave in to his manners. "Do you want to come in?"

As if she feared he would change his mind, she hurried across the threshold into the foyer. "You look good. You're tanner than usual. Have you been using a tanning booth or some of those lotions?"

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Showing her into the living room, Mac replied that he had spent a lot of time outside.

“Golf?”

“Tennis. I play twice a week.” He wondered if he should return her compliment by saying how good she looked. Catching his reflection in the mirror in the corner curio containing glass artifacts Robin had purchased during a trip to China, he had to admit that he did look good. The regular tennis games with Garrett County’s prosecuting attorney Ben Fleming kept him trim and fit even if he did lose the majority of their matches.

She wasn’t paying much attention to him. Her blue eyes, rimmed in red and framed with dark swollen circles, gazed up at the beams in the two-story foyer and living room. Her mouth hung in awe at the discovery of each new treasure that she had missed out on.

“What are you doing here, Christine?” He decided to skip the vacant compliment about her looking good to go straight for the heart.

Her eyes filled with tears and spilled down her cheeks. “I screwed up.”

“I know,” Mac said. “You didn’t need to drive all the way out here to Spencer to tell me that.”

Wailing, she buried her face in her hands.

Behind her, Gnarly watched while sitting up in the love seat with his front paws resting on top of the back. When her cry rose to a loud shriek, he buried his face in his paws.

“Mac, what’s going on?” Archie rushed in from the back deck with David close behind her.

The two women met each other’s gaze.

Christine asked first, “Is this Archie?”

As if she didn’t know the answer, Archie looked at Mac.

“Yes.” Standing up straight, Mac crossed over to stand next to her. “This is R.C. Monday. She lives in the guest cottage.” He went on to introduce David. “David O’Callaghan is our chief of police. He’s a good friend of mine. He came to

ask for my help in solving a robbery that happened in town today.”

“*Our* children told me a lot about you,” she told them. “I’m Christine. I’m sure Mac told you a lot about me.”

“Not really,” Archie replied quickly.

As if to remind Mac that he had forgotten someone during his introductions, Gnarly let out a loud whine.

Startled by the noise behind her, Christine whirled around. Spying the German shepherd filling the love seat and almost at eye level with her, she announced, “That’s a dog.”

“That’s Gnarly,” Mac said.

Eying Gnarly with a mixture of fear and curiosity, Christine stayed rooted in the middle of the living room without moving toward him. Gnarly was equally ambivalent about her.

“Did you drive out here alone?” Mac wondered how she had managed to drive in her inebriated condition without being pulled over by the police.

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“Where’s Stephen?”

At the mention of the name of the man for whom she had divorced him, she burst into hysterical cries again. “I’m so sorry, Mac. Please forgive me. Please let me have another chance. After all we had been through together—” Suddenly, she was on her knees with both arms wrapped around his legs while sobbing into his thighs.

David snatched his keys from his pocket. Announcing that he had reports to finish at the police station, he hurried past them.

“But what about the robbery at the market?” Mac called out.

“I’ll pay off the manager.” David was out the door and gone.

Mac didn’t know whether to ask Archie for help or not. She answered for him. “I have a tight deadline.” She galloped out to the deck to head down to her cottage.

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When Christine began choking on her sobs, Gnarly dug his stolen bone out from under the cushion and leapt over the back of the love seat to follow after Archie.

“Get up, Christine.” Mac pulled her up to her feet by her armpits and dragged her over to the sofa.

Her tears had glued strands of her golden blond hair to her wet cheeks. Mac recalled a time, as recently as the day that he had come home to find his belongings packed up in the garage, when she would never have left home without each hair being in place.

“Stephen left you, didn’t he?”

“We did have a good marriage,” she choked out. “If I hadn’t made that one mistake—” Claspng her arms around his neck she tried to kiss him.

While diving backwards to dodge her lips, he released her hold on his neck. “You threw me out of my own home.” He folded her hands in her lap.

