

FIRST GRAVE ON THE RIGHT

DARYNDA JONES



First Grave *on the Right*



Darynda Jones

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For Annette.

My beautiful sister.

You are like sunshine:

bright,

incandescent,

and oddly irritating at times.

But what else are sisters for?

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And to Mom. Hope your trip up was magical. May your hips always sway to Tom Jones. Say hey to Dad for us.

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Chapter One

Better to see dead than be dead.

—CHARLOTTE JEAN DAVIDSON, GRIM REAPER

I'd been having the same dream for the past month—the one where a dark stranger materialized out of smoke and shadows to play doctor with me. I was starting to wonder if repetitive exposure to nightmarish hallucinations resulting in earth-shattering climaxes could have any long-term side effects. Death with extreme pleasure was a serious concern. The prospect led to the following dilemma: Do I seek help or buy drinks all around?

This night was no exception. I was having a killer dream that featured a set of capable hands, a hot mouth, and a creative employment of lederhosen when two external forces tried to lure me out of it. I did my darnedest to resist, but they were fairly persistent external forces. First, a frosty chill crept up my ankle, the icy caress jolting me out of my red-hot dream. I shivered and kicked out, unwilling to acknowledge the summons, then tucked my leg into the thick folds of my Bugs Bunny comforter.

Second, a soft but persistent melody played in the periphery of my consciousness like a familiar song I couldn't quite place. After a moment, I realized it was the cricketlike chime of my new phone.

With a heavy sigh, I pried open my eyes just enough to focus on the numbers glowing atop my nightstand. It was 4:34 A.M. What kind of sadist called another human being at 4:34 in the morning?

A throat cleared at the foot of my bed. I turned my attention to the dead guy standing there, then lowered my lids and asked in a gravelly voice, "Can you get that?"

He hesitated. "Um, the phone?"

"Mmm."

"Well, I'm kind of—"

"Never mind." I reached for the phone and grimaced as a jolt of pain ripped through me, reminding me I'd been beaten senseless the night before.

Dead Guy cleared his throat again.

"Hello," I croaked.

It was my uncle Bob. He bombarded me with words, of all things, apparently clueless to the fact that predawn hours rendered me incapable of coherent thought. I concentrated super duper hard on concentrating and made out three salient phrases: *busy night, two homicides, ass down here*. I eventually managed a reply, something resembling, "What twirly nugget are you from?"

He sighed, clearly annoyed, then hung up.

I hung up back, pressing a button on my new phone that either disconnected the call or speed-dialed the Chinese takeout around the corner. Then I tried to sit up. Similar to the coherent-thought problem

this was easier said than done. While I normally weighed around 125 ... ish, for some unexplainable reason, between the hours of partially awake and fully awake, I weighed a solid 470.

After a brief, beached whale–like struggle, I gave up. The quart of Chunky Monkey I ate after getting my ass kicked had probably been a bad idea.

In too much pain to stretch, I let a lengthy yawn overtake me instead, winced at the soreness shooting through my jaw, then looked back at Dead Guy. He was blurry. Not because he was dead, but because it was 4:34 A.M. And I'd recently had my ass kicked.

“Hi,” he said nervously. He had a wrinkled suit, round-rimmed glasses, and mussed hair that made him look part young-wizard-we-all-know-and-love and part mad scientist. He also had two bullet holes on the side of his head with blood streaking down his right temple and cheek. None of the details were a problem. The problem resided in the fact that he was in my bedroom. In the wee hours of dawn. Standing over me like a dead Peeping Tom.

I eyed him with my infamous death stare, second only to my infamous fluster stare, and got no response immediately.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, stumbling over his words, “didn't mean to frighten you.”

Did I look frightened? Clearly my death stare needed work.

Ignoring him, I inched out of bed. I had on a Scorpions hockey jersey I'd snatched off a goalie and a pair of plaid boxers—same team, different position. Chihuahuas, tequila, and strip poker. A night that is forever etched at the top of my Things I'll Never Do Again list.

With teeth clenched in agony, I dragged all 470 throbbing pounds toward the kitchen and, more important, the coffeepot. Caffeine would chisel the pounds off, and I'd be back to my normal weight in no time.

Because my apartment was roughly the size of a Cheez-It, it didn't take me long to feel my way through the kitchen in the dark. Dead Guy followed me. They always follow me. I could only pray this one would keep his mouth shut long enough for the caffeine to kick in, but alas, no such luck.

I'd barely pressed the ON button when he started in.

“Um, yeah,” he said from the doorway, “it's just that I was murdered yesterday, and I was told you guys were the one to see.”

“You were told that, huh?” Maybe if I hovered over the pot, it would develop an inferiority complex and brew faster just to prove it could.

“This kid told me you solve crimes.”

“He did, huh?”

“You're Charley Davidson, right?”

“That's me.”

“Are you a cop?”

“Not especially.”

“A sheriff's deputy?”

“Uh-uh.”

“A meter maid?”

“Look,” I said, turning to him at last, “no offense, but you could have died thirty years ago, for all I know. Dead people have no sense of time. Zero. Zip. *Nada*.”

“Yesterday, October eighteenth, five thirty-two P.M., double gunshot wound to the head, resulting in a traumatic brain injury and death.”

