

Fifth Grave Past the Light

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Never underestimate the power of a woman

on a double espresso with a mocha latte chaser high.

-T-shirt

Charley Davidson isn't your everyday, run-of-the-mill grim reaper. She's more of a paranormal private eye/grim reaper extraordinaire. However, she gets sidetracked when the sexy, sultry son of Satan, Reyes Farrow, moves in next door. To further complicate matters, Reyes is her main suspect in an arson case. Charley has vowed to stay away from him until she can find out the truth...but then dead women start appearing in her apartment, one after another, each lost, confused, and terrified beyond reason. When it becomes apparent that her own sister, Gemma, is the serial killer's next target Charley has no choice but to ask for Reyes' help. Arsonist or not, he's the one man alive who could protect Gemma no matter who or what came at her. But he wants something in return. Charley. All of her, body and soul. And to keep her sister safe, it is a price she is willing to pay.

Charley Davidson is at it again in Fifth Grave Past the Light, the sexy, suspenseful, and laugh-out-loud funny fifth installment of the New York Times bestselling series by Darynda Jones.

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author DARYNDA JONES won a Golden Heart[®] and a RITA[®] for her manuscript First Grave on the Right. As a born storyteller, she grew up spinning tales of dashing damsels and heroes in distress for any unfortunate soul who happened by, annoying man and beast alike. Darynda lives in the Land of Enchantment, also known as New Mexico, with her husband and two beautiful sons, the Mighty, Mighty Jones Boys.¹

Ask me about life after death.

-T-SHIRT OFTEN SEEN ON CHARLEY DAVIDSON, A GRIM REAPER OF QUESTIONABLE MORALS

The dead guy at the end of the bar kept trying to buy me a drink. Which figured. No one else was even taking a second look and I'd dressed to the nines. Or, at the very least, the eight-and-a-halves. But the truly disturbing part of my evening was the fact that my mark, one Mr. Marvin Tidwell, blond real estate broker and suspected adulterer, actually turned down the drink I'd tried to buy him.

Turned it down!

I felt violated.

I sat at the bar, sipping a margarita, lamenting the sad turn my life had taken. Especially tonight. This case was not going as planned. Maybe I wasn't Marv's type. It happened. But I was oozing interest. And I wore makeup. And I had cleavage. Even with all that going for me, this investigation was firmly wedged between the cracks of no and where. At least I

could tell my client, aka Mrs. Marvin Tidwell, that it would seem her husband was not cheating on her. Not randomly, anyway. The fact that he could've been meeting someone in particular kept me glued to my barstool.

"C-come here often?"

I looked over at the dead guy. He'd finally worked up the courage to approach and I got a better view. I figured him for the runt of the litter. He wore round-rimmed glasses and a tattered baseball cap that sat backwards on top of muddy brown hair. Add to that a faded blue T-shirt and loosely ripped jeans and he could've been a skater, a computer geek, or a backwoods moonshiner.

His cause of death was not immediately apparent. No stab wounds or gaping holes. No missing limbs or tire tracks across his face. He didn't even look like a drug addict, so I couldn't tell why he'd died at such a young age. Taking into account the fact that his baby-faced features would make him look younger than he probably was, I estimated him to be somewhere around my age when he'd passed.

He stood waiting for an answer. I thought "Come here often?" was rhetorical, but okay. Not wanting to be perceived as talking to myself in a room full of people, I responded by lifting one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug.

Sadly, I did. Come here often. This was my dad's bar, and while I never set up stings here for fear of someone I knew blowing my cover, this just happened to be the very same bar Mr. Tidwell frequented. At least if it came to a knockdown drag-out, I might have some backup. I knew most of the regulars and all of the employees.

Dead Guy glanced toward the kitchen, seeming nervous before he refocused on me. I glanced that way as well. Saw a door.

"Y-you're very shiny," he said, drawing my attention back to him.

He had a stutter. Few things were more adorable than a grown man with boyish features and a stutter. I stirred my margarita and pasted on a fake smile. I couldn't talk to him in a room full of living, breathing patrons. Especially when one was named Jessica Guinn, to my utter mortification. I hadn't seen her fiery red hair since high school but there she sat, a few seats down from me, surrounded by a group of chattering socialites who looked almost as fake as her boobs. But that could be my bitterness rearing its ugly head.

Unfortunately, my forced smile only encouraged Dead Guy. "Y-you are. You're like the s-sun reflecting off the chrome bumper of a f-fifty-seven Chevy."

He splayed his fingers in the air to demonstrate, and my heart was gone. Damn it. He was like all those lost puppies I tried to save as a child to no avail because I had an evil stepmother who believed all stray dogs were rabid and would try to rip out her jugular. A fact that had nothing to do with my desire to bring them into the house.

"Yeah," I said under my breath, doing my best ventriloquist impersonation, "thanks."

"I'm D-Duff," he said.

