

The truest characters of ignorance are vanity and pride and arrogance.

Samuel Butler

PROLOGUE

Spencer Mountain on Deep Creek Lake, Western Maryland—Three Years Ago

“Are you ready for this?” Mac Faraday asked David O’Callaghan, Spencer’s chief of police.

The two men peered through the window at the fleet of vans and SUVs blocking the mountain road. A mob of journalists and their camera operators filled the small front yard of the log A-Frame home built into the side of Spencer Mountain. The rear of the luxurious mountain house provided a bird’s view of the valley floor and Deep Creek Lake.

“There sure are a lot of them,” David said in a low voice.

Mac looked over at the handsome young man. A gold police shield was pinned to his chest. Shining, it stood out against his uniform’s white shirt. Somehow, it seemed unfair that the police chief, only in his early thirties, should be introduced to the media with such a horrible case. Baptism by fire.

“You’ll do fine,” Mac said. “Use your officer’s training from the Marines. When you go out there, take command. They’re going to try to take control from you—don’t let them.”

“You make it sound like I’m going into battle.”

“You are.” Unable to look at the journalists, desperate for something to report—anything, no matter who it hurt; Mac turned away.

David followed him into the front sitting room. “When you were a homicide detective in DC, did you ever have to give a statement to the media?”

“Are you kidding?” Mac replied. “I’m the last person my superiors wanted speaking to one of those vultures.” Grasping David’s arm, he softened his tone. “You’re going to do fine. We’ve practiced your statement. Remember, no questions because—”

“It’s an open police investigation,” David finished.

“It’s okay to be firm with that,” Mac said. “You’re in charge of this investigation. A young woman is missing. Your first objective is bringing her home to her mother—not playing up to the cameras.”

“I almost wish I wasn’t chief of police,” David muttered. “I remember how much Dad despised having to do things like this. They always seemed to take one thing he would say and twist it—”

“I know.” A smile came to Mac’s lips when he thought about the feelings he and his birth father shared, even though they had never met. There was something to genetics.

He caught a look in David’s eyes, which were identical to his own. They had both inherited their deep blue eyes from their father, as well as his tall, slender build. The only noticeable difference was in David’s blond hair, inherited from his mother. Mac had inherited his birth mother’s dark hair, touched with gray at the temples that had crept in after he had hit forty.

As a teenager, Robin Spencer had given birth to Mac out of wedlock. Her parents had immediately whisked him away to be adopted. While Mac’s mother went on to become a world famous murder mystery author, his birth father, Patrick

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O'Callaghan, had become Spencer's police chief. Eventually, he married and had a son.

It was only upon Robin Spencer's death forty-seven years later that Mac Faraday, a homicide detective in Washington, DC, had discovered the truth. She had left her entire estate, which included a mansion on Deep Creek Lake, to him. She had also left her journal to Mac. From that, the multi-millionaire had learned about his parents unending love for each other and his half-brother, who lived in the same town.

"I'm glad you're here to help me, Mac," David said.

Mac shrugged his shoulders. "It's better than losing another tennis match to Fleming."

Arthur Bogart, Spencer's deputy chief of police, came in from outside. "The natives are getting restless out there, Chief."

"I'm ready." David picked up a clipboard with his notes from the coffee table to go over his statement one more time.

"I'll give these to our officers to pass out to them." Bogie picked up a stack of papers that contained a drawing of their suspect and handed some to Mac.

"Chief O'Callaghan?"

They looked up the stairs leading to the upper levels of the home. Florence Everest was making her way down. Archie Monday, assistant to the late Robin Spencer, was behind her.

Focusing on the case of Florence's missing daughter, Mac pushed away the thought of how lovely Archie was. For the last four days, the petite blonde had been acting as friend and confidante to the distraught mother.

When Robin Spencer had left her estate worth two hundred and seventy million dollars to Mac, she had further increased his good fortune by stipulating that her assistant, Archie Monday, was permitted to live in the guesthouse for as long as she wanted. Mac had no desire for the emerald-eyed

blonde who loved to go barefoot to leave. It isn't every man who inherits a house with a live-in beauty.

Under normal circumstances, it would be difficult to gauge Florence Everest's age. She was a tall, slender woman with the look of a movie star from the days of the silver screen or a runway model. Her presence was flawless. An interior decorator, she knew all about style, and she had used her talents to become successful in business as well as in high society, which was how she had risen up from a single working mother to the cream of Deep Creek Lake society.

