

## BOOK EXCERPT

*How many years have I lived here, and I still don't know where Archie puts the scissors?*

After closing the drawer in the nightstand on his side of the bed, Mac gave up and twisted around to grasp the designer tag hanging from under his armpit. Hoping to not tear a hole in the new blue sweater that his daughter, Jessica, had given him for Christmas, he gave it a sharp tug.

The tag gave way, but the plastic “do-hickey” that kept it attached to the sweater didn’t.

*Rats!*

From where he was sprawled out in the center of the bed, Gnarly cocked his head at him.

“I don’t suppose you could bite it off without putting a hole in this sweater, huh, Gnarly?”

Mac studied the label he had torn off. *Dolce & Gabbana. Never heard of them. But if Jessica bought it, it has to be expensive, and she’ll have a fit if I put a hole in it.* Mac went into the master bathroom in search of nail clippers.

Gnarly’s bark, and then his jump between the bed and the door, prompted Mac to forget the do-hickey hanging under his armpit. After grabbing his gun from the drawer in the

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nightstand, he followed Gnarly down the stairs to the two-story foyer, out the cut-glass front door, and onto the front porch. Mac clutched his weapon behind his back. When Gnarly, sitting at his side, uttered a low growl, Mac tightened his grip and watched the sedan slowly make its way around the circular driveway before coming to a halt at the bottom of the porch steps.

When the elderly driver stepped out of the car, Mac placed her and the car.

Agnes Douglas. Archie's mother.

No wonder Gnarly had growled. He never had liked her very much ... and the feeling was mutual.

Shoving aside his fears about the safety of Archie, his family, and their friends, Mac forced a wide grin onto his face. After shoving the gun into the back waistband of his pants and covering it up with his sweater, he hurried down the steps to take the white-haired woman into his arms. Like her only daughter, she was petite. She fell two inches short of five feet tall, and Mac had to bend over to hug her. In her heavy dark blue winter coat and thick snow boots, she resembled a blue snow man.

*Shouldn't she be with Archie and the bridesmaids getting their hair done at the salon? Oh well, Agnes goes and does what she wants when she wants. Best not to question.*

"Agnes, I'm so glad to see you." Mac clasped her arm, slipped his other arm around her waist, and guided her across the slick ice, up the steps, and inside.

At the top of the steps, Gnarly backed away. Agnes had made it quite clear to Gnarly that he was only allowed to look at, but not touch, her.

"I told her that I had one of my headaches." At the top of the porch steps, she turned to Mac. She tilted her head back to peer up at him from over the top of her glasses. She paused to look him up and then down, and then she noticed that he was

wearing only his bedroom slippers without any socks. "What are you doing outside in two feet of snow and ice without boots on?"

"I heard you coming and didn't want you to slip on the ice."

Agnes' head bobbed up and down while she chastised him. "Do I look like I need your help? I haven't broken a hip yet. Archie depends on you. What good are you going to do her dropping dead from pneumonia?"

Unable to come up with an answer, Mac shrugged.

Willing Gnarly out of her way, she opened the front door. "I hope you have the tea ready." Grabbing him by the elbow, she ushered him inside. Gnarly was barely able to slip inside before she slammed the door.

"Actually," Mac said as gently as possible, "I was on my way out."

Her head snapped up to glare at him. "What do you mean you were on your way out?"

"One of my groomsmen and I have an appointment with the tailor." Mac looked down at the tiny elderly woman who stood before him in the middle of the living room. She clasped her handbag with both hands in front of her.

Like a referee at a boxing match, Gnarly sat between them, looking from one to the other.

"Did I do something to upset you, Agnes?"

"I think it's best if we lay out our ground rules *before* you marry Archie," she said.

Sensing a battle, Mac folded his arms across his chest. He was physically setting up a barrier. "Okay, Agnes. Shoot."

"To be blunt," Agnes said in a tone devoid of emotion, "I'm giving this marriage five years. Archie refuses to tell me how much you're paying for this huge three-ring circus, but I hope you'll think it's worth it when you only get five years on your investment."

