Old Boyfriends

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Extract

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CHAPTER

I

Vivian Leary stood motionless at the corner of the street, her eyes darting from side to side. She had no idea where she was or how she'd gotten lost. After all, she'd lived in Colville her entire life. She should know—*did* know—every square inch of this town. But the last thing she remembered was going out to collect the mail and that must have been hours ago.

The street didn't look familiar and the houses weren't any she recognized. The Henderson house at the corner of Chestnut and Elm had been her marker, but it was nowhere in sight. She remembered that the Hendersons had painted their place white with green shutters. Where was it? she wondered, starting to feel frantic. *Where was it?* George would be upset with her for taking so long. Oh no, how could she have forgotten? George was dead.

The weight of grief settled over her, heavy and oppres-

sive. George, her beloved husband, was gone—taken from her just two months short of their sixtieth anniversary. It had all happened so fast….

Last November, her husband had gone outside to warm up the car before church, and a few minutes later he lay dead in the carport. He'd had a massive heart attack. The nice young man who'd come with the ambulance had told her George was dead before he even hit the pavement. He sounded as if this was supposed to comfort her. But nothing could have eased the shock, the *horror,* of that dreadful morning.

Vivian blinked hard, and despite the May warmth of eastern Washington, a chill raced up her bare arms. She tried to extinguish her growing panic. How was she going to find her way home?

Susannah would know what to do—but then she remembered that her daughter didn't live in Colville anymore. *Of course* Susannah wasn't at home. She had her own house. In Seattle, wasn't it? Yes, in Seattle. She was married with two precious children. Susannah and Joe's children. Good grief, why couldn't she think of their names? Her grandchildren were her joy and her pride. She could picture their faces as clearly as if she was looking at a photograph, but she couldn't recall their names.

Chrissie. The relief was instantaneous. Her granddaughter's name was Chrissie. She was born first and then Brian was born three years later. Or was it four years? It didn't matter, Vivian decided. She had their names now.

What she needed to do was concentrate on where she was—and where she should go from here. It was already starting to get dark and she didn't want to wander aimlessly from street to street. But she couldn't figure out what to do next.

If there'd been any other pedestrians around, she could've stopped and asked for directions to Woods Road.

No…Woods Road had been her childhood address. She hadn't lived there since she was a schoolgirl, and that was before the war. For heaven's sake, she should be able to remember her own address! What was wrong with her?

The place she was looking for was the house she and George had bought almost forty-five years ago, when the children were still at home. She felt a mixture of fear…and shame. A woman of eighty should know where she lived. George would be so frustrated and impatient if he ever found out about this…. Only he'd never know. That didn't make her feel any better, though. She *needed* him, and he wasn't there to help her, and that filled her with anxiety so intense, she wrung her hands.

Vivian started walking again, although she wasn't sure where she was headed. Maybe if she kept moving, if she concentrated hard enough, the memory would eventually return to her.

Her legs tired quickly, and she sighed with relief when she saw a bench by the side of the road. Vivian couldn't understand why the city would place a nice wooden bench there—not even near a bus stop. It was a waste of taxpayers' money. If George knew about this, he'd be fuming. He'd been a public servant all those years, a superior court judge. A fine one, too, a man of principle and character. How proud Vivian was of him.

Still, she was so grateful for somewhere to sit, she wasn't about to complain. George had freely voiced his opinions about matters of civic responsibility and what he called city hall's squandering of resources. While she lis-

tened to her husband's views, she didn't always share them. She had her own thoughts when it came to politics and things like that, but she usually didn't discuss them with George. That was something she'd learned early in her marriage. George always wanted to convince everyone of the superiority of *his* ideas and he'd argue until he wore people down. So when her views differed from his, she kept them to herself.

Sitting on the hard bench, she glanced about, hoping to find a landmark. Oh my, this was a busy street. Cars whizzed past, their lights blinding her until she felt dizzy. She wasn't nearly as tired now that she was sitting. That was good, because she needed to think. Thinking was important. She hated forgetting basic facts, like her address, her phone number, people's names. This happened more and more often now that George had died, and it frightened her.

Perhaps if she closed her eyes for a moment, that would help. She'd try to relax, clear her mind, since all this worry only made her memory less reliable.

It was chilly now that the sun had gone down. She should've brought a sweater but she'd been working in the garden earlier and it had been hot. Her irises were lovely this spring, even though her garden was in sad shape. For years, it had been a source of pride and she hated the way it looked these days. She did as much as she could, but so much else needed to be done. Weeding, pruning, planting annuals… After dinner she'd decided to do some watering and remembered that she hadn't collected the mail. That was when she'd gone out, planning to walk to the neighborhood mailbox. And now here she was, lost and confused and afraid.

That was when Vivian sensed someone's presence and opened her eyes. Joy coursed through her veins as she stared, wondering if her mind had betrayed her.

"George?"

Her husband of fifty-nine years stood beside her, shadowed under the nearby streetlight. His smile warmed her and she straightened, eyes wide open, terrified he'd disappear. George had come to help her, come to save her.

"That *is* you, isn't it?"

He didn't answer but stood there plain as could be. He'd always been such a handsome man, she thought, admiring his broad shoulders and his confident posture.

They'd been high school sweethearts and known each other their entire lives. Vivian felt she was the luckiest girl in the world when George Leary asked her to marry him. They'd been apart for nearly three years while he was fighting in Europe. Then he'd gone to college to get his law degree on the G.I. Bill. That time of struggle had paid off, though, and after a few years of private practice, he'd been invited to join the bench. George had been the one and only love of her life and she missed him terribly. How like him to come to her now, in her hour of need.

Vivian reached out to him, but George backed away. She dropped her hand abruptly, biting her lower lip. No, of course—she should've realized she couldn't touch him. One couldn't touch the dead.

"I'm lost," she whispered. "Don't be angry with me, but I can't find my way home."

He smiled again and she was so relieved he wasn't upset with her. She'd forgotten things before he died, too, and

sometimes he got frustrated, although he tried to hide it. She'd even stopped cooking but that was because she'd forgotten so many of her recipes. The ones in cookbooks were too hard to read, too confusing. But George never complained and often heated soup for both of them.

Vivian felt she should explain what had happened. "I went to get the mail and I must've decided to go for a walk, because when I looked up I wasn't anywhere close to the house."

He stretched out his hand and she got to her feet.

"Can you take me home?" she asked, hating how plaintive and helpless she sounded.

He didn't answer. Then she realized that dead men couldn't talk, either. That was all right; she didn't care as long as George stayed with her. Six months it had been since he'd died and every one of those months had seemed an eternity.

"I'm so glad you came," she whispered, trying to hide the way her voice cracked with emotion. "Oh, George, I miss you." She told him about the garden, even though she knew she was rambling. He'd never liked it when she talked too much, but she was afraid he'd have to leave soon, and there was so much to tell him. "George, I'm sure Martha is stealing. I just don't know what to do. I watch her like a hawk when she comes to clean, but still I find things missing. I can't let her rob me blind, and yet I hate to fire her after all these years. What should I do?" She hadn't really expected him to answer, and he didn't.

Then, suddenly, she saw the house. They were on Chestnut Avenue, where they'd lived since 1961. She walked laboriously to the front door, holding on to the railing and

taking the steps one at a time. When she looked up to thank George for helping her, her beloved husband had vanished.

"Oh, George," she sobbed. "Come back to me…please. Please come back."