

Excerpt

LITERALLY DEAD

An Empty Nest Mystery

© 2016 Lois Winston

ONE

The wheels of my suitcase couldn't spin fast enough as I pushed through the revolving door of the Crown Jewel Hotel in midtown Manhattan. Once inside the lobby, I stopped short and gazed awestruck, soaking in the writerly atmosphere. My heart pounded so fast I could hear it reverberating in my ears. Or maybe that was the din of the voices from hundreds of romance authors filling the forty-story marble and glass atrium.

My eyes bugged out as I scoped the room. "Oh my God, Blake!" I reached for my husband's hand and squeezed it. "That's Liz Phillips," I released my grip on my suitcase handle and pointed in the direction of the bar off to my right. "And Elise Robertson."

"Friends of yours?" asked my husband.

"I wish! They're two of the most successful romance writers in the world. I can't believe I'm standing only a few yards away from them!" Talk about a fan girl moment! One more superstar sighting and I just might need a brown paper bag to ward off imminent hyperventilation.

"Hurry!" I pulled him along, nearly tripping over my Kate Spades as I race-walked toward the shortest of several lines that serpentine from the hotel registration desk around the chic silver, white, and gray lobby.

Blake grabbed me, preventing me from executing a face plant. Then he spun me around and settled his hands on my shoulders. Lowering his head until our foreheads nearly touched, he said, "I know you're excited, Gracie, but take a deep breath. Slow down. The conference doesn't start for several hours. You're not going to miss anything."

I humored him by continuing at a jog instead of a sprint until I reached the back of the line. "I can't believe I'm here!" I squealed, bouncing on the balls of my feet.

A year of slaving over my manuscript had finally paid off. "Just think, by this time next year I'll probably be returning as Gracie Elliott, published romance author."

"Don't you mean Emma Carlyle?"

"Right. Sorry." Since Blake didn't think the stuffy old academics of the university governing board would take too kindly to a faculty wife writing sensuous romances—not that my writing rose anywhere near *Fifty Shades* level—I'd promised to publish under a pseudonym. Thus, Gracie Elliott would become Emma Carlyle on bookstore shelves.

"Besides, aren't you forgetting something?"

"Like what?"

"You need to sell your book first."

Leave it to Mr. Logical to burst my bubble. "Yes, of course, but I'm sure I'll have plenty of offers here at the conference. After all, I'm the winner of the Society of

American Romance Author's Cream of the Crop writing competition. That's a huge award. You should be excited for me, Blake. And proud of my accomplishment."

"I am excited for you, sweetheart, and I've always been proud of you. You're the most amazing woman I've ever met. You set yourself a goal, and you work until you accomplish it." He pecked my cheek. "I just don't want to see you disappointed."

"Why would I be disappointed? You just said I always accomplish my goals, didn't you?"

"Yes, but some goals take longer than others. Did winning this contest guarantee you a publishing contract?"

"No, but—"

"The win gives you the opportunity to attend this writing conference, nothing more. Let's keep everything in perspective, okay?"

"Fine. But you're going to eat those practical words of yours by the end of these three days."

"I'd love nothing better than to see you prove me wrong."

We inched our way up in line. "Notice anything odd?" he asked above the cacophony of conversations around us.

I glanced up at my husband, then around the massive lobby. "Odd?" Although this was my first writing conference, I'd attended my share of business conferences and conventions over the years. Prior to the industry downsizing that outsourced my job as a fabric designer overseas and left me jobless and pension-less, I'd spent many hours cooling my Kate Spades and Christian Louboutins in long, slow-moving hotel check-in lines. "Not really."

"It's a veritable estrogen brigade here, Gracie!" My normally unflappable husband suddenly looked like the clueless hero of a fish-out-of-water romance novel.

I did notice several women eyeing Blake. Nothing new there. Heads always turn when we enter a room, but never in my direction. Women always zero in on Blake, especially widows, divorcees, and campus coeds. With the exception of his shock of silver hair, my middle-aged husband could pass for Hugh Jackman. I needed Wolverine claws to fend off some of the more aggressive ones. "Most of them probably think you're an agent or a publisher," I said. *And that I'm your assistant*, I added to myself.

