

A creative funeral arrangement runs into a problem.

THE ULTIMATE PLOT

The merciless Tucson heat attacked Debra as she parked her Cadillac in a handicap space at the Bones & Marble Mystery Bookstore. Opening her purse she took out a bottle of prescription pain pills and downed several with a long gulp from her water bottle. That would keep the excruciating pain from her brain tumor at bay for a couple of hours, but sometimes the throbbing was so intense she could barely think rationally.

Squinting through her bifocals she read the directions she'd scrawled on a yellow Post-It note: *Mustard color 1990 Chevy—missing right front fender—coyote tail on antenna—code words— ...* Damn! She couldn't read her own writing—but how many coyote-tail antennas could there be?

Sweat dripped down her forehead and fogged up her lenses. After wiping them off with a lace-edged hanky she spotted the car tucked into a corner of the parking lot under a shady tree, thank god. Her silk Armani pantsuit damp with sweat, she collected her purse and a bulging Bones & Marble paper bag and inched herself to the ground.

Hobbling due to the brace on her left knee, Debra reached the ugly car and stopped behind its rear bumper to catch her breath. Her heart thumped wildly as she approached the driver's back, taking in his frizzy red hair and beige skin. When he turned his head, she stopped in her tracks. There must be some mistake—he looked as young as a teenager. Confused, she turned to leave.

"Wanna buy a book?" His voice sounded as immature as he looked.

Debra still couldn't recall what she was supposed to answer. "Uh..."

His innocent-looking lips twisted in a sneer. "Get in."

Making her halting way to the passenger side, she wrestled with the door handle until he leaned over and unlatched it. Suppressing a groan she hoisted herself onto the torn vinyl seat.

Crossing the car's threshold made Debra feel she had crossed an emotional threshold as well. Her self-confidence restored, she stiffened her posture and voice to match. "You're Joey? Lift up your tee shirt, please."

Joey's head swiveled and his mud-brown, heavy-lidded eyes opened a fraction wider. "What the hell?"

"I want to see if you're wearing a wire. Hurry up, it's an oven in here."

Rolling his eyes he pulled up his sweat-stained grey cotton shirt, twisting sideways to show his back was clear too. "Let's see the cash," he said, straightening up. "The deal was five thousand down, five after, right?"

Satisfied he wasn't an undercover cop, she reached for the Bones & Marble bag. "Hold your horses, young man. How do I know you're qualified for the job?"

He pulled up the left sleeve of his tee shirt, revealing a row of tiny tattooed skulls. "That good enough for you?" The callous glaze in his eyes sent ice down her spine.

Debra counted five skulls before he covered them back up. Taking a deep breath, she explained that every Friday morning, she and three other retired ladies met at the Bones & Marble bookstore. "We have a mystery novel workshop. Our group is called Devious Divas."

"Say what?"

"The name means—uh—crafty dames. I'll need you here tomorrow morning at eleven sharp to get a good look at them."

"What for? Your agent didn't say nothing about that."

Her agent was her brother Lance, who had been only too happy to find a hit man to euthanize her, in exchange for being the beneficiary of her \$23 million estate. She had advanced him \$3 million to tide him over the seven years before she could be declared dead. If her body were found, she'd have a secret burial at sea to avoid a media circus.

Debra's ulterior motive for meeting the hit man was to give him some instructions she hadn't shared with Lance. Joey didn't know the name of the "agent", for they'd communicated by phone or via a locker at the bus station.

"What exactly did my agent tell you?"

Joey fiddled with his silver Virgin Mary pendant. "Said you had some kinda terminal disease, didn't want you to suffer none. Like I told him, I can take you out any way you want."

She sneezed from the dust in the car. "I think a gunshot, execution style, would be best. Another extremely important thing—you must make sure the other three ladies go with me."

He grinned. "Ah, I get it. You hate their guts."

"No, no! Just the opposite. You see, Joey, when I'm on the Other Side I want my friends around me, to continue our lovely critique group."

He leaned forward, wiping his nose on the cuff of his sleeve. "Say what?"

"Haven't you heard of the Other Side, the Afterlife, life after death?"

Crossing himself, he leaned back against the door. "That's a lie," he said with a slight quiver in his voice as if he could see corpses he knew returning to haunt him.

