



Fast and Loose (A Stone Barrington Novel)

By Stuart Woods

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In the latest thriller from #1 *New York Times*–bestselling author Stuart Woods, Stone Barrington’s newest foe has a short fuse...and it’s just been lit.

Stone Barrington is enjoying a boating excursion off the Maine coast when a chance encounter leaves him somewhat the worse for wear. Always able to find the silver lining in even the unhappiest circumstances, Stone is pleased to discover that the authors of his misfortune are, in fact, members of a prestigious family who present a unique business opportunity, and who require a man of Stone’s skills to overcome a sticky situation of their own.

The acquaintance is fortuitous indeed, for as it turns out, Stone and his new friends have an enemy in common. He’s the sort of man who prefers force to finesse, and who regards any professional defeat as a personal and intolerable insult. And when Stone’s sly cunning collides with his adversary’s hair-trigger-temper, the results are sure to be explosive...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Fast & Loose*

“Enjoyable...A series of tit-for-tat exchanges leads to an exciting showdown.”—*Publishers Weekly*

Praise for the Stone Barrington novels by Stuart Woods

“Woods creates another action-packed thriller for his readers to devour, with plenty of interesting twists and turns that make for a nonstop, can’t catch-your-breath read.”—*Booklist*

“Tony trappings, colorful characters, and a magnificent McGuffin...Dry-witted dialogue keeps the tone light and drives this glossy, modern take on the classic detective story.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Mr. Woods knows how to portray the beautiful people, their manners and mores, their fluid and sparkling conversation, their easy expectations and all the glitter that surrounds and defines them. A master of dialogue, action and atmosphere, the Key West resident has added one more jewel of a thriller-mystery to his ever-growing collection.”—*Fort Myers Florida Weekly*

“Addictive...Pick [a Stuart Woods novel] up at your peril. You can get hooked.”—*Lincoln Journal-Star*

About the Author

Stuart Woods is the author of more than sixty novels, including the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Stone Barrington series. He is a native of Georgia and began his writing career in the advertising industry. *Chiefs*, his debut in 1981, won the Edgar Award. An avid sailor and pilot, Woods lives in Florida, Maine, and New Mexico.

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1

Stone Barrington lay back in the cockpit of the Concordia 40, a small cruising yawl built by Abeking & Rasmussen, a German yard, in 1938, and let the light breeze take him back toward Dark Harbor. The sails were nicely balanced as he sailed up Maine's Penobscot Bay, and he lashed the helm while he looked around, then peed overboard. Thus relieved, he settled back into the cockpit and tucked a cushion behind him, relaxed and happy.

He dozed off.

The yacht jerked a bit, waking him, and he found himself in the thickest fog he had ever experienced. He could barely make out the stem of the boat, and he was uncertain about his course. He had been headed for the Tarratine Yacht Club moorings, and his own dock beyond, but he didn't know how long he had been asleep or whether the wind had changed and put him off course. He checked the depth sounder: 55 feet of water—too deep to anchor with the rode he had aboard. He stood up and dropped the mainsail to slow the boat to a crawl, continuing with the jib and the mizzen. He went back to his cockpit seat and resumed his position, but left the helm lashed. They were making only three knots in the light breeze, and he reckoned he couldn't get into too much trouble at that speed. The depth was now 70 feet.

He heard a voice from somewhere in the fog saying, "Start the engines and drop the sails," but he couldn't figure out the direction from which it had come. Then there was the sound of water moving past a hull, but he was still unable to determine the direction. He rummaged in a cockpit locker for the air horn and pressed the button. The noise shocked him, and it was followed by shouting from the fog.

Then he saw a shape to port and grabbed for the helm. It took a moment to throw off the lashings, and in that time there was a terrible noise, and his world turned upside down. The boom swung across the cockpit and caught him on the side of his head, and darkness fell.

He felt the pain before he felt his surroundings, and he feared that if he opened his eyes it might make things worse. He allowed some light past his eyelids, then quickly shut them again, groaning loudly at the pain. He heard a rustle beside him, and felt a cool hand on his forehead.

"He's awake," a low female voice said. "Get Father."

Stone tried to speak, but his mouth was too dry. A glass brushed his lips, and he took in a sip of water.

"Is that better? Can you speak?"

"I'm sorry to open with a cliché," he said, "but where am I?"

She chuckled. "You're in bed. You had an accident."

He got his eyes all the way open this time, and there was an arm attached to the cool hand, and a woman attached to the other end of the arm-very blond, almost white hair. "What kind of an accident?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" she asked.

He thought about that. "Fog," he said. "Lots of fog. There was a noise."

"Your foghorn?"

"Yes."

"That was the first we knew of your presence."

"I didn't hear yours."

"I'm sorry about that. The crew was busy getting the sails down."

He struggled to sit up, but she pushed him back. "Not yet," she said. She lifted his head and tucked another pillow under it, enabling him to look around-first, at the woman. Very nice. He was in a cozy cabin of beautifully varnished mahogany.

