

It's Murder, My Son

A Mac Faraday Mystery

By

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*With Love,
To Jack,
My King of the Beasts*

PROLOGUE

Deep Creek Lake in Spencer, Maryland

The sitcom was senseless. That didn't matter. Katrina was too tense to handle anything with depth. The hot bath and martini had failed to soothe her nerves. She ran the water until steam filled the master bathroom.

The weather channel had predicted that the severe winter storm would hit around midnight and continue through the next day. Spotting storm clouds on the horizon, Katrina anticipated waking to white-out conditions. Buried in a thick white blanket would be her last memory of Deep Creek Lake.

After a long soak in the tub, Katrina slipped into her red silk bathrobe and combed out her long black hair. Tenderly, she rubbed the most expensive anti-aging moisturizer over each inch of her olive flesh.

Her beauty had earned her millions. That made it worth preserving at all costs.

Time for a third martini before bed. She wondered if she would hear from her husband before she fell asleep. He had told her that he would be working late in the city.

Like I don't know what you've been working late on. Go ahead. Get snowed in with Rachel for Valentine's Day. Enjoy it while you can.

After completing her nightly beauty routine, she returned downstairs to the home theater where she got sucked into a verbal exchange between a husband and wife about their teenage son's sexy girlfriend.

A noise outside made her jump out of the recliner.

She glanced at the clock.

Almost nine. Could Chad have decided to come out when I mentioned my appointment with the divorce lawyer? Maybe he does love my money more than he loves Rachel.

She listened. Nothing except the wind signaling the blizzard's approach.

Maybe I should call David? No. It wouldn't look good if Chad found him here. He's already suspicious.

The German shepherd began scratching at the back door.

Not again, you damn dog! When you aren't wanting out or in, you're digging up the back yard.

With a groan, she pulled herself out of the recliner and let the dog out onto the patio. As long as she was up, she poured herself another martini and admired her reflection in the mirror behind the bar before returning to her seat for another sitcom.

Her mind sucked in by the television, Katrina was unprepared to fight when her killer attacked and pinned her down by her throat.

"Did you really think I was going to let you leave?" she heard through the roar in her ears while gasping her last breath.

CHAPTER ONE

Three Months Later

The Valentine's Day blizzard that had paralyzed the East Coast for almost a week was only a memory when Mac Faraday drove between the stone pillars marking the entrance to Spencer Manor.

In the heart of Maryland, the cedar and stone home rested at the end of the most expensive piece of real estate on Deep Creek Lake. The peninsula housed a half-dozen lake houses that grew in size and grandeur along the stretch of Spencer Court. The road ended at the stone pillars marking the multi-million dollar estate that had been the birthplace and home of the late Robin Spencer, one of the world's most famous authors.

While packing up his handful of belongings in his two-bedroom, third-floor walk-up in Georgetown, Mac Faraday envisioned his arrival into high society:

He would pull up to the front door of Spencer Manor in his red Dodge Viper. Then, the front doors would open and Ed Willingham, the senior partner of Willingham and Associates, would welcome him into his new home. Ed was the first attorney Mac liked. He sensed it had something to do with Ed working for him.

Everything happened as Mac had envisioned until Ed opened the front door and released a hundred pounds of fur and teeth that shot like a bullet aimed at the man in the roadster.

“No! Come back here! Stay!” the lawyer seemed to beg the German shepherd, which landed in the front passenger seat of Mac’s convertible in a single bound.

Mac felt the beast’s hot breath on his cheek while they spilled into the stone driveway. He shoved against the canine straddling his chest to keep him from ripping his throat open.

In a flash, his thoughts raced back to the event that had brought him to this moment.

Mac’s twenty-year marriage had ended with the single pound of a judge’s gavel. Even though his wife had left him for another man, the judge had awarded their home and everything of value to her. Mac had received the credit card debt that she had racked up after tossing him out of their home. After the hearing, Mac had made an appointment to meet with his lawyer to arrange for the next legal proceeding: bankruptcy.

Ed Willingham had cornered Mac on his way out of the courtroom. Assuming that the silver-haired gentleman had been sent by his now ex-wife’s lover to deliver another round of legal torture, Mac Faraday had escaped and hurried away.

After jogging three city blocks in Washington, DC traffic, Mac had felt sorry for the sweaty little man chasing after him. When he had turned around to face him, Mac had noticed that this lawyer wore the expression of a child bursting to tell his secret, which would change his life forever.

The teenage girl who had given him up for adoption forty-five years earlier had grown up to become Robin Spencer. Upon her death weeks earlier, America’s Queen of Mystery had left her vast fortune to her illegitimate son, an underpaid homicide detective named Mac Faraday.

Nobody had told him that a man-eating dog was part of that inheritance.

A high-pitched whistle broke through his screaming and the shepherd’s barking.

The canine froze.

"Gnarly, get off him!" Mac heard yelled in a feminine, but firm, tone.

The German shepherd paused.