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“Five years? Investment?” Mac chuckled. “With all due respect—”

Agnes’ hand shot up. She shook her head. “Don’t give me that all-due-respect crap. I’ve had seven children, six boys. Archie’s daddy keeled over with a heart attack when she was only five years old. Since that time, I’ve been ’round the block so much that I wore a rut in it and”—she shook her finger at him—“I learned ages ago that when someone says to me ‘with all due respect,’ they’re not giving me an ounce of it.”

“I don’t consider Archie to be an investment,” Mac said through gritted teeth. “And to be *blunt*, I don’t think you know enough about our relationship to be in a position to make any sort of prediction about the success or lack of success of our marriage.”

“Archie has spent the last dozen years of her life hiding out in this mansion, taking care of your mother,” Agnes said. “Then, she’s spent the last few years in your bed. Now,” she glanced him up and down, “you’re a very attractive man, and I’m sure Archie wouldn’t want to marry you if you weren’t good in bed. I’m sure all of that money adds to your appeal, but there’s more to lifelong happiness than sex and money. There’s character, and marriage with a man who has no character—”

Mac stepped toward her. “What gives you the right to comment on my character?”

As if to voice his agreement, Gnarly barked.

She moved in until she was toe to toe with him. Coming only up to his chest, she peered up into his blue eyes. “You’re marrying my daughter. *That* gives me the right.”

“You don’t even know me,” Mac said down to her.

“I’ve known dozens of men like you,” Agnes said. “I’ve been in the shadows, watching them for the last thirty years. After my husband passed away, I had to put food on the table, and I did it well by cleaning the mansions of some of the

richest, and even famous, people in and around Pittsburgh.” She shook her finger at him. “Men who didn’t know the meaning of the word ‘integrity.’”

“We’re not all like that.”

“I know,” Agnes said. “I’ve seen that first hand. I’m lucky to have a very fine position right now. I’m working for a man with integrity coming out of his ears. Mr. Crane is a self-made gentleman. He’s worked hard his whole life to gain the benefits of his wealth.”

“And I haven’t?”

She scoffed. “Where did you get all of your money, Mac?”

Knowing that she knew the answer, Mac glared at her.

“You’re living off the sweat of your mother and ancestors,” she said.

“I was raised in a middle-class home by an Irish-American father and an Italian-American mother,” Mac said. “They taught me the value of good hard work as soon as I could carry my dinner plate to the sink without dropping and breaking it. They also taught me about truth and justice. So don’t you stand there telling me that I’m not good enough for your daughter, because you know nothing about me.”

The front door flew open so abruptly that Mac reached for his gun behind his back. He gripped the handle until he saw Joshua Thornton cross the threshold. It took Mac a moment to recognize Joshua in his beard and mustache.

“Am I interrupting?” Sensing the tension, Joshua looked from Mac to Agnes and then to Gnarly, who whirled around to charge down into the dining room. Barking and whining, he jumped up onto the windows and peered out.

Fighting a losing battle, Mac tried to sound casual. “We were just talking.” Stepping away from her, Mac ran his hand over the top of his head while gesturing to Agnes with the other. “Josh, this is Archie’s mother. Agnes.”

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“Mother of the bride.” Joshua clasped her hand in his gloved hand.

“Joshua Thornton is one of my groomsmen,” Mac said before saying to him, “You grew a beard.”

“Very observant,” Joshua said with a grin while rubbing his facial hair. “I decided to take advantage of my rural roots.” He turned to Agnes. “I understand most of the groomsmen are made up of your children. Six sons. That’s a lot.”

“All big strapping men like their father,” Agnes said with pride. “Every one of them has a fine job and a nice family. I’ve got twenty-three grandchildren.”

“And you’re getting two more,” Joshua pointed out. “Saturday night when Mac and Archie get married, she’ll become a step-mother to Jessica and Tristan.”

With a sudden thought, Agnes whirled around to Mac. “How do your children feel about you starting a new family with Archie?”

“Starting a new family?” Mac stalled. “Tristan and Jessica love Archie, and she loves them. Tristan is my best man, and Archie asked Jessica to be her maid of honor. We consider ourselves a family.”

“And what about when you and Archie have your own children?”

“My children are her children.”

