

Dead and Kicking

The Harry Russo Diaries, volume 1

By Lisa Emme

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To my son, Quinn
You are my greatest creation
This is just a book.

And to my big brother, Scott
For inspiring me with your
Strength and courage
And reminding me that
There's no time to waste.
This is me, throwing off the bowlines.

Chapter One



"Not that one," Gran said with an exaggerated sigh as I held up one dress and then another. "Not that one either." The offending dresses joined the growing pile of rejects on the bed.

"This is ridiculous," I replied. "This whole thing is ridiculous." I stomped back to my closet to try again. I mentally tried on one outfit after another, the hangers zinging back and forth along the rod, as I attempted to find something that would pass Gran's inspection. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this."

"Don't get your panties in a twist. It's just a coffee date, not an arranged marriage."

"It's not even a date! It's an ambush." Zing, zing, zing, the hangers continued to fly back and forth. Finally my hand fell on a cute, little sun dress, paired with a sweater to keep away the autumn chill, and it would do. "That's it. It's this one, or I'm not going."

Gran squinted at the dress, a look of distaste on her face. "That's the best you can do? Why is it that everything you own makes you look like some sort of hippy school marm?"

"They do not!" I replied, crossing my arms in front of me. "I have eclectic taste. That's all."

"Eclectic taste? That's just a fancy-schmancy way to say weird. If you're ever going to catch a man, you have to do a better job of

advertising the wares.” Gran’s hands sculpted a much more voluptuous figure in the air than mine would ever be. At five foot eight inches with short, dirty blonde hair, I don’t exactly cut the most lady-like figure. Throw in the fact I have apples rather than melons (Gran’s words not mine) and my jeans don’t swish when I walk (“you can see daylight between those gams”) and my figure is probably better described as ‘boyish’.

“Advertise? Catch a man? Did you ever think that maybe I don’t want a man in my life right now? I’m twenty-three, not some old maid you know.” After pulling the dress on, I gave it a twirl in the mirror, liking the way the circular skirt swirled out around my knees. “I still can’t believe I let you talk me into this ridiculous set up. The guy doesn’t even know me. Even if we do bump into each other at the coffee shop, what makes you think we’ll hit it off?”

“He doesn’t know you *yet*. That’s why you need to bump into him. I mean *really* bump into him. Spill your coffee on him or something. Give him a chance to get to know you. It will make a great story to tell my great-grandbabies.” Gran was a big fan of the old movies where the woman and the man would meet in some cutesy manner and fall head over heels. She was determined I should have my own ‘meet-cute’.

“Great-grandbabies?? Oh no, that’s it. I’m not going.” I collapsed on the bed, a hanger sticking me in the ribs.

“Angharad Grainne Russo, you promised me you would do it.”

That’s right, my name is Angharad. It’s the kind of name that makes people chuckle and say ‘what were your parents thinking?’ I can’t even blame them since my mom died bringing me into this world and my dad is a mystery she took to her grave. No, my mouthful of a moniker is all Gran’s fault. And, since I know you are probably wondering, it’s pronounced An-HAR-ad GRAW-nya ROO...well, I think you can get the rest. Can you blame me if I prefer to be called Harry?

“Alright, alright. One week. One week of hanging out at the coffee shop for one hour a day just to ‘meet cute’ your idea of Mr. Right-for-Me, then that’s it.”

I grabbed my navy cardigan and headed out the door. Gran didn’t move fast enough and I passed through her less than corporeal body. Dead seven years and still bossing me around. Oh, that’s right, I guess I hadn’t mentioned that part yet. I’m like the kid in that old Bruce Willis movie. I see dead people.

Growing up in a community of witches, being the kid that sees ghosts, isn’t exactly the strangest thing, but it’s still considered pretty weird. And that’s even including Meryl Doncaster whose hair used to change colour every time she sneezed, at least until she hit puberty and started to get her gift of camouflage under control.

I was the kid that knew everyone's secrets. Ghosts are terrible gossips, especially ones that know there is a medium in their midst that can pass along a message. Witches can be real bitches when they die. I didn't pass along half the things they said to me. Some things are just better left unsaid.

Gran was a very powerful hedge witch herself and although there hadn't been a medium in the community for years, she did her best to see that I learned how to control my gift. This meant that I had to learn the rituals of banishment and summons, in that order of course, it wouldn't do to summon a spirit and then not be able to get rid of it. I have never actually summoned a ghost, other than when I first learned how to do it. Ghosts just sort of find me.

I'm also pretty good with plants. I can grow just about anything, anywhere. That's why I started up my little shop, Contain Yourself, here in town, taking my green thumb to the masses, helping them grow flowers, veggies, and yes, the occasional medicinal marijuana plant, in eco-friendly containers. I actually started as an assistant when the shop was still Mrs. Potts' Flowers, but a year ago Mrs. P decided to slow down and semi-retire, so I bought the business. I wouldn't say she has slowed down much though; she still works in the shop every day. I usually just handle inventory and some of the deliveries.

Delivering flowers is a great way to put my strange gift to some use. Lots of flowers get

delivered to funerals and hospitals and where there's death, there's quite often a messed up spirit wondering what the hell happened. More often than not, I just lay down the 4-1-1, point them to the proverbial light and send them on their way. Every so often though, there is something holding them back, preventing them from making the transition.

