

TIME OUT OF MIND excerpt
Copyright © by Barbara Raffin.

Prologue

Night stole warmth from the earth like death snatches heat from a body. The man standing at the edge of the bog, the fingers of fog drifting up from the decaying morass beneath his feet and winding around his legs knew. He'd had more experience with death than any human being need to.

Still, he ignored the chill of the light-thieving night that penetrated his rubber boots and flannel shirt. He ignored the dampness clinging to his skin. It was easier tonight, what with *her* to watch through the long hours. Since arriving, she'd cloistered herself in the glassed-in room at the back of the small house built upon the tenuous tentacle of sand that reached toward the bog.

She slept curled up on one end of the rattan divan pressed against the inner wall of the sunroom. A misnomer, calling that enclosure surrounded by swamp a sunroom...like calling the slumber of the young woman ten days shy of thirty restful. The creases scoring her generous brow beneath her spiky, coffee-brown bangs suggested otherwise. As did the spasms ticking at the hinge of her delicate jaw and jarring the deceptive stillness of one, long leg stretched across the floral-printed, vinyl cushion of the couch.

Not that she was aware of him outside of the bungalow in the gloom of false dawn. She wasn't aware of him in the usual sense—the physical sense. She'd also been spared the memories...unlike him.

Except maybe in the fragmented state of dream.

She struggled in her sleep, her slender hand reaching through the paralysis of slumber, fingers splayed for the grip of another's that would never hold. He knew whose grasp failed her. He knew in the same way he knew she had never in any lifetime lived beyond the age of thirty. A man didn't hunt a woman through the centuries without learning everything there was to know about her, especially a woman whose death that man had countless times affected. He'd almost taken too long to find her...this time.

Chapter 1

*"I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind."*

—from *Dirge Without Music* by Edna St. Vincent Millay

The scalding coffee slipping down Samantha Moore's throat didn't warm her any better than the sunlight filtering through the tinted, triple-paned windows surrounding her. Why couldn't she warm up? She was home. She'd grown up in this house, playing with her paper dolls on this very porch.

But that had been a long time ago. A lifetime ago. Literally, her father's lifetime. He'd died six weeks back and taken the warmth of her haven with him. Samantha's fingers tightened around the coffee mug, and she turned her face from the early morning sunlight that couldn't warm her.

"Just settle Dad's estate and get back to the city, to work." She blew the objective through the steaming tendrils rising from the mug pressed between her palms. But her voice lacked the decisive edge that usually punctuated her directives.

Just as the father who'd meant everything to her was now gone from her life. How could he have passed a physical one week and died the next?

Before she could think beyond her father's doctor's sympathetic, "Sometimes there is no rhyme or reason to death," a tapping on glass drew her attention toward the sun porch door. A man stood beyond the long, clear panel, taller than most she knew in Killdeer, his denim-clad legs braced apart at a manly angle.

She squinted into the bright sunbeams that slashed across the side yard and the man's broad shoulders. He gripped a flannel shirt in a tight fist against a lean hip. His other hung suspended in mid-knock against a background of tousled, dark hair. As for his face, the harsh light seared one side and cast the other into deep shade, making it impossible for her to see details. Samantha Moore distrusted anything she couldn't see clearly.

Maybe she should borrow on her city-learned brusqueness and pretend she'd heard nothing—turn her back to the door and stroll from the room as though she saw no one. But this was rural Wisconsin where everybody knew everyone...usually.

She opened the door and, belatedly, realized she didn't recognize the strapping figure of a man on her doorstep. Tersely, she demanded, "Who are you?"

There was a hesitation as he lowered the hand from between his face and her door, a stretched moment during which she thought he might be unable to answer...or debated what best to reply. That last—that suspiciousness, she blamed on the attorney in her. And the attorney in her never apologized for that ingrained mistrust even if the woman would. Before she could determine whether woman or lawyer prevailed, the stranger on her doorstep answered in a voice barely more than a husky whisper and acidic as peat. "Name's Michael Archer."

She was a master negotiator and an expert in the art of poker faces. Yet, Samantha shivered. To cover, she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. But the move brought her shoulder nearer the doorjamb—nearer the hard contours of a chest defined by a close fitting, black T-shirt. The cool, musty aroma of the swamp clung to the dark threads, as if the man wearing that shirt had just stepped from that dying place.