“Oh,” I said, reining in my skepticism. “Well, I’m not a cop.” I turned back to the pot, determined to break its iron will with my infamous death stare, second only to—

“So, then, what are you?”

I wondered if *your worst nightmare* would sound silly. “I’m a private investigator. I hunt down adulterers and lost dogs. I do not solve murder cases.” I did, actually, but he didn’t need to know that. I’d just come off a big case. I was hoping for a few days’ respite.

“But this kid—”

“Angel,” I said, disappointed that I didn’t exorcise that little devil when I had the chance.

“He was an angel?”

“No, his name is Angel.”

“His name is Angel?”

“Yes. Why?” I asked, becoming disenchanted with the Angel game.

“I just thought it might have been his occupation.”

“It’s his name. And believe you me, he is anything but.”

After a geological epoch passed in which single-celled organisms evolved into talk show hosts, Mars was still holding out on me. Coffee was still holding out on me. I gave up and decided to pee instead.

Dead Guy followed me. They always—

“You’re very ... bright,” he said.

“Um, thanks.”

“And ... sparkly.”

“Uh-huh.” This was nothing new. From what I’d been told, the departed see me as something of a beacon, a brilliant entity—emphasis on the *brilliant*—they can see from continents away. The closer they get, the sparklier I become. If *sparklier* is a word. I’ve always considered the sparkles a plus, being the only grim reaper this side of Mars. And as such, my job was to lead people into the light. Aka, the portal. Aka, me. But it didn’t always go smoothly. Kind of like leading a horse to water and whatnot. “By the way,” I said, glancing over my shoulder, “if you do see an angel, a real one, run. Quickly. In the opposite direction.” Not really, but freaking people out was fun.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. Hey—” I stopped and twirled to face him. “—did you touch me?” Somebody practical had molested my right ankle, somebody cold, and since he’d been the only dead guy in the room ...

“What?” he said, indignant.

“Earlier, when I was in bed.”

“Pffft, no.”

I narrowed my eyes, let my gaze linger menacingly, then resumed my hobble to the bathroom.

I needed a shower. Bad. And I couldn't dillydally all day. Uncle Bob would stroke.

But as I stepped toward the bathroom, I realized the worst part of my morning—the *let there be light* part—was fast approaching. I groaned and considered dillydallying despite the state of Uncle Bob's arteries.

Just suck it up, I told myself. It had to be done.

I placed a shaky hand on the wall, held my breath, and flipped the switch.

“I'm blind!” I yelled, shielding my eyes with my arms. I tried to focus on the floor, the sink, the Clorox ToiletWand. Nothing but a bright white blur.

I totally needed to lower my wattage.

I stumbled back, caught myself, then forced one foot in front of the other, refusing to back down. I would not be stopped by a lightbulb. I had a job to do, dammit.

“Did you know you have a dead guy in your living room?” he asked.

I turned back to the dead guy, then glanced across the room to where Mr. Wong stood, his back to me, his nose buried in the corner. Looking back at dead guy number one, I asked, “Isn't that a bit like the pot calling the kettle African-American?”

Mr. Wong was a dead guy, too. A teeny-tiny one. He couldn't have been more than five feet tall, and he was gray—all of him, almost monochrome in his translucence, with a gray uniform of some sort and ash gray hair and skin. He looked like a Chinese prisoner of war. And he stood in my corner day after day, year after year. Never moving, never speaking. Though I could hardly blame him for not getting out more with his coloring and all, even I thought Mr. Wong was a nut job.

Of course, the mere fact that I had a ghost in the corner wasn't the creepiest part, and the moment Dead Guy realized Mr. Wong wasn't actually *standing* in the corner, but was hovering, toes several inches from the floor, he'd freak.

I lived for such moments.

“Good morning, Mr. Wong!” I semi-shouted. I wasn't sure if Mr. Wong could hear. Probably a good thing, since I had no idea what his real name was. I just named him Mr. Wong in the interim. Between creepy dead guy in the corner and normal walking-around dead guy he would someday become if I had anything to say about it. Even dead people needed a healthy sense of well-being.

“Is he in time-out?”

Good question. “I have no idea why he's in that corner. Been there since I rented the apartment.”

“You rented the apartment with a dead guy in the corner?”

I shrugged. “I wanted the apartment, and I figured I could cover him up with a bookcase or something. But the thought of having a dead guy hovering behind my copy of *Sweet Savage Love* gnawed at me. I couldn't just leave him there. I don't even know if he likes romance.”

I looked back at the newest incorporeal being to grace me with his presence. “What’s your name anyway?”

“Oh, how rude of me,” he said, straightening and walking forward for a handshake. “I’m Patrick Sussman. The Third.” He stopped short and eyed his hand, then glanced back up sheepishly. “I don’t guess we can actually—”

I took his hand in a firm shake. “Actually, Patrick, Patrick Sussman the Third, we can.”

His brows drew together. “I don’t understand.”

“Yeah, well,” I said, going into the bathroom, “join the club.”

As I closed the door, I heard Patrick Sussman III freak out at last.

“Oh, my god. He’s just ... hovering.”

It’s the simple things in life, and all that crap.