"Yes, I'm talking to you." She seemed to respond to the dog's nonverbal question.

As if weighing his options, Gnarly glared down at his quarry.

Through his fear, Mac noticed that the dog's brown face was trimmed in silver. His fingers dug into Gnarly's thick golden mane. He would have thought Gnarly was a beautiful animal if he wasn't trying to mutilate him.

"Mac is your new master," the woman back on the porch told the dog. "What have I told you about biting the hand that feeds you?"

The dog uttered a noise that sounded like "Humph!" before climbing off Mac's chest and disappearing around the front of the roadster.

Sighing with relief, Mac pushed himself up onto his elbows.

Keeping as far from the beast as possible, Ed Willingham rushed around the rear of the car to help him climb to his feet. "Mac, I am so sorry. I never expected Gnarly to react like that. Your mother always called him a pussy cat."

"That was no pussy cat." Mac clutched his chest where Gnarly's paws had threatened to crush his ribs. He glanced around for the woman who had saved his life. "Who called him off me?"

"That's Archie." Ed led him by the elbow up the porch steps and into the foyer of the manor. "She comes with the house."

"What do you mean she comes with the house?" Before Ed could explain, Mac sucked in a deep breath when the reality of what he had come into struck him with full force.

The front foyer of Spencer Manor stretched up two stories to the cathedral ceiling paneled in cedar. Granite slabs made up the floors throughout the home, including the three steps that led down to the dining room which opened up onto the deck overlooking the lake. Colorful afghans were draped across

leather furniture in the living room, which was twice the size of the one in the home Mac's ex-wife had won from him thirty days earlier. Stone fireplaces commanded every room. Every window and door provided a view of Deep Creek Lake.

The scent of leather and cedar seemed to wrap around him like a soft blanket welcoming its lost son home.

Candid photographs of people Mac didn't know and memorabilia dating back generations littered the mantles, walls, and end tables. He wondered what connection these things had in his and his grown son's and daughter's roots.

Outside on the deck, a petite woman with shortly-cropped blond hair set a table for lunch. Even though the season had yet to shake the chill from winter, her skin was golden from the sun. Ankle bracelets jeweled her bare feet. Her white shorts and short-sleeved top contrasted with the jeans and jacket Mac wore for protection against the cool breezes that swept in off the lake.

"Archie was Robin's editor and assistant. She's lived in the guest cottage for years," Edward explained. "She receives a check every month from a trust fund Robin left her; plus, she gets to live in the guest cottage for as long as she wants." He clarified, "She's been taking care of the estate and Robin's dog, Gnarly. He's now yours. Good luck with that character."

"He's going to need it," Mac muttered about the German shepherd following at Archie's heels. With food on the scene, the dog seemed to have forgotten about him.

Inside the living room, Mac stopped before a life-sized portrait hanging over the stone fireplace. 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. A German shepherd sat at attention by his side.

The resemblance between Mac and the man in the painting was striking.

"That's not you," Ed told him. "Robin had that portrait done over fifteen years ago. It's her vision of Mickey Forsythe,

the detective in most of her books, and Diablo, his dog.” He added, “Uncanny resemblance, huh?”

Mac felt a chill go down his spine. “Weird.”

“Your ancestors founded Spencer back in the 1800s,” Ed explained. “They were millionaires by the 1920s when the electric company put in the dam and built the lake. After that, Spencer became a resort town. One of the most luxurious hotels in the country is the Spencer Inn. Robin’s grandfather had built it and passed it down to her, but she preferred murder to business.” The attorney sighed with a smile. “Robin wasn’t interested in anything that didn’t involve a dead body.”

“Now I know where I get it,” Mac replied.

“Lunch is ready,” Archie stepped in from the deck to announce.

Claiming he couldn’t stay due to an appointment in the city, Ed handed Mac two sets of keys before speeding away in his Jaguar.

“Hungry?” Archie had prepared salmon and salad.

The smell of mesquite filled the air. Mac noticed a fire in the outdoor stone fireplace that took up a corner of the deck. She had cooked the fish on a grill over the open flames.

As if to answer her, Gnarly jumped up to snatch the salmon from one of the plates. Archie turned around in time to see him gulping it down. “Gnarly! Bad dog!” Done with his meal, the dog sniffed along the edge of the table to see if it held anything else worth stealing. “Stop it!” She swatted the dog’s rump. “Go lay down.”

After backing up a single step, Gnarly sat with his eyes trained on the table.

“He’s a bad dog,” she said. “But he’s really very loveable.” She patted Gnarly on the top of his head. She offered Mac her lunch, which he continued to decline until she offered to split it.

On his way to the table, he stopped at the deck railing to take in the view.

Boulders lined the shoreline of Spencer Point. At the very tip of the peninsula, the boulders had been lined up to support a wooden walkway leading to a gazebo housing a hot tub set in

the lake. Trees along the lake provided privacy without cutting off the view.

A path off one end of the deck led to Archie's log cottage tucked into the corner of the property. Surrounded by a floral garden, it resembled a grown-up version of a little girl's playhouse.

