

Chapter One

Whoever said that only the good die young had obviously never met Michael Garland.

He was thirty-six years old, sexy as hell, a total badass - and dead as a doornail. Right at that moment, he was also in the process of driving Dr. Charlotte "Charlie" Stone totally around the bend.

"We could be on a beach right now," he grouched, referring to the fact that she had elected to return to work rather than take the extended vacation that had been recommended after her most recent death defying experience. His tone was light. His eyes on her were dark and watchful. He was worried about her, she knew. To tell the truth, she was a little worried about herself. "Sand. Sun. You in a bikini. Come on, Doc, confess: you've got something against fun."

He only ever called her Doc any more when he was seriously ticked off at her. Short version: he felt she needed to take some time off, while she disagreed. At thirty-two years old, Charlie had been in charge of herself since her early teens. She did *not* need a man – ghost, whatever – constantly second guessing her decisions.

Her brows snapped together.

"Go away," she mouthed at him soundlessly, after a quick glance assured her that her living companion's attention was occupied elsewhere.

Michael snorted. "Not in this life, buttercup." One corner of his mouth quirked up slightly. "Or in this death, either."

Oh, ha, ha. But she didn't – couldn't – say it aloud. If they'd been alone, Charlie would have done more than shoot him an exasperated look. She would have told him to take his fun and stick it up a bodily orifice. Fun was not what life was all about. Life was serious. Purposeful. Sometimes painful. And - well, definitely not fun.

But they weren't alone. In fact, they were even less alone than he thought they were.

"*I won't tell.*" The agonized whisper made Charlie's heart thump. Her fingers tightened around the pen she was holding. The (living) convicted serial killer chained to a seat on the other side of the poured concrete table from her never changed his expression. Neither did the dead convicted serial killer – that would be Michael, looking as alive as she did herself in a snug white tee, faded jeans and boots – who leaned broad shoulders against the beige-painted cinder block wall to her left as he played self-appointed spectral bodyguard. Which was a complete waste of time, as she had told him when he had insisted on following her into the interview room rather than waiting outside in the hall as she would have preferred so that she could concentrate fully on

her research subject. Number one, there was no need: in this heavily guarded maximum security prison, of all places, she was perfectly safe. And number two, if something were to go wrong, if she were to find herself in danger, there was nothing he could do about it anyway. He was ectoplasm; ether; air. He couldn't so much as swat a fly, because in this earthly plane he no longer existed. In the past, he had occasionally managed to manifest physically for the briefest of moments, but because in typical-for-him aggressive fashion he had pushed the boundaries of that until he had gone a heavenly bridge too far, he had, apparently permanently, rendered himself as insubstantial as a breath. And even if he *could* once again manage to manifest physically, he still couldn't: he'd been warned that if he did, if he once again took on a corporeal aspect, the bond holding him here might very well snap like a rubber band and he would be sucked up into Spookville, as he called the purple twilight-y, monster filled place that was his immediate afterlife destination, possibly never to return.

Therefore, as Charlie had pointed out to him earlier, as a bodyguard Michael was useless.

And even if he wasn't useless, even if he could manifest, there was still nothing he could do to protect her from what was currently disturbing her: the voices.

The voices were all in her head.

Sort of.

At least, she seemed to be the only one who could hear them. Her gift, or curse, depending on how you looked at it, was that she could see/hear/communicate with the spirits of the newly, violently dead (which was how she had found herself saddled with Michael, a former subject of her research who'd been stabbed to death shortly after leaving this very room about six weeks back). But Charlie could only *hear* this woman. Whom she couldn't be completely sure was real. Or dead.

"When's the last time you even took a vacation?" Folding his arms over his chest, Michael narrowed sky-blue eyes at her. At six-foot-three, with tawny blonde hair that didn't quite reach his shoulders and a face and body that would make any female between the ages of twelve and ninety drool, he was one of the best looking men that she had ever seen. Too bad he was a total pain in the ass. Not to mention dead. Among other problematic things. He continued, "A real vacation, that didn't involve work, where you just went somewhere sunny and hung out in your bathing suit and relaxed. I'm betting it's been years. Hell, I'm betting you don't even *own* a bikini. Am I right?"