* * *

The shower felt like heaven covered in warm chocolate syrup. Steam and water rushed over me as it inventoried each muscle, adding a mental asterisk if it ached.

My left biceps definitely needed an asterisk, which made sense. The asshole in the bar last night wrenched my arm with the apparent intention of ripping it off. Sometimes being a private investigator meant dealing with society’s less-than-savory characters, like a client’s abusive husband.

Next, I checked my entire right side. Yep, it ached. Asterisk. Probably happened when I fell against the jukebox. Stealth and grace, I ain’t.

Left hip, asterisk. No idea.

Left forearm, double asterisks. Most likely when I blocked asshole’s punch.

And then, of course, my left cheek and jaw, quadruple asterisks, where my block proved utterly useless. Asshole was simply too strong and too fast, and the punch had been too unexpected. I went down like a drunken cowgirl trying to line dance to Metallica.

Embarrassing? Yes. But strangely enlightening as well. I’d never been KO’d before. I thought it would hurt more. Somehow, when you’re knocked senseless, the pain doesn’t show up till later. The asshole is a cold, heartless bitch.

Still, I’d made it through the night with no permanent damage. Always a good thing.

As I tried to work some of the soreness out of my neck, my thoughts turned to the dream I’d had the same dream I’d been having every night for a month. And it was proving harder and harder to vanquish the remnants after I woke, the lingering touches, the fog of hunger. Every night in my dreams, a man appeared from the darkest recesses of my mind, as if he’d been waiting for me to fall asleep. His mouth, full, masculine, would sear my flesh. His tongue, like flames across my skin, would send tiny sparks quaking through my body. Then he would dip south, and the heavens would open and a chorus singing hallelujah would ring out in perfect harmony.

At first the dreams started small. A touch. A kiss light as air. A smile I could see only in the

periphery of negative space, finding beauty where I'd never expected. Then the dreams developed and became stronger and frighteningly intense. For the first time in my life, I'd actually climaxed in my sleep. And not just once. In the last month, I'd come often, on more nights than not, in fact. All at the hands—and other body parts—of a dream lover I couldn't see, not fully. Yet I knew he was the epitome of sensuality, of male magnetism and allure. And I knew also that he reminded me of someone.

I figured my dreams were being invaded, but by whom? I've had the ability to see the departed all my life. I had been born a grim reaper, after all. *The grim reaper*, though I didn't discover *that* little jewel until I was in high school. Even so, the departed have never been able to enter my dreams, make me quake and quiver and, I admit, beg.

As far as my ability goes, there's nothing particularly special about it. The departed exist on one plane, and the human race exists on another, and somehow—whether by freak accident, divine intervention, or psychological disorder—I exist on both. A perk, I suppose, of grim reaperism. But it's all quite simple. No trances. No crystal balls. No channel surfing the dead from one plane to the next. Just a girl, a few ghosts, and the entire human race. What could be easier?

And yet, he was something more, something ... not dead. At least he seemed that way. The person in my dreams radiated heat. Dead people are cold, just like in the movies. Their presence will fog your breath, make you shiver, stand your hair on end. But the man in my dreams, the dark, seductive stranger I'd become addicted to, was a furnace. He was like the scalding water rushing over me, sensual and painful and everywhere at once.

And the dreams were so real, the feelings and responses his touch evoked so vivid. I could almost feel him now, his hands sliding up my thighs, as if he were in the shower with me at that very moment. I could feel his palms rest on my hips and the length of his hard body press against my backside. I reached behind me, ran my fingers along his steel buttocks as he pulled me onto him. His muscles contracted and released underneath my touch, like the tide's flow and ebb under the sway of the moon. When I forced a hand between us, slid it down his abdomen to encircle his erection, he hissed in a breath of pleasure and hugged me to him.

I felt his mouth at my ear, his breath fan over my cheek. We had never spoken. The heat and intensity of the dreams left little room for conversation.

But for the first time, I heard a whispered utterance, faint and almost imperceptible. "Dutch."

My heartbeats skyrocketed, and I jerked to attention, glancing around the shower, searching for ghosts in cracks and crevices. Nothing. Had I fallen asleep? In the shower? I couldn't have. I was still standing. Barely. I clutched the shower valves to keep myself upright, wondering what in the crazy afterlife had just happened.

After steadying myself, I turned off the water and grabbed a towel. *Dutch*. I'd distinctly heard the word *Dutch*.

Only one person on Earth had ever called me Dutch, once, a very long time ago.

Chapter Two

So many dead people, so little time.

—CHARLOTTE JEAN DAVIDSON

Still reeling from the potential identity of Dream Guy, I wrapped myself in the towel and slid open the shower curtain. Sussman poked his head through the door, and my heart took a belly dive into the shallow end of shock, cutting itself on the jagged nerve endings there.

I jumped, then placed a calming hand over my heart, annoyed that I was still so easily surprised. A thousand times as many times as I've seen dead people appear out of nowhere, you'd think I'd be used to it.

"Holy crap, Sussman. I wish you guys would learn to knock."

"Incorporeal being," he said, giving attitude.

I stepped out of the shower and grabbed a squirt bottle from my vanity. "You set one foot in the bathroom, and I will melt your face with my transcendental pest repellent."

His eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"No," I said, my shoulders deflating. I had a really hard time lying to the departed. "It's just water. But don't tell Mr. Habersham, the dead guy in 2B. This bottle is the only thing that keeps that dirty old man out of my bathroom."

Sussman's brows arched as he scanned my lack of attire. "Can't say that I blame him."

I glowered and swung open the door, pulling it through his face and disorienting him. He put one hand on his forehead and one on the doorjamb to ride out the dizzy spell. Newbies were so easy. After giving him a second to get his bearings, I pointed to the sign tacked on the outside of my bathroom door.

"Memorize it," I ordered, then slammed the door shut again.

" 'No dead people beyond this door,' " he read aloud from beyond the door. " 'And, yes, if you suddenly have the ability to walk through walls, you're dead. You're not lying somewhere in a drainage ditch waiting to wake up. Get over it, and stay the hell out of my bathroom.' " He stuck his head through the door again. "That's a bit harsh, don't you think?"

My sign may have seemed a tad brutal to the untrained eye, but it usually got my message across. Unless it was Mr. Habersham. Him I had to threaten. Often.

Even with the sign, I tended to wash my hair as if the apartment were on fire. Dead people standing in the shower with me after the rinse cycle was a bit much. You're never quite the same after a shotgun-blast-to-the-head pops in for tea and a sauna.

I pointed a sharp index finger. "Out!" I ordered, then turned back to the quandary that was my bruised and swollen face.

Applying foundation after you've been knocked on your ass was more of an art than a science. required patience. And layers. But after the third layer, I ran out of patience and washed my face of the whole matter. Seriously, who was going to see me this early in the morning? By the time I pulled my chocolate brown hair into a ponytail, I almost had myself convinced that bruises and black eyes added a certain je ne sais quoi to my appearance. A little concealer, a little lipstick, and voilà, I was ready for the world. The question remained, however, Was the world ready for me?

I stepped out of the bathroom in a plain white button-down and jeans, hoping the generous expanse of bosom I carried would help me achieve a solid 9.2 on a scale of 10. I had breasts aplenty. Just in case, I undid the top button to show more cleavage. Maybe no one would notice the fact that my face resembled a topographical map of North America.

“Wow,” Sussman said, “you look hot even with the slight disfigurement.”

I stopped and turned toward him. “What did you say?”

“Um, you look hot?”

“Let me ask you something,” I said, easing closer. He took a wary step back. “When you were alive, like, five minutes ago, would you have told some chick you'd just met that she looked hot?”

He thought about that a moment, then answered, “No. My wife would divorce me.”

“Then why is it the moment you guys die, you think you can say whatever you want to whomever you want?”

He thought about that a moment, too. “Because my wife can't hear me?” he offered.

I stabbed him with the full power of my death stare, likely blinding him for all eternity. Then I grabbed my handbag and keys. Just before I shut off the lights, I turned back and said with a win. “Thanks for the compliment.”

He smiled and followed me out the door.

* * *

Apparently, I wasn't as hot as Sussman thought. I was freezing, in fact. And, naturally, I'd forgotten my jacket. Too lazy to go back for it, I hurried into my cherry red Jeep Wrangler. Her name was Misery, in homage to the master of horror and all things creepy. Sussman oozed into the passenger seat.

“The grim reaper, huh?” he asked as I clicked my seat belt.

“Yep.” I hadn't realized he knew my job title. He and Angel must have had quite the talk. I turned the key, and Misery purred to life around me. Thirty-seven more payments, and this baby was a mine.

“You don't look like the grim reaper.”

“You've met him, have you?”

“Well, no, not really,” he said.

“My robe's at the cleaners.”

That got a sheepish chuckle. “And your scythe?”

I shot him an evil grin and turned on the heater. “Speaking of crimes,” I said, changing the subject

“did you happen to see the shooter?”

“Neither hide nor hair.”

“So ... no.”

He slid his glasses up with an index finger. “No. I didn’t see anyone.”

“Darn. That doesn’t help.” I turned left onto Central. “Do you know where you are? Where your body is? We’re headed downtown. This might be you.”

“No, I had just pulled into my drive. My wife and I live in the Heights.”

“So, you’re married?”

“Five years,” he said, a sadness permeating his voice. “Two kids. Girls. Four and eighteen months

I hated that part. The people-left-behind part. “I’m so sorry.”

He looked at me with *that* expression, that you-can-see-dead-people-so-you-must-have-all-the-answers expression of so many who’d come before him. He was about to be very disappointed.

“It’s going to be hard on them, isn’t it?” he asked, surprising me with the direction of his thoughts

“Yes, it will be,” I answered honestly. “And your wife will scream and cry and go through depression from hell. Then she’ll find a strength she never knew she had.” I looked directly at him

“And she’ll live. For the girls, she’ll live.”

That seemed to satisfy him for the moment. He nodded and stared out the window. We drove the rest of the way downtown in silence, which gave me unwanted time to think about dream lover. If I was right, his name was Reyes. I had no idea if Reyes was his last name or his first, or where he was from, or where he was now, or any other thing about him, for that matter. But I knew his name was Reyes, and I knew he was beautiful. Unfortunately, he was also dangerous. The one and only time I met him was years ago, when we were both in our teens. Our one encounter was full of threats and tension and skin and his lips so close to mine, I could almost taste him. I never saw him again.