“You were always such a good gentle man.” Each word came out slowly and deliberately in her effort to appear in control.

“Funny,” Mac said, “that’s not what your lawyer told the judge.”

“Stephen told him to say that.” Her tears fell anew. “If he hadn’t seduced me—he made me all these promises and told me how you didn’t treat me right and how I deserved so much better than our little house in the suburbs with its little lawn and...He said that I deserved so much more and that he could give it all to me because I deserved more.” Batting her tears out of her eyes, she waved her hands and glanced at the elegance surrounding her in the manor. “Like this.”

“Maguire certainly thought what we had was good enough to take away from me and move into,” Mac noted. “What about your job?”

“You want to rub my nose in it, don’t you?” she spat out. “Tristan told you.” She guessed which of their two children had spilled the beans about her losing her job due to her alcoholic state.

“You got laid off,” Mac stated.

She corrected him. “Fired.”

“You’d been with Robertson and Sons for over fifteen years,” Mac said. “You were head of the paralegal team. What happened?”

“It was political.”

“What did they say?”

“The complaint was absenteeism.” She rushed on, “I had leave saved up. And then they started complaining because I’d have a few drinks at lunch. Like I’m the only one to have two-martini lunches.”

Mac asked her, “How much have you had to drink today?”

She glanced over his shoulder at the bottle of wine on the back deck. “You first.”

“That was my first drink of the day and I didn’t drive over the mountains after drinking it.” He asked her again, “How many glasses of wine did you have before you decided to come out here looking for me?”

“Everyone needs some liquid courage before begging for mercy.” She reached for his hands. “Forgive me.”

“I forgive you.” Mac pulled his hands away. “I can do that. I’ve moved on. If you need my forgiveness in order to move on with your life after all that’s happened, then I can give it to you.”

She tried to make her smile as becoming as possible in her condition. “What about us?”

“There is no us, Christine.”

“You can’t abandon me like this, Mac,” she cried. “I’ve lost everything. I’ve got nothing. When Stephen left...” she broke into heavy sobs. “Oh, Mac...” She collapsed into his lap.

* * * *

Seeing that Christine was unfit to drive, Mac grabbed her suitcase from the back seat of her five-year-old Mercedes and

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drove her in his car to the Spencer Inn, another part of his inheritance, so that she could sleep it off.

The resort rested at the top of Spencer Mountain. The front of the stone and cedar main lodge offered a view of the lake below and the mountains off in the distance. While resting between boating, golf, skiing, mountain biking, hiking, or any of the other host of activities, guests could enjoy the view in cane rocking chairs on the wrap-around porch. Between activities, they could partake of refreshments in the outdoor café on the multi-level deck among the flora of an elaborate living maze or, if the weather was too chilly, the lounge inside. For more formal eating, the Inn's five-star restaurant offered dining experiences that had been favorably recorded in gourmet magazines for decades.

Mac was still trying to wrap his head around owning a resort that he couldn't have afforded to visit a year ago.

Even with all the twists and turns driving up to the top of the mountain from Spencer Point, Christine had managed to fall asleep in the passenger seat of his Dodge Viper. When the valet opened the door to help her out, she almost fell onto the red carpet leading up the steps to the main entrance. With a bellhop in tow carrying her suitcase, Mac led Christine across the lobby to the front desk.

Seeing the inn filled with guests—some resting in front of the fireplace, others reading in front of the waterfall fountain on the other side of the lobby, and a large group going into the lounge for cocktails—Mac worried that no rooms would be available.

When the desk clerk asked if he wanted to check Christine into his private penthouse suite, he replied, "I have a private suite?"

Mac's reaction amused the clerk. "On the top floor. We never book it. It's available only for you and your private guests."

Mac turned around. The guests that littered the lobby now resembled money in a coin jar. They were paying guests. Paying to stay at *his* resort. The resort *he* owned. It hit Mac as

it had been hitting him time and again: This all belonged to him.

