



Copper Lake Confidential

By Marilyn Pappano

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When she returns, Macy meets Stephen Noble, an author and veterinarian, who doesn't know about Macy's troubled past. Stephen finds her irresistible, and, finally, Macy feels willing to trust another man. With her family's help, Macy packs up old remnants—eager to usher in new beginnings. Her future seems hopeful—until strange things start happening in the house: stirrings in the windows...items turning up in unexpected places...lingering scents that don't belong.

Is Macy slowly descending into madness? Or is something more sinister at work in Copper Lake?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Author of 80+ books, Marilyn Pappano has been married for thirty+ years to the best husband a writer could have. She's written more than 80 books and has won the RITA and many other awards. She blogs at www.the-twisted-sisters.com and can be found at www.marilyn-pappano.com. She and her husband live in Oklahoma with five rough-and-tumble dogs.

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Going home alone? Are you crazy?

With her brother's words echoing in her ears, Macy Howard pulled into the driveway of the house she'd left a year and a half ago and stopped. The garage door slid up at the touch of a button, revealing a space empty but for a few tools and yard-care equipment. The lawn was mown, the hard surfaces neatly edged, the flowers freshly watered. She had no doubt the backyard looked as good, that the pool was sparkling clean, the house and guesthouse dusted and vacuumed and ready to be lived in again.

Not that she would ever live in this house again.

Hands trembling, she eased the minivan into the garage, shut off the engine and watched in the rearview mirror as the door slowly came down. If she closed her eyes, if she relaxed, she could almost believe it was a normal day back before her life had blasted all to hell.

Clary would be in the child seat in back, tired after a morning of play and shopping, and the groceries would be waiting to be carried in and put away. She would fix lunch—sandwiches, probably; Clary was in a peanut-butter-and-jelly rut—then she would put her daughter down for a nap before Mark made his usual post-lunchtime call to see how his favorite girls were. But it wasn't a normal day.

Clary was in Charleston with her uncle Brent and his bride, Anne. Mark was dead.

And Macy was fiercely glad he was.

The tips of her fingers began to ache. Taking a deep breath, she forced them to unclench from the steering wheel. Things she used to do without thought now required conscious effort: undo the seat belt, open the door, slide out, close the door. Her footsteps echoing on pebbled pavement, she walked across the garage to the door that led inside, then stopped.

She couldn't do this. She should have stuck to the original plan: drive up Friday morning with Clary, Brent and Anne. Check in to a hotel. Come to the house with her brother and sister-in-law. Pack what she intended to keep—nothing that would remind her of Mark. Leave and never come back.

But no, she'd wanted to be alone her first time here. Didn't want an audience for whatever emotions she might feel. Didn't want to show even the tiniest bit of weakness to people who watched her, every moment, for just that.

She fitted her key in the lock, twisted and opened the door into the laundry room. Though shutting off the alarm system came instinctively, the first step beyond that was like slogging through knee-deep concrete that

hadn't yet set. The second was hard, too, and the third, but finally she reached the pantry, then the kitchen.

Stainless, stone and tile gleamed. Her lawyer must have hired a cleaning service after getting her email that she was returning. A lime-green colander filled with fresh red apples sat on the island. The sweet scent of hazelnut mixed in the air with wood polish, and a vase of rusty-hued flowers occupied the center of the breakfast table. Through the window over the sink, she could see the beds that had been her passion, bright and alive with color, as if she'd never gone away.

Home. She was home. In a place that could never be home again.

Grief swept through her, and she mercilessly squelched it. She'd done all the mourning she intended to do for Mark within the first week of his death. After that, when the truth had come out, she'd sworn to never feel one more moment's sorrow for him. Her only regrets were for her daughter and herself, and for the sweet little baby he'd caused her to lose. The life she'd lived, the future she'd planned, the past that had been nothing but lies...

A sound startled her before she realized it was her own strangled emotion. *Anger*, she named it. Anger was good. Anger would carry her through this.

Her shoes clicked on the high sheen of the marble floor as she walked through the house that Mark had built. It had been a happy home, or so she'd believed. A shared home. But all the choices had been his—the style, the materials, the colors.