“There it is,” Sussman said, dragging me from my thoughts.

He’d spotted the crime scene several blocks away. Red and blue lights undulated along buildings pulsing through the pitch black morning. As we drove closer, the bright spotlights set up for the investigators lit up half a city block. It looked like the sun had risen in that one spot alone. I saw Uncle Bob’s SUV and pulled into a hotel parking lot nearby.

Before we got out, I turned to Sussman. “Hey, you didn’t happen to see anyone in my apartment did you?”

“You mean, besides Mr. Wong?”

“Yeah. You know, like, a guy?”

“No. Was somebody else there?”

“Nah, forget it.”

I had yet to figure out how Reyes did the magic shower trick. Unless I had the uncanny ability

sleep standing up, he could do more than just enter my dreams.

After I got out—and Sussman more or less fell out—I looked for Uncle Bob. He stood about forty yards away, a spotlight casting an eerie glow around him as he gave me the evil eye. He's not even Italian. I'm not sure that's legal.

Uncle Bob, or Ubie as I liked to call him—though rarely to his face—is my dad's brother and detective for the Albuquerque Police Department. I guess he got a life sentence, because my dad was a cop, too, but he retired years ago and bought a bar on Central. My apartment building sits directly behind it. I make a little extra cash occasionally tending bar for him, which brings my current job count to 3.7. I'm a private investigator when I have clients, a bartender when my dad needs me, and technically, I'm on the APD payroll as well. On paper, I'm a consultant. Probably because it sounds important. In real life, I'm the secret to Uncle Bob's success, just as I was for my dad when he worked for the APD. My ability rocketed them through promotion after promotion until they both became detectives. It's amazing how easy it is to solve crimes when you can ask the victims who did it.

The .7 stemmed from my illustrious career as the grim reaper. While it does take up a significant amount of my time, I never profit from that part of my life. So, I'm still undecided as to whether or not I should call it a job.

We walked under the police tape at exactly five thirtyish. Uncle Bob was livid but surprisingly stroke-free.

"It's almost six," he said, tapping his watch.

That'd teach me.

He wore the same brown suit as the day before, but his jaw was clean shaved, his mustache neatly combed, and he smelled like medium-priced cologne. He pinched my chin and maneuvered my face to get a good look at the bruises.

"It's much closer to five thirty," I argued.

"I called you over an hour ago. And you need to learn to duck."

"You called me at four thirty-four," I said, swiping at his hand. "I hate four thirty-four. I think four thirty-four should be banned and replaced with something more reasonable, like, say, nine twelve."

Uncle Bob released a long breath and popped the rubber band at his wrist. He'd told me it was part of his anger management program, but how the infliction of pain could possibly help control anger was beyond me. Still, I was always willing to help a surly relative in need.

I leaned into him. "I could Taser you if you think it'll help."

He slid me the evil eye again, but he did it with a grin, and that made me happy.

Apparently, the supervisor for the Office of the Medical Investigator had already done his part, so we could walk onto the crime scene. As we did, I ignored the plethora of sideways glances directed my way. The other officers have never understood how I do what I do, how I solve cases so fast, and they look at me with wary suspicion. I guess I can't blame them. Wait a minute. Yes, I can.

Just then I noticed Garrett Swopes, aka pain-in-the-ass skiptracer, standing over the body. I rolled

my eyes so far back into my head, I almost seized. Not that Garrett wasn't good at his job. He studied under the legendary Frank M. Ahearn, probably the most famous skiptracer in the world. From what I'd heard, thanks to Mr. Ahearn, Garrett could find Hoffa if he put his mind to it.

He was also easy on the retinas. He had short black hair, wide shoulders, skin like Mayan chocolate and smoky gray eyes that could capture a girl's soul if she stared into them long enough.

Thank God I had the attention span of a gnat.

If I had to guess, I would say he was only half African-American. The lighter skin tone and gray eyes screamed hybrid. I just didn't know if his other half was Latino or Anglo. Either way, he had a confident walk and easy smile that turned heads wherever we went. So, looks were certainly not an area he needed to work on.

No, Garrett was a consummate pain in the ass for other reasons. As I stepped into the light, he looked at the bruises on my jaw and smirked. "Blind date?"

I did that thing where you scratch your eyebrow and flip someone off at the same time. I'm good at multitasking like that. Garrett just smirked. Again.

Okay, it wasn't his fault he was an ass. He used to like me until Uncle Bob, in a drunken stupor, told him *our little secret*. Naturally, he didn't believe a word of it. Who would? That was about a month ago, and our friendship took a nosedive from barely there to nonexistent. He's pretty much slotted me for the loony bin. And Uncle Bob, too, for believing I can actually see the departed. Some people have no imagination.

"What are you doing here, Swopes?" I asked, a little more than annoyed that I had to deal with him.

"I thought this might be one of my skips."

"Is it?"

"Not unless meth heads wear three-piece suits and fifteen-hundred-dollar Crisci loafers."

"That's too bad. I'm sure it's much easier to collect your fee when the skip is dead."

Garrett shrugged, semi-agreeing.