For those on the A-list, Florence Everest was the only interior decorator in town.

Casting a fearful glance out the window at the crowd that seemed to be closing in while David's officers pushed them back, she asked, "Do I need to go out there?" Her eyes were puffy from a recent flow of tears.

"No," David said. "If you're out there, they'll be focused on you. I want them to listen to me and look at our pictures from the sketch artist."

A ruckus outside caused them to return to the window. The journalists looked like they were about to mow down the dozens of Spencer and Garrett County officers trying to hold them back when the front door opened.

A young woman and man rushed inside and slammed the door behind them.

While the woman rushed to hug Florence, her chubby companion hung back to glare at David and Mac. His penetrating gaze bore through his small dark eyes under his dark eyebrows and flabby cheeks.

"Ms. Everest, have you heard anything yet?" the woman asked. "I saw on the Internet that the police chief was going to make an announcement. Does that mean they found Khloe?"

"No, Lily," Florence said. "We've heard nothing yet."

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“I wish I had insisted on Khloe going home with me.” With a sob, Lily glanced over at the row of pictures that lined the fireplace mantel. “I saw that she had had too much to drink. None of this would have—”

“It’s not your fault.” Florence draped her arm around Lily’s shoulders.

Everyone’s eyes turned to the mantel, which contained an array of pictures of the dark-haired beauty. Like her mother, her hair that fell in a thick wave past her shoulders. Her dark eyes stood out against her alabaster skin. Many of the photographs were professional shots that displayed her striking features that had won her leading roles in the local community theater circuit.

“We’re passing out pictures of the man that you saw Khloe talking to down at the lake on Friday night,” David explained. “If we can get it out across the media, maybe someone will recognize him.”

“That’s all?” Lily’s friend exploded. “You’re passing out drawings of this guy? Why aren’t you out there looking? Why aren’t you bringing in suspects to question? She’s been missing for the last four days and all you bunch of boobs have been doing is hanging around looking at the view and contemplating your navels.”

“Now look here, Bevis,” Bogie said, “We’ve been doing everything possible. You don’t know—” The silver-haired deputy chief who possessed the solid build of a wrestler was more than impressive enough to cause Bevis to back up a step to avoid contact with him.

“I know all about abduction cases.” Bevis tried to avoid the imposing form of the deputy chief. “Back when I was a kid, my mother and her friend were kidnapped, and my father caught their killer. He was a sheriff in Frederick County in the 1970s, and he knew his job. He worked hundreds of abduction and murder cases, and it’s because he was so good

at what he did that they elected him senator. I know all about how this works. I also know that your handling of this case is totally unacceptable!" Threatening to strike the police chief in the chest, he poked a finger in David's direction. "If you morons would have listened to me four days ago, Khloe would be home now, and her kidnapper would be in prison."

There was something about the smug expression on Bevis' face that made Mac want to slap it. Sometimes, Mac wondered if it was who Bevis' father was that rubbed him the wrong way. Senator Harry Palazzi, a former sheriff, had earned every bit of the reputation of a sleazy politician. He could see by David's clenched jaw that he had the same effect on him.

"Everyone is on edge right now, Bevis," David said in a steady tone. "So I'm going to excuse your comments as simply that."

"Spoken like a man with no balls," Bevis replied. "How did you get appointed police chief anyway?" He cast a glance in Mac's direction before scoffing. "I'm sure rubbing elbows with the owner of the Spencer Inn had nothing to do with it."

"That's enough, Bevis." Florence stepped in to cut Bogie off before he was about to grab the young man by the front of his shirt to take him outside for a little talk about respect.

Seeing Bogie coming, Bevis backed up. His legs buckled and he fell backwards to land on his rump on the floor.

Without missing a step, Gnarly, another part of Mac's inheritance, scurried around from where he had moved in to trip Bevis and sit down next to his master. A huge German shepherd with a mind of his own, Gnarly and Mac had a love-hate relationship. When he listened to Mac, or took it upon himself to act in Mac or Archie's defense, it was love. When he was committing petty larceny, it was hate.

At this moment, it was love. "Watch yourself," Mac told Bevis, "that first step is a doozy."

