

# SECOND GRAVE ON THE LEFT

DARYNDA JONES



Second Grave  
*on the Left*



Darynda Jones

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  NEW YORK

For the Mighty, Mighty Jones Boys, Danny, Jerrdan, and Casey.

You are the reason I breathe.

# Acknowledgments

Even in my wildest dreams, I never thought I would get an agent like Alexandra Machinist or an editor like Jennifer Enderlin. I've said this before, but it bears repeating. I'm not sure what I did to deserve you. Maybe it was that stretch as a volunteer at the local nursing home. Or the time I pulled that kid out of a burning building. No, wait, I never pulled a kid out of a burning building.

'Kay, I'm going to keep working on that. In the meantime, thank you so much to Jen, my spectacular editor, and everyone at St. Martin's Press and Macmillan. You guys rock so hard.

To Alexandra, my own personal Superwoman, and everyone at the Linda Chester Literary Agency.

To the wonderful Whitney Lee at the Fielding Agency and the super-savvy Josie Freedman at ICM. Thank you guys so very much.

To the super-talented Liz Bemis at Bemis Promotions. Just, wow.

To my very own Charley Davidson, Danielle Tanner.

To my family—you know who you are—and my friends. Thank you for liking me. Or pretending to like me. I appreciate the effort either way.

To the goddesses of LERA and the Ruby Slipped Sisterhood, my other family.

To Bria Quinlan, Gabi Stephens, and Samira Stephan for help with translations.

To Commander Murray Conrad. Thank you for letting me bug you on a continual basis without arresting me.

And a special thank-you to my readers, especially those readers who stayed up the night before this book was due to give me feedback: Danielle Swopes, Tammy Baumann, and Kit Carson. I totally owe you guys a mocha latte. Or a small island.

# Contents

Title Page  
Dedication  
Acknowledgments

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen  
Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty

Also by Darynda Jones

Copyright

# Chapter One

GRIM REAPERS ARE TO DIE FOR.

—T-SHIRT OFTEN SEEN ON CHARLOTTE JEAN DAVIDSON, GRIM REAPER EXTRAORDINAIRE

“Charley, hurry, wake up.”

Fingers with pointy nails bit into my shoulders, doing their darnedest to vanquish the fog of sleep I’d been marinating in. They shook me hard enough to cause a small earthquake in Oklahoma. Since I lived in New Mexico, this was a problem.

Judging by the quality and pitch of the intruder’s voice, I was fairly certain the person accosting me was my best friend, Cookie. I let an annoyed sigh slip through my lips, resigning myself to the fact that my life was a series of interruptions and demands. Mostly demands. Probably because I was the only grim reaper this side of Mars, the only portal to the other side the departed could cross through. At least, those who hadn’t crossed right after they died and were stuck on Earth. Which was a freaking lot. Having been born the grim reaper, I couldn’t remember a time when dead people weren’t knocking on my door—metaphorically, as dead people rarely knocked—asking for my assistance with some unfinished business. It amazed me how many of the dearly departed forgot to turn off the stove.

For the most part, those who cross through me simply feel they’ve been on Earth long enough. Enter the reaper. Aka, *moi*. The departed can see me from anywhere in the world and can cross to the other side through me. I’ve been told I’m like a beacon as bright as a thousand suns, which would suck for a departed with a martini hangover.

I’m Charlotte Davidson: private investigator, police consultant, all-around badass. Or I could’ve been a badass, had I stuck with those lessons in mixed martial arts. I was only in that class to learn how to kill people with paper. And—oh, yes—let us not forget grim reaper. Admittedly, being the reaper wasn’t all bad. I had a handful of friends I’d kill for—some alive, some not so much—a family of which I was quite grateful some were alive, some not so much, and an *in* with one of the most powerful beings in the universe, Reyes Alexander Farrow, the part-human, part-supermodel son of Satan.