"My father will be here in a moment to take a look at you," she said. "Your name is Stone Barrington, is it not?"

"It is."

"My name is Marisa Carlsson, with a cee and two esses."

"How did you know my name?"

"You had a wallet with business cards inside. It's drying out, while your clothes are being laundered."

He realized he was naked under the covers. "Who undressed me?" he asked.

She laughed. "The pleasure was mine."

"I'm glad you see it that way."

"Well," a man's voice said, "is our patient awake?" He stepped into the cabin, an older male version of his daughter.

"More or less," Stone said.

"This is my father, Dr. Paul Carlsson," she said.

"You've had a thump on your head," the doctor said.

"I noticed that."

Carlsson laughed. "He's well enough to have a sense of humor."

"Where is my boat?" Stone asked.

"I'm afraid it's at the bottom of Penobscot Bay. There was nothing we could do-it sank very quickly after the collision."

"I'm sorry to hear it. It was an old boat that had made people happy for a long time."

"What boat was it?"

"A Concordia 40 yawl, built in 1938, at Abeking and Rasmussen."

"Funny, that's where this yacht was built," the doctor said.

"What is she?"

"A ninety-foot ketch, designed by Ron Holland, built the year before last."

"Well, I suppose the better yacht won the battle."

"Don't worry about your boat, we'll deal with that later. You've had a concussion, but your vital signs are strong and you're making good conversation, so I don't think we'll have to hospitalize you. We'll get you some soup, to keep your strength up, but then you must rest. You should be fine in the morning."

A uniformed steward came in with a steaming mug of something on a tray. Stone sipped it. "Chicken soup,"

he said.

"The cure for everything," the doctor replied.

"Except my headache. Do you have any aspirin?"

"We do. Marisa?"

She left the cabin and returned with three pills. Stone washed them down with the soup. "One of them will help you sleep."

The next time he woke up sun was streaming through the port over his head, and his clothes, laundered and ironed, were neatly stacked on the bed. He found a razor and a new toothbrush in the head, then had a hot shower and dressed. He stepped out of his cabin into a hallway and followed that to the saloon, then he walked up some stairs to the deck and found Dr. Carlsson and his daughter having breakfast on the afterdeck.

They waved him to a seat, and the steward took his order.

"How are you feeling?" Carlsson asked.

"Almost like new-perhaps a little fuzzy around the edges."

"That's the last of your sleeping pill."

Stone looked around; they were anchored in the harbor not far from the Tarratine. "I live right over there," he said, pointing at his house. "Just down from the yacht club."

"What a lovely house," Marisa said. "Is it old?"

"Only a few years. I inherited it from a cousin, Dick Stone, who built it."

"We'll get you ashore after breakfast," Carlsson said, "and then we'll talk about your yacht, see what we can do."

"Are there just the two of you aboard?" Stone asked.

"Yes, my wife died some years ago," Carlsson said.

"Why don't you come for dinner this evening?" Stone asked.

"That's very kind of you," Carlsson said. "We'd like that very much."

"Are you Dr. Carlsson of the Carlsson Clinic?" Stone asked.

"I am one of the Dr. Carlssons," he replied, "the elder one. Marisa and my two sons are all Dr. Carlssons, as well."

The Carlsson Clinic was a famous hospital, with locations in several cities, on a par with the Mayo Clinic. "Well," Stone said, "I have not lacked for medical attention. If you say I'm all right, then I must be."

The tender from the big yacht dropped Stone at his dock, and he walked up to the house. The door opened, and Bob, his yellow Labrador retriever, bounded out to greet him, carrying a ratty stuffed raccoon that was his favorite toy.

Stone knelt and petted him, scratched his back, then took the raccoon and tossed it into the house. Bob followed closely.

Mary, his housekeeper, was dusting the living room. "We were worried," she said, "when you didn't come home last night."

"I had an accident," Stone said.

Mary's husband, Seth Hotchkiss, came into the room. "What kind of accident?"

"I got run down by a much larger yacht in the fog."

"Any damage?"

"Total loss. She's at the bottom of the bay."

"Such a beautiful boat," Seth said. "Very sad. You all right?"

"A slight headache is all. By the way, there'll be two guests for dinner tonight. They're coming at six for drinks. Two Dr. Carlssons, father and daughter."

"Lobster?" Mary asked.

"Just fine." She would boiled it, shelled it, and tossed the meat in butter.

"Mr. Rawls moved out and into his place this morning," Seth said. "I drove the stuff he'd bought over there."

Stone's neighbor, Ed Rawls, had had his house destroyed by fire a couple of months ago and had rebuilt. "I'm happy for him," he said.

"Joan called already this morning."

"I'll call her back now." He sat down on the sofa and picked up the phone.

"The Barrington Practice at Woodman & Weld."

"I'm alive."