A wail snapped him out of his daze.

Realizing that Christine was no longer at his side, Mac whirled around.

Her shoulder bag held up to strike, Christine had run across the lobby toward the lounge. Even with the target's back to him, Mac recognized his broad shoulders, dark hair, each strand in place, and sophisticated demeanor. With the grace of a ninja, he raised his arm to block her blow while grabbing her bag with the other to prevent a second strike.

"What are you doing here?" Stephen Maguire demanded to know. His tone suggested that he found the Spencer Inn permitting such low class through its doors offensive.

"Who is she?" Christine shoved him out of her way to get to the woman by his side.

Younger than other women that Mac had seen in Stephen Maguire's company, Christine's rival was as slender as his ex-wife had been in her youth. Her silky copper-colored hair and porcelain skin only further enraged Christine.

"Who she is, is irrelevant." Stephen Maguire made no move to protect his companion when Christine charged. The girl's eyes widened like those of a deer about to be struck by a speeding vehicle. Crying out for help, she dove to hide behind him.

Mac grabbed his ex-wife while trying to disarm her. "They're not worth it."

Christine danced around her ex-husband to get at the other woman. "Who do you think you are?"

"What's up with you, bitch?" the girl replied.

The commotion had drawn Jeff Ingle, a willowy man in a gray suit that matched his slicked-back hair, from his corner office down a hallway that led back to the business offices. The Inn's manager jumped in to reinforce the blockade to protect the girl. "Madam, if you don't quiet down, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

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“If you know what’s good for you, then I suggest you leave—now!” Christine raged. “I’m going to kill you!”

“You’re crazy.” She turned to Stephen. “Who is she?”

“Some drunken lunatic,” Christine’s former lover replied.

“Lunatic?” Christine shouted.

“Stop it, please!” Mac reached out to grab her arm, which she jerked away so hard that he had to duck to avoid being slapped.

“Who drove me to lunacy? You! Like you have every other woman that’s crossed your path.”

Leading his companion away by the arm, Stephen Maguire left the conversation and the lobby. When Mac and Jeff Ingle forcibly kept Christine from following, her rage reached hysterical heights.

“Don’t you walk away from me, Stephen. You won’t get away with this. I’m not going to let you get away with this. Do you hear me? I’m going to kill you! I’m going to kill you, Stephen Maguire! I’m going to kill you dead!”

“Shut up!” Mac cut off her madness with a slap across her face.

Startled by the assault, Christine yelped and grabbed her cheek.

“Mac?” Jeff noticed the guests staring dumbfounded at the scene.

“What is wrong with you?” Any sympathy that Mac had had for his ex-wife earlier was now gone.

Jeff Ingle gestured to the desk clerk. “Make sure a bottle of champagne and fruit tray is delivered to Mr. Maguire’s room with a note of apology.”

“Why are you apologizing to him?” Christine demanded to know.

“You attacked him,” Mac said. “He’s a guest at my inn and you attacked him.”

“You do know who that was, don’t you?” Jeff asked both of them. “That was one of the Maguires. Tycoon Broderick Maguire. Supreme Court Justice Everett Maguire. The social register.”

“I am very familiar with all the power and influence of the D.C. Maguires.” Mac recounted in a mocking tone, “One call and I can have you wiped out and licking the curb.” He shot a glare at Christine. “Heard the threat and experienced it.”

Wiping his sweaty brow with the handkerchief that he carried and used often, Jeff said, “Let’s hope Mr. Maguire doesn’t decide to take down the Spencer Inn by telling his friends about this incident and suggesting they start going to the Wisp for the season instead.” Grabbing Christine’s suitcase, the manager ushered them into an elevator to take them up to the top floor.

As part of the hotel security, the elevator wouldn’t take them up to the penthouse floor until Mac held his personal Inn key card to the eye beam for it to read the security code.