"Beautiful," Mac breathed.

"Robin loved this place. She had traveled all over the world, but she thought this was the most beautiful place of all. She wanted you to enjoy it the way she did." When Archie turned to lead him to the table, he caught a whiff of her scent. She smelled like the roses in the garden.

Offering him the seat facing the lake, she sat across from him. "I thought that since we're going to be living here together, the least I could do was welcome you with a nice lunch." She smiled. "From here on out, you're on your own when it comes to cooking."

"I was afraid of that." Mac sipped the water. "I'm a rotten cook. I've been living on take out since my wife and I split up."

"That stuff can kill you. You might want to consider hiring a housekeeper and cook. Robin didn't have one because she liked doing that stuff for herself. She had a cleaning lady come in once a week, but that was it as far as household staff. Last summer, the cleaning lady got married and moved to Maine. Robin never got around to replacing her. As big as this house is, you'll need a housekeeper."

"How much do housekeepers cost?" he asked.

Her laughter reminded him that with the two hundred and seventy million dollars Robin Spencer had left him, he could easily pay the going rate for any maid service. In an effort to take the attention away from his goof, he asked her, "What kind of name is Archie for a girl?"

"Archie is what Robin called me. My real name is R. C. Monday."

"R. C. Monday?" Mac asked. "What does R. C. stand for?"

"Nothing," she answered quickly. "Robin loved it. She said I was her Archie. Everyone else took up on it and that's what they call me. Do you remember Nero Wolfe?"

“Who’s Nero Wolfe?”

Her smile dropped. She blinked at him in disbelief. “Nero Wolfe. The Fat Man. His mysteries are a classic.”

Again, Mac’s cheeks felt warm. “I’m afraid I’m not up on murder mysteries. Most of the reading I’ve done is to study murder cases and forensics. Only in the last month, since I found out that Robin Spencer was my mother, have I been reading her books. It takes a long time to read eighty-seven books, five plays, and watch twenty-eight movies based on her books.”

“Plus, her journal,” Archie said.

“You know about her journal?”

“Robin and I were close. She was like a mother to me,” she said in a soft voice.

“Since you know about it, then would I be correct in assuming that you knew about me before all this happened?”

“I’m the one who found you for her. It took me less than three weeks.” One corner of her lip curled up. “But I have to admit that it was Robin’s idea to meet you by calling your police department with a story about basing her new detective on Georgetown’s top homicide detective. Once she was alone with you, it was a cinch for her to collect your DNA to confirm that you were her son.”

Mac shook his head at the cleverness of it all.

Five years earlier, he had felt honored when his supervisor had chosen him to meet Robin Spencer at the Four Seasons to answer questions for her book research. The celebrated author’s cutting wit had caught him off guard. They had lunched on burgers and eaten ice cream for dessert. Before he knew it, the afternoon was over and Robin had invited him to have dinner with her as well. Claiming to want to know everything in order to create a realistic character, she had interviewed him about his childhood and family. The next day, she had sent him a basket of fruit and a thank you card.

Ed Willingham had told Mac that Robin took the spoon he had used to eat his ice cream to a private lab to compare his DNA to hers to determine if he was her son. At the time, the thought had never occurred to him that he had spent the day

with the birth mother who had given him up for adoption over four decades earlier.

Archie interrupted his thoughts by saying, "I know all about you." She fed her last bite of salmon to Gnarly, who wolfed it down without tasting it.

Mac enjoyed her playful nature. "What exactly do you know?"

"You had the best arrest record in DC, but that didn't matter much after Freddie Gibbons Jr. flew off into the sunset on his daddy's private jet. After that, no one looked good and you were made the scapegoat."

Mac lost his appetite.

She leaned across the table in his direction. "Who do you think gave Frederick Gibbons the heads up that the grand jury was about to indict his little boy of being the Rock Creek Park serial rapist?" she whispered as if someone else was on the deck to overhear their discussion.

"Didn't matter who gave Gibbons the heads up. According to my boss, it was my fault that he got away," he said, even though he knew the fault didn't belong to him.

"Do you mean Harold Fitzwater?"

That startled him. She even knew the name of his supervisor in Georgetown.

"Don't you think Stephen Maguire handling the indictment was a conflict of interest?" she asked. "They were fraternity brothers and roommates at George Washington University."

"You're kidding."

She nodded her head. "Less than a month after Freddie Gibbons escaped to Switzerland, Frederick Gibbons Senior made your boss's home mortgage disappear."

"Fitzwater criticized me for not being a team player." Mac gritted his teeth while recalling, "He kept telling me to look elsewhere for suspects. He and Steve were protecting Gibbons all along." He wondered how he had missed finding out that the assistant district attorney prosecuting the monster who had terrorized Rock Creek Park for months was close friends with the rapist's father. "How did you know?"

Archie answered, "I looked into the players' backgrounds and found that they had both graduated from George Washington University with degrees in political science. They were the same age. So I figured they had to know each other. A check on their previous known addresses proved that they had once been roommates."