She thought back to the warm, muggy October day he'd died and shuddered. *All* the choices had been his. But the question still haunted her: How had she not known? She'd lived with him, loved him, had a child with him and been carrying their second daughter. How could she not have known him for the monster he was?

Stopping at the foot of the stairs, she looked up. Despite the recent cleaning, dust motes floated on the air, scattered, slowly drifting toward her. For too many months, she'd been like them, scattered and drifting. She'd been weak, vulnerable. *Fragile*, the doctors had called her.

Her chest tightened, making each breath harder to take. She imagined the dust particles flowing in with the air, carrying the faint scent of Mark's cologne into her lungs, and with a sudden shudder, she pivoted toward the French doors that opened from the family room onto the patio.

In all her years in the house, the backyard was the one place she'd felt truly comfortable. It had been her space, her choices, her retreat. The stone patio gave way to lush grass, to the shimmer of the pool and the gardens and beds that spread everywhere.

She could breathe out here.

The only request she'd made of Brent, who'd handled her affairs for the past eighteen months, had been that he hire Bo Larkin to take care of the garden, and he'd done it. Bless his heart, he would have done anything to help her get better.

She walked across the grass, satisfied to see that Bo had been as meticulous in her work as Macy was herself. How had Bo felt, though, caring for a garden that no one saw besides her and the lawn service guys? All that time and effort.

As she neared the corner of the house, a snuffle outside the privacy fence caught her attention. It was followed by rustling, grunting and slithering, and for an instant the hairs on her neck stood on end. Swallowing hard, Macy took the last few steps that blocked her view of the narrow side yard...and saw a big yellow dog happily trampling the daylilies that grew in the corner of the bed. A hollowed-out area under the gate explained the noise.

"Hey," she said sharply, and he looked up at her, tongue lolling from his mouth, before laying his head on his paws.

"Scooter!"

The shout came from the street, a man's voice, and the dog's ears pricked before he hunkered in a little more. "You've run away, haven't you?" Big brown eyes watched her.

"*Scooter!*"

The Lab managed to make himself a little flatter, closing his eyes, for a moment appearing as if he were asleep. Then he opened one to a slit to peek at her. She stopped her smile before it could form and moved past him to the gate.

"Scooter, dang it, you know you've got to take your medicine," the voice muttered. "Do I have to chase you all over the neighborhood every time?"

Macy glanced at the dog, still pretending to sleep, then unlatched the gate. At least someone in the world was apparently having a normal day, even if it did mean chasing down his recalcitrant dog. She wondered if he knew how much to appreciate that. She would give up every dime of her fortune to learn what "normal" was supposed to be now.

When she tugged the heavy gate open, Scooter's owner was nearing her driveway. He was tall, lanky, wearing cargo shorts and a T-shirt and glasses, with his brown hair standing on end, as if he'd combed his fingers through it in frustration. A red leash was draped around his neck.

He was a stranger to her, luckily. She really would have hated for the first person she saw to be someone she knew, someone like her friend Sophy's mother, Rae Marchand, who lived three houses down, or Louise Wetherby from the end of the block. Either woman could put any gaggle of teenage girls to shame with their gossiping skills. Rae was pretty harmless about it, but Louise liked to leave her victims bleeding from the sharpness of her tongue. Macy intended to avoid both women during her stay.

"Hey," she called. "Would Scooter, by chance, be a yellow Lab with a fondness for making his bed in my daylilies?"

Switching directions, the man grimaced. "I'm sorry. He's on meds right now, and he knows I give them at noon, so he's started making his escape about ten minutes before."

Automatically, Macy checked her watch. It was 12:05. "You think your dog can tell time?"

Her dry tone quirked one of his brows. "You think it's coincidence he's taken off at the same time every day for a week?" Without waiting for a response, he went on. "If he's damaged the flowers, tell me where I can replace them or send me a bill or something."

"I'm sure they'll be fine." She stepped back to allow him through the gate. The dog was still feigning sleep, though with one ear cocked up to hear better.