She shot him a look that should have singed his eyeballs. And not just because the only swimsuit she possessed was a five-year-old black one piece.

"I'm right," he concluded with grim satisfaction.

"Where's my candy?" whined the live serial killer she could actually answer without

seeming nuts . Her attention instantly redirected toward her *job*, Charlie pulled from the pocket of her white lab coat the Hershey bar that she had elected to use as a reward (bribe) for this particular subject for responding to her questions, one of which he had answered just before Michael had distracted her. Opening the wrapper, she broke off a section and slid it across the table, then watched her test subject scoop it up and eat it with a great deal of lip-smacking satisfaction. The shackles joining his wrists clanked as he moved. He also had manacles around his ankles securing him to the floor, and a chain around his waist that was fastened to a sturdy metal ring in the wall behind him. It prevented him from rising, or getting close enough to actually put his hands on her.

She might be the goat to his deceptively harmless-looking tiger, but in this controlled environment he was the tethered one.

“You didn’t give *me* chocolate,” Michael objected. “Hell, I didn’t know chocolate was even an option.”

Charlie ignored that. She was administering a simplified version of the Myers-Briggs Personality Test to the hulking, balding fifty-two year old convict in front of her. They were alone except for Michael (since he was invisible to everyone except her, she wasn’t sure he even counted) and the guard, Johnson, who periodically checked on them through the small glass window in the metal door. Outside the walls of Wallens Ridge State Prison, where they were currently seated in the tiny, windowless room next to her office, her test subject was known as the Snake River Killer. His given name was Walter Spivey, and he was a hairdresser by trade. He was also notorious as the murderer of seventeen young women whose flesh he had liked, post-mortem, to gnaw from their bones, and he had been on various death rows for the past twelve years. Two months earlier, he had been moved to Wallens Ridge for the express purpose of participating in her government-sponsored study. An apparent anomaly among serial killers, who tended to have higher than average IQ’s, Spivey was of special interest to her because his IQ of record was 82. Her meetings with him had convinced her that this was an error, or possibly an attempt by some psychiatrist in the pay of Spivey’s defense lawyers to circumvent a death sentence, because in many jurisdictions a low IQ was considered a mitigating factor. Whatever, it had been satisfying for her to determine that a serial killer who had at first seemed like the exception to the rule probably was not, after all. He was crazy like a fox – in other words, cunning and manipulative.

A psychiatrist with her own dark personal history with serial killers, Charlie had thought she was immune to the bad vibes that the worst of them emanated.

She’d been wrong. With his pale, sweaty skin and loose, damp mouth, Spivey crept her out. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that she was a slender, pretty brunette like the majority of his victims, whose pictures she had seen in his file, but she didn’t really think so. Before – meaning before nearly dying had totally messed her up – being shut up like this with him wouldn’t have bothered her at all. She would have regarded Walter Spivey with the clinical detachment of a medical student toward a cadaver.

Now she found that being near him made her skin crawl. The only possible solution? Ignore it. Power through. And hope it went away.

“Again, please just answer yes or no,” she said to Spivey. From her calm voice, of which under the circumstances she was justly proud, to the up-twist in which she wore her shoulder length chestnut hair, to her understated jewelry and the simple blue shirt and black pants beneath her lab coat, Charlie was to all outward appearances unflappably professional. If anxiety had caused her to chew her lipstick off when the voices had started up again just before she’d sat down with Spivey, and if there were shadows resulting from a certain amount of sleeplessness beneath her blue eyes, well, hopefully nobody would notice. “You usually place yourself nearer to the side than the center of a room.”

Michael snorted. “You think he’s going to answer honestly? Take it from me, by the time you get to death row you’ve pretty much figured out that I as in introvert is bad. So he’s going to say center, because that makes him an extrovert, and thus an E instead of an I. Nobody wants to fry, babe. Everybody you’re talking to in here is working every angle they can to avoid it.”

