

CHAPTER ONE

His eyes are the wrong color.

That was the panicky thought that tore screaming through Charlie's mind.

They should have been sky blue. They weren't: they were a hazelish shade of brown.

She stared up at him, unblinking, and felt the ground tilt beneath her feet.

It has to be him. Who else could it be?

His eyes were the wrong color, he had a tiny white scar beside his mouth that had never been there before, his hair was cut short and was kind of styled, and his six-foot-three--inch frame looked leaner than it should have been. Maybe that was because the black leather motorcycle jacket he was wearing with jeans and a button-up collared blue shirt (!) hid some of the truly impressive muscles that the T-shirt she was used to seeing him in had revealed.

Yeah. And maybe not.

Michael? Her heart shivered at the question, which she didn't repeat out loud.

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross had posited that there were five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. A little more than two weeks after Michael had disappeared—seventeen days, to be precise—Charlie reckoned that she'd just been torpedoed right into the third stage, because what kept running through her head was a feverish Please God I'll do anything please.

She stood in the small, grassy graveyard, with the crude white cross that marked Michael's grave in front of her and the viburnum hedge from which she had once gathered an armful of flowers to mark it to her left. As the steepled old First Baptist Church loomed in the background, Charlie desperately clung to a sliver of hope.

Please let it be him.

The heavy silver man's watch that hung loosely around her left wrist—Michael's watch, several sizes too large for her arm—glinted in the golden autumn sun. She didn't know if that was a good sign or a bad one.

Vacillating between joy and fear, she looked at the man frowning down at her with an intensity born of marrow-deep need. Except for those few small differences, it was all there: the square jaw, the broad cheekbones and forehead, the straight nose and beautifully cut mouth. The tawny hair, the height, the outrageous good looks. Her hand

was on his arm: she could feel the solid muscles through the smooth leather of his jacket. Yet her eyes probed his and she came up empty. There was no electric zing, no trumpets signaling a joyous reunion going off in her head. The vibration she was picking up with every atom of sensitivity she possessed translated to This is a stranger. Reality hit, and the fragile little bit of hope she'd been cherishing shattered like glass.

Face it, she told herself savagely as her hand dropped away from his arm, this gorgeous man is not Michael. He might be turning her inside out simply by standing there, but that was because of what was going on with her rather than anything to do with him.

The multicolored pinwheels of happiness, of answered prayers, of unlikely miracles that had begun twirling through her bloodstream from the moment she had set eyes on this man faded and stilled. It's not Michael, she told herself again, and the world once more became the gray, colorless place that his absence from her life had made it.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice raspy. Her throat was so tight it hurt to talk.

"Rick Hughes." The way his eyes narrowed on her face with speculation, the way the tan skin around them tightened and crinkled, made her stomach twist. The expression was all Michael, even if the brisk syllables with their total lack of a slow Southern drawl were not. "And you are?"

Okay, he apparently didn't know her. Didn't recognize her.

Pain curled through her system.

She introduced herself, still in that same strangled voice: "Charlie Stone." Still in shock from encountering the living image of the dead man she had only lately been able to admit even to herself that she loved, standing beside the grave where his body was interred. Despite everything her senses were telling her, she continued to search the man's face, his eyes, for some hint of Michael, some sign that it was him after all. She forced herself to stop, to get a grip.

Michael's gone. She knew that, but she was obviously having trouble coming to terms with it.

Rick Hughes's surprised expression was so much like Michael's that it was the equivalent of an arrow that lodged directly in her heart.

"Charlie Stone? Dr. Charlotte Stone?" His gaze moved over her. Watching his face, she was able to follow along: she had chestnut brown hair, a little longer than shoulder length, that today was pulled back into a low ponytail. Delicate features, fair complexion, denim blue eyes. Five-six and slender. Actually, more slender than usual, because since Michael had disappeared she'd barely been eating. Once Michael had told her men expected someone with her credentials to be butt-ugly instead of the babe he'd labeled

her. Remembering this, she interpreted Hughes's expression accurately, or at least she was pretty sure it was accurately. Her spine stiffened in response to the sheer sexism of men who automatically assumed that an educated woman would be unattractive.

"Yes," she replied. And yes, okay, there was possibly a frosty overtone to her answer.

"I was just up at Wallens Ridge," he said, referring to the supermax prison where Charlie, a psychiatrist, was currently conducting research on a government grant, studying the psychology of serial killers. It was also the place where, a little more than eight weeks ago now, Michael had been murdered. "And I was told that you're the person I need to see. I was also told that you wouldn't be available for several more days, as you'd taken a temporary leave of absence."

"Yes, I did." To assist an FBI team in catching a serial killer. Less than an hour before on this late Thursday afternoon in early October, she'd arrived back at Lonesome Pine Airport with plans to take the weekend to get her head on straight before returning to work at the prison on Monday. She'd been five minutes away from her house in Big Stone Gap when, from the backseat of the taxi that was currently waiting by the curb, she had spotted his stunningly familiar figure in the graveyard. Only, of course, in the way things tended to work in her life, it turned out that he was the wrong man.