"Didn't mean to take you by surprise," he said through lips that looked as though they'd be as smooth to the touch as the brass doorknob her fingers gripped and as strong to the taste as the coffee in the mug she pressed between her breasts.

But she still couldn't see through the blaze of sunlight what details lie beneath the whisker-textured jaw cocked at her.

"If you'd rather I come back later..." He leaned forward as though he meant to say more. But the shadow of the door-casing fell across his face, erasing the blinding glare of the sun; and Samantha found herself captivated by a mossy-green pair of eyes that seemed as old as time. She blinked to break the spell and reminded herself how very much he'd left unsaid.

"What do you want?" she demanded in an oddly husky voice.

"Mac from the gas station at the crossroads told me you'd be needing a handyman."

Mac. Her father's best buddy. Mac, who'd owned and run the service station at the crossroads for as long as she could remember.

It seemed Michael Archer had been around Killdeer long enough to learn only tourists and transients said *in town* when referring to the intersection of Highway 13 and Washout Road where Mac's was situated. That the locals referred to that intersection as *the crossroads*.

Locals or canny con artists. Might Mr. Archer also have learned that the local biologist's daughter was alone and worth a bundle? Rural communities like Killdeer kept few secrets. She decided to remain cautious of the stranger with hair dusky as silt.

"You sure you have the right place?" she quizzed.

"This the Moore place?"

She nodded when she should have demanded to know why a man with a face too carnal for any woman to ever forget, even a woman focused on business, wasn't better employed. But she'd never learned to casually probe a person about their background, and there were too many rules these days about what kind of questions an employer could ask a prospective employee. Edward Benet, her business partner, had been sued for such a reason.

Besides, this mossy-eyed stranger with the dark hair curling down his neck and around his ears had a way about him that tended to distract her.

"You expect me to hire you just like that?" She snapped her fingers.

One corner of Michael Archer's smooth, chiseled lips tugged upwards. "I come with a recommendation from Mac."

"I could call him and check up on you, you know." She probed his face for any telltale sign of uncertainty.

He jutted his square chin toward the far wall that partitioned the kitchen from the porch where the phone hung just out of sight. "I'd expect no less from you, Miss Moore."

"That's Ms."

He grinned, a quick, wide flash of white teeth. "Ms. Moore."

He'd made a target of her all right, this man with his potent charm. Two things brokering land had taught her. How to recognize and make use of opportunity and how to spot another opportunist. Still, while every fiber of logic in her commanded that she send the stranger at her door packing, some inexplicable compulsion kept her testing him.

"Of course you'd have no problem with my calling Mac now. I'm sure you don't expect him to be in the station at this hour."

"I don't know the time." The stranger on her doorstep waved his wrist in front of her face. "No watch."

"But you do know it is early."

His smile eased a bit. "If it's after 6:30, Mac'll be there."

So, he knew Mac arrived at the station every morning well before opening time. It didn't take a rocket scientist to spot a bunch of old men with coffee mugs in hand hunkered down on the cracked Naugahyde and rusty chrome furniture beyond the broad, front window of Mac's full-service station. It wouldn't take a Sherlock Holmes to figure out that Mac, in spite of his husky build, didn't eat the two dozen doughnuts he picked up from the bakery each morning by himself.

The stranger braced his free hand against the doorjamb above her head and leaned closer, close enough that she should have strained back from him rather than stand there inhaling his intoxicating musk and warming to his animal heat.

"Brews a mean pot of coffee, that Mac does," he said in his deep, heady voice. "Thick enough it could eat the paint off the bumper of a fifty-five Ford."

An unsettling sensation surged through her, like something in what he'd said had triggered a reaction to a long forgotten memory. Only she couldn't put her finger on what that memory might be.

Couldn't put her finger on why Michael Archer studied her as though he waited for a reaction, either. But reaction to what? The cleverness of his retort?

Not that simple, an instinctive voice inside her warned.

"Wait here," she said, shutting the door between them with an abruptness that made Michael Archer jump back from her threshold.

