

Chapter One

The sight of the dead man stretched out on her couch stopped Dr. Charlotte Stone in her tracks.

Except for the flickering glow of the TV, the house was dark, but his big body sprawled across the pale natural linen upholstery was impossible to miss. Freezing in place just inside the threshold of her living room, Charlie fought desperately to get a grip. Lying on his back with his head resting on one of the couch's thickly padded arms, eyes closed and arms folded across his wide chest, he could almost have been asleep. But she knew better: he was beyond sleep now. The sudden tightness in her chest as she looked at him made it difficult to breath. Her heart pounded. Her pulse raced.

She was swallowing hard, working on corralling her runaway emotions and whipping them into some kind of acceptable shape, when he opened his eyes and looked at her.

Even seen by TV light, those sky blue eyes of his were enough to make an unsuspecting woman go weak at the knees. Luckily, she had experienced their power before. Plus, she knew what he was, what he was capable of. But the sad fact was, she was a sucker for him anyway.

He smiled at her. It wasn't a particularly nice smile. Didn't matter: her stomach still fluttered.

Idiot.

"So how's that whole moving on thing working out for you, Doc?" he drawled.

The hint of acidity in Michael Garland's honey-dipped voice didn't stop the warm rush of – let's call it relief – that had started flooding her veins the second she had laid eyes on him. She absolutely should not have been so glad to see him. In fact, she should not have been glad to see him at all. But where he and she were concerned, "should" had flown out the window awhile back.

"Just fine." Charlie's answer was as cool and untroubled as she *wasn't* feeling. Regaining her power of movement, she hit the wall switch that turned on the lamps on either side of the couch. Then she walked across the polished wood floor to the bleached oak coffee table, picked up the remote, and turned the TV off, ending the deafening blast of the sports channel he had been watching. Cranked to an almost painful loudness, the sound was what had brought Charlie rushing in from the porch just a couple of moments before – and what had broken up the more than friendly good-night that she'd been exchanging at her front door with Tony Bartoli, the handsome FBI agent whom Garland thought she was moving on to. Garland had clearly seen her

kissing Tony, and he just as clearly hadn't liked it. What his jibe meant was that he thought that she was moving on to Tony from *him*. Not that she and Garland had the kind of relationship that she could move on from, exactly, but – well, it was complicated.

The short version was, she was a psychiatrist who studied serial killers. Garland was a convicted serial killer, and, as an inmate at Wallens Ridge State Prison where she was conducting her latest government-sponsored study, her former research subject. That association had ended with his death.

This was the part that bore repeating: Michael Garland was absolutely, positively, no-coming-back-from-it dead. As in, what she was looking at and talking to was his ghost.

See, she had the unfortunate ability to see ghosts. Oh, not all ghosts. Only the recently, violently departed, who, confused about what had happened to them, sometimes lingered for a short period on earth after their passing. Garland had been murdered eleven days before, shanked by one of his fellow inmates. Charlie had tried to save his life, to no avail. In classic no-good-deed-goes-unpunished style, his ghost had attached itself to her at the moment of his passing, to torment and harass (among other things) her until he should finally pass on to the Great Beyond. Which, in typically irritating fashion, he was resisting.

Usually the ghosts she could see lingered for no more than a week. By that yardstick, Garland was already well past his sell-by date.

Which was one reason she had been so glad – strike that – so surprised to see him. She had last set eyes on him some four days before, when he had saved her life. Since then, she had been afraid – strike that, too – increasingly convinced that she would never see him again.

Much as she hated to admit it even to herself, the thought had made her heart bleed.

But here he was, all six-foot-three hunky inches of him. Thirty-six years old at the time of his death. Chippendales-worthy body in a snug white t-shirt and faded jeans. A thick mane of tawny hair that didn't quite reach his wide shoulders. Square jaw, broad cheekbones and forehead, straight nose and well-cut mouth. Absurdly tan and healthy looking for a ghost – or a man who had spent the last four years of his life in federal prison, which he had done. Outrageously handsome. Certifiably dangerous. The proverbial bad penny.

Who could make her heart pound and her blood heat and her good sense fly out the window. He was the very last thing she needed – or wanted – in her life.

Dead or alive.

Not that she had any choice in the matter.

She could no more control his presence in her life than she could control the sun, the moon and the stars. He had just shown up, and one day – probably sooner rather than later – he would just disappear. The universe was in charge here, not her. Which was the thought that steadied her.