"I'm Charley." I kept my hands wrapped around my drink lest he decide we needed to shake. Not many things looked stranger to the living world than a grown woman shaking air. You know those kids with invisible friends? Well, I was one of those. Only I wasn't a kid, and my friends weren't invisible. Not to me, anyway. And I could see them because I'd been born the grim reaper, which was not as bad as it sounded. I was basically a portal to heaven, and whenever someone was stuck on Earth, having chosen not to cross over immediately after death, they could cross to the other side through me. I was like a giant bug light, only what I lured was already dead.

I pulled at my extra-tight sweater. "Is it just me, or is it really warm in here?" His baby blues shot toward the kitchen again. "Hot is m-more like it. S-so, I-I couldn't help but notice you t-trying to buy that guy over there a drink." I let my fake smile go. Freed it like a captured bird. If it came back to me, it would be mine. If not, it never was. "And?" "You're b-barking up the wrong tree with that one." Surprised, I put my drink down-the one I bought myself-and leaned in a little closer. "He's gay?" Duff snorted. "N-no. But he's been in here a lot lately. He l-likes his women a little … l-looser." "Dude, how much sluttier can I get?" I indicated my attire with a sweep of my hand. "N-no, I mean, well, you're a l-little-" He let his gaze travel the length of me. "-t-tight." I gasped. "I look anal?" He drew in a deep breath and tried again. "H-he only hits on women who are more s-substantial than you." Oh, that wasn't offensive at all. "I have depth. I've read Proust. No, wait, that was Pooh. Winnie-the-Pooh. My bad." He shifted his nonexistent weight, cleared his throat, and tried again. "More v-voluptuous." "I have curves." I said through a clenched jaw. "Have you seen my ass?" "Heavier!" he blurted out. "I weigh- Oh, you mean he likes bigger women." "E-exactly, while I on the other hand-" Duff's words faded into the background like elevator music. So Marv liked big women. A new plan formed in the darkest, most corrupt corners of Barbara. My brain. Cookie, otherwise known as my receptionist during regular business hours and my best friend 24/7, was perfect. She was large and in charge. Or, well, large and kind of bossy. I picked up my cell phone and called her. "This better be good," she said. "It is. I need your assistance." "I'm watching the first season of Prison Break." "Cookie, you're my assistant. I need assistance. With a case. You know those things we take on to make money?" "Prison. Break. It's about these brothers who-" "I know what Prison Break is." "Then have you ever actually seen these boys? If you had, you would not expect me to abandon them in their time of need. I think there's a shower scene coming up." "Do these brothers sign your paycheck?" "No, but technically neither do you." Damn. She was right. It was much easier to just have her forge my name. "I need you to come flirt with my mark." "Oh, okay. I can do that." Nice. The F-word always worked with her. I filled her in and told her the deal with Tidwell, then ordered her to hurry over. "And dress sexy," I said right before hanging up. But I regretted the sexy part instantly. The last time I told Cookie to dress sexy for a much-needed girls' night out on the town, she wore a lace-up corset, fishnet stockings, and a feather boa. She looked like a dominatrix.

I'd never been the same.

"S-so, she's coming?" Duff asked.

"Possibly. She's watching hot guys on TV. It all depends if her daughter is there or not. Either way, she should be here soon."

He nodded.

As I sat waiting for my BFF, I took note of all the women in the bar that night. Calamity's was kind of a cop hangout. Women certainly came in, just not by the droves. But this place was packed and noisy, and at least 75 percent of the patrons were women. Which was odd.

I'd been coming to the bar for years, mostly because my dad owned it, but partly because my investigations office was on the second floor, and in all that time, I'd never seen the place so disproportioned in favor of the feminine mystique except that one time I talked Dad into bringing in a male revue. He'd agreed for two reasons. One: I'd batted my lashes. Two: He thought a male revue was a guy who came in, tried the food, then did a review in the paper. I may or may not have encouraged that line of thinking. Dad would probably have taken it better if I'd been over eighteen when I suggested it. He wanted to know how many male revues I'd been to.

"Counting this one?" was apparently not an appropriate reply.

Someone put a plate of food in front of me.

"Compliments of the chef."

I glanced up at Teri, my dad's best bartender. She knew I was working an infidelity case and probably guessed that I'd struck out, thus the comfort food. The heavenly aroma hit me so fast, I had to force myself not to drool.

"Thanks." I took a slice off the plate and sank my teeth into the best chicken quesadilla I'd ever had. "Wow," I said, sucking in cool air as I chewed. "Sammy really outdid himself."

"What?" she said over the crowd.

I waved her on and continued to eat, letting my eyes roll back in ecstasy. I'd been enjoying Sammy's concoctions for years, and while they were always mouthwateringly good, this was incredible. I scooped equal parts guacamole, salsa, and sour cream onto the next bite, then went in for another trip to heaven.

Duff watched me eat while standing wedged between the back of my barstool and the guy standing next to it. His left half was inside Duff's right. The guy looked up, searched the ceiling for air vents, turned to his left, his right, then "three; two; one;

He shivered and stepped away.

Happened every time. The departed were cold and when people stood inside one, the hairs on the backs of their necks rose, goose bumps shot across their skin, and a shiver ran down their spines.

But Duff wasn't paying attention to the guy. While he pretended to center his attention on me, he kept a weather eye on the door to the kitchen, glancing over every few seconds, chewing on a nail.