She slid the bolt into place and headed for the phone in the kitchen. She shouldn't even bother to check the man out. He raised every instinctive alarm she possessed.

He also aroused a few she didn't even know she had. Dangerous, letting a pretty boy with just enough ruggedness about him to spark a lady's curiosity hang around her back door.

She set her coffee mug down on the kitchen counter, picked up the phone receiver, and punched out the number she'd known by heart since childhood. So Michael Archer had gotten himself invited to one of Mac's coffee klatches. Big mystery.

The phone rang in her ear.

Or he'd heard about Mac's penchant for strong coffee and made use of the information for his own ends.

Which was?

Get her to drop her guard.

Ring two.

Get her to hire him.

She glanced through the narrow archway between the kitchen and sunroom toward the far wall. He still waited beyond the triple panes of glass that insulated the house against whatever weather mid-Wisconsin flung at the abode—that now insulated her from a man too tall, too dark, too handsome for her own good.

Mac answered on the third ring. Samantha ducked away from the opening between the rooms and started asking her questions.

Following a glowing report of Michael Archer's amiability and quick wit, Mac summarized, "Right nice young man."

"Do you remember when he showed up?" she probed.

"Wouldn't likely forget. We'd just laid your daddy to rest."

"I was still here?"

"You'd just left."

She paused, digesting the convenient timing of Michael Archer's arrival before continuing. "Where's he been staying?"

"In the swamp."

"Camping practically in my back yard," she muttered under her breath, pacing the breadth of the short wall and eyeing the stranger who'd obviously won over Killdeer's most conservative congregation of residents.

"You say something, Samantha?"

"I was just wondering what brought him to Killdeer. Did he say?"

Like the stranger loitering at her back door would have told any friend of hers his true motives. But, she might catch him telling contradictory stories.

Silence stretched on the other end of the phone, fueling her suspicion, followed by a perplexed, "Can't say that he did. Though I think he's some kind of biologist like your daddy was. Wait. What're you saying, Doc?"

She heard the voices of the regulars in the gas station echoing off its cinder-block walls before Mac spoke again. "Doc Evers says he's an ornithologist. Kirby thinks he's studying insects out in the swamp. And Lud insists he's a land developer looking to drain our wetlands and turn them into vacation home sites. That Lud's full of it." Mac snorted. "Like some developer would hang around this berg, living off odd jobs."

Samantha sagged into the opening between rooms and smiled, not because Mac's reasoning reassured her, not because she knew Lud Hangstrom and his alarmist viewpoints. She smiled because the banter of her father's friends brought back fond memories of simpler, safer times. She smiled because the camaraderie prompted images of her father.

She smiled because part of her still belonged here.

Through the window almost the width of the house away, Michael Archer flashed a brilliant smile. She resented his invading her pleasant recollections. Worse. His beard-shadowed chin leveled the same angle it had when he'd challenged her to call Mac—an angle that had pointed directly to where her phone was—a telephone that hung on the backside of the kitchen wall...beyond view from the sunroom door. How had he known?

"Thanks, Mac," she murmured and hung up. Her smile faded and her resolve firmed. There would be no job here for a man who seemed to have made it his business to know more about her than he should.

He watched her move in and out of the opening between the kitchen and the porch as she talked on the phone, darting glances in his direction. Not that he worried about what Mac might be saying about him. Experience had taught him how to blend in, how to avoid suspicion. But things often happened beyond a man's control.

Like an all-consuming obsession dictated by destiny.

When she'd opened the door and demanded his name, he'd almost blown his cover. He'd almost blurted out his true identity. He'd almost reached across the threshold, captured her in his arms, and taken her mouth with his right then and there.

But that wouldn't have worked, not with this liberated woman who hadn't so much as batted a single eyelash in his direction. She wasn't like the girl she'd been the last time, all flirtatious desperation. She'd fallen hard and fast for him then...and died the youngest of them all.

The impact of the memory slammed into his chest and he grit his teeth against the pain twisting through his heart. Repeatedly, he'd been driven through time immemorial to find her and impact her life...or death. After all these lifetimes, he still didn't know which.

Though she'd always died because of him.

Though he'd loved her hopelessly, helplessly each and every time. If there was a lesson to be learned—a lesson that would enable him to spare her life, he hadn't learned it yet.