"Where have you been?" If there was a snap in her tone, he had earned it, just because he had somehow managed to make her care about the answer. Still, afraid her question might reveal how stupidly involved with him she had become, she would have taken it back if she could have.

"Missed me bad, hmm?" Garland swung his long legs off the couch and sat up. Under other circumstances, Charlie would have given a dirty look to the scuffed cowboy boots that he hadn't seemed to have any qualms about planting on her pristine couch. But ghost boots – she was pretty sure that they didn't leave marks.

Anyway, the smirk in the grin he directed at her was way more annoying than the boots on the linen, so she directed her dirty look right into his twinkling baby blues before turning on her heel and walking away.

"Nope." She threw the reply over her shoulder as she reached the hall and headed past the old-fashioned staircase that led to the second floor toward the kitchen. Standing up, he followed her. She was wearing nothing more exciting than a silky white sleeveless blouse and a pair of well-tailored black slacks with heels, a little dressier than her usual attire because Tony had been taking her out to dinner but nothing special. Still, she could feel Garland's eyes on her, and strongly suspected that he was watching her trim backside with appreciation as she walked. Casting a quick, suspicious glance over her shoulder, she tried to catch him at it, but he was (a) too quick, (b) too wily, or (c) just too damned lucky to get caught. As their eyes met, he grinned at her. "Liar," he said.

She snorted, shaking her head in firm denial. Terrifying to think that having a ghost following her made her feel more fully alive than she had in days. Even more terrifying to realize that what she really wanted to do was turn around and walk right into his arms.

Which she couldn't do, because he had no more substance than air. And which she wouldn't do even if she could.

Because she really wasn't that self-destructive. She didn't think.

Moonlight pouring through the kitchen windows – a tall, wide one that took up almost all the back wall behind the eating area, and a smaller one set into the top of the kitchen door - illuminated the white cabinets and stainless steel appliances and hardwood floor. She'd left the curtains in the front of the house closed, so no one could see in from the street. The kitchen blinds were raised all the way to the top of the windows, because there was no one living behind her to see in, and because she liked the view. As she stepped into the silvery light from the hall's darkness, Charlie realized that she could

see her reflection in the big window's dark glass. Her chestnut brown hair hung in loose waves around her shoulders. Her fair skin was, as usual, pale, but her denim blue eyes looked kind of sultry because she had deliberately played them up with liner and shadow, which she almost never wore, and an extra coat or two of mascara. Her wide mouth looked full and soft, but more vulnerable than it should have given that right after dinner she had freshly applied deep red (vampy) lipstick. That softly smudged look would be because, she realized belatedly, Tony had subsequently kissed all her lipstick off, so her lips were now both slightly swollen and bare. She was five-six, slender and fit at age thirty-two, and over the years a lot of guys had told her that she was beautiful. If she remained skeptical, it was because most of the time those same guys had been trying to talk her into the sack. Tonight, the makeup plus the three-inch heels made her look, um, sexier. Ordinarily she wore low-heeled, sensible shoes because the last thing she wanted to do was give off any kind of look-at-me-I'm-hot vibe, which exercise in discretion owed a lot to the fact that her usual daily work was carried out in a prison full of incarcerated men. Which was also why she customarily wore her hair up and minimal makeup. But tonight, for Tony, she'd made an effort. With, yes, the thought that she might allow their relationship to progress to the next level, as in, sleep with him. Because Tony was way handsome and because she really liked him and because she badly needed a normal, uncomplicated man-woman relationship in her life.

And because she'd feared – thought - that Garland was gone for good and she was determined to eradicate any lingering memories of him. Of *them*.

In the end, she hadn't been able to bring herself to invite Tony in. She'd already been sending him on his way when the blasting of her should-have-been-silent TV had reached her ears and caused her heart to swell with hope and hurried things along. Sex with Tony, she had decided somewhere between dinner and her front door, was something that just wasn't going to happen. At least, not yet.

But Garland didn't have to know that.

In fact, she wasn't about to let Garland know that.

He was way too full of himself already.

Charlie suddenly realized that hers was the only reflection that she could see in the window. Garland was right behind her. A lightning glance over her shoulder confirmed it: he was definitely still there.

But to judge by what she could see in the window, she was alone. His reflection didn't show up. And that would be because, in the physical world in which she and every other living creature existed, he did not.

He was something only she could see.

She knew that, of course, but seeing it so soundly reinforced made her stomach clench.

"Admit it, Doc: you were worried about me."

Charlie closed her eyes.

Worried about him. That vastly understated the case. Truth was, when he had not shown back up after materializing for just long enough to take the killing blow meant for her, she had been sick with fear over him. Afraid that he had been sucked up into Eternity, and that she would never see him again.