"I'm impressed," Mac said. "Now tell me what you know about Patrick O'Callaghan."

For an instant, her face went blank. Then her eyes widened and her mouth opened to utter a gasp. "Pat? Chief O'Callaghan? Why do you want to know about him?"

"I heard the name."

"Where? You read about him in Robin's journal."

"She did mention him."

"He—He was your father?" She gasped again. "I should have known. You look just like him."

Mac responded with, "Should have known? I thought you said Robin was like a mother to you. She told you about me and she told you about the journal, but she never told you who my father was?"

"I never asked. I figured if she wanted me to know that she would have told me."

Mac sat forward in his chair. "Judging by your reaction, I take it that you knew my father."

"I can't believe I didn't see it. Robin was devastated when he died. I knew they were close—" She made a noise deep in her throat. "Duh! She even told me that they dated when they were in high school. It was after Pat got sick that she told me about you and asked me to find you. Now, I know why. She wanted me to find you for him."

"She said in her journal that she told him all about me. He died seven months after I had met her at the Four Seasons." He asked her, "What was he like?"

Archie smiled broadly. "Oh, he was fabulous. Pat O'Callaghan is a legend on Deep Creek Lake. Imagine John Wayne and Matt Dillon wrapped up into one. The police chief Spencer has now is a boob. Pat and Robin made such a good

team. I knew she loved him. I guess that's why she never got married after her husband died in Vietnam."

"Pat wanted to marry her when she got pregnant, but her parents refused to let her marry a policeman," Mac explained. "They thought she would end up being a widow. So, they shipped her off to college, where she married an army officer who died and left her a widow anyway."

"Why didn't she come back for Pat?"

Mac cleared his throat. "She did, but by then it was too late. He had gotten married."

"To Violet," she said. "Pat would never have left Violet, even though he loved Robin. He was very loyal. Did she tell you in her journal about...?"

"My brother. Do you know him?"

"David's a good friend of mine," Archie said. "After his father died, he and I started working together to help Robin on her cases."

"Her cases?" Mac asked.

She explained, "Robin was a homebody. She liked her writing and her gardening. She hired me to do her research. I would research on the Internet or go interview people for her. I'd come back with the information and she would write her books. Then, I would edit them. Every now and then, a real case would come up that Robin would take a personal interest in. When that would happen life would get exciting." She grinned.

Uttering a whine, the German shepherd inched toward Mac's plate, which contained one bite of salmon. Archie fed him a crouton from her plate. "She acquired Gnarly while working her last case."

"Gnarly?" Mac reached out to pat the dog's head. Previously, he had concluded that Gnarly appeared so large to him because the dog had been standing over him. In the less threatening setting, Mac could see that he was indeed one of the largest German shepherds he had ever seen.

"It means extreme, and that's Gnarly all right. He can be really good, or he can be really bad," Archie said. "The woman

next door was murdered Valentine's Day weekend and her husband didn't want him, so Robin bought him."

"Murdered? Next door?" Mac pushed his plate aside. "Have the police arrested her killer yet?"

"No, Robin was looking into the case when she passed away. I told her to go see a doctor because she had such a bad headache for like four days. She thought it was a migraine. If I'd had any idea that it was an aneurysm..." She looked down at her plate.

When Mac saw the pools of tears in her green eyes, he could see that his mother had meant more to her than a pay-check.

She sucked in a shuddering breath. Her chest heaved before she declared, "I've tried to carry on with it, but it's really hard without her."

"Tell me about the murder."

"You're just like your mother." Archie stacked their plates. "Your face lit up like it was Christmas morning when I mentioned a murder right next door."

She carried the plates into the house with Gnarly prancing at her heels in search of any scraps that might fall into his mouth. After picking up their water glasses, Mac followed her into the kitchen. The stainless steel appliances shone. The granite counters looked like sheets of emeralds.

"In which house was the murder committed?"

Archie stepped out onto the deck and pointed through the trees scattered along the stone wall separating Spencer Manor from the rest of the peninsula. Through the branches filled with fresh young leaves, Mac could make out the corner of a gray cedar house.

"Her name was Katrina Singleton," Archie said. "Three months ago, she was found in the family room with her throat crushed. The police are looking for a stalker that killed her first husband. They haven't been able to find him since her murder."

"Was her first husband killed here in Spencer?"

She gestured up toward the top of the mountain behind them. "Right up there. No one understands this case. Our

phone book reads like a listing of who's who among America's rich and famous. Suddenly, out of the blue, this guy with wild hair shows up dressed in an old army jacket. He was threatening her, attacking her—horrible stuff. The police never caught him even once. Katrina swore he was a disgruntled client from Washington, but he always had an alibi.”

“If it wasn't him, did she have any idea who else would have wanted to stalk her like that?”

With a shake of her head, she went back inside the house to the kitchen. “She said he had the words ‘Pay Back’ written on the name label on his army jacket.”