Thus, as the grim reaper, I understood dead people. Their sense of timing pretty much sucked. Not a problem. But this being woken up in the middle of the night by a

living, breathing being who had her nails sharpened regularly at World of Knives was just wrong.

I slapped at the hands like a boy in a girl fight, then continued to slap air when my intruder rushed away to invade my closet. Apparently, in high school, Cookie had been voted Person Most Likely to Die Any Second Now. Despite an overwhelming desire to scowl at her, I couldn't quite muster the courage to pry open my eyes. Harsh light filtered through my lids anyway. I had such a serious wattage issue.

"Charley..."

Then again, maybe *I'd* died. Maybe I'd bit it and was floating haplessly toward the light like in the movies.

"... I'm not kidding..."

I didn't feel particularly floaty, but experience had taught me never to underestimate the inconvenience of death's timing.

"... for real, get up."

I ground my teeth together and used all my energy to anchor myself to Earth. Mustn't ... go into ... the light.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Cookie's voice was muffled now as she rummaged through my personal effects. She was so lucky my killer instincts hadn't kicked in and pummeled her ass to the ground. Left her a bruised and broken woman. Groaning in agony. Twitching occasionally.

"Charley, for heaven's sake!"

Darkness suddenly enveloped me as an article of clothing smacked me in the face. Which was completely uncalled for. "For heaven's sake back," I said in a groggy voice, wrestling the growing pile of clothes off my head. "What are you doing?"

"Getting you dressed."

"I'm already as dressed as I want to be at—" I glanced at the digits glowing atop my nightstand. "—two o'clock in the freaking morning. Seriously?"

"Seriously." She threw something else. Her aim being what it was, the lamp on my nightstand went flying. The lampshade landed at my feet. "Put that on."

"The lampshade?"

But she was gone. It was weird. She rushed out the door, leaving an eerie silence in her wake. The kind that makes one's lids grow heavy, one's breathing rhythmic, deep, and steady.

"Charley!"

I jumped out of my skin at the sound of Cookie's screeching and, having flailed, almost fell out of bed. Man, she had a set of lungs. She'd yelled from her apartment

across the hall.

“You’re going to wake the dead!” I yelled back. I didn’t deal well with the dead at two in the morning. Who did?

“I’m going to do more than that if you don’t get your ass out of bed.”

For a best-friend-slash-neighbor-slash-dirt-cheap-receptionist, Cookie was getting pushy. We’d both moved into our respective apartments across the hall from each other three years ago. I was fresh out of the Peace Corps, and she was fresh out of divorce court with one kid in tow. We were like those people who meet and just seem to know each other. When I opened my PI business, she offered to answer the phone until I could find someone more permanent, and the rest is history. She’s been my slave ever since.

I examined the articles of clothing strewn across my bedroom and lifted a couple in doubt. “Bunny slippers and a leather miniskirt?” I called out to her. “Together? Like an ensemble?”

She stormed back into the room, hands on hips, her cropped black hair sticking every direction but down, and then she glared at me, the same glare my stepmother used to give me when I gave her the Nazi salute. That woman was so touchy about her resemblance to Hitler.

I sighed in annoyance. “Are we going to one of those kinky parties where everyone dresses like stuffed animals? ’Cause those people freak me out.”

She spotted a pair of sweats and hurled them at me along with a T-shirt that proclaimed GRIM REAPERS ARE TO DIE FOR. Then she rushed back out again.

“Is that a negatory?” I asked no one in particular.

Throwing back my Bugs Bunny comforter with a dramatic flair, I swung out of bed and struggled to get my feet into the sweats—as humans are wont to do when dressing at two o’clock in the morning—before donning one of those lacey push-up bras I’d grown fond of. My girls deserved all the support I could give them.

I realized Cookie had come back as I was shimmying into the bra and glanced up at her in question.

“Are your double-Ds secure?” she asked as she shook out the T-shirt and crammed it over my head. Then she shoved a jacket I hadn’t worn since high school into my hands, scooped up a pair of house slippers, and dragged me out of the room by my arm.