Agnes laughed. “That’s nice to say—”

Not wanting any piece of the conversation, Joshua went down into the dining room to see what had Gnarly’s attention.

“It’s the truth,” Mac said.

“Will they still love Archie when she has your baby?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I had a vasectomy years ago.” Agnes’ jaw dropped, and she fell back while Mac held up his hand to

silence her. "And Archie knew about it before we ever started dating."

"How could you do that to her?"

"To her?" Mac replied. "I had it done before I even met Archie—while I was married to my first wife."

"Why?"

"Because my first wife wanted me to," Mac said. "We had two children, and when my daughter entered puberty she ceased to be human anymore—"

"I know what you mean," Joshua called from the dining room where he was peering out the window. "Some kids are worse than others. My twins—when they hit twelve, Murphy turned into Mr. Hyde. Most ill-tempered kid you ever saw—until my daughter Sarah came along. Meanwhile, Murphy's identical twin, J.J., was as calm and steady as they come—still is. Nothing gets a rile out of that young man."

Something had Gnarly's attention. The German shepherd was growling and pawing at the window.

*Is there something moving among the rose bushes?*

"Well, Christine couldn't stand it," Mac said. "So she told me that if I loved her, I'd get a vasectomy to make sure she never had to go through that ever again."

Agnes' wrinkled face screwed up. "Your daughter was a handful, so your wife made you go under the knife?"

Mac shook his head. "I did it because I loved her. You won't believe the things I've done for the people that I love."

*Is that a spark—what did the sun just reflect off of?* "Mac," Joshua called out, "there's no hunting allowed around here, is there?"

"It's residential. Why do you ask?"

"Gun!" Joshua cried out while driving Gnarly down to the floor.

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Several gunshots took out the windows and doors across the length of the dining room while Mac body slammed Agnes to the floor behind the sofa.

“Wh-what’s—” Agnes sputtered out while Mac dragged her across the floor toward the wall. When she tried to climb up to her knees, he shoved her back down to the floor.

“Josh!” Mac cried out. “Are you okay?”

“We’re fine!” Joshua and Gnarly were crawling across the floor toward the living room.

Mac had gotten Agnes up against the wall. “How many shooters?” He took his gun out and raised up to peer out the window to the front driveway.

“Is that a gun?” Agnes squawked.

“Yes.”

“Were you carrying that the whole time we were talking?”

“As a matter of fact—” Mac replied. “Great self-control I have, don’t you think?”

“There are two shooters in the back, Mac!” Joshua called out as a series of shots took out the front windows. “Plus some in the front.”

“They have us surrounded?” Agnes yelled. “Why?” She hissed at Mac. “What are you into?”

“Mac,” Joshua called out from where he and Gnarly were crouching at the stairs leading up to the living room, “cover me and Gnarly. They have us outgunned with automatic weapons. If we can get to my SUV, I’ll grab some additional weapons to even things up.”

Seeing that Joshua had a gun in a shoulder holster under his coat, Agnes shrieked. “What type of people is my daughter mixed up with?”

Nodding his approval to Joshua’s plan, Mac crawled to the end table in the corner and opened the drawer. He took out a semi-automatic. “There’s a Colt nine-millimeter in the

bottom drawer of that cabinet at the top of the stairs, Josh. Can you make it to it?"

"I'll have to."

"On the count of three, you make a break for it."

Joshua said, "Gnarly and I will head for the SUV. I'll get in the back and cover you and Agnes. When you get there, Mac, you drive, and I'll cover us on the way out."

"What am I supposed to do?" Agnes asked Mac as he crawled along the floor toward the front door.

"You stay behind me," Mac said. "When I give the signal to run, you run for Joshua's SUV as hard and as fast as you can. Don't stop for anything—no matter what. Josh and I will cover you."

The shooting outside stopped.

With a sigh, Agnes said, "Maybe—"

"No," Joshua said, "they're getting ready to move in."

"Now!" Mac yelled.

With a slap on Gnarly's back, Joshua raced up the stairs and across the living room.

At the same time, Mac jumped up and shot with one gun out the front window while shooting across the dining room and out onto the deck. He shot at anything that moved.

Covering her ears, Agnes screamed at the top of her lungs.