Gnarly gazed up at Mac with big brown eyes. His size alone was intimidating.

“Strange that someone would target a woman with a dog, especially Gnarly,” Mac said. “Didn't he do anything to protect her?”

“Gnarly was found beaten to a pulp. David took him to the vet before Katrina's second husband Chad got here from Washington. Chad told the vet to put him to sleep. When Robin got wind of it she offered to buy Gnarly.” Archie rolled her eyes while adding, “Chad Singleton is such a jerk. He wanted five thousand dollars. He said that if Robin didn't pay his asking price that he would have him put down. Robin was between a rock and a hard place and he knew it. She paid every penny. Bastard.” She proceeded to load the dishwasher.

The doorbell rang.

She reminded him, “It's your house.”

Mac went to the foyer and gazed through the cut glass window panes. A police officer in a white shirt with a silver badge pinned to his chest waited for his response on the other side of the door.

What're the police doing here?

It took a moment for Mac to recall that his picture had been all over the news—the bankrupt detective inheriting the world's most famous mystery writer's vast fortune. Overnight, he had become famous.

Opening the door, his eyes met those of the officer.

O'Callaghan was the name printed on the label pinned under his badge.

This was the man Mac had come to Deep Creek Lake to meet. The man's eyes were the same color and shape as his. He also had the same height and build. His blond hair seemed to be the only difference in their appearance.

"Mr. Faraday?"

Mac tore his eyes from the name plate. "Yes?"

"I'm Officer David O'Callaghan." He offered Mac his hand. "I came to welcome you to Spencer, Maryland. Your mother was a friend of mine. She and my father grew up together. He used to be Spencer's police chief."

Mac stepped back and opened the door. "Would you like to come in?"

David accepted the invitation. While Mac closed the front door, Gnarly ran in, planted his paws on the officer's shoulders and licked his face.

Apologizing, Mac tried to pull the dog off. "He's a really bad dog."

"Your mother didn't think so." David rubbed the dog's ears. "She loved Gnarly more than anything. He hung out here even before she bought him." He stopped in front of the portrait and gazed up at it before turning back to Mac. "Unbelievable. I always thought Mickey Forsythe was from her imagination."

"She had that painted years before she ever met me."

"A mother always knows her child."

"Did you know about me?"

The officer said, "Robin never mentioned you to me."

"Hi, David," Archie called from the kitchen doorway. "How's Violet?"

David answered with a sigh. "As ornery as ever. She doesn't like the new nurse. But that's okay. The feeling is mutual." He told Mac, "My mother is in a wheelchair and housebound. I work a lot of hours, so we have a live-in nurse. We've been through seven in the last four years."

Archie turned her attention to Mac to explain that she needed to go home to her cottage. She had a short deadline to

meet on an editing project. With a farewell wave from across the room, she stepped out onto the back deck and disappeared among the trees between the main house and cottage.

“This sudden change in lifestyle must feel strange to you.” David sat on the sofa under the portrait.

“I never imagined it would feel as strange as it does. This morning, I caught myself comparing the price of gas between two service stations before I remembered that I had enough money to fill up the tank at either of them.”

After a few pleasantries, David told him, “Mom’s health went to hell in a handcart after my father passed away. She refused to go into a nursing home and I couldn’t take care of her. Robin set up a trust fund for her. She footed the bill to make sure my mother had a live-in nurse and that her medical expenses would be taken care of.” He smiled in spite of the truth about his mother. “Mom’s so obnoxious that the nurses keep quitting.” David shook his head with a sad expression. “Her mind’s not there enough to think about where the money’s coming from to pay for the nurse, but it’s there enough for her to remember that she hated Robin. If she knew the truth, she’d be mad enough to kill someone, if she could get out of her wheelchair to do it.”

Even though he sensed why, Mac asked, “Why did your mother hate Robin?”

“Robin and Dad were close, and Mom was very jealous of their relationship.”

After years of investigative training and experience, Mac could easily spot David studying him from where he sat with Gnarly at his feet.

If David had been a murder suspect, Mac wouldn’t have the dilemma of what to say next. But he wasn’t a murder suspect. He was the younger brother for which Mac had yearned when he was a child.

Murder was a safe topic.

In the tone of one professional to another, Mac asked him, “Archie told me that a neighbor here on the Point was murdered. Have you made any headway in finding out who did it?”

David sat back in his seat. He seemed to relax with the change of topic. "The man Katrina claimed to have been stalking her disappeared from his home in Washington shortly before her murder. He had an alibi for every incident we questioned him about. Yet, we can't ignore him taking off at such a convenient time."

"Washington's pretty far to travel to stalk someone," Mac noted. "Is there anyone local who may have wanted her dead?"