"Mary said you didn't come home last night. Anybody I know?"

"An accident-collision with a much larger yacht. I lost the boat."

"Ooh! I'll keep my picture of it as a memento."

"Anything going on?"

"You're still getting calls about the business with Christian St. Clair and Nelson Knott. What should I tell them?"

Christian St. Clair was a multibillionaire who had been running a TV pitchman, Nelson Knott, for President, putting lots of money behind him.

"Tell them they're both dead, and I don't speak for them. Tell them to call that guy, what's his name?"

"Erik Macher."

"That's the one. He was St. Clair's right-hand man in all this. They should speak to him, if he hasn't been arrested."

"It's been weeks. Why don't they leave you alone?"

"Beats me. If I talk to the media I'll find myself in the spin zone-they'll distort whatever I say."

"This morning's Times had the medical examiner's report on St. Clair. Cause of death was a bomb in a piece of luggage that he opened. Would that be your strong case?"

"Not my strong case, Ed Rawls's. It was taken from him at gunpoint, and he didn't have time to tell them how to open it safely."

"So Ed's not to blame?"

"I would defend him on the available evidence."

"When are you coming home? You're due for your physical first of the week."

"I'm dining with two eminent physicians tonight. Will that do?"

"It's your FAA flight physical, to keep your medical certificate valid. You can't fly without it."

"I know, I know. I hate to come back just for that. The weather up here is gorgeous-autumn comes earlier here than in New York."

"Lucky you. It's like a steam bath on the streets here."

"No calls?"

"Dino called to find out when you're coming back. He couldn't reach you there."

"I'll call him this morning. Nothing else?"

"Nope. Apparently everyone has forgotten about you."

"Everyone but the bloody media. Don't give them this number or my cell number."

"Gotcha."

"See you later." Stone hung up and wondered what to do next. He and his clothes were already clean, so he didn't need to bathe and dress. He called Dino.

"Bacchetti."

"It's Stone."

"Where the hell have you been?"

"I'll tell you, but you're not going to believe me."

"Try me."

"I was sailing late yesterday afternoon, when I encountered a fog bank-couldn't see a thing."

"Let me guess-you were run down by a beautiful yacht sailed by a beautiful woman who rescued you and nursed you back to health."

"That's pretty much what happened."

"You're kidding. I made that up."

"You must be psychic. The owner of the yacht is Dr. Paul Carlsson, of the Carlsson Clinic-and his daughter."

"What happened to your yacht?"

"She lies in a watery grave at the bottom of Penobscot Bay."

"That's sad-pretty boat."

"Listen, can you still hijack that police helicopter whenever you like?"

"Whenever I like, sometimes."

"Why don't you do that this afternoon and get them to drop you here? Weekend's coming up, and it's nice and cool here."

"Put me down for a yes. I'll check with Viv and confirm, if you'll hang on for a moment." He put Stone on hold, then came back. "I talked her into it, and the chopper's available. We'll aim for five o'clock."

"I'll meet you at the airstrip. The Carlssons are coming to dinner. They're nice folks."

"We'll look forward to it. Bye." Dino hung up.

Stone told Mary to order more lobsters.

Stone stood by the lovely old 1938 Ford station wagon that was the house car and watched the NYPD

helicopter settle onto the runway. The copilot got out and dumped the Bacchettis's luggage onto the tarmac, then got back in and the chopper lifted off and turned southwest, toward New York.

Stone kissed Viv, shook Dino's hand, and the three of them loaded the bags into the wagon. As they drove away, another helicopter, one Stone recognized from a charter service at Rockland airport, set down on the runway. He didn't see who got out.

"I hear Paul Carlsson is coming to dinner," Viv said. "I met him at some event last year. He was charming, and he has a charming daughter, too."

"They're both coming," Stone said.

"It's about time. You've been without female companionship for too long."

"You're not going to get an argument from me about that."

3

Erik Macher marched himself into the late Christian St. Clair's library/office, which was undergoing the final touches of repair, and sat down at a leather-topped library table already occupied by four serious-looking men.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Macher said, careful to speak respectfully.

The four nodded and mumbled something. They were the chairman of the board, two directors, and the corporate counsel of St. Clair Enterprises, and Macher was there to let them know, as gently as possible, that he would be running things from now on. Their agreement was crucial to him.

"I assume you all received the documents I sent you."

They all nodded.

"And I assume you read Mr. St. Clair's will, which was prepared by the law firm of Mr. Berenson, our corporate counsel."

"That is so," Berenson said, "and it was signed and witnessed in my presence." The others merely nodded.

"Mr. Berenson, was I a party to drawing up the will, and did I discuss it at any time with you or any of your people?"

"No, and no," Berenson replied. "I am satisfied that the will is authentic and correctly represents the wishes of Mr. St. Clair."

"Thank you," Macher said. "Do any of you have any questions about the preparation and intent of the will?"

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