From the kitchen entry, she glanced his way. He forced the pain back and pasted a smile across his lips. He must not fail.

Unless failing to find her was the key to breaking the cycle.

She hung up the phone and strode through the window-lined room toward him. Too late, her footsteps seemed to tap out across the parquet floor.

Hell, it had been too late the first moment they'd met. She'd conquered him centuries ago with the swing of her sturdy hips beneath a peasant skirt. Those hips, narrower now and draped

by pleated linen slacks, didn't sway with the same ease they had then. And the look she gave him now wasn't saucy.

The tiny dead bolt she erroneously thought could keep him out, scraped noisily from its sheath. She opened the door barely a foot, her gray eyes hard as steel. "Mr. Archer—"

"Just Archer." *Because you've always called me by my last name.*

"Mr. Archer—"

That's the girl. Don't make it easy for me. Don't make it easy for The Fates. Fight us!

"—I really don't think you're right for the job."

He leaned forward, stuck his face into the slim opening she guarded with her spare body and gave her his most winsome smile. "You didn't come to that conclusion by anything Mac said."

Her steely gaze darted over his unshaven chin. Had he overdone the grizzled look in his effort to temper his cover-guy looks...to avert a fiasco like the last one?

He should have realized she wouldn't be a troubled, gullible adolescent this time. Word around town was that Jonathan Moore had been a devoted, loving parent to his only child—that he'd raised a self-assured, successful woman. A woman with her feet planted firmly on the ground, had been how Mac had described her. He should have anticipated such a woman would not fall victim to any physical veneer, rugged or clean-shaven.

"Let me be honest with you, Mr. Archer." Her matter-of-fact tone slapped at his ears. "You don't exactly look like the type of man who'd be satisfied with common labor."

Silently, he cursed himself for the looks that grew more perfect with each new lifetime...with each tortured demise of the woman he touched with love. Aloud he drawled, "Satisfaction has nothing to do with what I need, ma'am."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, just enough to warn him he was being too cute with her. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other as though she might close the door in his face.

He grabbed the edge of the door and stepped into the space he held open with brute force, barely keeping the panic from his voice. "You *have* to hire me. I need this job!"

Apprehension etched the outer corners of her eyes and curled across her shoulders. He eased back a little. But he didn't let go of the door—didn't pull his foot back from its base as he gave her a sheepish smile. "Money's run out and foraging isn't my strong point. So, you see, I really need the work."

She didn't move, didn't speak. She just stood there, her mouth a slack little circle of surprise.

"I could start with the yard work. You wouldn't even have to let me into the house."

She stared at him, irritation scudding across her eyes like clouds against a flat, colorless sky.

Recalling that there had never been a fit, snit, or plain out vexation he hadn't been able to tease her out of, he quipped, "You could phone Mac every hour. Tell him, if you miss a single call, he should muster the militia and come after me."

Something that he didn't quite catch flickered in her wide pupils before she blinked. Amusement? Compassion? He wasn't sure which. He gambled on compassion and let desperation edge back into his voice.

"Try me out for the day. I'll work for food."

She looked at his hand gripping the edge of the door inches from her face and frowned. He let go of the door. Her eyes followed the retreat of his hand, cautious, wary.

He mulled the possibility of her refusing him work—refusing to let him close enough in this lifetime for him to complete what he'd been sent to do. But what if what he'd been sent to bring

her soul down rather than save it? Her nearly colorless, gray eyes told him she had no more lives after this one to spare. This was his last chance...and hers.

He curled his fingers against the sides of his thighs, his fingernails catching on the raised seams of his jeans like a mind snagging on hard, harsh reality. He wasn't strong enough to surrender his only purpose for being. He wasn't strong enough to change what destiny decreed.

He wasn't strong enough to save her. Could she save herself? She'd have to. The ability seemed beyond his control.

The Fates help her.

Her gaze lingered on his fingers a few seconds before dropping to the foot he still jammed against her door.

That's my girl. Don't be fooled by the illusion of concession.

He started to slide his foot from the door. But, when she looked up, he stopped.