Cookie was a lot like orange juice on white pants. She could be either grating or funny, depending on who was wearing the white pants. I hopped into the bunny slippers as she dragged me down the stairs and struggled into the jacket as she pushed me out the entryway. My protests of “Wait,” “Ouch,” and “Pinkie toe!” did little good.

She just barely eased her grip when I asked, “Are you wearing razor blades on your fingertips?”

The crisp, black night enveloped us as we hurried to her car. It had been a week since we’d solved one of the highest-profile cases ever to hit Albuquerque—the murder of three lawyers in connection to a human trafficking ring—and I had been quite enjoying the calm after the storm. Apparently, that was all about to end.

Trying hard to find her erratic behavior humorous, I tolerated Cookie’s manhandling until—for reasons I had yet to acquire—she tried to stuff me into the trunk of her Taurus. Two problems surfaced right off the bat: First, my hair caught in the locking mechanisms. Second, there was a departed guy already there, his ghostly image monochrome in the low light. I considered telling Cookie she had a dead guy in her trunk but thought better of it. Her behavior was erratic enough without throwing a dead stowaway into the mix. Thank goodness she couldn’t see dead people. But no way was I climbing into the trunk with him.

“Stop,” I said, holding up a hand in surrender while I fished long strands of chestnut hair out of the trunk latch with the other one. “Aren’t you forgetting someone?”

She screeched to a halt, metaphorically, and leveled a puzzled expression on me. It was funny.

I had yet to be a mother, but I would have thought it difficult to forget something it took thirty-seven hours of excruciating pain to push out from between my legs. I decided to give her a hint. “She starts with an *A* and ends with an *mmm-ber*.”

Cookie blinked and thought for a moment.

I tried again. “Um, the fruit of your loins?”

“Oh, Amber’s with her dad. Get in the trunk.”

I smoothed my abused hair and scanned the interior of the trunk. The dead guy looked as though he’d been homeless when he was alive. He lay huddled in an embryonic position, not paying attention to either of us as we stood over him. Which was odd, since I was supposed to be bright and sparkly. Light of a thousand suns and all. My presence, at the very least, should have elicited a nod of acknowledgment. But he was giving me nothing. Zero. Zip. Zilch. I sucked at the whole grim reaper thing. I totally needed a scythe.

“This is not going to work,” I said as I tried to figure out where one bought farming equipment. “And where could we possibly be going at two o’clock in the morning that requires me to ride in the trunk of a car?”

She reached through the dead guy and snatched a blanket then slammed the lid closed. “Fine, get in the back, but keep your head down and cover up.”

“Cookie,” I said, taking a firm hold of her shoulders to slow her down, “what is going on?”

Then I saw them. Tears welling in her blue eyes. Only two things made Cookie cry: Humphrey Bogart movies and someone close to her getting hurt. Her breaths grew quick and panicked, and fear rolled off her like mist off a lake.

Now that I had her attention, I asked again. “What is going on?”

After a shaky sigh, she said, “My friend Mimi disappeared five days ago.”

My jaw fell open before I caught it. “And you’re just now telling me?”

“I just found out.” Her bottom lip started to tremble, causing a tightness inside my chest. I didn’t like seeing my best friend in pain.

“Get in,” I ordered softly. I took the keys from her and slid into the driver’s seat while she walked around and climbed into the passenger’s side. “Now, tell me what happened.”

She closed the door and wiped the wetness from her eyes before starting. “Mimi called me last week. She seemed terrified, and she asked me all kinds of questions about you.”

“Me?” I asked in surprise.

“She wanted to know if you could ... make her disappear.”

This had *bad* written all over it. In bold font. All caps. I gritted my teeth. The last time I’d tried to help someone disappear, which was pretty much last week, it ended in the worst way possible.

“I told her whatever her problem was, you could help.”