Not that I have low self-esteem. I'm simply bowing to the obvious. I'm not bad looking, just your average middle-aged woman—average height, average figure, average brown hair. My one outstanding feature is that I have one green eye and one blue eye, like Gracie Allen, which is what first caught Blake's attention. He was researching early nineteen-fifties television at the time, and I reminded him of the late comedienne in both looks and mannerisms. Except Gracie Allen was acting. My sometimes harebrained, scatterbrained nature is ingrained in my DNA.

Blake, on the other hand, is so far above average, he resides on another planet in a galaxy far, far away—an invitation-only planet reserved strictly for celebrities and guys who resemble celebrities.

My husband speared me with *The Look*, the expression he reserves for those times when I ramble to the tune of my own off-key, off-kilter symphony. "Are you sure we're at the right hotel? This looks more like a Mary Kay convention than a writing conference. Where are all the men?"

“I see men.” I motioned around the lobby. “Two reservation clerks behind the desk, one at the concierge station, three bellhops—”

“You know what I mean. *Male* authors.”

I rolled my eyes. My husband might be brilliant when it comes to his own field of expertise—twentieth century culture and counter-culture and its influences on the media—but he obviously knew nothing about twenty-first century romance fiction, a field dominated by women. I shrugged. “At the thriller writers and sci-fi writers conferences?”

“She’s right,” said someone behind us. “Very few men write romance.”

Blake and I turned to face the woman who belonged to the voice and who had obviously been eavesdropping on our conversation. She sported a chestnut pixie haircut streaked with silver and a smattering of fine laugh lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth.

OMG! I recognized her immediately. A third romance superstar, and this one was standing right behind me and speaking to us! My jaw flapped open and closed several times before words spilled out. Finally I said, “You’re Paisley Prentiss!”

She held her hand out to me. “Guilty.”

I grabbed her hand in both of mine and gave it an enthusiastic shake. “I’m a huge fan! I’ve read all your books.”

“Thank you. And you are?”

“Gracie Elliott.”

She smiled, her laugh lines deepening as she extricated her hand. “First-timer?”

Did I have a bright red neon *Romance Writer Wannabe* sign flashing above my head? “Is it that obvious?”

She cocked her head toward Blake. “Husband?”

I nodded. “Blake Elliott.”

Paisley chuckled. “Dead giveaway. Most of us leave our spouses at home. They tend to get in the way of our fun.”

Blake shot me *The Look*.

“I wanted him here to see me accept the Cream of the Crop Award,” I said.

“Congratulations. I remember my first contest win. It was very exciting.”

“Did you sell your book as a result of winning a contest?” asked Blake.

“Heavens, no! Writing contests are a way for writers to gain feedback and hone their skills. They rarely result in anything beyond that.”

“Really?” My heart plummeted to my toes. “But won’t I meet agents and editors here? Shouldn’t they want to read my book?”

“Some might, but don’t give up hope if no one does.”

“But—”

She placed her hand on my upper arm. “It’s a process, Gracie, usually a very long process. I wrote for ten years before I sold my first book.”

“You? But you’re Paisley Prentiss. Your romantic comedies are a constant fixture on the *New York Times* bestseller list.”

“And once upon a time I stood here just like you—wide-eyed and hopeful—until the reality of the publishing industry smacked me upside the head. Rejection happens. A lot. Even to published authors. Those who eventually succeed do so because they don’t give

up. The trick is to keep writing. Keep learning. Keep submitting your work. If you're lucky, someday your efforts will pay off, and you'll sell your first book."

Someday? I don't have *someday*. I'm forty-seven years old and unemployed with two kids in college and a husband whose professor salary doesn't begin to allow us to think about a comfortable retirement, let alone pay for my designer shoes and handbag addiction.