"I'm not asking you to believe it—just pay attention. Don't you even appreciate that you're getting four kills in one job, for heavens sakes?"

He stopped pouting and sat up, mumbling under his breath. Debra glared at him and asked if he had a good gun. He assured her his Beretta 9mm hadn't failed him yet.

"Okay, here's what I want you to do. I'm going to invite my writing group to a picnic on an island off Guaymas. You'll be on the island and you'll shoot us all while we're having our lunch on the beach —me last, by the way, so my friends will already be on the Other Side to welcome me."

The Devious Divas were all in their eighties, and would have made proper wills and burial arrangements, so death wasn't unexpected. In fact, when they reunited in the Great Beyond, the ladies would definitely appreciate having been spared a complicated old age.

Joey stared at her. "You want to go to Mexico, take a boat to an island?"

"What's wrong with that?" Debra found a fresh hanky and blotted her temples.

He frowned with a tiny hint of emotion in his eyes. "Don't you know what it's like there right now? Street thieves everywhere, and off the beaches you got them narco-subs from Colombia. They're killers, man."

She laughed. "You should be right at home."

"Hah!" He spat out the window. "You don't bring a single bullet across the border, unless you like being tortured in a Mexican prison."

"Sheesh! I thought you were a professional. Do you want the job, or not?"

He shrugged. "If I'm free on the date you want. But—more hits, more money."

Debra was prepared for this contingency. "Okay, I'll give you three thousand extra for the ladies, and that's my limit. Don't ever tell my br— my agent I paid you extra, or he'll deduct it from your final payment."

A wave of excruciating pain racked her body from wig to Guccis and everywhere in between, reminding her she was doing the right thing. The kid stared out the window until she was done wincing and gasping. Then she handed him the bag of money, assuring him while he counted it that her agent would be in touch with a firm date for the job.

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A monsoon thunderstorm greeted Ada, Beth and Chris as they arrived at Bones & Marble for their weekly Devious Divas meeting. Having lived in Tucson long enough to scorn rain gear, they were duly soaked as they shuffled from their cars to the bookstore.

In the cafe section they purchased coffee and donuts, then settled down around their usual corner table while they waited for Debra. When the clock ticked around to 10:15, Ada reached into her tote bag and handed out copies of the chapter she'd been working on. "We'd better start —Deb may be stalled in traffic."

"She seems to have something on her mind lately, have you noticed?" Beth looked over her shoulder to make sure their fourth member wasn't on the horizon.

Chris said through a mouthful of donut, "She's in a lot of pain all the time from her tumor."

Ada frowned. "With all those pills she takes, it's a wonder she can even think straight. You don't suppose she's planning to jump ship and join another group?"

"I doubt it," Beth said, twisting her faux pearls around her index finger. "The only way members have ever left Devious Divas is feet first."

The women cackled like cage-free hens, and other patrons turned to stare.

Ada rustled her papers. "Okay, this is Chapter Five of *Death For Hire*.' Oh, wait—here comes Debra."

Hobbling faster than usual, Debra dropped her portfolio and purse onto the table. "Sorry, girls—had to pick up a prescription. Too many people had the same idea." After supplying herself with coffee and a donut she eased into her chair, but didn't look ready to take out her pen and write comments on Ada's story.

"Shall we begin?" Ada said pointedly.

Debra, midway through a sip of coffee, waved her free hand and swallowed. "Listen, girls, I had a great idea. I want to treat you all to a weekend in Mexico for my birthday."

"Oh, my!" Ada dropped her pen. "That's awfully extravagant of you, Deb."

"Your birthday's in April?" Beth said.

Chris bounced in her chair. "What a lovely idea. Where in Mexico?"

Debra's eyes sparkled as she described her plan to fly them first class to Guaymas and take them on a picnic to the island of Algodón. "It's about an hour's boat ride from the beach where *Catch-22* was filmed. Did any of you see the movie or the set?" She gazed across the room as if she could picture it now.

Looking in the same direction, Ada noticed a young man with red hair loitering as if he were about to steal a book. Her hand went to her throat. "I haven't been to Mexico since a thief snatched my gold chain right off my neck." She leaned forward, lowering her voice. "Don't look now—but that guy with the frizzy red hair looks just like him. I know it couldn't be, but it still gives me PTSD."