Sweet but sadly overstated. “Why didn’t you tell me she’d called?” I asked.

“You were in the middle of a case with your uncle and people kept trying to kill you and you were just really busy.”

Cookie had a point. People had been trying to kill me. Repeatedly. Thank goodness they didn’t succeed. I could be sitting there dead.

“She said she would come in and talk to you herself, but she never showed. Then I got this text a little while ago.” She handed me her phone.

Cookie, please meet me at our coffee shop as soon as you get this message.

Come alone. M

“I didn’t even know she was missing.”

“You own a coffee shop?” I asked.

“How could I not know?” Her breath hitched in her chest with emotion.

“Wait, how do you know she’s missing now?”

“I tried calling her cell when I got the message, but she didn’t pick up, so I called

her house. Her husband answered.”

“Well, I guess he would know.”

“He freaked. He wanted to know what was going on, where his wife was, but the message said come alone. So, I told him I would call him as soon as I knew something.” She bit her lower lip. “He was not a happy camper.”

“I’ll bet. There aren’t many reasons a woman wants to disappear.”

She blinked at me in thought before inhaling so sharply, she had to cough a few moments. When she recovered, she said, “Oh, no, you don’t understand. She is very happily married. Warren worships the ground she walks on.”

“Cookie, are you sure? I mean—”

“I’m positive. Trust me, if there was any abuse in that relationship, it was to Warren’s bank account. He dotes on that woman like you wouldn’t believe. And those kids.”

“They have kids?”

“Yes, two,” she said, her voice suddenly despondent.

I decided not to argue with her about the possibility of abuse until I knew more. “So, he has no idea where she is?”

“Not a single one.”

“And she didn’t tell you what was going on? Why she wanted to disappear?”

“No, but she was scared.”

“Well, hopefully we’ll have some answers soon.” I started the car and drove to the Chocolate Coffee Café, which Cookie did not own, unfortunately. Because, really? Chocolate and coffee? Together? Whoever came up with that combination should have won a Nobel Peace Prize. Or at least a subscription to *Reader’s Digest*.

After pulling into the parking lot, we drove to a darkened corner so we could observe for a few moments without being observed. I wasn’t sure how Mimi would take to my presence, especially since she told Cookie to come alone. Making a mental list of who could be after her based on what little I knew, her husband was at the top. Statistics were hard to dismiss.

“Why don’t you wait here?” Cookie asked as she reached for her door handle.

“Because we have a lot of paperwork back at the office, and that paperwork’s not going to file itself, missy. No way can I risk losing you now.”

She glanced back at me. “Charley, it’ll be okay. She’s not going to attack me or anything. I mean, I’m not *you*. I don’t get attacked and almost killed every other day.”

“Well, I never,” I said, trying to look offended. “But whoever’s after her might beg to differ. I’m going. Sorry, kiddo.” I stepped out of the car and tossed her the keys when she got out. After scanning the near-empty lot once more, we strolled into the

diner. I felt only slightly self-conscious in my bunny slippers.

“Do you see her?” I asked. I had no idea what the woman looked like.

Cookie looked around. There were exactly two people inside: one male and one female. I wasn’t surprised it was so slow, considering the freaking time. The man wore a fedora and a trench coat and looked like a movie star from the forties, and the woman looked like a hooker after a rough night at work. But neither really counted, since they were both deceased. The man noticed me immediately. Damn my brightness. The woman never looked over.

“Of course I don’t see her,” Cookie said. “There’s no one in here. Where could she be? Maybe I took too long. Maybe I shouldn’t have called her husband or taken the time to drag your skinny ass out of bed.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh man, this is bad. I know it. I can feel it.”

“Cookie, you have to calm down. Seriously. Let’s do a little investigative work before we call in the National Guard, okay?”

“Right. Got it.” She placed a hand over her chest and forced herself to relax.

“Are you good?” I asked, unable to resist teasing her just a little. “Do you need a Valium?”