"Actually," Uncle Bob said, "I asked him to stick around, you know, for an extra set of eyes."

I was doing my darnedest to keep my own eyes off the body—dead people I could handle, dead bodies not so much—but a movement in my periphery had me zeroing in on that very thing.

"So, are you getting anything?" Uncle Bob asked—he still thinks I'm psychic—but I was too busy staring at the dead guy in the dead body to answer.

I inched over and nudged the body with my foot. "Dude, what are you still doing in there?"

The dead guy looked at me with wide eyes. "I can't move my legs."

I snorted. "You can't move your arms either, or your feet or your freaking eyelids. You're dead."

"Jesus H.," Garrett said through clenched teeth.

"Look." I turned to face him head-on. "You play on your side of the sandbox, and I'll play on mine. *Comprende?*"

"I'm not dead."

I turned back. “Hon, you’re as dead as my great-aunt Lillian, and trust me, that woman is now in a perpetual state of decomposition.”

“No, I’m not. I’m not dead. Why isn’t anyone trying to revive me?”

“Um, because you’re dead?”

I heard Garrett mutter something under his breath, then stalk off. Nonbelievers were such dramatic queens.

“Okay, fine, if I’m dead, how am I talking to you? And why are you so sparkly?”

“It’s a long story. Just trust me, mister, you’re dead.”

Just then, Sergeant Dwight walked up, all crisp and formal looking in his APD uniform and military buzz. “Ms. Davidson, did you just kick that dead body?”

“For heaven’s sake, I’m not dead!”

“No.”

Sergeant Dwight tried his hand at a death stare. I tried not to giggle.

“I got this, Sergeant,” Uncle Bob said.

The sarge turned to him, and they eyed each other a full minute before he spoke. “Would you mind not contaminating my crime scene with your relatives?”

“*Your* crime scene?” Uncle Bob asked. A vein in his temple started pulsing.

I considered popping the rubber band at his wrist, but I still had doubts as to its efficacy. “Hello Uncle Bob,” I said, patting his arm, “let’s go over here and talk, shall we?”

I turned and left without waiting, hoping Uncle Bob would follow. He did. We strolled past the spotlights to a tree and assumed innocuous conversational positions. I tossed a smile to Sergeant Dwight Yokel that leaned heavily toward smart-ass. I think he growled. Good thing I wasn’t into people-pleasing.

“Well?” Uncle Bob asked as Garrett reluctantly rejoined us.

“I don’t know. He won’t get out of his body.”

“He what?” Garrett raked a hand through his hair. “This is classic.”

I ignored him and watched as Sussman walked over to a third dead person on the scene, a striking woman with blond hair and a fire engine red skirt suit. She screamed femininity and power. I liked her instantly. Sussman shook her hand. Then they both turned to look at the only dead person present lying in a pool of his own blood.

“I think they know each other,” I said.

“Who?” Uncle Bob asked, glancing around as if he could see them.

“You got an ID on this guy?”

“Yeah.” He fished out his notebook, reminding me I needed to dash into Staples. All my little notebooks were filled to maximum capacity. As a result, I kept writing pertinent information on my hand, then accidentally washing it off. “Jason Barber. A lawyer at—”

“Sussman, Ellery, and Barber,” Sussman said in unison with Uncle Bob.

“You’re a lawyer?” I asked him.

“Sure am. And this is my partner, Elizabeth Ellery.”

“Hey, Elizabeth,” I said, reaching out to shake her hand. Garrett pinched the rim of his nose.

“Ms. Davidson, Patrick told me you can see us.”

“Yep.”

“How—?”

“Long story. But first,” I said, heading off the barrage of questions, “let me get this straight: You are all three partners at the same law firm, and you all three died last night?”

“Who else died last night?” Uncle Bob asked, tearing through his notebook.

“We were all three *murdered* last night,” Sussman corrected. “All nine-millimeter double taps the head.”

Elizabeth raised her perfectly arched brows at him. “Double taps?”

He smiled sheepishly and tried to kick the dirt at his feet. “I heard the cops talking.”

“I only got two homicides.”

I looked up at Uncle Bob. “You have only two homicides from last night? There were three.”

Garrett went still, probably wondering what I was up to, how I could know any such thing since I couldn’t possibly see dead people, so dead people couldn’t possibly tell me they were dead. It just wasn’t possible.

Uncle Bob studied his notebook. “We got a Patrick Sussman found outside his home in the Mountain Run area, and this guy, a Jason Barber.”

“Okay, here with us now is Patrick Sussman ... *the Third*,” I said, tossing Sussman a grin, “and Jason Barber. But he’s in denial right now.” I looked over as the coroner zipped the body bag.

“Help!” Barber yelled, squirming like a worm in a frying pan, “I can’t breathe!”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” I whispered loudly. “Would you just get up?”

“And?” Uncle Bob asked.

“Elizabeth Ellery was killed, too,” I said, hating to do it with her standing right there. It just felt awkward.

Garrett was now eyeing me with open hostility. Anger was a common emotion when faced with something impossible to believe. But quite honestly, fuck him.

“Elizabeth Ellery? We don’t have an Elizabeth Ellery.”

Elizabeth was studying Garrett. “This guy seems a little upset.”