"Scooter." His master—well, owner, since he didn't seem to have much mastery over the dog—crouched in front of him. "We talked about this, didn't we? You're not welcome in anyone's yard but your own."

Macy restrained a smile. For so many months, the only people she'd dealt with outside her family were so overwhelmingly serious. For that matter, with the exception of Clary, the family members were too serious, too. Now here she stood in her backyard with a man who had discussions with his dog about proper behavior and, apparently, expected the animal to understand. It wasn't normal, but it beat her usual days by a mile.

The man hooked the leash onto Scooter's collar. "Come on," he said sternly. "Apologize to the lady, then we're going home."

For a moment the dog remained motionless, then he leaped to his feet, eyes wide, looking as surprised as if he'd really been woken from sleep. He jumped at his owner with enough force to knock the man down if he hadn't been prepared, then panted and strained toward the gate as if eager to be on his way.

"Apologize, Scooter."

Happiness draining from his face, the dog walked over to Macy, head ducked down, eyes peering up at her, then rubbed his head lightly against her knee. He really did look contrite, and finally her smile formed.

"Apology accepted," she murmured, feeling silly.

"By the way..." The owner straightened, standing six inches taller than her. "I'm Stephen Noble. Scooter and I live down around the curve." He gestured toward the north, which gave her one important piece of information: he wasn't part of the Woodhaven Villas subdivision. He hadn't been one of her and Mark's neighbors.

Though he probably still knew everything that had happened. He did live in Copper Lake, after all, and he didn't seem the least bit hermitish.

"Macy Howard." She watched his face closely for some reaction—even in Charleston and Columbia, in the beginning, her name had drawn some response—but not from him. "Have you lived here long?"

"About ten months. I came to work with Dr. Yates for a while and decided to stay."

Inwardly cringing at the mention of a doctor, Macy breathed deeply. "So you're a physician's assistant or a nurse or.?"

His eyes—hazel behind the glass lenses—shadowed, then he laughed. "No. Dr. Yates is a vet. So am I."

Relief washed through her. She wasn't sure she'd ever be recovered enough to comfortably deal with medical personnel. And being a vet certainly helped explain why he thought his dog could tell time and why he had regular discussions with him.

"I've never had any pets," she said as explanation why she didn't know that detail about Dr. Yates. Mark had chosen whom they socialized with, and a veterinarian had never made the list.

She had never been the snob Mark was; by his standards, her own family wouldn't have been good enough. They didn't have old blood and old money, prestige and power. They didn't rate with the great Howards.

A snort of disgust rose inside her, but she choked it down. Not now, not here.

"I've never *not* had pets," Stephen was saying. "Being a vet was all I ever wanted to do. More or less."

"So you got your dream. Good for you." Being happy was all Macy had ever wanted. A comfortable life. A husband she loved who loved her back. Kids to cherish. Stability.

You're stable now, she reminded herself, forcing even breaths. She had some unsteady moments, but they were fewer and further between. She was capable and competent. She *was*.

"What do you do?"

She blinked, then refocused on Stephen. "Do?"

"Do you work? Have a job besides taking care of this place?"

"I, uh...no." She hadn't worked since a part-time job in college. As soon as Mark had graduated, she'd dropped out and they'd gotten married. He'd never wanted her working then, and she didn't need to now. Between his death and his grandmother's a month later, Macy had enough money to support herself, her daughter and whatever family Clary might one day have for the rest of their lives.

"Well..." Stephen shifted, tugging on the leash. "I've got to get this guy home and shove a couple pills down his throat. Remember, let me know about the flowers. I'll take it out of Scooter's cookie money."

She murmured something—goodbye, she thought—and watched them leave, the dog walking quietly alongside his owner, but they faded from her thoughts before they were gone from sight.

Sure, she had money to support herself and Clary, but...what would she *do*? What would fill her days? What would she contribute? How would she show Clary how to be a kind, compassionate, responsible, productive adult?

And the most terrifying question of all: With all that free time, with nothing to do but take care of Clary, how would she ever stay sane?

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