Instead of heading for the front door, Gnarly leapt over the old woman and out through the broken-out front window.

A horrified scream and a series of gun shots erupted from the other side of the wall.

Agnes' screams reach an even higher octave when a man tried to run in through the broken-out dining room doors, only to have Mac riddle his body with bullets.

The gun shots were punctuated by an explosion that shook the floor around them.

Mac dared to glance out through the window. His eyes widened. "I don't believe it."

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“They have a bomb, too,” Agnes said with heavy breathes.

“Grenade launcher.” Mac tucked one of the guns into the front waistband of his slacks. “But it’s on our side.” He dragged her to her feet by the arm. “Time for us to move, Agnes.”

They dove out the front door. When they stepped out onto the porch, Agnes stopped when she almost tripped over the blood-soaked body of a man. Blood and tissue hung from where his neck had once been. The sleeves of his camouflage coat were shredded.

“Oh, dear—”

“We don’t have time to sightsee, Agnes!” Slipping and sliding on the ice, Mac fought to stay on his own feet while pulling Agnes down the steps and across the driveway to where Joshua was shooting at two men he had pinned down between the garage and the house.

Racing past her blue sedan, Agnes noticed that it had been the victim of numerous bullet holes, and that several of the windows had been shattered. “That’s my car!”

“Forget your car!” Mac dragged her along as fast as he could in his slippers.

Enraged, she seemed to be yelling at the gunmen when she demanded to know who was going to pay for it.

“Be serious!”

When Agnes’ feet went out from under her, Mac picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder like a heavy sack of dog food.

“What are you doing?” she objected while beating on his back with her purse.

“Getting you out of here alive!” he said while dodging bullets that flew over their heads. Joshua was doing a good job of keeping them pinned so that they could not get a clear shot.

Joshua had planned well enough to leave the side door to the SUV open so Mac only had to toss Agnes into the back

seat next to Gnarly before diving into the driver's seat and slamming the door shut.

The keys were already in the ignition.

"Let's give them something to remember us by!" Joshua called out right before Mac heard a *swoosh*.

Seconds later, he heard an explosion and saw the row of rhododendron bushes that lined the walkway between the garage and the house go up in a great explosion.

*Oh my, he blew up Archie's rhododendrons!*

Mac hit the gas pedal. The tires spun. The SUV was still gaining traction when Mac heard a shot ping off the back side panel.

"Hit it, Mac!" Joshua fired off another round of shots.

"I'm trying!"

When the SUV gained traction, it shot like a cannonball across the driveway and out onto the road.

Lured by the gunfire and explosions, neighbors were cautiously peering out their windows when the SUV raced down Spencer Point and crossed the bridge to head up the mountain.

"Are they following us?" Mac called back to ask Joshua.

"Not yet!" Grabbing his side, Joshua dropped down onto his back in the rear compartment.

The SUV swerved when it hit a patch of ice.

"Slow down!" Agnes yelled up at Mac. "Haven't you ever heard of black ice? Are you trying to get us all killed?"

"Josh, what are you doing with a grenade launcher?" Mac demanded while trying to maneuver on the snowy road. He was looking for a particular side road that would take them off the busy lakeside trail and up the mountain.

"I used to be a boy scout. I learned at an early age to always be prepared." Joshua went through the contents of the black canvas bag he had spread open in the back and reloaded his guns.

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Seeing all the guns, Agnes asked, "What do you do, Josh?"

He answered while snapping a fresh clip into his handgun. "I'm a lawyer."

Agnes' eyes grew wide.

"That was a professional hit squad," Mac called out. "It was a thought-out attack. We need to find someplace out of the way and get in touch with David to let him know what we're dealing with."

"Disengage my GPS and get rid of your cell phone!" Joshua hurled his cell phone out the broken-out rear window. "Find some secluded place for us to stop. I've got burner phones for us to use." He held out his hand to Agnes. "Give me your cell phone!"

"I don't have a *cell phone!*" Agnes' tone said she was insulted that he would even suggest she carried such an instrument. She noticed blood all over Joshua's hand. "Are you bleeding?" She rose up in her seat to gaze at him in the rear compartment. What she saw made her scream.