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Bevis pointed at the dog whose tongue was hanging out the side of his mouth in what appeared to be a laugh. “He tripped me on purpose.”

Lily offered her hand to help him up. “Really, Bevis, he’s a dog. They aren’t capable of doing things on purpose. What is it with you two? You’ve been paranoid about him ever since you met him.”

“I don’t like the way he looks at me.” Shoving his cell phone into his pocket, he smoothed his hair with both of his hands. “I know he stole my phone the other day. That’s why I had to go out yesterday to buy a new one.”

“Why would a dog steal your cell phone?” Lily asked.

When Mac cast a glance in Gnarly’s direction, the dog scurried over to hide behind Archie.

“The sooner we get this started, the sooner we get it over with.” David moved to the door with Bogie directly behind him. Mac, Bevis, and Lily fell in behind them. Archie grasped Gnarly’s collar to hold him inside with her and Florence to watch through the window.

As soon as the media saw David step out of the house, a hush fell over the journalists. Cameras were poised to frame him in their shot when the police chief stepped up to the bank of microphones that they had set up on a makeshift podium in the driveway.

Bevis leaned against the porch railing with his arms folded across his chest. His tubby stomach rolled over his belt. Mac wondered if that smirk ever left his face. It seemed to be permanently etched there. Behind him, Lily chewed on her pinky finger.

Bogie, Mac, and two of David’s officers positioned themselves behind him in a show of support when the police chief began his statement:

“Four nights ago, on Wednesday night, twenty-one year old Khloe Everest, accompanied by two friends, went out for

an evening of clubbing. During the course of the evening, she became separated from her friends. Khloe Everest did not make it home. Witnesses have told our investigators that they saw Khloe parked at a boat launch on Deep Creek Lake. She was seen speaking to a young man. On Thursday morning, her mother, Florence Everett, who was out of town on a business trip, received a phone call from her daughter's cell phone, in which she was screaming and crying for help during what seemed to be an attack. They were abruptly cut off. Ms. Everest immediately contacted our police department. Since that time, we have been searching for Khloe Everest. All of you have received pictures of Ms. Everest. We are still searching for the young man with whom she was last seen. At this time, I would like to distribute composite pictures that have been made of him based on witness descriptions."

"Is he a suspect?" a journalist yelled out.

"Right now, we only want to talk to him," David said. "He is wanted for questioning."

"Do you think Khloe's disappearance is in any way connected to the Amber Houston disappearance and murder in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania?" another journalist shouted out. "They are about the same age and disappeared in the same way. Could it be the same killer?"

Another journalist agreed. "Have you checked the dumpsters belonging to motels in the area... like the one in McHenry?"

"We are examining all possibilities," David said. "Until we get evidence suggesting otherwise, we're operating on the assumption that Khloe is alive."

Over the heads of the journalists, Mac saw a car pull up as far as it could go on the blocked road and turn off to get out of traffic. Squinting, he could see a young, dark-haired woman behind the wheel. She fluffed her hair with her hands and checked her lipstick in the rearview mirror before opening the

door and sliding out of the driver's seat. With a broad grin on her face, she sashayed up the driveway in her high heels and fire engine red short skirt.

Mac was still trying to find the words to express his surprise when Lily abruptly screamed, "Khloe!"

It took a full moment for the journalists to react. Cameras followed the line of Lily's pointing finger to the young woman in the driveway striking a pose for the cameras.

"What's going on?" she asked with a giggle in her voice. "Has someone been killed?"

While the journalists mobbed the subject of the search, David turned to gaze at Mac in stunned disbelief.

Not only was Khloe Everest alive, but, judging by the glee on her face while posing for the cameras, she was doing extremely well.



Mac was the first to get over his shock and fight his way through the mob to grab Khloe by the wrist. "We need to talk," he hissed through gritted teeth before dragging her out of the throng of reporters to take her inside where her mother hugged her—until she discovered that Khloe had never been in danger.

Even Gnarly was cocking his head at her with an expression of disbelief in his eyes.

"We thought you were dead!" Florence screamed at her. "None of us have eaten or slept in four days. All of these officers all over the county and much of the state have been searching for you, and where were you? Shacked up in a motel with a boy?"

"You should have called your mother." While chastising Khloe, Archie stroked Florence's arm in comfort—or was it to calm her down and hold her back from throttling the girl?