“No, I’m good,” she said, practicing the deep-breathing techniques we’d learned when we watched that documentary on babies being born underwater. “Smart-ass.”

That was uncalled for. “Speaking of my ass, we need to have a long talk about your impression of it.” We walked to the counter. “Skinny? Really?” The retro diner was decorated with round turquoise barstools and pink countertops. The server strolled toward us. Her uniform matched the light turquoise on the stools. “I’ll have you know \_\_\_”

“Hey, there.”

I turned back to the server and smiled. Her name badge said NORMA.

“Would you girls like some coffee?”

Cookie and I glanced at each other. That was like asking the sun if it would like to shine. We each took a barstool at the counter and nodded like two bobbleheads on the dash of a VW van. And she called us *girls*, which was just cute.

“Then you’re in luck,” she said with a grin, “because I happen to make the best coffee this side of the Rio Grande.”

At that point, I fell in love. Just a little. Trying not to drool as the rich aroma wafted toward me, I said, “We’re actually looking for someone. Have you been on duty long?”

She finished pouring and sat the pot aside. “My goodness,” she said, blinking in

surprise. “Your eyes are the most beautiful color I’ve ever seen. They’re—”

“Gold,” I said with another smile. “I get that a lot.” Apparently, gold eyes were a rarity. They certainly got a lot of comments. “So—”

“Oh, no, I haven’t been on duty long. You’re my first customers. But my cook has been here all night. He might be able to help. Brad!” She called back to the cook as only a diner waitress could.

Brad leaned through the pass-out window behind her. I’d expected to see a scruffy older gentleman in desperate need of a shave. Instead, I was met with a kid who looked no older than nineteen with a mischievous gaze and the flirty grin of youth as he appraised the older waitress.

“You called?” he said, putting as much purr into his voice as he could muster.

She rolled her eyes and gave him a motherly glare. “These women are looking for someone.”

His gaze wandered toward me, and the interest in his expression was nowhere near subtle. “Well, thank God they found me.”

Oh, brother. I tried not to chuckle. It would only encourage him.

“Have you seen a woman,” Cookie asked, her tone all business, “late thirties with short brown hair and light skin?”

He arched a brow in amusement. “Every night, lady. You gotta give me more than that.”

“Do you have a picture?” I asked her.

Her shoulders fell in disappointment. “I didn’t even think of that. I have one at my apartment, I’m sure. Why didn’t I think to bring it?”

“Don’t start flogging yourself just yet.” I turned to the kid. “Can I get your name and number?” I asked him. “And that of the server on duty before you as well,” I said, looking at Norma.

She tilted her head, hesitant. “I think I’d have to check with her before giving out that information, honey.”

Normally I had a totally-for-real laminated private investigator’s license that I could flash to help loosen people’s tongues, but Cookie dragged me out of my apartment so fast, I hadn’t thought to bring it. I hated it when I couldn’t flash people.

“I can tell you the server’s name,” the kid said, an evil twinkle in his eyes. “It’s Izzy. Her number’s in the men’s bathroom, second stall, right under a moving poem about the tragedy of man boobs.”

That kid missed his calling. “Breasts on men are tragic. How ’bout I come back tomorrow night? Will you be on duty?”

He spread his arms, indicating his surroundings. “Just living the dream, baby.

Wouldn't miss it for the world."

I took a few moments to scan the area. The diner sat on the corner of a busy intersection downtown. Or it would be busy during business hours. The dead silver screen star with the fedora kept staring at me, and I kept ignoring. Now was not the time to have a conversation with a guy nobody could see but me. After a few hefty gulps of some of the best coffee I'd ever had—Norma wasn't kidding—I turned to Cookie. "Let's look around a bit."

She almost choked on her java. "Of course. I didn't even think of that. Looking around. I knew I brought you for a reason." She jumped off her stool and, well, looked around. It took every ounce of strength I had not to giggle.