Heaven help him. To what level of deceit had fate reduced him this time? Would he force his way in and slay her like some madman if she didn't admit him?

He met the conflicted gaze she raised at him—met it and felt it deep inside himself. He wanted to shout at her to barricade herself from him. Yet, he couldn't make himself move his foot that final inch that would enable her to close the door.

Samantha snapped a fresh sheet open over the double bed in the first floor, master bedroom. She should have been making up the garret bedroom upstairs that had been hers. But she needed to feel close to her father, and the bed where he had died in full view of the wetlands he had loved seemed as close as she could get.

Besides, the bedroom-play space upstairs adjoined the storage area beneath the eaves that she needed to clean out. Dust and boxes of old memories did not make good bedfellows.

The draft created by the settling sheet made her silk blouse ripple against her skin. But it was the reminder that she might be the one who'd have to crawl into the dark, musty, storage space under her eaves that raised goose bumps along the backs of her arms. She hated closed-in spaces. She hyperventilated at the mere thought of an elevator—which had put her at a distinct disadvantage when she'd moved to Chicago. Even with therapy, she'd never made it to the top of the Sears Tower. Claustrophobia was one of the reasons she needed a handyman.

The steady *whish, whish* of a scythe hacking back the vegetation from the foundation of the house raised a new crop of goose bumps along her spine. Fear of crawling into tight spaces aside, what had possessed her to hire Michael Archer with his haunted, green eyes? Every nerve ending in her body had screamed for her to make him go away even as she'd said, "There are rakes, pruning shears, and anything else you might need in the storage shed on the other side of the house. It isn't locked."

It had to have been the gravelly desperation in his voice that had appealed to her sympathy. But sympathy got people in trouble all the time, especially women alone. How often had her mentor and partner Ed pointed out the economical cost of that emotion, warning her against empathizing with those whose mismanagement cost them their property?

"They're lucky we are willing to buy them out after they made a mess of things," he'd once said of a mom and pop operation whose attempt at expansion had left them cash poor. Samantha had argued against pressuring the couple—had argued that the little business could flourish if the couple were left alone to ride out the temporary setback.

"And while we play nice guy," Ed had argued back, "somebody else jumps at the opportunity and buys the property out from under us."

Opportunity. That's what she'd milked a million dollars' worth of personal assets from. That's why she could spot another opportunist a mile off.

That's how she knew Michael Archer was an opportunist.

Then why had she hired him?

Because, in spite of all Ed's hard-hitting advice, she was still a sucker for the walking wounded. If the real estate world ever figured that out about her, every agent would line up at her door with an endless stream of Brooklyn Bridges for sale. Where had all her common sense gone?

She must have left it in Chicago among the paperwork on the firm's latest land brokering deal. She'd stayed to proof contracts long after the rest of the staff had left the office yesterday, a normal routine for her even on a Friday. But she'd altered her pattern last night by driving to Dad's instead of to her apartment. She should have waited and started out fresh this morning. Then she'd have missed Mr. Archer's sunrise visit. At the very least, she'd have been rested and alert when he did show up. But she hadn't waited. Common sense failure number one.

By the time she'd reached the house where she'd grown up, she'd been too wired to sleep. Yet, her *I'll-sit-a-few-minutes-on-the-porch-and-unwind* had quickly dissolved into slumber on that stiff, rattan divan. Common sense failure number two.

She'd awakened feeling disoriented and muzzy, no match for a drop-dead gorgeous guy showing up on her doorstep asking for a job before she'd downed her first cup of coffee. Was it any wonder common sense had failed her for the third time in the cramped space of a dozen hours?

She wouldn't be fooled again. She'd hold him to the part of his bargain about *trying him out for one day* and let him do the yard work. Though she wouldn't hold him to the *work-for-food* clause of their verbal agreement. She couldn't take that kind of advantage of the man...just in case there was a shred of truth to his hard luck story.

Now don't you start going all soft on me, Sammy.

She smiled. Her father had denied ever speaking those words to her. But, who else would have teased her like that whenever she went a little soft with sentiment but a man as nostalgic as her father? Besides, no one else ever called her Sammy.

She turned her attention back to the bed and tucked the corners of the sheet under the mattress. So she'd brought a little city-living paranoia home to safe, rural Killdeer.