"What motel were you at?" David asked her.

“It was some dive outside Morgantown,” Khloe said with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Didn’t you see the news about a tri-state-wide search for you?” Lily asked.

“We weren’t watching television.” Khloe’s grin was wickedly naughty.

“What about the phone call you made to me?” Florence demanded to know.

“What phone call?” While her words communicated bafflement, her grin said she knew exactly what her mother was talking about.

“You really need to work on playing innocent,” Mac said in a low voice in reference to the smile kicking at the corner of her lips.

“You called me on your cell phone,” Florence said in a high-pitched voice. “You were screaming and crying and—”

“Oh!” Khloe wailed in laughter. “So that was you I called. It was a butt dial.”

Blinking, Florence turned to David for help.

“That’s when you have your phone in your back pocket,” David explained, “and you sit down and accidentally call someone without realizing it.”

“Once, a SWAT team got called out to a school because a teacher accidentally butt dialed his wife,” Bogie said. “She heard voices, but her husband didn’t respond when she tried talking to him. So she thought that the school had been taken hostage. The school was locked down and SWAT converged on it before the police realized it was a mistake.”

“Why didn’t you answer your phone during the last four days? Why have you had it turned off so that we couldn’t locate you via GPS?” David asked her. “Why haven’t you called anyone to tell them that you were all right?”

"I was busy," Khloe said with a toss of her head that sent her long hair back over her shoulder. She checked out the window to see if the media had left yet.

"Since when have you been too busy to text?" The anger in Lily's tone matched that of Khloe's mother.

"What's the name of this boy you were with?" David asked her.

"Brad...something or other," Khloe said with a shrug of her shoulders.

"You were in bed with a boy for four days, never checking the news, not calling any of your friends or family, and you didn't get his last name?" Bogie asked.

"She set us up." Lily glared at Khloe. "You set me up."

"Why?" David asked.

"Excuse me," Khloe said, "but my fifteen minutes of fame is slipping by fast and there are some people outside who want to talk to me." She turned to find David blocking her path. When she moved to one side, Mac blocked that escape. "Hey, I did nothing wrong."

"Actually, you did," David said. "It's called obstruction of justice. During the last four days, police from most of the state have been looking for you when we could have been focusing on people who were in real trouble."

"Hey, I didn't call the police!" Khloe pointed at her mother. "She did."

"After you set up that butt dial to make it look like you've been kidnapped," Florence said. "Think of all the young women who have really been kidnapped. Who have really been raped and humiliated, who really do need help, and you made a mockery of all of these officers to play this little game of yours—for what?" She pointed out the window. "Fame!"

Mac glared into Khloe's eyes, which were filled with satisfaction. "I know you're too young and cocky to understand

this right now—but I’ve worked a lot of murder investigations that involved some very famous people—both as victims and suspects—and all of them had one thing in common.”

“What’s that?” Khloe said with a sigh to show him that she was humoring him.

“They paid a price,” Mac said. “They all paid with their privacy. Some paid an additional price of their dignity. You,” he chuckled, “you traded in your integrity. Too bad you’re so young that you have yet to realize what a valuable thing that is.”

“I’ll think about that when I’m in front of the cameras on my way across the red carpet.” She pushed her way through to make her way to the door.

“It’s obstruction of justice,” David said forcibly. “Five years in prison if convicted.”

Khloe whirled around and shot him a glare. “First, you have to prove that I engineered all of this to make you look like a bunch of fools, instead of you doing it to yourselves.”

“Considering that your own mother and best friend believe you’re capable of it,” David said, “we will prove it. No one makes an ass out of my people and gets away with it.”

“Knock yourself out.” With a flip of her hair, she stepped outside to strike another pose for the cameras.

Florence sighed. “It’s all my fault...letting her grow up without a father.”

Lily wrapped her arm around her waist. “Do you really think she’d be less self-absorbed if she knew her father?”

Mac saw that instead of David, it was now Khloe to whom Bevis was directing his beady-eyed glare while stroking his plump lips. Outside, the latest infamous newsmaker was being swarmed by the media.

“What do you think?” David drew Mac’s attention for the unpleasant man’s display. “Is there really any way to prove she did engineer this whole fiasco?”

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“Even if there isn’t,” Mac said, “she’ll get hers. What goes around comes around.”