The pain that had accompanied that fear had shown her just how very vulnerable she had become where he was concerned. Now that he was back, she was determined to better guard her clearly way-too-susceptible heart.

Falling in love with him was not an option. In life he'd been the baddest of bad men, the convicted murderer of seven women, sentenced to death for his crimes.

And be he never so sexy and charming, in death he was exactly the same person.

That's what she had to keep reminding herself of, even if some too-stupid-to-live part of her refused to accept it.

He claimed he was innocent. All the evidence said otherwise.

Even if, for the sake of argument, she allowed herself to believe in his innocence, believe that the exhaustive police investigation and all the evidence and the courts and the entire criminal justice system were just plain wrong in his case, she still wasn't about to let herself go where she feared their association was headed.

She wasn't about to commit the ultimate folly of letting herself fall in love with him. No way, no how.

Bottom line was, he was dead, she was alive.

Whatever their relationship was or wasn't, the hard truth was, there was absolutely no future in it.

If she let herself forget that, she deserved every bit of heartbreak that would be hurtling her way.

So get over being so ridiculously glad to see him already.

Charlie opened her eyes. There she still was, looking at her own reflection in the kitchen window, with not so much as a glimmer to indicate that a gorgeous (dead) guy was standing right behind her.

"I was actually very comfortable with the idea that nature had finally taken its course with you." She spoke over her shoulder, admirably cool, as she crossed to the light switch beside the back door and flipped on the kitchen light. A round oak table with four slat-back chairs stood in the eating area in front of the window. Because she had been

away, the table was piled high with mail. Beyond it, out the window, she could see the tall, nodding shadows of the sunflowers that grew in a patch along her back fence. Backlit by moonlight, they were striping the grass with shifting lines of black. Beyond that, a thickly wooded mountainside formed an impenetrable wall of darkness as it rose to meet the night sky.

This old-fashioned, two-story white clapboard farmhouse with its gingerbread trim and wide front porch was the first real home she had ever had, and she loved it. Located on a quiet street at the edge of Big Stone Gap, Virginia, a coal mining town deep in the heart of Appalachia that was still reeling from the recession, it provided her with a much needed respite from the daily grimness of her work at the prison, which perched like a vulture at the top of the mountain, overlooking the town. Decorating and furnishing it had been a project that she had enjoyed.

Until right this minute, when Garland's presence suddenly seemed to fill it to bursting, she had never recognized that with just her in it the house had sometimes felt empty. No, strike that: lonely.

"Bullshit," he said without heat, and the inescapable fact that he'd hit the nail on the head there made her lips tighten. Ignoring him, she crossed to the table with the intention of checking out her mail. He stopped in the kitchen doorway and, folding his arms over his chest, propped a broad shoulder against the jamb. *"Thank you for saving my life, Michael."*

His mocking falsetto earned him a narrow-eyed glance. But truth was, he *hadsaved* her life, and she was grateful.

"Thank you." She turned her attention to the mail. Nothing like a fat stack of bills to provide a distraction.

"Michael," he prompted. She could feel his eyes on her.

Ostensibly busy flipping through the pile of envelopes, she said nothing. The last time she had called him Michael – well, she wasn't going there. She was going to forget that whole mind-blowingly sexy episode.

Yeah, right. Never gonna happen as long as you live.

Well, she was going to try.

"So, you shack up with FBI guy while I was gone?"

The question annoyed her. Actually, he annoyed her. Greatly. In the process of tearing open an envelope, she flicked him a look. And lied. "Yes."

"Your nose just grew, Pinocchio."

"If you're not going to believe me, why ask?"

"Good question." He shrugged. "So why *aren't* you shacking up with FBI guy?"

"Because, believe it or not, I don't sleep with everything in pants," she snapped before she thought. As a slow smile spread across his face, she felt like biting her tongue. Because, of course, she had slept with Garland. Sort of. As in, ghost sex. Again, it was complicated.

But whether or not it had been, in the strictest sense, real or not, it had definitely been the hottest sex of her life.

And she was not going there. Not again. Not even in her thoughts.

"I do believe it." He crossed the kitchen to stand across the table from her. His big hands curled around a chair back. His steady gaze made her uncomfortable. She concentrated on the mail.

"Thing is, I think I'm starting to know you pretty well. I think you're a one-man woman, Doc."

Her eyes snapped up to meet his. At what she saw for her there, she felt a wave of heat.

God, don't let it show.