David bent over to rub both of Gnarly's ears. "The Hardwicks, the couple who live two doors up from you. They're kind of..." He cleared his throat. "High strung." Grinning, he embraced the dog. "Gnarly was running loose when he allegedly impregnated the Hardwicks' poodle. They went so far as to file a civil suit for paternity against the Singletons. The judge said that without proof positive that Gnarly was the father, they had no case. The last I heard, they were trying to get his DNA. No judge will waste his time with a warrant. Archie says every time Gnarly goes beyond the wall, Mr. Hardwick is close behind him trying to scoop up anything Gnarly will leave behind. It's been months and he's got nothing. We're beginning to suspect Gnarly knows what he's up to."

"Isn't DNA testing at a private lab—on a dog—expensive? What kind of people...?" Mac burst out laughing when he saw the officer was indeed serious.

"Now you know what I meant when I said they were high strung."

"Plus they have way too much time on their hands. Is that common with rich people?"

"Not really," David said. "They had reported Gnarly to animal control, who said that if they have no proof that he has been running loose, there was nothing that they could do. So, they installed a security camera to try to catch him. We had hoped that they got something the night of Katrina's murder, but they claim someone broke their camera and it doesn't work."

Mac's mind was working. "Where was the victim's husband during the murder?"

“He was in the city. He’s an estate lawyer working in DC.” David noted, “He put the house up for sale and hasn’t been back since the murder. He also remarried one month after his wife got killed.”

“That’s kind of fast.”

“He and Katrina only got married last June.” David cocked his head before asking with a grin, “Why are you so interested in the murder of a neighbor you never even met?”

“Murder is my business.”

“You told Larry King that you were retired.”

“Everyone needs a hobby.”

* * * *

Mac felt like a stranger invading someone’s bedroom. Located at the far end on the top floor of the manor, Robin Spencer’s bedroom suite had two balconies with views of the lake on opposite sides of the house. Even though Archie had replaced the bed in which his mother had died, as well as replacing the floral-printed bedding with masculine royal blue satin sheets and comforter, he still felt awkward.

The movers had delivered Mac’s clothes and personal items earlier that week. Archie had hung up his clothes in the walk-in closet and put away everything else. Except for the pictures and mementos of people he didn’t know, the suite looked like it had always been his.

Two paces ahead of his new master, Gnarly charged into the room and leapt up onto the bed. He lay down in the center and faced Mac as if to dare him to try to remove him.

“You may be very pretty,” Mac told the dog, “but you’re not my type. Off the bed.” He gestured with a swipe of his hand.

The canine seemed to consider the consequences of disobeying the order before jumping down from the bed and sitting at his feet.

“Good boy.” Mac patted him on top of the head on his way into the master bath.

After introducing himself to the steam shower, the satin sheets seemed to embrace his body for his first night as master of Spencer Manor.

Mac had placed two books on the nightstand. One was Robin Spencer's fifth book. He was making his way chronologically through her writings. The second was a thick cloth-bound journal in which Robin had written her deepest thoughts and feelings. She had started it the day she found her son. He made a point of reading two or three entries each night before going to sleep. When he opened the journal to read the next entry the question crossed his mind, *I wonder what my mother thought about the murder in her own backyard?*

Recalling that the murder was committed on Valentine's Day weekend, he flipped through the pages until he came to an entry near the end of the book:

My darling son – What was supposed to be a quiet weekend on the Point after Mother Nature dumped two feet of snow on us turned into a circus. David found Katrina's body today. Everyone is assuming the psycho stalking her finally did her in. In theory, it makes sense. We've all seen him scaring Katrina to death. It doesn't make sense to me. I was so certain about the Holt case. The necklace proved the worst possible solution. Maybe I'm too old to be doing this anymore. This whole thing has given me a headache. How could I have been so wrong? My doing nothing got that poor girl killed. If David finds out, can he ever forgive me?

CHAPTER TWO

Mac Faraday's first mystery at Spencer Manor was the case of the missing butter.

Before his arrival, Archie had bought staples for the kitchen so that he wouldn't have to rush out to the grocery store. He found his refrigerator stocked with unopened eggs, bacon, butter, milk, and other items that most people needed to get by.

His first morning, Archie took him to McHenry to complete his shopping. When they returned, Mac discovered both the butter and bacon missing from the fridge.

"Maybe you had them for breakfast," she suggested while loading the meat into the freezer.

"A whole pound of butter and bacon for one breakfast?" Mac checked the door leading out onto the back deck. As he had thought, it was locked.

She laughed. "Who breaks into a house like this and steals butter and bacon? I'd take the Monet in the study. You do know that painting is the real thing, don't you?"

As if he thought the butter and bacon would reappear, he opened the refrigerator again to look inside. "It was there when I made my list this morning. Now it's gone. I can't cook without butter. What am I saying? I can't cook with it, either."

Archie offered to lend him some of hers. Still, he wondered who would break into a house loaded with antiques and artwork from all over the world only to steal butter and bacon. He suspected the stalker wanted for killing his neighbor.

Two days later, Mac was still puzzling over the missing food when Archie helped him interview prospective housekeepers and cooks.