Charlie didn’t know why she was surprised to discover how much Michael knew about the MBPI personality test. He was highly intelligent. Manipulating the test was something that he was absolutely capable of doing. If he knew that introversion was a mild indicator of a sociopathic personality, then she was pretty confident that he also knew that INTJ - Introversion, intuition, thinking, judgment – was the Myers-Briggs personality type most common among serial killers. She spared a minute to try to remember what Michael’s type was – she hadn’t gotten around to testing him herself before he was killed, although she knew he’d been tested before - and couldn’t; when she got back to her office, she would pull his file and check.

“Center,” Spivey responded with a sunny smile, and as Charlie recorded his answer looked pointedly at the Hershey bar. “Can I have my candy?”

“Told ya,” Michael’s tone was smug as Charlie broke off another section of candy bar and slid it over. The tips of Spivey’s fingers just brushed hers. They felt soft and damp. The contact made her stomach tighten, and she quickly pulled her hand back. Michael continued, “And just so you can quit racking your brain, I scored ESFP. And that was without being bribed by chocolate.”

The curious thing was, ESFP – extraversion, sensing, feeling, perception – was the exact opposite of INTJ. Absolutely *not* the mark of a serial killer. As far from it as a subject could possibly get, in fact. Charlie’s lips twisted. No way had that been an accident. Michael had, no doubt, manipulated the test. As she reached that conclusion, she shot him a condemning look. He grinned, a slow and devilishly charming grin that admitted everything.

And just as easy as that he had her going all marshmallow-y inside.

Damn it. She refocused on her test subject with grim determination.

“Please don’t do this to me.” The disembodied whisper came out of nowhere, snapping her out from under the spell of Michael’s smile right back into the Amityville Horror that her life was devolving into like a quick plunge into ice water. The terror in the voice sent chills down Charlie’s spine. Her instant, instinctive reaction was to glance at Michael, furtively searching his face to see if he’d heard it, too. If the woman she was hearing was present in spirit, even if the timing and circumstances of her death put her beyond the parameters of Charlie’s ability to see her, Michael should have been able to see her, because as a spirit himself he could see other spirits in his vicinity, just like she was able to see any living, breathing human who might, for example, walk into the room.

But Michael clearly wasn’t seeing whoever was connected to the voice. He wasn’t hearing her, either.

Okay, deep breath. This was different. This was outside Charlie’s experience. This was a whole new facet of the freak show that was her existence. This had been happening to her only since she had died and been brought back.

Either she was cracking up, or – or what? She wasn’t sure. Random floaty voices existed in the universe, to which she was just now able to tune in? For the last three weeks, since she had woken up in a hospital bed to learn that she had nearly drowned, she had been hearing the voices at odd moments. The truth was that she wasn’t sure of anything about them. Who was speaking. Who they were talking to. If they actually even existed outside of her head. What it meant.

All she knew was that the experience of hearing them was unnerving. And she needed – badly needed – for it to stop.

If they didn’t, she was afraid she might start to fall apart.

“More,” Spivey demanded, licking his lips. His lashless brown eyes fixed on Charlie’s slender fingers as they absently smoothed the foil covering the remaining chocolate.

Charlie shook her head as she tucked the candy bar back into her pocket and out of sight. Keeping it visible, she had discovered, was too great a distraction for Spivey. “After you answer the next question,” she told him firmly.

“No,” the unseen woman moaned. Gritting her teeth, Charlie did her best to tune out the voice while glancing blindly down at the papers on the table in front of her. Clairaudience – that’s what her sudden ability to hear these disembodied voices was called. Unless they really were all in her head, and crazy described it better.

“Babe, you just turned a whole nother shade of pale.” Michael frowned at her. As she

glanced at him, she had to consciously stop herself from taking her lower lip between her teeth, an obvious sign of distress that he would jump on like a duck on a June bug.

Time for Charlie to face the truth: her way-too-close brush with death had done a number on her. In its aftermath, she felt vulnerable in a way that she hadn't in years. It had brought back a host of terrifying memories. It had upset her carefully constructed psychological equilibrium. It had sensitized her in ways that she feared she was only just beginning to discover. It had made her want to curl up in a ball in the middle of her hospital bed and pull the covers over her head and stay there forever, as if that would somehow keep her safe from the evil that she knew – *knew* - existed in the world.