"You might be right," she said with a false cordiality of which she was justifiably proud. "And if ever I find that man, I'll be sure to let you know."

His answering look made her foolish, reckless heart pick up its pace. Afraid of what he might read in her eyes, she let them drop to the square brown packing box that had been the next item of mail to come within reach of her hands. Damned tape – the box was swaddled in it. Clear and shiny, it was stubbornly resistant to all her attempts to breach it. Reaching for the small pair of scissors she kept along with items like push pins and paper clips in a basket on the sideboard behind her, she cast another glance at him. She was just in time to watch him fade into translucence. Eyes widening, hand tightening convulsively around the scissors, she registered with a tingle of shock that she could absolutely see the rest of the kitchen through him. Even as she stared, he wavered, then started to solidify once more.

She was still struggling to wrap her mind around what she was seeing when he did it again.

"Might want to close your mouth, Doc. Damned if you don't look like you've seen a ghost."

That at least had the virtue of snapping her out of total immobility. Her lips met and firmed. Her eyes collided with his. "Funny."

He seemed to look at her more closely. Of course, it was hard to tell when he was once again as diaphanous as smoke. "So what's up?"

"You - you're flickering." Her mouth had gone dry. Wetting her lips, she tried to swallow.

He was returning to being almost – *almost* – solid looking. *Oh, God.*

"Flickering?" He glanced down at himself. Seeming to notice nothing amiss – okay, he looked solid again, so why would he? – he lifted his eyebrows at her.

"Fading in and out. Like – like Tinkerbell at the end of Peter Pan.

You know, the Disney movie. When Tink was dying, and the children had to clap to bring her back." The comparison made Charlie feel cold all over. She was so rattled that she was hardly making sense, she knew. Her eyes stayed glued to him: he'd started fading again as she spoke, and was now as insubstantial as a layer of chiffon, and rippling like one, too, if said chiffon had been caught in a breeze. It wasn't the first time she'd seen an apparition flicker, but it was definitely the first time that the sight had made her heart lurch and her blood drain toward her toes.

The other times – she'd been relieved. And she'd been relieved because the flickering was a sign that the ghost she was looking at would soon cease to be a problem to the living. And that would be because that flicker meant that the apparition was minutes away from fading into nothingness, and she was comfortable in the knowledge that it was leaving this earthly plane and never coming back.

But now, with him, she felt her composure shattering into a million lacerating shards as she faced what that flickering probably meant: either he was getting to the stage where she wasn't going to be able to see him anymore, or he was being drawn permanently into the Hereafter. One way or the other, it didn't matter. If what she'd seen happen in the past was prologue to the present, he was going.

It wouldn't be long before she was free of him. For good.

Which she had known all along was going to happen.

He was a ghost, and ghosts couldn't stay.

So why did that make her feel so utterly devastated?

"Must've missed that one," he replied drily.

Her eyes stayed fixed on him with a kind of horrified desperation.

The glowing green numbers of the digital clock over the microwave were perfectly

visible through his wide and muscular chest: She could read the time: 11:22.

"How – how do you feel?"

"To tell the truth, like I died about a week back."

"Would you stop joking?" Her tone was fierce. "I'm serious."

He shrugged. "Thing is, I had a hell of a time getting back here this time. Way harder than I've ever had before. Them Spookville walls – they didn't want to let me out. If I hadn't been so worried about you, I don't think I could have made it through. Ever since I did, I've been feeling the damned place pulling at me, like it's doing its best to reel me back in. Right now, it's pulling pretty strong." His eyes narrowed at her. "You got a particular reason for asking?"

"Oh, God." Her chest felt tight. Drawing a breath required real work. "I think – it might be time. I think – you might be getting ready to leave."

His brows snapped together. "What? Hell, no. I'm not going anywhere."

"I don't think you have a choice."

"So do something. Ju-ju me." His relatively unalarmed tone told her that he did not perceive the immediacy of the danger.

Charlie shook her head, speechless because he was now pulsing like a light bulb getting ready to burn out and was clearly unaware of it. Something that felt like a giant fist closed around her heart. She gripped the scissors so hard the metal hurt her fingers. She already knew how this story had to end. But she wasn't ready. There was so much still unresolved between them, so much to say....

"Please don't take him yet." The words were scarcely louder than a breath. Emerging of their own volition, they weren't addressed to him: she was speaking to the universe, to the vast, unknowable forces of Eternity, to God himself. Then, realizing what she had said - and what it revealed – she shifted her grip on the scissors and looked down and started cutting through the tape on the box. Savagely.