To his credit Blake refrained from saying, "I told you so," but I knew he was thinking it. Instead, he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and changed the subject. "So, Paisley, you say there are no male romance writers? What about all those sappy tearjerkers I've seen in bookstores over the years?"

"Which ones?"

Blake thought for a moment. "There's that one about the covered bridges in Iowa. And the one where it turns out the wife has dementia. Weren't they written by men?"

"Yes, but those books aren't romances."

Blake scoffed. "Of course they are."

Paisley shook her head and held up a finger. "First rule of romance: the story *must* have an HEA."

"HEA?"

"Happily ever after," I informed my husband.

"Those guys don't write HEA," explained Paisley. "Someone always winds up leaving or dying. Or leaving, then dying."

Blake wasn't buying it. "So you're saying *Romeo and Juliet* isn't a love story? I believe every Shakespearean scholar in the world would disagree with you."

"Love story, yes. Romance, no."

Blake shrugged. "Semantics."

"No, there's a big difference. At least in the publishing world."

I yanked on Blake's sleeve. "Stop arguing. This is Paisley Prentiss. She knows what she's talking about."

"There are a few male romance authors," Paisley continued. "Some write in partnership with their wives; others write on their own. But they all write under pen names."

She pointed to a grouping of chairs a few feet from where we stood and whispered, "See that dumpy old guy in the baggy jeans, suspenders, plaid shirt, and cowboy hat? He's written over a hundred historical romances as Penelope McGregor."

"*He's* Penelope McGregor?" I asked way too loudly. Several heads turned in my direction—including Penelope McGregor's. *Whoops!* He skewered me with a killer scowl as he used a cane to heave his massive body out of the chair. I quickly looked away, but it was too late. The intense heat of embarrassment suffusing my face pegged me as the blurring culprit.

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" asked Paisley as Penelope McGregor turned her—his—back on us and with great difficulty lumbered toward the bank of elevators.

"I'll say," I muttered. Given the level of steam in her—his—books, I expected Penelope McGregor to look more like the late Barbara Cartland than an eighty-year-old version of *Southpark's* Eric Cartman.

“He keeps his real name a closely guarded secret,” said Paisley. “Rumor has it he holds some highly sensitive government position and would lose his job if his bosses ever connected him to Penelope.”

“He’d have to present ID to check into the hotel,” said my ever-logical husband.

Paisley shrugged. “I suppose he’s got some way of working around that. Besides, the hotel would never divulge personal information about a guest to anyone.”

“Unless TMZ paid off a desk clerk,” said Blake.

Paisley considered that for a moment. “I don’t think TMZ is interested in romance authors. We’re not high enough up on the celebrity food chain for them.”

Through my partially obstructed view, I continued to stare at Penelope McGregor’s back as he waited for an elevator. When the doors of the elevator directly in front of him opened, an extremely tall, overly Rubenesque woman exited, nearly barreling into him. When he refused to budge, instead of stepping around him, she stiff-armed him out of her way.

Penelope McGregor lost his balance and teetered backwards, his cowboy hat flying off his head. Several people behind him reached out and grabbed hold of his arms, preventing him from landing on his rump. Without so much as a glance in his direction, the woman who had pushed him stormed toward the registration desk.

“Here comes trouble,” said Paisley.

“Isn’t that Lovinia Darling?” I asked. Even though I hadn’t gotten a good look at her face, I recognized the trademark vintage Pucci attire and platinum beehive hairdo of the most famous of all living romance authors.

“The devil herself.”

The crowds had thinned as people crowded into several elevators. I watched as a younger woman who had followed behind Lovinia placed her hand on Penelope McGregor’s forearm and said something to him.

Although I couldn’t hear what she said, he answered her in a booming voice that filled the lobby. “You should be ashamed of yourself, always making excuses for that woman.”

Heads turned in their direction. A hush settled across the lobby, making her reply audible to those of us standing nearby. “I didn’t mean—”

He jerked his arm from her grasp. “Save it. I know what you meant.” He turned and having missed his chance to enter the first elevator, headed toward another currently discharging passengers.