"How about we try the restroom, Magnum," I suggested before my willpower waned.

"Right," she said, making a beeline for the storeroom. Oh well, we could start there.

A few moments later, we entered the women's restroom. Thankfully, Norma had only raised her brows when we began searching the place. Some people might've gotten annoyed, especially when we checked out the men's room, it being primarily for men, but Norma was a trouper. She kept busy filling sugar jars and watching us out of the corner of her eye. But after a thorough check of the entire place, we realized Elvis just wasn't in the building. Nor was Cookie's friend Mimi.

"Why isn't she here?" Cookie asked. "What do you think happened?" She was starting to panic again.

"Look at the writing on the wall."

"I can't!" she yelled in full-blown panic mode.

"Use your inside voice."

"I'm not like you. I don't think like you or have your abilities," she said, her arms flailing. "I couldn't investigate publicly, much less privately. My friend is asking for my help, and I can't even follow her one simple direction, I can't ... Blah, blah, blah."

I considered slapping her as I studied the crisp, fresh letters decorating one wall of the women's restroom, but she was on a roll. I hated to interrupt.

After a moment, she stopped on her own and glanced at the wall herself. "Oh," she said, her tone sheepish, "you meant that literally."

"Do you know who Janelle York is?" I asked.

That name was written in a hand much too nice to belong to a teen intent on defacing public property. Underneath it were the letters *HANA L2-S3-R27* written in the same crisp style. It was not graffiti. It was a message. I tore off a paper towel and borrowed a pen from Cookie to write down the info.

"No, I don't know a Janelle," she said. "Do you think Mimi wrote this?"

I looked in the trash can and brought out a recently opened permanent marker package. "I'd say there's a better-than-average chance."

"But why would she tell me to meet her here if she was just going to leave a message on a wall? Why not just text it to me?"

"I don't know, hon." I grabbed another paper towel to search the garbage again but found nothing of interest. "I suspect she had every intention of being here and something or someone changed her mind."

"Oh my gosh. So what should we do now?" Cookie asked, her panic rising again. "What should we do now?"

"First," I said, washing my hands, "we are going to stop repeating ourselves. We sound ridiculous."

"Right." She nodded her head in agreement. "Sorry."

"Next, you are going to find out as much as you can about the company Mimi works for. Owners. Board. CEOs. Blueprints of the building ... just in case. And check out that name," I said, pointing over my shoulder to the name on the wall.

Her gaze darted along the floor in thought, and I could almost see the wheels spinning in her head, her mind going in a thousand different directions as she slid her purse onto her shoulder.

"I'll call Uncle Bob when he gets in and find out who has been assigned to Mimi's case." Uncle Bob was my dad's brother and a detective for the Albuquerque Police Department, just as my dad was, and my work with him as a consultant for APD accounted for a large part of my income. I'd solved many a case for that man, as I had for my dad before him. It was easier to solve crimes when you could ask the departed who did them in. "I'm not sure who does missing persons at the station. And we'll need to talk to the husband as well. What was his name?"

"Warren," she said, following me out.

I made a mental list as we exited the restroom. After we paid for our coffee, I tossed Brad a smile and headed out the door. Unfortunately, an irate man with a gun pushed us back inside. It was probably too much to hope he was just there to rob the place.

Cookie stopped short behind me then gasped. "Warren," she said in astonishment.

"Is she here?" he asked, anger and fear twisting his benign features.

Even the toughest cop alive grew weak in the knees when standing on the business end of a snub-nosed .38. Apparently, Cookie wasn't graced with the sense God gave a squirrel.

"Warren Jacobs," she said, slapping him upside the head.

"Ouch." He rubbed the spot where Cookie hit him as she took the gun and crammed it into her purse.

“Do you want to get someone killed?”

He lifted his shoulders like a child being scolded by his favorite aunt.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I went to your apartment complex after you called then followed you here and waited to see if Mimi would come out. When she didn’t, I decided to come in.”