One applicant in a form-fitting dress indicated to Mac that she was more interested in a position as his trophy wife than his housekeeper. Archie crossed her name off their list before she sashayed out the door. Another was polite enough, but her satanic tattoos, body piercings, and probing questions about dead bodies the former detective had seen in the line of duty made Mac nervous. Another applicant discovered that she was allergic to dogs. Minutes into the interview, she ran from the house with red, swollen eyes, a runny nose, and hives. The other two applicants were inexperienced in either cooking or housekeeping.

The last applicant was scheduled for mid-afternoon. With the break between interviews, Archie prepared chicken sandwiches and a pitcher of iced tea, which they ate on the lower deck by the water's edge. In the warm days leading into summer, their neighbors were enjoying a variety of water sports in the cove.

Archie referred to her notes after swallowing the last bite of her sandwich. "Cathy Miller comes very highly recommended. She's in her fifties. She had both cooked and cleaned for the Steinbecks for fifteen years. Robin used to know them. They have a big horse farm in Fairmont."

"Why doesn't she work for them now?" Mac refilled their glasses with iced tea.

"She had to quit when her father became ill. By the time he died, the Steinbecks had already replaced her."

"Where's Gnarly?" Mac realized he hadn't seen his dog since breakfast when he'd stolen Mac's frozen waffles. Recalling that his new dog had been the cause of a civil suit against Katrina Singleton, he wondered what antics Gnarly pulled when he wasn't home.

“He’s probably casing a cookout.” Archie stacked their paper plates. “Would you believe Easter weekend he came home with a T-bone steak? He stole it off the Taylors’ grill.”

Spencer Court ran the length of the peninsula before curving onto a bridge that crossed the cove to intersect with Spencer Road, which zigzagged to the top of the mountain. A handful of luxury homes resided on the lakeshore across the cove.

A stone and log showplace rested directly across from Spencer Manor. Across the water between them, Mac spied an in-ground pool, in addition to tennis courts and an elaborate garden. A woman with long dark hair sunned herself by the pool. In spite of the distance, he could see that she had a perfect figure.

“That’s Sophia Hainsworth,” Archie said when she saw him peering across the cove.

Mac felt like he should recognize the name.

“Her married name is Sophia Hainsworth-Turner. She’s been in a lot of television shows and a half-dozen movies—a couple of them halfway good. She’s married to Travis Turner.”

“Now that name is familiar,” Mac said. “I’ve read a couple of his novels. They’re mysteries, too.”

“Robin discovered him,” Archie said. “He was born and raised here in Spencer. He went off to Hollywood to be a movie star. A few years later, he called Robin and told her that he had decided to try his hand at writing and asked if she’d read his book. It was excellent. The only thing she suggested was changing the outcome for one of the characters and the title. She introduced him to her agent and Travis Turner became a household name.”

“His books aren’t as good as Robin’s.”

“Spoken like a loyal son.”

Mac asked, “Why’s a famous novelist bringing his movie star wife here for the season instead of the Hamptons? Deep Creek isn’t particularly known for being the in place for the Hollywood set.”

“Usually they do travel with the Hollywood A-list, but Travis is basing his next book on Katrina’s murder.”

Beyond the Turner home and up toward the mountaintop, the Spencer Inn was a part of Mac's inheritance that he had yet to investigate. The manager, Jeff Ingle, had invited him to inspect the hotel. Frankly, the notion of owning a five-star hotel and restaurant intimidated him.

Two docks up the cove, Mac spied a couple he had identified as the Hardwicks. They eyed him and Archie through thick black cat-eyed glasses while sipping wine under a deck umbrella. Equally short and round in shape, they were dressed in identical black trousers and white button-down shirts.

Archie whispered, "Do you see them?"

"David told me that they had filed a paternity suit against the Singletons on behalf of their poodle."

"They've complained to the police more than once about Gnarly's barking. If it weren't for David we'd be having a lot more trouble with them than we do." She shook her head slightly. "It's only a matter of time before you get a call from Ed saying that you're being sued for some cockamamie mental stress over Gnarly."

"And I thought that life would be a breeze if I was rich."

"Welcome to the world of the rich and famous, Mr. Faraday. One day about three years ago, the Hardwicks were a couple of middle class nit-picks having lunch at a five-star DC restaurant when the server tripped over a briefcase left out in the aisle. She spilled Gordon Hardwick's coffee in his lap. He got burnt, and—Wham! A jury gave them the ticket to the Point. Not only did they win one, but two lawsuits. Prissy Hardwick filed a separate one claiming that, due to the burn to her husband's family jewels, she suffered mental distress because he was unable to perform his husbandly duty." She leaned over to tell him, "Guess who the idiot—or maybe he wasn't such an idiot—was who left the briefcase out where the server could trip over it."

"Gordon Hardwick," Mac concluded.

Archie nodded her head. "That coffee stunt got them their early retirement. But two point five million only lasts so long when you have money going out and not much coming in.

They've been looking for another million-dollar award to keep them in the lifestyle to which they've become accustomed. Watch your step around them."