The elevator would only take registered guests and hotel employees to floors containing guest rooms and suites. Guests expecting visitors not staying at the Inn had to notify the front desk, who would issue the visitor a temporary key card.

There was no shortage of other facilities at the Inn that visitors not staying overnight could enjoy, like the conference facility, award-winning spa, and restaurant and lounge on the first three floors of the Inn. The elevator would allow guests without key cards access to those areas.

As the elevator took them up, Mac ordered Christine, “Stay in the suite. Order whatever you want from room service for dinner and get some sleep. I’ll come by for breakfast in the morning and we’ll talk about how to fix things.”

“Stephen Maguire ruined everything in my life.” She blinked the tears out of her eyes.

When the doors opened, they stepped down the corridor that ran the length of the top floor to the service elevator and stairwell at the other end.

Jeff warned Christine about using the stairwell. “Don’t go in without your key card. Once you go into the stairwell, none of the doors to any of the floors will open without your key card except the doors to the main areas down on the first, second, or third floor. We’ve had more than one guest go

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into the stairwell in their bathrobe or less and have to traipse through the lobby to the front desk to get let back into their room.”

With pride, Jeff said that every penthouse suite, except Mac’s, had been reserved for that weekend. “It’s the height of the autumn foliage and the Inn has the most beautiful views of the colors across the mountains and around the lake. This will be our biggest weekend until ski season starts in about six weeks.” He gestured at the door across from Mac’s suite. “This weekend, we have an ambassador from eastern Europe staying here. He says he has never seen the autumn foliage before.”

Mac recalled before the dissolving of their marriage, when Christine would have gushed over the elegance of the two-bedroom suite that afforded a view of the lake and wooded trails leading down to the water’s edge. There was a time she would have thrown off her clothes and jumped into the hot tub out on the balcony before curling up with glee in front of the fireplace.

Instead, she miserably gazed out the picture windows at the multi-colored landscape without seeing it while mumbling thanks to Jeff when he handed her the key card.

After the manager left, Mac got her attention. “I’m going now. Like I said, enjoy the suite. Order dinner, stay here, and stay away from Stephen Maguire. I’ll be back tomorrow at nine o’clock. We’ll have breakfast and discuss how we can get you back on your feet again then.”

“It’s not supposed to be like this.” She stomped her feet. “My life has gone to hell.”

“Then get out of hell,” he said. “You’re a big girl and you’ve made some dumb mistakes. We all make mistakes. Do what a grownup does. Fix it. You crawled into bed with a snake and got bit. Learn from it and make it right.”

Christine returned to gazing out the window. “You’re right, Mac,” she said in a strangely quiet tone. “That’s what I have to do.”

CHAPTER TWO

Mac knew in his heart that his Saturday night had to be better than Christine's. He was positive that his Sunday morning would be less traumatic due to the absence of a hangover. Still, this knowledge didn't console him any when he returned to the Spencer Manor to find a note taped to Archie's cottage door:

My dearest Mac,

Gone out to visit an old friend. See you tomorrow.

Love,
Archie

It was a defining moment.

It was when Archie wasn't there that Mac came to realize how much he had come to depend on her company.

In the five months since he had moved to Spencer, they had spent every Saturday night together, as well as most other evenings and days. Many evenings, they would go to the Spencer Inn for a dinner prepared especially for them by the chef, who delighted in treating Archie to new exotic recipes from faraway lands.

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Having been Robin Spencer's travel companion around the globe, Archie was fearless when it came to trying strange and unusual foods. Her adventurous taste buds delighted the Inn's chef.

Other times, Archie would work her own culinary magic in the manor's gourmet kitchen, and had taught Mac a few simple tricks in an effort to teach him to cook.

After dinner, they would either sit together on the deck to watch the sun set, or in the hot tub on cool evenings, or watch a movie together in the home theater. Afterwards, they would say good night with a hug and a kiss, at which point Archie would return to her cottage while Mac escorted Gnarly up to the master suite.