She stared at his retreating back as he stepped inside and the doors closed behind him. Then she scurried off to catch up with Lovinia.

By this point Lovinia Darling had pushed her way to the front of the registration line to our right, elbowing aside a woman in the process of checking in. We had progressed far enough along our own line that I had a clear view of Lovinia’s back.

The woman she’d pushed aside opened her mouth to object but took one look at the rude buttinsky, snapped her mouth shut, and stepped aside. You’d think the Queen of England had just cut in line in front of her.

Lovinia Darling smacked her key card onto the counter and in a voice that carried across the lobby asked, “Do you know what this is?”

The reservation clerk glanced at the plastic. “Your room key, ma’am.”

“Room being the operative word here.”

With condescension dripping from his voice, he asked, "Is there a problem?"

"There most certainly is a problem. I'm supposed to have a deluxe suite, not a *room*." She turned to the woman who had followed after her. "Don't just stand there like a lizard napping on a rock. Show this pompous *clerk* the paperwork."

The woman reached into an enormous leather satchel and withdrew a folder crammed with papers. She began thumbing through sheets while Lovinia Darling stood, hands on hips, impatiently tapping what I recognized as a fifteen hundred dollar pair of Jimmy Choo anthracite glitter Lorelai pumps. "It's here somewhere," said the woman, her voice quivering. "I know it is."

"I don't know why she puts up with such abuse," said Paisley.

"Who is she?"

"Marcella Ford, Lovinia's personal assistant."

"Oh, for the love of—!" Lovinia snatched the papers from Marcella's hand. "What good are you? Must I do everything myself?"

Marcella cowered from Lovinia's verbal assault, visibly shrinking into herself as the scene unfolded before us. The petite woman was no match for her larger-than-life bully employer.

I made a mental note to strike Lovinia Darling from my automatic buy list. No way would she ever see a dime of royalties from me ever again, no matter how much I'd previously enjoyed her books.

Lovinia quickly rifled through the papers, pulled one from the pile, and slammed it onto the counter. "Here!" She pointed to something on the page. "Right there it states a deluxe suite. Not a *room*. I don't do *rooms*."

By now all the other women waiting in line had ceased their chatter, their eyes directed toward the drama playing out at the front desk.

The clerk perused the paper, typed something on his keyboard, then consulted his computer terminal. "Your paperwork is from the conference, ma'am. The conference may have promised you a suite, but they only paid for a room for you. One room with two queen beds for two occupants." He pushed the paper back toward her. "If there's been a mistake, it's on the part of the conference. You'll have to take this up with them. Now please step aside. You're holding up the line."

Lovinia threw back her shoulders and appeared to grow several inches taller than her already six-foot frame. "Young man, do you have any idea who I am?"

"No, ma'am, and I really don't care."

She fisted the counter. "I demand to speak with the hotel manager."

"I *am* the hotel manager, and I'll be happy to upgrade you to a suite if either you or the conference pays for it. Barring that, you'll have to be satisfied with your *room*."

Lovinia Darling spun around and began berating her assistant. "This is your fault, Marcella."

"How...I—" She snuffled and blinked furiously behind thick black frame glasses, but even from my vantage point of several feet away I could see she failed miserably. Her entire body trembled as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Oh, stop blubbing!" Lovinia waved her hand in dismissal. "Go find the conference chair and straighten out this mess. I'll be in the bar." She turned on her Lorelais, threw back her shoulders, and with head held high, strutted across the lobby.

Blake had remained uncharacteristically silent during *As the Romance World Turns* played out before us. Now, as the chatter in the lobby resumed at an even higher decibel level than the pre-Lovinia Darling episode, he turned to me and said, “Sure you wouldn’t rather write cozy mysteries, Gracie? Or better yet, how about children’s books?”