The tiny part of her brain that wasn't still reeling from shock scoffed: You didn't really think that he was Michael standing there, alive, did you?

But from the crushing sense of loss she was experiencing, it seemed that somewhere deep in her heart, or soul, she had.

You can't be gone. Not just like that. She sent the thought winging directly toward Michael, one of dozens that had taken that route since he'd disappeared, and immediately shut that folly down. Even if, somewhere in the misty reaches of the universe, he by some miracle did still exist (and she knew she shouldn't even begin to allow herself to hope for that), mental telepathy had never been part of their thing. And yes, sometimes bad things happened, just like that.

Bad things like Michael being destroyed.

Taking a deep breath, Charlie tried to focus. When it came to her professional life she tried to keep things, well, professional. Her hands were clenched into tight fists at her sides, she discovered. She wasn't yet able to tear her eyes away from this man's handsome face, but she made herself unclench her fingers.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, liking to think that her voice sounded less off-putting than it had before.

"I have a court order granting me access to some files that are apparently in your possession." He cocked a thumb at the grave, which, because it was still fairly new,

formed a little higher mound and sported a little less grass than the ones around it. M. A. Garland had been hand-painted on the marker in black, slightly uneven letters, along with the dates of Michael's birth and death. Looking at it made her chest ache. "On this guy: Michael Garland."

Once again the ground seemed to tilt beneath Charlie's feet. Hearing Michael's name spoken out loud was bad enough, but at his graveside by his doppelgänger?

Really, God? What fresh hell is this?

"Who are you?" she asked again, in a different intonation. If he wasn't Michael—and he wasn't, she was now almost convinced of that—then the fact that this man existed, that he was apparently alive and real and human and right at this moment standing close enough to touch, officially blew her mind.

Her subconscious was shouting a warning: Hello, something's up. Big red flag here.

All kinds of crazy possibilities started popping into her mind, running the gamut from his being some kind of shape-shifting demon to a faux-Michael from an alternate dimension to a very real-seeming hallucination brought on by grief and stress. At least, these possibilities might seem crazy to anyone who didn't live in her world. Short version was, she had the unfortunate ability to see the newly, violently dead; Michael had been one of the serial killers she was studying; had gotten himself murdered; and then, as one of those newly violently dead that only she could see, had come back as a ghost to haunt, taunt, and otherwise make her life miserable until she'd made the truly colossal mistake of falling in love with him, at which point he'd been yanked away into a purple-twilight version of purgatory, where, according to all the psychic sources she'd desperately consulted when he had disappeared, he'd almost certainly suffered a fate far worse than death or even hell: oblivion.

In other words, the possibility of a shape-shifting demon or alternate dimension or too-real hallucination wasn't as outlandish as it might sound.

To put it succinctly, in her world shit happened.

"I'm a lawyer," Hughes said, adding to her complete and utter shock. That this spitting image of Michael, whose contempt for every component of the justice system was oceans deep, was a lawyer floored her. "A criminal defense lawyer," he said. "The client I'm here on behalf of was charged with murdering his girlfriend. In the course of investigating the circumstances surrounding the crime, we discovered that it was identical in every significant detail to those committed by a serial killer known as the Southern Slasher"—he jerked a thumb at the grave again—"also known as Michael Garland. I thought we had a winner of an alternative theory about the identity of the true killer in my client's case until I learned that Mr. Garland was in prison at the time this particular murder was committed. Still, I'm hoping that by following up on Mr. Garland I might learn something that'll shed some light on my client's case."

“Since you’re here, you obviously know he’s dead.” She couldn’t say Michael’s name aloud: it just wouldn’t come out. For her to not see Michael’s grave was also impossible. It was there, in her field of vision, no matter how much she fought to not look at it. But looking at the man in front of her was even worse: it hurt. In the past two-plus weeks, she’d discovered that psychic pain could be every bit as agonizing as pain inflicted by a gun or a knife. “He’s not going to be shedding light on anything. You could have just sent for the files.”

“I’d also like to talk to you,” Hughes said. From his voice, she was pretty sure he’d grown up somewhere north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The vibe he gave off was more big-city polished than anything Mi—no, she wasn’t going there. You have to stop thinking about him. “I’m hoping you can help me with some questions I have.”

The last thing in the world she wanted to do was talk to him about anything, much less about Michael. Encountering him like this had shaken her badly; she had barely been keeping it together as it was. Now this—this terrible cosmic joke the universe was apparently playing on her was making her head spin, making it hard for her to catch her breath, making it impossible for her to think clearly. Looking at the man in front of her was physically painful. And it was starting to feel scary. If he wasn’t Michael—

He’s not. You know he’s not.

At the moment she wasn’t capable of much critical thinking beyond that, but she had managed to form and hold on to one crucial thought: Until you get this figured out, you need to be careful.

There was so much wrong with what was happening here she couldn’t even begin to count the ways.

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