Tonight, Archie wasn't there.

Mac was spending Saturday night in the manor alone, unless he counted Gnarly. Missing her companionship also, the dog opted for drowning his sorrows in a bag of popcorn.

The man and his dog stayed up late into the night watching a horror movie in the home theatre. The feature about a war between werewolves and vampires was already on when Mac had arrived home to find Gnarly with an open bag of popcorn, which he had stolen off the kitchen counter. Mac rooted for the vampires while Gnarly howled his allegiance to the werewolves.

The triumph of the vampires over the werewolves was a hollow victory without Archie sitting next to him covering her eyes during the gory parts, or better yet, burying her whole face against his chest while he held her, at which point the scent of her perfume would excite his senses.

Funny how you don't notice how much someone's scent excites you until it's replaced by dog breath.

The next morning, Mac woke up on the sofa when Gnarly alternated between licking his nose and pawing at his hand. The two of them had been up so late that Gnarly missed his six o'clock morning patrol of the Point.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Mac dragged himself up the stairs with one hand on the banister while Gnarly guided

him with the other until they made their way to the deck's doors, where the dog suddenly jumped on the doors with both front paws pounding. His urgent barking seemed to bounce inside of Mac's head like a ping pong ball.

"What's your problem?" he demanded to know. But Gnarly wasn't sticking around to answer. As soon as the door was open, he shot out like a bullet, across the deck, down the steps, and around the corner of the house. His barking sounded like a battle charge.

The bright morning sunlight momentarily blinded Mac, while at the same time the chilling autumn breeze that swept in off the lake sent a shock through his body that woke up any part of him that hadn't been awakened by Gnarly's barking.

Archie was his first vision of the day.

As always, she was barefoot with her toes dressed up in bright red polish that matched her floor-length silky bathrobe.

"Rough night?" she asked him.

"What's his problem?" Mac asked.

"It's not his fault. Otis keeps provoking him."

"Who's Otis?" Mac looked around off the deck in search of another dog. Gnarly's barking could now be heard at the front of the house.

"That big fat squirrel," she answered. "You can't miss him. He's the biggest squirrel on the Point. Otis keeps coming up onto the deck and shaking his fat butt with his bushy tail at Gnarly. He's begging for a fight."

Though he could see that she was serious in her version of the war between the dog and squirrel, Mac couldn't help being amused. It sounded like an animated movie. To him, it was simple. Gnarly was territorial and couldn't stop barking at everything that moved on the Point.

"This squirrel actually has a name?" he asked.

"Everyone has to have a name."

Usually, she would come in and they would share a cup of coffee. If he was lucky, she would prepare breakfast.

This morning, she made no such movement. Instead, she gazed at him with emerald eyes that didn't look angry, but sad.

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Mac wondered, as he often did with women, if he had done something to offend her. Maybe he hurt her feelings when he laughed about Gnarly and Otis.

"I'm surprised Gnarly's barking didn't wake Christine up," she said.

"Why would it? What makes—"

Christine's car. It's still in the driveway. Archie must have seen it when she came home.

He asked, "Do you think Christine spent the night here?"

"Yeah."

"No, no." Taking her hand, he led her inside. "Want some coffee?"

In his haste to get breakfast, Gnarly plowed into her, causing her to fall against Mac when the three of them squeezed through the open doorway. While he fed Gnarly, she prepared the coffeemaker and pressed the button to grind the beans and brew a pot of coffee for the two of them.

After Mac told her about the scene that Christine had caused in the lobby of the Spencer Inn, she asked, "Why did you take her up to the Inn instead of letting her stay here? It isn't like you don't have enough room." She collected the cream and sugar for their coffee.

"Would you have wanted her to stay here?" After Gnarly attacked the food in his bowl, Mac took two mugs from the cupboard. He paused to watch her reaction.