Maybe the door to the kitchen was really a portal to heaven and if he stepped through it, he would cross to the other side. No, wait.

As I sat there stuffing my face, I began to wonder about something. I'd checked out Mrs. Tidwell's Friendbook page while researching Mr. Tidwell for more pictures. I liked to take every precaution when approaching a mark to make certain I could recognize him or her

when necessary. I got the wrong guy one time. It ended badly.

I dug my phone out of my jeans again, found Mrs. Tidwell's profile, and clicked through her photo history. Sure enough, when they got married a little over a year earlier, Mrs. Tidwell had been much heavier. She'd clearly lost a lot of weight, and she'd kept a log on her page with her progress, losing over one hundred pounds over the past year. While I cheered her dedication, I began to wonder if Mr. Tidwell would share my enthusiasm or if he'd liked his wife better before.

The concept kind of floored me. Most guys strayed when their wives gained weight. Tidwell seemed to be straying for the opposite reason. Maybe he felt threatened by her new look. She was a knockout.

I panicked when Tidwell stood to leave. He threw down a few bills, then started for the door, and I realized this night would be a complete bust. I was really hoping for a money shot to put this case to bed. With my optimism dwindling, I began contemplating my schedule to set up a second attempt when Tidwell stopped. His gaze locked on the front door. I looked past him and almost gasped at the raven-haired vixen walking through it. The moment our eyes met, Barry White started playing through the speakers overhead. The lights dimmed and a smoky, sultry kind of aura centered on the newcomer.

Coincidence? I think not.

Enter Cookie Kowalski. Loyal, stalwart, and just the right size. Cookie walked toward me, her expression a mixture of curiosity and hesitance. Surely she wasn't worried I'd get her into trouble.

And she was dressed to kill. She wore a dark pantsuit with a long sparkling frock and a silver scarf opened at the neck to reveal her voluptuous attributes.

"You saucy minx," I said when she sat beside me at the bar.

She grinned and scooted closer to me. "This is okay?"

I looked her over again. "It's fantastic. And it definitely did the job."

Tidwell sat back down at his table, interest evident in every move he made. I gestured toward him with the barest hint of a nod. She did a quick scan of the room and let her gaze pause a fraction of a second on Tidwell before refocusing on me.

But she still wasn't convinced. "So, if you were a guy, would you be into me?"

"Hon, if I were a guy, I'd be gay."

"Yeah, me, too. So, what do I do?"

"Just give it a sec. He'll probably--"

"The man at the table behind you would like to buy you a drink, darlin'," Teri said. Her brows rose as she waited for a response. Sobriety clearly came late in life for her, but she was what my father would call a handsome woman, with long dark hair and striking hazel eyes. Still, she'd seen too many illicit rendezvous, complicated hookups, and bad one-night stands to be overly impressed. Experience had hardened her.

I could be hard. If I practiced. Gave it my all.

"Oh," Cookie said, caught off guard. "I'll take a whiskey sour."

Teri winked and began practicing her magic.

"A whiskey sour?" I asked Cook.

"Your f-friend seems nervous," Duff said, and I agreed with a nod.

Cookie stared ahead as though standing before a firing squad. "Liquid courage," she said.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"That's what they said about nuclear energy on Three Mile Island."

She cast me a horrified look.

I fought a grin and tucked a small mic into the folds of her scarf, pretending to adjust it.

"Look, all you gotta do is open the lines of communication. I'll be able to hear everything he says." I tapped my ear to indicate the receiver I was wearing. "Just see how far he wants to take things. Unfortunately, him buying you a drink does not prove infidelity."

Her pallor turned a light shade of green. "I have to have sex with him?"

"What? No. Just, you know, see if he wants to have sex with you."

"Do I have to make out with him?"

Oh, wow. I never realized how uneducated Cookie was in the ways of extramarital investigations. She was more of a behind-the-scenes kind of gal. I just figured she'd know what to do.

Teri set the drink down. Cookie grabbed it and took a long draw.

"Don't do anything that makes you uncomfortable," I said as she took another hearty swig. "Just try to get him to proposition you. Now, turn and offer him a salute. Let him know you're interested."

Before I could coach her further, she did exactly that. She turned to him, her back rigid, and saluted.

Jessica's table of airheads burst out laughing. I closed my eyes in mortification and said through gritted teeth, "I meant lift the glass."

"What?" she asked through equally gritted teeth. "You said to salute him." She was starting to panic. I could feel it radiating off her in waves. "I thought maybe he was in the military."

"It's okay, just calm down."

"Calm down?" She turned back around. "You calm down. I'm completely calm. I'm like deep water that's deep and still."

I wrapped a hand around her arm and squeezed to coax her back to me. She drew in a long breath and let it out slowly, forcing herself to calm....

Other Books

Poems: My brother's grave, Dream of life, and other poems.

☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ... -so fond memory interprets the past , viewing it in the light cast upon it by the event , then , it may be ... service at Trinity Church , where he read both the Lessons , the fifth chapter of Isaiah , and the fifth of the First ."