Instead she had coped in the only way she knew how to: by getting up and getting on with it, and going back to work.

But the voices were unsettling. The voices she didn't need.

“You okay?” Michael's eyes were intent on her face. He suddenly seemed to take up way too much space in the tiny room. Even though, of course, since he had no physical substance and was in fact a phantom that only she could see and hear, he took up no actual space at all. “Finish up with this scumbag, and let's head home.”

Home. Meaning her house in the nearby town of Big Stone Gap. Hearing Michael call it that felt funny, but - good. Since college she'd lived alone and liked it. Now she lived with him. A ghost. *Her* ghost. Her home was *their* home. Six weeks into their association, she was still processing the ramifications of that. Still processing the ramifications of *him*.

Still working hard not to fall in love with a damned – and she was very much afraid that that was the literal truth – ghost.

This was her second day back at Wallens Ridge, and she was tired – way too tired for three p.m. on a Tuesday, when before she had routinely worked until 5:30 five days a week and then had more than enough energy left at the end of the day to go for a long run up the wooded mountain trail behind her house. She'd completed reams of other tasks before getting started with this interview, of course, but still the level of exhaustion she was experiencing was abnormal, and she recognized that. The idea of going home early was enormously appealing. But the work she was doing was important. The stakes were high. If she could figure out a way to identify serial killers in the earliest stages of their development, before they started to kill, hundreds of lives would be saved, as would immeasurable amounts of human suffering.

The suffering she herself had endured being a case in point.

With a quick, barely there shake of her head for Michael, she re-focused on the questions in front of her.

“Please answer yes or no.” Charlie looked at the chubby-cheeked, harmless looking

man who was watching her expectantly. She felt her stomach tighten. “You prefer meeting in small groups rather than interacting with lots of people.”

“No,” Spivey answered, so promptly that Charlie wasn’t entirely sure whether he was answering the question or just responding at random, as he sometimes did.

“Again, answer yes or no: You prefer interacting with lots of people?” she tried to clarify.

“No,” he said. “I want candy.”

“You can have candy after you answer,” she told him, and repeated the question.

“No,” he said.

She looked at him for a second – he was leaning slightly forward, staring in the general direction of her pocket where the candy bar waited, although she knew he couldn’t see it from where he sat. With an inward sigh, she tapped the end of her pen against the questionnaire without recording a response, recognizing that she had gotten as much out of Spivey as she was going to get for the day. It was time to end the interview.

“Thank you, Mr. Spivey. We’re finished here,” she said.

“I want candy,” he said, frowning at her. His round face turned petulant, like that of a giant baby who was about to cry. His eyes batted. He licked his already damp lips.

“All right.” Repressing a shiver of revulsion, she retrieved the candy bar from her pocket while Michael straightened away from the wall and muttered, “Hallelujah.”

“You’ve done very well today,” she told Spivey as she broke off a piece and pushed it across the table toward him. “We’ll meet again next –“

“*Please,*” the woman’s voice inside her head screamed, the cry so shrill and full of pain that Charlie lost focus.

She only realized what she had done – that her hand had moved too far across the table, putting it within Spivey’s reach – when Spivey grabbed her wrist and yanked her violently toward him.

Her heart leaped. As her stomach slammed into the edge of the table, she tried to stop her forward momentum without success.

“Got you,” Spivey crowed with satisfaction a split second before his teeth crunched down on her fingers and Charlie screamed.

“*Goddamn it,*” Michael roared, and dove for Spivey. Charlie felt the brush of a large, solid body hurtling past her, heard the smack of flesh hitting flesh, heard Spivey cry out as his head snapped back. He dropped her hand and she threw herself back out of his

reach just as Johnson burst through the door.

“Charlie.” Michael’s voice was no more than a breath of sound as she cradled her wounded hand and fought to regain her composure. Her stomach dropped clear to her toes as she realized that he was nowhere to be seen.