"Spencer Manor is your home. You can let whoever you want to stay here." Those beautiful emerald saucers seemed to bore into him.

"I asked if you wanted her to stay here."

Each one dared the other to say what was on his or her mind.

The only sounds in the kitchen were the churning of the coffeemaker and Gnarly devouring his breakfast. When he was finished, the German shepherd sat between the two of them and licked his chops while looking from one of them to the other as if to ask what was going to happen next.

"I'm going to step out on a limb here," Mac announced.

“You first.” Leaning back against the counter, she looked as if she was bracing for him to punch her.

Crossing his arms across his chest, he leaned against the kitchen table. “If the situation was reversed, and it was your ex-husband—”

“I don’t have an ex-husband.”

“Imagine you did,” he said. “If you had an ex and he came here, I wouldn’t feel comfortable with him spending the night under the same roof as you—even if nothing happened between the two of you.” He plunged on. “The cottage is yours. Even if it legally belongs to me, Robin said that you can live there as long as you want. That makes it your home. Since it’s your home, you can invite whoever you want to spend the night with you, but...”

“But...”

He hated that but.

Haven’t I said enough? I told you that I don’t want you having other men around. What more do I have to say?

“You were upset because you thought Christine had spent the night with me,” he came back at her. “Why were you upset about that?”

There. Let’s put it back on you.

Seeming to have seen the invisible ball tossed into Archie’s court, Gnarly turned his gaze from Mac to her.

“Because I was jealous.”

Mac waited for her to go on, but she didn’t. “Of what?”

Now her hands were on her hips. “Christine kicked you out of your home. She and her lover conspired to wipe you out. They stripped you of everything and then she had the gall to come here to ask you to take her back. When I came home last night and saw her car here, I thought—” She clenched her jaw shut.

“You thought I had taken her back,” he finished for her.

“Meanwhile...” Seeming to change her mind about what she was about to say, she turned her attention to the coffee. She took the pot from the burner and filled both of the mugs.

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Mac stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms about her waist. “Meanwhile, you’ve been here for me,” he whispered into her ear.

Saying nothing, she nodded her head.

He kissed her ear. “I’m sorry I’m not good at saying how much people mean to me. But you do mean a lot to me. I missed you last night.”

Suddenly, her arms were around his neck and her mouth on his.

He welcomed the return of her scent and her taste as he held her against him. It was as if she didn’t want to lose the chance to have him now that he offered the opportunity.

With no clear memory of the last time that he had felt wanted by any woman, Mac had forgotten the joy of the touch of feminine hands on him. He gasped with shock and pleasure when he felt her fingertips and nails on his back when she pulled him to her.

The bongs of the grandfather clock in the foyer chiming the eight o’clock hour brought Mac to his senses with a jolt.

“No,” he gasped out while pulling away from her. Apologetically, he unwrapped her arms from around his waist.

“No?” she whimpered.

“I have to go.” He kissed her fingertips. “I’m meeting Christine for breakfast at nine o’clock.”

“Are you serious?”

Not wanting to let her go, he clung to both of her hands in his while begging for her to understand. “I have to talk to her. I couldn’t last night because she was so inebriated. She’s been asking the kids for money from their trust funds, which since I’m the trustee I won’t let them give her, which makes her mad at them. Tristan refuses to talk to her anymore because she’s drunk all the time. I’m going to talk to her about going into rehab and I have to do it at breakfast before she starts drinking again.”

He pressed her fingers to his lips. He wished that this had been another time, another day when neither of them had any

responsibilities calling them away. He wanted to spend the whole day alone with her and no one else, to get to know her in ways that he had only been imagining for a long time.

“Later?” he whispered to her.

The sadness in her eyes was replaced with an invitation. “Hurry back.”