He looked ragged and a little starved from days of worry. And he was about as guilty of his wife’s disappearance as I was. I could read people’s emotions like nobody’s business, and innocence wafted off him. He felt bad about something, but it had nothing to do with illegal activity. He probably felt guilty for some imagined offense that he believed made his wife leave. Whatever was going on, I had serious doubts any of it had to do with him.

“Come on,” I said, ushering them both back into the diner. “Brad,” I called out.

His head popped through the opening, an evil grin shimmering on his face. “Miss me already?”

“We’re about to see what you’re made of, handsome.”

He raised his brows, clearly up to the challenge, and twirled a spatula like a drummer in a rock band. “You just sit back and watch,” he said before ducking back and rolling up his sleeves. That kid was going to break more than his share of hearts. I shuddered to think of the carnage he would leave in his wake.

Three *mucho grande* breakfast burritos and seven cups of coffee later—only four of them mine—I sat with a man so sick with worry and doubt, my synapses were taking bets on how long he could keep his breakfast down. The odds were not in his favor.

He’d been telling me about the recent changes in Mimi’s behavior. “When did you notice this drastic change?” I asked, the question approximately my 112th. Give or take.

“I don’t know. I get so wrapped up. Sometimes I doubt I’d notice if my own children caught fire. I think about three weeks ago.”

“Speaking of which,” I said, looking up, “where are your kids?”

“What?” he asked, steering back to me. “Oh, they’re at my sister’s.”

A definite plus. This guy was a mess. Thanks to Norma, I’d graduated from taking notes on napkins to taking notes on an order pad. “And your wife didn’t say anything? Ask anything out of the ordinary? Tell you she was worried or felt like someone was following her?”

“She burned a rump roast,” he said, brightening a little since he could answer one of my questions. “After that, everything went to hell.”

“So, she takes her cooking very seriously.”

He nodded then shook his head. “No, that’s not what I meant. She never burns her

roast. Especially her rumps.”

Cookie pinched me under the table when she saw me contemplating whether I should giggle or not. I flashed a quick glare then returned to my expression of concern and understanding.

“You’re a professional investigator, right?” Warren asked.

I squinted. “Define *professional*.” When he only stared, still deep in thought, I said, “No, seriously, I’m not like the other PIs on the playground. I have no ethics, no code of conduct, no taste in gun cleansers.”

“I want to hire you,” he said, unfazed by my gun-cleanser admission.

I was already planning to do the gig for Cookie pro bono—especially since I barely paid her enough to eat people food—but money would come in downright handy when the bill collectors showed up. “I’m very expensive,” I said, trying to sound a bit like a tavern wench.

He leaned in. “I’m very rich.”

I glanced at Cookie for confirmation. She raised her brows and nodded her head.

“Oh. Well, then, I guess we can do business. Wait a minute,” I said, my thoughts tumbling over themselves, “how rich?”

“Rich enough, I guess.” If his answers got any more vague, they’d resemble the food in school cafeterias everywhere.

“I mean, has anyone asked you for money lately?”

“Just my cousin Harry. But he always asks me for money.”

Maybe Cousin Harry was getting more desperate. Or more brazen. I took down Harry’s info, then asked, “Can you think of anything else? Anything that might explain her behavior?”

“Not really,” he said after handing his credit card to Norma. Neither Cookie nor I had enough to cover our extra coffees, much less our *mucho grandes*, and since I doubted they would take my bunny slippers in trade ...

“Mr. Jacobs,” I said, putting on my big-girl panties, “I have a confession to make. I’m very adept at reading people, and no offense, but you’re holding out on me.”

He worked his lower lip, a remorseful guilt oozing out of his pores. Not so much an I-killed-my-wife-and-buried-her-lifeless-body-in-the-backyard kind of guilt but more of an I-know-something-but-I-don’t-want-to-tell kind of guilt.