I nodded my head. “He doesn’t believe I can see you guys. It’s upsetting him that I’m talking to you.”

“That’s too bad. He’s—” She inclined her head to study his backside. “—nice looking.”

I chuckled, and we did a discreet high five, making Garrett even more uncomfortable. “Do you know where your body is?” I asked her.

“Yes. I was going to visit my sister near Indian School and Chelwood. I had a present for m

nephew. I missed his birthday party,” she added sadly, as if realizing at that moment that she would miss all the rest as well. “I heard the kids playing in the backyard and decided to sneak up to surprise them. That’s the last thing I remember.”

“So you didn’t see the shooter either?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“Did you hear anything? If you were shot, surely—”

“I don’t remember.”

“He used a silencer,” Sussman said. “It sounded weird, muffled, like a door slamming.”

“The shooter used a suppressor,” I relayed to Uncle Bob. “And neither of these two saw who did it.”

“Where is your body, exactly?” I asked Elizabeth. As she told me, I repeated the address to Uncle Bob.

“She’s around the side of the house. There are lots of bushes, which could explain why no one had found her.”

“What does she look like?” Uncle Bob asked.

“Um, Caucasian, about five-ten,” I said, calculating her height minus the three-inch heels.

“Hey, you’re good,” she said.

I grinned appreciatively. “Blond hair, blue eyes, a light birthmark on her right temple.”

She wiped at her temple self-consciously. “I think that’s blood.”

“Oh, sorry. The coloring is sometimes a bit hazy.” I pointed helpfully to Uncle Bob’s notebook.

“Scratch that birthmark.” Then I looked up at him. “She should pretty much be the only dead person there in a red designer skirt suit and stilettos.”

Garrett almost snarled at me. “Get in my truck,” he ordered through his teeth, “and bring the dead chick with you.” He said the last bit sarcastically.

I turned back to Uncle Bob. “Are you going to let him talk to me that way?”

Uncle Bob shrugged. “He does have a mean apprehension record.”

“Fine,” I said in a huff. Not that I couldn’t handle Garrett. I just wanted to complain. Before leaving, however, I had to deal with Barber. Elizabeth, Sussman, and I strolled over to the ambulance as the coroner was talking to Sergeant Dwight. Barber’s nose was peeking out of the body bag. “Dude, I’m not kidding—you have to get out of your body. It’s freaking me out.”

He leaned up just enough for me to see his face. “It’s my body, dammit. I know the law, and my possession is nine-tenths of it. And as for you,” he said, pointing a finger out of the bag, “aren’t you supposed to be here for us? To aid us in our time of need? Isn’t that what you do?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“Well, I have two words for you: compassion fatigue,” he said, his voice accusatory.

I turned to Sussman and sighed. “Nobody appreciates my inability to appreciate their situation. Could you please talk some sense into him?”

Garrett stood by his truck, stewing over the fact that I hadn’t followed him to it like a groveling puppy.

“Davidson!” he yelled over the hood.

“Swopes!” I volleyed, mocking the long-standing tradition of referring to comrades by their last names. I looked back at my lawyers. “Meet us at my office later.”

Sussman nodded, then glared at Mr. I’m Not Dead as a Doornail in August.

Elizabeth walked beside me to Garrett’s truck. “Can I sit beside the hunk?”

I graced her with the biggest smile I could conjure. “He’s all yours.”

Chapter Three

Never knock on death's door.
Ring the doorbell then run. He totally hates that.

—T-SHIRT

Garrett broke a cold pack, shook it, then tossed it to me as he swerved onto Central. “Your face lopsided.”

“I was hoping nobody would notice.” I winked at Elizabeth, who sat between us, a fact I neglected to mention to Garrett. Some things were better left unsaid.

Garrett turned an irritated gaze on me. “You thought nobody would notice? You pretty much live in your own little fucked-up reality, don't you?”

“Damn,” Elizabeth said, “he doesn't pull any punches.”

“You pretty much annoy me and thus can kiss my ass,” I said. To Garrett, not Elizabeth.

There's a certain responsibility that comes with having a name like Charley Davidson. It brooks no opposition. It takes shit from no one. And it lends a sense of familiarity when I meet clients. They feel like they know me already. Sort of like if my name were Martha Washington or Ted Bundy.

I looked in the side mirror at the black-and-white following us to the address where Detective Robert Davidson, from an anonymous tip, believed there might be another victim. Uncle Bob got lots of anonymous tips. Garrett was starting to put it all together.

“So, you're his omnipotent anonymous source?”

I gasped. “Do you kiss your mother with that mouth? Though I do like the *omnipotent* part.” When Garrett just glowered, I answered, “Yes. I'm his anonymous source. Have been since I was five.”

His expression turned incredulous. “Your uncle took you to crime scenes when you were five years old?”

“Don't be ridiculous. Uncle Bob would never have done that. He didn't have to. My dad did.” When Garrett's jaw fell open, I chuckled. “Just kidding. I didn't have to go to crime scenes. The victims always found their way to me without my help. Apparently, I'm bright.”

He turned away and watched the pinks and oranges of the New Mexico sunrise ribbon across the horizon. “You'll have to forgive me if I don't fall for it.”