“Oh, I will.” He brought his lips to hers. “I’ll be back by lunchtime. I’ll have Antonio prepare a special lunch for us and bring it home. Cheese and fruit—”

“Strawberries dipped in chocolate?” Her eyes lit up.

The grin on her face melted his heart. “Strawberries dipped in chocolate it is.”

“And we’ll eat them in the Jacuzzi together.” Like a child excited by the prospect of a dream come true, she clapped her hands.

“Together.” He kissed her one last time before going upstairs to prepare to meet his ex-wife.

* * * *

It took every fiber of Mac’s being to force thoughts about his and Archie’s plans for later out of his mind and replace them with the matter awaiting him at the top of the mountain.

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t had visions—in reality they’d been fantasies—of this moment. He’d rehearsed them in his mind more than once ever since discovering Christine’s affair with Stephen Maguire.

Every vision contained a common thread. Christine would realize that while her lover had looks, position, prestige, and wealth, it was her devoted husband who’d always been there for her. Upon making this realization, she would beg for him to take her back and Mac would take much relish in saying, “No, no, no, and hell no. You made your bed, baby, now lie in it.”

Then he would leave her on her knees, tearing at her clothes, and beating on the ground with her fists in anguish.

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Now that the opportunity had presented itself for him to live out his fantasy, Mac didn't have the heart to bring it to life. Christine's pitiful condition had sucked the joy out of his vengeance. She had already made her bed and not only lain in it, she had made a full-fledged nest out of it.

Mac couldn't leave the mother of his children there.

His private table was waiting for him in the corner of the Inn's restaurant. As soon as Mac walked through the cut glass doors, Antonio, the host on duty, whipped a fresh pot of coffee from the burner and took it to the table to fill his cup.

"Will Archie be joining you this morning, Mr. Forsythe?" With a snap of his fingers, Antonio signaled for a server to fetch a basket of hot croissants for Mac's table.

"It's Faraday," Mac replied. "No, another friend is visiting from out of town. But I do have a special lunch order that I'd like for the kitchen to prepare for her."

"If it's for Archie, then it won't be anything less than special." Antonio announced before hurrying to the kitchen to put in Mac's order for their romantic lunch.

While Mac watched for Christine, or Stephen Maguire's entrance into the restaurant to flaunt his blue blood among the common folks, the servers continued waiting on other customers. Seeing their nervous glances in his direction, he noted that he still hadn't gotten used to being the boss. His employees' anxiousness made him uncomfortable.

During his career as a homicide detective he had encountered many powerful people who delighted in crushing those who worked for them. Mac wanted so much to not become one of "those bosses".

When Antonio asked if he wanted to go ahead and order, Mac checked the time on his watch. It was twenty minutes after nine o'clock. Assuming Christine had overslept, he used his master key card to take the elevator up to the penthouse.

"Christine!" Mac called out while pounding on the door when she didn't answer after his second knock. "Wake up. It's time for breakfast."

“What the hell is going on?” The door across the corridor, which had a Do Not Disturb sign hanging on it, flew open.

Mac’s apology for the disturbance was cut short by the shock of seeing the short, squat, bald-headed man standing naked before him. As bald as the top of his head was, his face was covered in a thick gray beard that went down his barrel chest and stomach and the rest of his exposed body.

“Don’t you know that people are trying to sleep?” the naked man asked in a European accent so thick that Mac could only decipher his demand by piecing together what words he understood and the context of the situation.

Mac found his voice. “I think my—” He stopped when he caught himself starting to call Christine his wife. “My friend was supposed to meet me for breakfast. I guess she slept in.”

“Why don’t you try calling her instead of standing here pounding on the door like some heathen?” the naked man suggested. “All this noise and interruptions. If it isn’t the maid with towels, it’s someone playing horror movies, and now we have—”

“Omar!” A woman came into view from the sitting room behind the bald man. “Who are you talking to out there?”

Mac saw that the tall red-headed woman was as naked as her companion, though notably more attractive.