Anything to keep from watching him disappear.

Because there was nothing she could do to stop it. Because this was the way it had to be.

"Whoa, hold on there. What was that?" Even in this moment of what felt to Charlie like extremis, there was humor in his voice. "Sounded to me like that was you admitting you're not ready to see the last of me."

"Oh, go – soak your head." Her fingers stilled as she looked back at him. She'd been about to tell him to go to Hell, before it had hit her like a baseball bat between the eyes that that was in all likelihood exactly where he was going.

"Quit fighting it." He was all but transparent now, as see-through as delicately colored cellophane, coming in and out of focus faster than she could blink. Grief and dread combined to turn her blood to ice. "Would it kill you to give up and admit that you're crazy about me?"

His eyes teased her. Her heart felt like it would crack in half.

Okay, so she'd known this moment was coming. Known it from the beginning, from her first horrified realization that this scariest of ghosts had attached himself to her: the affliction was temporary.

At first, she'd reminded herself of that as a source of comfort.

Then she had just tried not to think about it.

But now, she discovered, she couldn't bear the knowledge that he was actually about to be gone from her world.

That she would never see him again.

That he would be caught up in the horrible purple fog of the place he called Spookville forever.

Or at least until he was dragged off to someplace even worse.

Abandoning the box, she put the scissors down on the table. Her movements were careful. Precise. Otherwise, she feared her hands would shake. Then, because her eyes were glued to him, she accidentally knocked the box over. All kinds of white packing peanuts came tumbling out, spilling across the table, onto the floor, everywhere.

She scarcely noticed. She didn't care.

He was barely there at all now, with no more substance than a heat shimmer. Her fists clenched so hard that her nails dug into her palms. It was all she could do to breathe. Her heart wept.

In consequence, her tone was angry. "You think this is a joke? Look at yourself *now*."

He looked down at himself. It was instantly plain that he saw what was happening.

Charlie could feel the sudden tension emanating from him, a new and electric sense of urgency in the air.

His jaw was tight as he looked back at her. "You might want to get cracking with that ju-ju, Doc."

"There's nothing I can do." At his behest and against her better judgment, she'd already used every scrap of spirit lore she'd ever learned that might keep him grounded to earth.

There wasn't anything left, or at least, nothing that she knew. If running to him and throwing her arms around him would have done any good, she would have raced around the table to his side, but she already knew that it would be easier to try to hold on to mist. *This is how it has to be.* She knew that, accepted it. And still her next words were nothing she had ever imagined she would say to him:

"Concentrate. Try to hang on."

"Ain't working." He was fading so fast now that she was afraid that he'd be gone in the next instant. "Better start clapping, Doc."

She sucked in air. "Garland -"

He was gone. Just like that. Her stomach dropped to her toes. Her knees went weak.

"Shit." She could still hear him. "I don't make it back, don't worry about me. Charlie...."

The rest of what he said was indistinct.

"Michael!" Forget keeping her distance, keeping her cool. Despite what she knew was the absolute futility of it, she rushed around the table to where he had been standing anyway, reaching for him, plowing her hands through the now-empty air. Nothing. Not even the slightest hint of an electric tingle – the tell-tale sign of contact with an invisible spirit - to mark where he had been. Defeated, she gripped a chair back hard. God, what had she expected? The universe always reclaimed its own. She knew that, knew that it had to happen, that this was no more than the natural order of things, but still she felt like her heart was being ripped out of her chest. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream.

"There has to be a white light," she called urgently through the pain, because helping him navigate Eternity was the only thing she could do for him now. "Michael, do you hear? You have to look for the light."

She thought he said something typical like, "Fuck that," and then, "Charlie," with something else after, but she couldn't be sure: his voice was too faint.

"Michael!"

This time there was nothing. No response. No voice. No sign of him. She took a deep, shuddering breath. Her throat closed up. The pain she was experiencing was acute. *This is what grief feels like.* Then she realized, *no, this is what heartbreak feels like.* Her eyes stung: it was from welling tears. Second time in the last eleven days that she, who never cried, had found herself doing just that. Both times had been over him.

Cursing herself for her idiocy, she dashed her knuckles across her eyes.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

A frantic pounding on the kitchen door tore Charlie's eyes away from the spot where he had last been, made her jump and gasp and shoot a startled glance toward the sound.

Pale and big-eyed and terrified looking in the darkness, a woman's face peered in at her through the diamond-paned window in the top of the door.

"Help me," the woman screamed, pounding the door again.

"Please, you have to let me in!"