“Um, no, I don't.”

“Okay,” he said in an exasperated voice, “if this is so real, tell me what my mom was wearing at her funeral.”

Great. One of those. “Look, most likely your mom went elsewhere. You know, into the light,” I said, wiggling my fingers to demonstrate. “Most everyone does. And I don't have the secret decod

ring for that plane of existence. My all-access pass expired years ago.”

He snorted. “That’s convenient.”

“Swopes,” I said, finally gathering the courage to press the cold pack to my cheek. Pain shot through my jaw as I reclined my head against the rest and closed my eyes. “It’s okay. It’s not your fault you’re an asshole. I learned a long time ago not to tell people the truth. Uncle Bob shouldn’t have said anything.” I paused for a response. Receiving none, I continued. “We all have a certain knowledge about how the universe works. And when someone comes along and challenges that knowledge, we don’t know how to deal with it. We aren’t hardwired that way. It’s difficult to question everything you’ve ever thought to be true. So, like I said, it’s not your fault. You can believe me or not, but whichever you choose, you’re the one who has to deal with the consequences. So make your decision wisely, grasshopper,” I added, the nonswollen side of my mouth curving into a grin.

When I didn’t get one of his trademark comebacks, I opened my eyes to see him staring at me. It was through Elizabeth, but still ... We sat idling at a stoplight, and he was using the time to analyze me with his super skiptracer senses. His gray eyes, striking against his dark skin, sparkled in curiosity.

“Green light,” I said to break his spell.

He blinked and pressed the gas pedal.

“I think he likes you,” Elizabeth said.

Since I hadn’t told Garrett she was sitting there, I tossed her an abbreviated version of my dead-end stare. She chuckled.

We drove a few more blocks before Garrett asked the ten-thousand-dollar question: “So who hit you?”

“Told ya,” Elizabeth said.

I ground my teeth and winced as I maneuvered the cold pack lower. “I was working on a case.”

“A case hit you?”

I heard an inkling of the old, non-asshole Garrett. “No, the case’s husband hit me. I was keeping him busy while *the case* boarded a plane to Mexico City.”

“Don’t tell me you got involved in a domestic abuse situation.”

“Okay.”

“You did, didn’t you?”

“Yep.”

“Damn, Davidson, have you learned nothing from me?”

Now it was my turn to stare incredulously. “Dude, you’re the one who taught me what Frank Ahearn taught you on how to teach people how to disappear. Why did you think I needed that information?”

“Not for you to get involved in domestics.”

“My entire client base is domestics. What do you think private investigators do?”

Of course, he was a licensed PI as well and could private investigate circles around me, but I

focused his business on skips. Bond recovery pays well when you're as good as he is. And, actually, had to agree with him on this one. I'd gotten in way over my head. But it all turned out okay in the end.

The case, otherwise known as Rosie Herschel, got my number from a friend of a friend and called me up one night, asking me to come to a Sack-N-Save on the Westside. It was all fairly cloak-and-dagger. To get out of the house, she told her husband they needed milk, and we met in a dark corner of the Sack-N-Save parking lot. The fact that she had to make up an excuse just to leave the house set my nerves on edge. I should have turned tail then, but she was so desperate and so scared and so tired of her husband taking out the fact that he was a certifiable loser on her that I couldn't turn her down. My jaw doesn't compare to the horrific shiner she was sporting the first time I met her. She knew, and I believed it, too, that if she'd tried to leave her husband without help, she would never have seen another birthday.

Since she was originally from Mexico and had relatives there, we cooked up a plan for her to meet her aunt in Mexico City. The two of them would then travel south with a deed and just enough cash to open a small inn, or *posada*, on a beach not far from her grandparents' village.

From what Rosie told me, her husband had never met any of her relatives from Mexico. The chances of him finding the right Gutierrez family in Mexico City were slim to none. But just in case we had new identities drawn up for them both. An adventure in itself.

In the meantime, I sent an anonymous text to Mr. Herschel, pretending to be an admirer and inviting him for drinks at a bar on the Westside. Though I longed for the security of my dad's bar, no way could I risk someone blurting out my real name. So I dropped Rosie at the airport and took her across the Rio Grande. Rosie would have to be there a few hours before her plane departed, but I had a plan to keep Herschel busy for the entire night. I goaded him into hitting me and pressed charges. Not that it was easy. Flirting like a vixen in heat then pulling the emergency brake in such a way that the mark felt like I'd just slapped him took skill. And naturally, a man like Herschel would take great offense to being led on. Throw in a few insults about small penises and a degrading giggle or two, and the fists start flying.

While I could have just gotten him drunk-off-his-ass wasted, then dumped him in an alley somewhere, I couldn't risk him finding Rosie gone until the morning. One night in jail was all we needed. And now she was well on her way to an esteemed career as a *posadera*.

"This is it," Elizabeth said.

"Oh, here," I said, relaying the info to Garrett. "This house on the corner?"

She nodded.

And she was right where she said she'd be. I saw her shoes first, red and sharp and expensive; then I glanced at departed Elizabeth's. Perfect match. That was good enough for me. I strolled back to the porch and plopped down while Garrett and the officer called it in.

While I was busy scolding myself for not examining the body and scouring the crime scene for

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