I’d considered mystery, especially after discovering Sidney Mandelbaum stabbed to death in the parking lot of the Moose Lodge. Sid had been one of my clients earlier in the year, during my brief foray as a wing woman for the senior set. I’d even discovered his killer, although it nearly cost me my life.

My heart belonged to romance, though. Just because the most famous romance writer in the world turned out to be more like Cruella de Vil than the sweet small town heroines she created, I saw no reason to switch genres. “I’m sure there are plenty of prima donnas in the worlds of mystery and kid lit,” I said. Pausing a beat, I added, “Just as there are in academia.”

Blake responded with *The Look*. I ignored him, not because I didn’t have a pithy retort on the tip of my tongue but because we’d finally reached the front of the registration line.

I gave my name to the desk clerk and held my breath. As part of the contest win, the conference had comped my room. After the drama surrounding Lovinia Darling, I worried that they might not have conveyed this information to the hotel. Blake would have a cow if we had to shell out more than seven hundred dollars for two nights at the Crown Jewel Hotel, especially since we live less than twenty miles away and I could easily commute into Manhattan for the three-day conference.

However, I needn’t have worried. The clerk only requested ID and a credit card to keep on file for incidentals since the conference wasn’t picking up the tab for pay-per-view or mini-bar charges. Not that I’d have time to watch a movie or would ever consider helping myself to a five-dollar granola bar.

Before heading to our room, I turned one last time to Paisley. “I’m so glad I had a chance to meet you. Maybe we’ll bump into each other at a workshop.”

“I have a better idea,” she said. “I’m in charge of setting up for the banquet tonight. Why don’t you join us? I can always use another volunteer, and it will give you a chance to meet some of the other authors.”

Really? I couldn’t believe my ears. Paisley Prentiss wanted me to hang out with her and her fellow authors? Had I just died and gone to publishing heaven? Trying my hardest to sound like a professional writer and not some teenybopper at a One Direction concert, I said, “I’d love to. Thank you so much.”

“Great. We’re meeting in the dining room at four-thirty.” She executed a quick eye-sweep of my classic Ann Taylor black linen business suit and gray silk blouse, one of my wardrobe staples for attending business events. Her scrutiny puzzled me. Paisley wore an outfit more suited to a quick trip to the supermarket. I stole a glance at the other women around me. That’s when I realized, except for the Pucci-clad Lovinia Darling, nearly every other woman in the lobby was dressed in jeans or khakis.

“Wear jeans and sneakers,” said Paisley.

“I thought the banquet was formal.” My business experience had taught me that a woman, especially one in a male-dominated profession, needed to present herself in a professional manner at all times. Romance writers might wear pajamas and bunny slippers as they sat at home in front of their computers, but this was a conference where

publishers, editors, and agents would be in attendance. Shouldn't everyone dress appropriately?

Or perhaps, since the conference didn't officially begin until the banquet this evening, they didn't feel the need for business attire this afternoon. Still, you never knew whom you might meet in a hotel lobby. First impressions were often lasting impressions, and my twenty-five years of experience in the textile industry had taught me it's always best to make a good first impression.

"Yes, tonight is formal," said Paisley, "but we'll be hauling cartons of books."

When I frowned, she patted me on the arm and added, "Don't worry. You'll have plenty of time to change your clothes before dinner."

"Okay. Four-thirty. See you there."

Before heading up to our room, Blake and I made a quick detour up the escalator to the mezzanine level where the SARA conference registration was taking place. I gave my name to the woman behind the registration table.

"Our Cream of the Crop winner? Congratulations!" She handed me a large canvas tote stuffed with books and an envelope containing my conference badge and seat assignment for the banquet. A pink ribbon with gold lettering that read *First Place Cream of the Crop* hung from beneath the badge. I couldn't take my eyes off it as Blake and I walked toward the elevator.

"If your grin gets any wider," he said, "your cheeks will crack."