Beth and Chris looked anyway, but the man had disappeared behind a book display.

"It's silly to judge a whole country by one bad apple," Chris said. "I'm sure we won't have any problems, especially since we're not going by road."

The ladies agreed that as they were retired and their schedules were delightfully flexible, the weekend after next would be peachy for all of them to fly down to Guaymas.

Debra told Lance about her plan to take her friends to Mexico for her farewell party, neglecting to mention it would also be *their* farewell party. She bought four first-class plane tickets, while Lance booked Joey a coach seat on the same flight.

Debra was so thrilled with the brilliant way she'd worked everything out, she almost forgot her pain for a whole five minutes.

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The Devious Divas arrived at Guaymas' legendary Hotel Playa de Cortez in time to salute the sunset with margaritas. Next morning they breakfasted on fresh fruit, croissants and coffee, then proceeded to the dock where their gourmet picnic lunches, beer and champagne had been loaded onto a canopied launch. Giggling as if they'd already sampled the alcohol, they helped themselves clamber aboard by grabbing onto Enrique, the skipper.

In Debra's eyes the boat danced across the turquoise water, and the towering fingers of Isla Algodon's majestic Organ Pipe Cactus beckoned a welcome. What a divine spot for crossing to the next life in the company of beloved friends!

As they neared the island, a series of random flashes like sunlight on metal caught her eye, coming from where the cactus met the beach. No doubt Joey was setting up for action.

Ada decided there was time for one more beer. "Let's drink a toast to our dear, generous Debra for a marvelous idea."

"To Debra!" Ada, Beth, and Chris raised their Tres Equis cans—but the beer never touched their lips.

The boat lurched.

The motor screeched.

The craft and its passengers levitated two feet straight up.

Everyone clung to the nearest piece of boat and held their breath.

Chris peeked over the side and squealed. "Oo! I don't think that's a whale."

Stupefied looks were exchanged as everyone labored to grasp why they were balanced crosswise upon an object about as long as the boat. It was constructed of riveted metal plates, with a turret-like protrusion which had become wedged against the launch's midsection.

The top of the turret burst open, releasing a nauseating stench of sweat, sewage, and tortillas—followed by a grubby face with viper eyes and a twisted mouth spitting guttural words ending with *gringos*—followed by a machete.

Debra understood instantly it must be one of those narco-submersibles from Colombia that Joey had mentioned, delivering cocaine to the notorious Sinaloa drug cartel in Guaymas. She joined hands with Ada, Beth and Chris. Enrique took a flying leap overboard, creating a wake of foam as he churned frantically toward the island.

The filthy drug runner looked as if he'd be good with a machete. Debra hoped it was sharp. She wondered if Joey could see what was happening from the island, and what he'd do when his targets didn't show up.

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Lance trusted Joey's word that his beloved sister's desperate wish had been granted as promised, and that a separate marine burial would not be necessary. Asking no questions, he gave the hit man a \$1000 bonus for a job well done.

A fortnight after Debra's demise, relaxing on his new ostrich-skin sofa with a dish of chocolate-covered Nigerian locusts, Lance dialed up his favorite TV show, *Crime Calendar*. This week's unsolved mystery concerned a twenty-foot canopied launch that whale watchers had sighted adrift in the Gulf of California.

Aboard were the decapitated remains of four elderly women, stripped of valuables and identification, deceased for about two weeks. The boat's skipper was not found. Pirates were suspected of having committed the murders, and the public was warned to be extremely cautious and well armed when boating off the coast of Sonora.

Lance wondered about the coincidence of the four women and Joey being in Guaymas around the presumed time of the killings, but he couldn't imagine a lone hit man doing that kind of damage. Shrugging, he turned to mentally spending the \$3 million that would tide him over pending the official death certification.

Lance had long believed he could write better mysteries than his sister's, and he couldn't wait to prove it. Quitting his job as a phlebotomist, he built an elegant writing den lined with recycled saguaro ribs. His first crime novel, dedicated to Debra, was entitled "The Ultimate Plot."

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