"Thanks for the warning." Mac checked his watch. The next applicant wasn't due to arrive for another fifteen minutes.

From their table at the water's edge, he could see over the stone wall up to the Singleton home, where three months earlier its resident had been murdered. "I read about Katrina's murder in Robin's journal." Mac asked, "Can you tell me what happened, from your point of view?"

Archie smiled. "David and I made a bet about how long it would take you to ask for specific details about the case. I bet within one day. He said you'd play it cool and wait." She flashed him a mock frown. "I lose. Katrina was thirty when she married Niles Holt. They moved in two years ago this month. They had lived out here less than three months when Niles Holt was murdered. Katrina went back to the city after Labor Day, and returned in June with a new husband. Eight months later, she's dead."

After pausing to allow Mac to store away that information, she added, "Chad Singleton stayed only a couple weeks before he went back to the city. Within a week or so after he left, we started seeing this bizarre character following her around. Katrina told David that he was a disgruntled client who started his terror campaign in the city before she moved here."

"Where was husband number two while all this was going on?"

"We saw more of her stalker than we saw of him," Archie answered. "It was weird considering that they were newlyweds. Katrina had long dark hair down to her waist and a body that wouldn't quit. She had these exotic green eyes. After the snow storm, Chad called the police because she wouldn't answer the phone. David went to check on her and found her body. Gnarly was behind a flower pot on the patio. He didn't get buried under the two feet of snow. Otherwise, he would have suffocated or frozen to death. David threw him in the back of his cruiser and took him to the vet."

“Did the police try putting the Singleton place under surveillance to catch her stalker before he killed her?”

“Sure, but nothing happened. When they would quit, Pay Back would show up again.” She said, “I suspected husband number two. Chad would have known when she was under surveillance. Did you ever see *Gaslight*? The husband was trying to drive his wife crazy for her money. Chad certainly didn’t waste any time quitting his job and remarrying after Katrina died.”

Mac agreed. “That is suspicious.”

“Are you going to continue investigating this case?”

“I’m retired,” Mac reminded her. “I now have a career as a millionaire playboy.”

Archie grinned. “I can’t see you spending your days playing golf and rubbing elbows with the rich and famous any more than you mother.”

“Mr. Faraday?” A woman with long straight salt-and-pepper hair tied into a ponytail at the back of her neck waved to them from the corner of the upper deck.

Archie checked the name in her notes before replying. “Mrs. Miller?”

“That would be me.” The chunky older woman began a slow descent down the steps to the lower deck.

Seeing the job applicant hobbling toward them, Mac stood up. “No, don’t bother coming down. We’re coming up.” He whispered to Archie, who was gathering the plates and glasses. “Do you have the list of questions for us to ask her?”

After assuring him that she did, she noted, “I don’t see any body piercings and I doubt if she’s applying to be your trophy wife.”

“So far, so good.”

The interview went close to an hour, but within fifteen minutes Mac glanced at Archie. Cathy Miller met all of his requirements. She was experienced in everything he needed to run the big house. He saw agreement in Archie’s eyes.

“By the way,” Archie said to Mrs. Miller, “Mr. Faraday has a dog. He’s a big German shepherd.”

Mac interjected, “He’s very mischievous.”

“Oh, I love dogs.” The housekeeper went on to tell one long, drawn out story after another about the various dogs she had encountered in her life, from the dog that had been run over by a school bus when she was a young girl to the dog that she raised from a pup for the Steinbeck family, but had to leave behind when her father became ill. When she began her fifth story, Archie interrupted her in mid-sentence with the suggestion that they show her the house.

Mrs. Miller took this as a sign that she had the job. Mac could see that Archie had made her decision also. In every room, Mrs. Miller delayed them with stories from her life.

This woman is going to drive me up the walls. Mac rubbed his aching temples when they returned to the living room. *How am I going to get out of this?*

“Oh, is that your dog?” Mrs. Miller pointed out the doors to the deck where Gnarly was chewing on a dark-colored round object covered with a stringy substance.

“He must have found some kid’s soccer ball in the lake.” Archie stepped to the door to take a closer look.

“What’s he pulling off it?” Mac asked.

“Seaweed?” Archie suggested.

The housekeeper stood between them to peer at the dog and his treasure. “Odd shape for a ball.”

“That’s no ball,” Mac breathed in a low voice while he opened the door.

Grasping the object with one hand, he stopped Gnarly when he tried to carry it inside. It felt slimy to his touch. Two empty eye sockets peered up at him. Mac announced, “That’s not seaweed. It’s hair.” Becoming entwined around his fingers, the slimy strands came loose from the skull.

“It’s a head!” Archie shrieked.

Mrs. Miller screamed and continued to scream. Too shocked to form words—Mac guessed it was probably the first time in her life—she uttered one continuous screech while grabbing her purse and running from the house to her car to peel out of the driveway.

It's Murder, My Son

“I guess I should cross Mrs. Miller off our list,” Archie moaned.

“I guess so.” Mac agreed while suppressing a smile.