Whish. Whish, whispered Michael Archer's scythe.

She shivered. But she wouldn't apologize for the touch of distrust that kept the urban set safe. It wasn't like she was paranoid enough to take Mr. Archer up on his suggestion that she report to Mac every hour. She could take care of herself. She had since well before her big-city job had taken her away from the small house where the most serious intruder had been a raccoon, which was the only reason her father had installed any lock on the back door.

Brush scratched at the outer bricks of the fireplace dominating the bedroom's outside wall. Samantha jumped. She was being silly. The man was a harmless transient. He'd work the day, collect his pay, and be on his way. Mac would find another handyman for her.

She smoothed the bedspread over the sheets and refolded a hand-sewn, wedding band patterned comforter across the foot of the bed. Her hand lingered between its folds, her fingertips tracing the tiny, raised stitches of the intercepting rings. Killing time on a business trip, she'd strolled aimlessly through a street bazaar. The moment she'd spotted the blue edge of the looping pattern, she'd been struck by the sense that she'd found something for which she'd been searching a long time.

Its homey patchwork, though, had proven out of place in the austere decor of her sterile apartment. So she'd given the quilt to her father, a man who'd loved without condition...unless you were a crafty raccoon.

Samantha lifted her face toward the sun porch with its feebly bolted door. If Michael Archer was some sort of psychopath, the short, brass nails holding the bolt to the doorframe provided little protection.

Her fingers curled and the quilt bunched in her fist. The stitches that appeared delicate to the eye felt tough and unyielding under her fingers. Spider webs were delicate yet strong...lethally strong.

Samantha stared at the quilt, for the first time, seeing something more than its beauty. Seeing how, with one blow from one broad shoulder, the man hacking vegetation back from the foundation of her house could break in, bind her in the wedding band quilt, and smother her.

She snatched her fingers from the quilt. Smother? Where had that come from?

And why link it to a beautiful quilt?...Whose interlocking stitches seemed to thicken and coil before her eyes.

Samantha gasped, the breath hissing in between her teeth. Yet her lungs called for air and her arms melded to her sides as though something cloth and quilted with strong stitches bound them in place.

She stumbled back from the beautiful blue and white quilt and collided with the half-open, tri-fold doors that partitioned the bedroom from the sun porch. They rattled in their track as Samantha, with leaden arms, pressed them back against the wall as far as they would go. Still, a suffocating pressure closed on her, refusing her lungs the oxygen they begged for.

She had to get away from that quilt!

She wheeled toward the sunroom but stopped dead in her tracks. More than crowded elevators, more than closed-in storage spaces, more than the suffocating darkness of night, she feared fire. Orange tongues of it licked at the frames of the sunroom's windows, danced across the ceiling, and snaked over the floor toward her feet.

Samantha's heart jumped against her breastbone. She should retreat into the bedroom. She could escape the fire by cutting through the bathroom with its two doors, one opening into the master bedroom, the other into the hall between the kitchen and front room. But she'd have to pass that quilt to get to the bathroom. The kind of irrational fear that governed her nightmares pushed her into the sunroom—away from the comforter with its strong, interlocking stitches.

She lurched through the flames and thickening smoke, her leaden arms out-stretched and groping for the nearest path of escape. She found the door. She found the slim cylinder of metal and fumbled the tiny knob of the dead bolt free of its sheath. But the door wouldn't give beneath her frantic push.

She screamed for help. But the roar of the fire swallowed her cry and searing pain blistered her lungs. She hadn't enough breath left for a second attempt. If she was to be saved, she would have to do it herself.

With a concerted effort, reason found a bubble of oxygen in the compressed arteries of her brain. The door she pushed against, opened *inward*.

She yanked and the door swung wide into the room, almost throwing her to the floor. Only her grip on the doorknob kept her upright; and she threw herself through the opening onto the deck.

Where the glassed-in sun porch met clapboard-sided house, a squatting Michael Archer splashed water over his bare shoulders from the end of a coiled garden hose. He looked up at her,

his eyebrows pulling together above the bridge of his nose. Why didn't he come to her aid? Why didn't he turn that hose on her burning house?
Why didn't she smell smoke?