But the pride I saw in his eyes made me want to break out in a combination Whip/Nae Nae/Snoopy dance. Only the knowledge of my own innate clumsiness—not to mention the certainty of my three-inch Kate Spade heels sliding out from under me on the marble floor—held me back. I'd already nearly executed a scene from a slapstick comedy when I first entered the hotel. Why tempt fate a second time? Blake did have a point, though. I probably looked totally goofy.

As if reading my mind, he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and drew me close. We then squeezed into an elevator car that immediately went from crowded to overcrowded with the addition of two more riders, our wheeled luggage, and the book-laden conference tote bag dangling from my arm. "Enjoy the moment, Gracie," Blake whispered in my ear as we scrunched together like sardines in a tin. "You've earned it."

Some men are embarrassed by what their romance author wives write. If Blake harbored any misgivings about my new career, he never once mentioned them—other than to request I use a pen name—and that stemmed from not wanting to jeopardize his job security. With only one of us now holding a full-time position, I completely understood his request.

Besides, thanks to the free-flowing booze at most faculty functions, too many professors regularly make complete fools of themselves. If Blake's colleagues learned I write romance, we'd both continually have to fend off boorish questions and comments pertaining to how I researched my sex scenes. A pen name spared us both from having to deal with that.

As the doors began to close in front of me, Lovinia Darling shouted, "Hold that elevator!" as she strode the last few feet toward us.

The woman behind me muttered, "Not if my life depended on it."

I guess she wasn't a member of the Lovinia Darling fan club, but even if the car had been filled with Darling devotees, this sardine can had already reached capacity.

Thankfully, with Blake and me being the last two people to enter the car, a certain part of his anatomy wasn't pressing against the backside of a woman who wasn't his wife. However, the two women standing behind us were way too close for comfort. I'm not keen on having a stranger's tatas up close and personal with any part of my husband. With not a millimeter of space between bodies, we certainly had no room for anyone else, let alone a woman in need of a Weight Watchers membership.

No one near the control panel made any effort to jab the button to hold the door open, not that they could have moved had they wanted to accommodate Lovinia. As the doors closed in her face, Lovinia Darling pursed her lips and shot me a stink eye.

"Do you think there's any truth to that rumor?" asked another woman standing somewhere behind me.

"Could be. It's not the first accusation," said the not-if-my-life-depended-on-it woman.

"Really?"

"The first one that I know of happened at least twenty-five years ago. Nothing ever came of it. I've heard rumors of others over the years, but I have no idea if they're true or not. Anyway, plagiarism is hard to prove."

Plagiarism? Were they talking about Lovinia Darling? *Holy guacamole!*

"Not any more," chimed in a third woman. Back then we didn't have ebooks, social media, and advanced search engines. Nowadays it's much easier to unmask a plagiarist."

Blake and I exchanged a knowing look. At the start of every school year he caught freshman turning in assignments they'd blatantly copied from the Internet. Some of the papers were even ones Blake himself had published! Often the plagiarist didn't even bother to check the author's name before copying the essay and pasting it into a new Word document with his own name.

"True," said the not-if-my-life-depended-on-it woman. "Sometimes all it takes is one observant fan to alert you to similarities in books. A bit of digging does the rest. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"About what?" the second woman asked.

"How long she's been doing it," said the third woman. "Possibly years. And she wouldn't be the first. Remember what happened to Jeanette Weeks? She not only stole storylines, she lifted entire passages from various authors' books and cobbled them together."

"I forgot about that," said the second woman. "Didn't she blame the stress of a failing marriage?"

Not-if-my-life-depended-on-it snorted.

Just then the elevator came to a halt at our floor. Blake and I stepped out. As the doors swooshed closed behind us, he turned to me and raised an eyebrow. "Rethinking your career as a romance author yet, Gracie?"

"Why?"

"This writing organization is a den of iniquity."

"Every profession has its bad apples."

"I'm still waiting to find a few good ones here," said Blake.

"What about Paisley? She seems perfectly nice."

"As long as she's not the plagiarist."

“Really, Blake! Besides, I believe the women in the elevator were referring to Lovinia Darling.”

“Time will tell.”