

SAID THE SPIDER TO THE FLY

By:

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Acknowledgment

To the great Creator Almighty who makes all things possible, I submit my most humble gratitude. I want to acknowledge the patient support of my loving husband, daughter, and son-in-law. I'd like to acknowledge the continued support and faith of my loving family, to all my friends, both online and those "live". Thanks for reading Miss Mae's works and for spreading the word.

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Dove Island, Catch Me If You Can, See No Evil My Pretty Lady, It's Extraordinary My Dear Winifred, and Fated Destiny

Chapter 1

A slow, stealthy footfall trod across the hardwood floor of the living room. Mona swung around from her spot at the kitchen counter, tensed and alert. The steps paused, and she imagined the unknown person eyeing the room's antiques, sizing up their monetary worth. On tiptoe, she edged down the length of the wall. She picked up a baseball bat that rested beside the refrigerator. Gripping the club in both hands, she charged through the doorway, screaming at the top of her lungs.

Her surprise attack sent the intruder stumbling backwards, tripping over an ottoman. In a defensive gesture, he threw his hands up, palms facing her. "Hey! Hold on, lady. You've got it all wrong."

"Get out." Mona held the bat in a threatening posture. "Get out of my house. *Now.*"

"Your house?" The man's dark brows shot up, and he blinked in confusion. "But Jerome Kincaid lived here. How could—?" A look of comprehension slid across his features. "Wait a minute. Are you his granddaughter, Mona Murphy?"

The idea that a stranger could deduce her identity unnerved her. She stepped forward, swinging the bat. "I told you to get out."

"Wait." The man jumped aside, bumping against a coat rack. It teetered to the floor, Mona's loosened windbreaker helping to cushion its fall. Behind the lenses of his wire-framed glasses, the intruder's brown eyes fastened a careful watch on her. "Listen, I didn't know you were here. I thought the house was empty—"

"That gives you no right to barge in."

"Let me get my card, okay? Maybe that'll convince you I'm not a prowler. Will you let me?" With one hand extended toward her, he slowly reached inside his suit coat and extracted a business card. He held it out for her inspection.

Not relinquishing her hold on her weapon, Mona scanned the words, *Preston Hitchcock, Five Star Insurance Agency.*

"Hitchcock?"

As though expecting her dubious reply, the man's lips twisted in a wry grimace. "No relation to Alfred, unless I'm a poor cousin."

Mona tightened her grip on the bat. "You're saying you're an insurance agent? Why should I believe you?"

"Call my office. They'll vouch for me. Maybe they'll even tell you how I got to be agent of the month."

"Why should that interest me?"

"Because it happened when I sold Jerome a half million dollar policy."

"What!"

"Yeah." Preston leaned away from the angle of the swaying club. He tilted his face, revealing a rugged profile. "He named you as sole beneficiary. I can show the policy to you if you'd like."

"Okay." Mona inhaled a startled breath, dazed by the news of her grandfather's action. "Where is it?"

"In my briefcase. But that's in the front seat of my car. I can—"

“How convenient. You think that’s a clever way to escape, don’t you?” She re-clenched the bat and gave a warning swing. “I’ll just call the police and have you arrested for breaking and entering.”

“I didn’t break in. I walked in. I’m trespassing, yes, I admit that. But I didn’t know anyone was here.”

“If you’re a legitimate insurance agent, you wouldn’t be trespassing.” She inched toward the telephone table, maintaining a wary eye on her captive. “You know Grandpa’s dead, and if you thought the house was empty, why are you here?”

“Because of the timing.”

“Huh?” Mona stood still, giving him a curious stare.

“When a client takes out a policy like Jerome did, and then almost immediately after it comes in force, the insured should die— Well, the people in the big office get suspicious.”

Her palms moistened around the bat’s smooth wood and she relaxed her grip. “Meaning what?”

“Can I ask you to get that thing away from my nose?” Preston gestured at the bat. “I’ll be happy to explain why I’m here.”

“First, tell me what you mean about ‘suspicious’. Is that like you have to make sure I’m his granddaughter?”