“Some heathen trying to wake up the people in the suite across the hall,” he called back to her. Based on how he had left the door wide open, he didn’t seem to care if Mac saw her unclothed.

“Well, if I were you I’d hurry up. The clock is ticking and my twenty-four hours is up in two.”

With the eagerness of a boy being told that this would be his last chance to kiss his date good-night, he slammed the door shut.

Using his key card, Mac let himself into Christine’s room.

At first, the silence in the suite made Mac think that Christine had sobered up and, realizing how foolish she had

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behaved the day before, left to return home. Then, he realized that her car was still at Spencer Manor.

The suite was too quiet.

It was possible for Christine to have left through the lobby to take a cab to the manor to get her car while he was waiting for her in the restaurant. Mac hoped that, if that was the case, she wouldn't run into Archie. If so, he was glad he wouldn't be there to witness the scene.

The empty room service tray was a clue that Christine had taken his advice to have dinner sent up. Not seeing any dishes, a quick check told him that she'd had the presence of mind to put her dirty dishes in the kitchenette's dishwasher and run it. During his check inside the dishwasher, Mac noticed two plates and two wine glasses.

It was a dinner for two.

"No, Christine," he murmured. "You didn't."

He noticed the first blood splatter on the wall as he rounded the corner into the sitting area.

That splatter was followed by another, then another, then a smear and a pool of blood.

In the middle of the sitting room, Mac first saw the leather shoes covered in blood. As he stepped into the room, he saw the rest of the body lying behind the coffee table, which had been overturned in the *mêlée*.

Christine, what have you done?

The blood that saturated the carpeting soaked into the knees of his pants when he knelt to press his fingertips against the neck that had been sliced open.

"Oh, Christine, no." Mac tasted his tears in his mouth.

Anger welled up inside him when he looked at the once handsome face of the man who twelve months before had been his enemy.

"Why did you come up here?" Mac yelled at the dead man. "She said she was going to kill you. You heard her. She swore. Why didn't you stay away, you bastard?"

Emotion overrode decades of police training that had become second nature to him. If he had been one of the de-

tectives who had worked under him before he retired, Mac would have raked him over the coals for not leaving the suite immediately and containing the crime scene.

With the back of his hand, Mac slapped the dead man's body, getting more blood on his sleeve and hand. The body didn't move in response to his slap. Rigor mortis had already set in.

She killed him last night.

With the sound of his heartbeat racing in his ears, Mac climbed up to his feet to go in search of clues to his ex-wife's whereabouts.

At the door to the master bedroom, his detective training kicked back in. Stephen Maguire had been stabbed several times.

Where's the murder weapon?

Mac guessed that she had put it in the dishwasher when she washed the rest of the dishes to get rid of the evidence.

Using a paper towel from the kitchenette in order to not disturb evidence on the door handle, he went into the master bedroom.

He was surprised to find her blood-soaked clothes scattered on the floor around the bed. Her suitcase rested on the luggage stand.

"Christine," he called out. "What happened?"

With no other place to search for her in the suite, Mac threw open the bathroom door.

The room shone like it had never been touched by human hands, or live ones.

He found her naked in the bottom of the shower tub. Her damp blond hair was plastered to her head and neck.

Mac pressed his fingers against her neck to check for a pulse. There was none.

Like Stephen Maguire, her body was stiff.

Suddenly, all the wounds from the past were gone. Once again, she was his wife, the girl he had felt honored to have gone out with him. The girl he had protected and taken care of. The girl he had loved.

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Holding her cold body, he rocked her in his arms while searching for any sign of life, and finding none.

While wiping her hair from her face, his fingers found a deep bloody gash at the back of her head at the base of her neck. He looked up at the towel rack in the shower above.

“So that’s what happened,” he said to her dead body.

He spied chunks of skin under her fingernails and deep red scratches on her arms and neck.

Sobbing, he asked her, “Christine, what are we going to tell the children?”