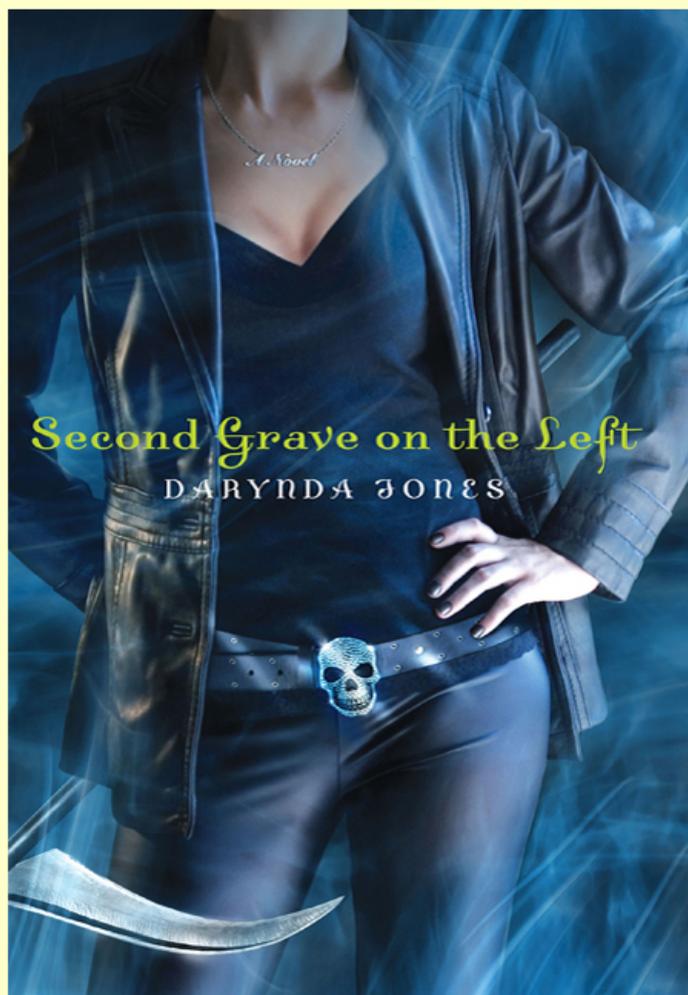


READ IT FIRST



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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?”

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