He hesitated. “Not exactly. See, it’s standard procedure when such a large amount of money is at stake. The underwriters want to confirm that all the terms written in the policy were met. That his death was —” He held her gaze. “Accidental.”

“Of course it was. He fell down the stairs.” Without thinking, she lowered the bat, waving a hand at the ornate spiral staircase, as though the sight of them provided all the needed evidence.

“Yes, we know he fell down the stairs. But, what we need to establish is that he didn’t mean to fall.”

“Didn’t mean to— You think he committed suicide?” Mona almost choked at the preposterous notion.

“I’m telling you the conditions of the policy. The cause of death must be explained to meet the company’s satisfaction. Otherwise, they won’t pay.” He sniffed the air. “Is that fresh brewed coffee?”

“Hmm? Oh.” Convinced the man told the truth, Mona tossed the unneeded bat aside. She missed her aim for the nearby chair, and the club banged onto the sturdy oak coffee table, rolling to a stop an inch from a unicorn figurine. Unbidden, the image of an attic door flashed through her mind.

Yanking her gaze from the statuette, she remembered the rules of hospitality and asked, “Would you like a cup?”

He stretched his lips into an easy grin. “Thank you. Yes, I would.”

Something about that grin caught her off guard and she gave him a closer look. Though she guessed his height to be less than six feet, he stood a head taller than her. The charcoal business suit fit snugly to his well-proportioned frame, the absence of tie, with shirt unbuttoned at the throat lending an air of casual comfort. A thin layer of tea-brown hair suggested premature balding, but his unlined complexion hinted his age at no more than thirty years old. Mona again noted his grin. For some reason, she found it peculiarly attractive.

She led the way to the kitchen. “But didn’t your company get a death certificate telling how Grandpa died?”

He trailed behind. “Dr. Henry just signed it, ‘Cause of death was blow to the head’. And Chief Banks’ official report said Jerome was found at the bottom of the stairs. The belief is that he fell and died

instantly when his head struck the floor.”

Mona took down a cup and saucer from the cabinet. She glanced at Preston as he paused in the doorway, his gaze holding steady on her movements. Feminine intuition told her he enjoyed the view.

Hiding her smile, she turned her back. “And those reports from a policeman and attending physician don’t satisfy your bosses?”

“He didn’t have a witness to verify the incident was accidental.”

Mona gave a dry chuckle. “Believe me, Grandpa wouldn’t kill himself. Besides, why should he? Certainly not to leave me a bunch of money.”

“I’m fairly new to Copper Springs,” Preston said. “I’ve only lived here for six months. But during that time, I’ve had the pleasure of getting to know Jerome. And I agree with you. I can’t see him taking his own life.”

Setting the coffee accessories on a silver tray, she carried it to the carved walnut table. “There’s your answer. Why can’t your company rely on your professional judgment?”

“My personal opinion doesn’t matter. I have to give them concrete facts.” His gaze slid down her, stopping at her feet. She glanced down. “Is something wrong?”

“Sorry.” He gave another of those disarming grins. “I’m not used to seeing a woman serve up coffee dressed in jeans and heels.”

She brushed hair off her brow, raking her nails through the mass of woven curls. “Just ask anyone in Copper Springs. They’ll tell you how different I am from everyone else.” The truth of the statement hit home with a hard punch, making her wince.

“Jerome told me a little about you—”

Her head snapped up. “What did he say?”

“That you left town five years ago to attend college and you hadn’t been back.”

“Oh.” Cream pitcher in hand, she sent a frowning glance at the window. “What’s that cat doing?”

“What cat?” Preston leaned towards the pane. “I can’t see anything.”

A crashing bang at the back door blended with a cat’s hair-raising yowl. Preston rushed to the door and jerked it open. Mona set down the pitcher and flipped the outside light switch. Scanning the back yard, Preston stepped to a tipped over garbage can.

“Guess that cat you saw knocked this over.” Preston righted the can and reached for the lid that rested a couple of feet away. But his movements paused as the raised lid revealed something underneath.

Foreboding trickled down Mona’s arms. “What is it?”

Squatting, Preston withdrew an ink pen from a breast pocket and poked at the object. He looked up. “These towels are soaked with blood.”