With a loud sigh, he lowered his head into his palms. “I thought she was having an affair.”

Bingo. “Well, that’s something. Can you explain why you thought that?”

Too exhausted to put much effort into it, he lifted his shoulders into the slightest hint of a shrug. “Just her behavior. She’d grown so distant. I asked her about it, and

she laughed, told me I was the only man in her life because she was not about to put up with another.”

In the grand scheme of things, it was quite natural for him to suspect adultery, considering how much Mimi had apparently changed.

“Oh, and a friend of hers died recently,” he said in afterthought. His brow crinkled as he tried to remember the details. “I’d completely forgotten. Mimi said she was murdered.”

“Murdered? How?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t remember.” Another wave of guilt wafted off him.

“They were close?”

“That’s just it. They’d went to high school together, but they hadn’t kept in touch. Mimi never even mentioned her name until she died, so I was surprised at how much it affected her. She was devastated, and yet...”

“And yet?” I asked when he lost himself in thought again. This was just getting interesting. He couldn’t stop now.

“I don’t know. She was torn up, but not really upset about losing her friend. It was different.” His jaw worked as he rifled through his memories. “I really didn’t think much about it at the time, but quite frankly, she didn’t seem all that surprised that her friend was murdered. Then I asked her if she wanted to go to the funeral, and my god, the look on her face. You’d think I’d asked her to drown the neighbor’s cat.”

Admittedly, drowning the neighbor’s cat didn’t really clue me in as much as I would’ve liked. “So, she was angry?”

He blinked back to me and stared. Like a long time. Long enough to have me sliding my tongue over my teeth to make sure I didn’t have anything in them.

“She was horrified,” he said at last.

Damn, I wished he could’ve remembered the woman’s name. And why Mimi wasn’t surprised when the woman was murdered. Murder is usually quite the surprise to everyone involved.

Speaking of names, I decided to ask about the one on the bathroom wall. Having found no foreign objects in my teeth, I asked, “Did Mimi ever mention a Janelle York?”

“That’s her,” he said in surprise. “That’s Mimi’s friend who was murdered. How did you know?”

I didn’t, but his thinking I did made me look good.

## Chapter Two

DON'T CROSS THE STREAMS. NEVER CROSS THE STREAMS.

—BUMPER STICKER

“What are you listening to?” I asked, reaching over and turning down the radio as Cookie drove home. “This Little Light of Mine” was just way too happy for the current atmospheric conditions.

She hit the SCAN button. “I don’t know. It’s supposed to be classic rock.”

“Oh. So, did you buy this car used?” I asked, thinking back to the dead guy in her trunk and wondering how he got there. I still needed to figure out if Cookie had been a black widow before she met me. She did have black hair. And she’d recently cut it. A disguise, mayhap? Not to mention her early-morning, pre-coffee mean streak that made road rage a practical alternative for a healthier, happier Cookie. The departed rarely just hung out on Earth for no particular reason. Dead Trunk Guy most likely died violently, and if I was ever going to get him to cross, I’d have to figure out how and why.

“Yeah,” she said absently. “At least we know where to start with Janelle York. Should I call your uncle on this one? And maybe the medical examiner?”

“Absolutely,” I said supernonchalantly. “So, then, where did you buy it?”

She looked over at me, her brows knitting. “Buy what?”

I shrugged and looked out the window. “Your car.”

“At Domino Ford. Why?”

I flipped my palms up. “Just wondering. One of those weird things you think about on the way home from investigating a missing persons case.”

Her eyes widened in horror. “Oh my god! There’s a dead person in my backseat, isn’t there?”

“Wait, what?” I said in stuttering astonishment. “Not even. Why would you assume such a thing?”

She fixed a knowing gaze on me a heartbeat before she pulled into a gas station, tires screeching.

“Cook, we’re five seconds from home.”

“Tell me the truth,” she insisted after nearly throwing me through the windshield.