Ghosts need energy to manifest. They can do this by siphoning off the excess energy that surrounds every living thing, including the loved ones they left behind. Electrical energy can also be used, which explains why ghosts are much more prevalent now than they were a hundred years ago. Unfortunately ghosts are usually drawn to their old lives, haunting their families, drawing the energy they need to exist from the ones they love, inadvertently harming them. Grief can weigh you down, but not as much as when a spirit is sucking the life force right out of you. I do what I can to help out. I like to think of it as community service.

Which reminded me; I had a stop to make on the way to the coffee shop. With that in mind, I headed down to the shop to pick up the arrangement of flowers I had readied earlier in the day.

Jubilee 'just call me Juba' Daniels had lived in the same two-bedroom bungalow almost his entire life. The last twenty-five years of which he had spent with his second wife Millie. Juba was the cutest, little old man I'd ever met. Standing

about 5'2" on his tip toes, he looked like a little, black Santa Claus with his big round belly and curly white beard. His beard was a real contrast with his dark, dark skin. He told me once he came from Senegal and his skin was so dark because his mother had dipped him in an inkwell to ward off evil spirits. The most memorable thing about Juba Daniels though, wasn't his dark skin or his white hair, it was his smile. You have never seen a happier, more genuine smile. It lit up his entire face from the dimple in his chin to the twinkle in his eye, and he was always smiling, especially when he talked about his wife Millie.

Every week like clockwork, Juba came into the flower shop to pick up a bouquet of cut flowers for 'his Millie'. Every week until last week that is, when instead of coming into the shop to buy flowers, he came to ask my help. Of course he was dead by that point, died in his sleep from a heart attack. Not a bad way to go I guess, except it was unexpected, like death often is, and he had a few loose ends he needed tied up.

Juba had a son from his first marriage, and as Juba put it, he was a real piece of work. Juba had tried to do his best with the boy, but his first wife had run off with a banker and took the boy with her when he was only five. After that, Juba and his son had sporadic contact and eventually the boy grew up and wanted nothing to do with his father or his father's new wife. At least not until the gentrification phenomenon hit the

neighbourhood and property prices started to sky rocket. Suddenly Neville Daniels, who hadn't amounted to much (unless being a meth-head counted), became very interested in his dear old dad and specifically his dad's health.

Worried his son might try and cheat poor Millie out of her estate, Juba had gone to a lawyer and written up a will, but thinking he still had plenty of time left on this Earth, he hadn't mentioned it to Millie. That's where I came in, and from the sound of things, I was just in time.

The front door was open when I arrived at the tidy, little house. From inside I could hear a man's raised voice.

"There ain't no will old lady, that means I gets half. You pays or you get out!" The angry voice obviously meant to intimidate.

"I don't have that kind of money," Millie replied quietly. "I'm sure we can come to some sort of settlement though. Your father would have..."

"I don't give no damn what my father thought. I want my money. Don't you go holding out on me."

I stepped into the house and called out. "Hello? Mrs. Daniels? Millie? It's me, Harry."

"Who are you? What are you doing in here?" Neville came out the kitchen door and into the living room, a scowl on his face. Despite being over forty, he was dressed like a teenage 'gangsta' in baggy jeans and an oversized T-shirt. He had accessorized the winning combo with a big silver chain with a large letter 'N' dangling on

it. Talk about a stereotype. "Get out of here white bitch."

"Harry, is that you?" Millie followed Neville out of the kitchen looking relieved.

I decided to ignore Neville. "It's me, Millie, and I have something for you, in honour of Juba." I held out the big bouquet of flowers I had put together. "One last bunch. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you dear. I should go put them in some water." Millie took the bouquet and headed back towards the kitchen.

"I'll come with you," I replied. I started to follow Millie, brushing past Neville.

"Hey bitch. I was talking to you." He reached out and grabbed my arm. "I told you get out. I've got some business here still."

As soon as his hand touched my arm, I stopped and reached across with my other hand to grab his thumb, flexing it back and forcing him to let go.

"Don't touch me asshole," I said, keeping my voice steady and low. I pulled his thumb back farther until he cried out. He twisted away, trying to free himself but I just followed his movement until I had his arm behind his back, his thumb pulled up at a painful angle. "Millie, maybe you should take the flowers to the kitchen."

When she was gone, I kicked out Neville's shin causing him to fall to his knees. With his arm still twisted behind his back I leaned in close and quietly said, "Listen closely. You are going to

leave this house and not come back. If I hear that you have been hassling Millie, I will be back and I will be bringing the police. I'm sure they would be thrilled to speak to a tweaker like you." I pulled on Neville's arm forcing him back up to his feet and marched him to the front door where I pushed him out, releasing his thumb with a painful jerk just to get my message across. I slammed the door and locked it just as Millie returned with a vase and the flowers.

"I'm afraid your stepson had to leave," I said.

"He's not going to be happy about that. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Don't worry Millie, Juba made sure you were taken care of."

Millie smiled sadly. "My Juba always took good care of me, but he didn't leave a will."

"But he did," I replied. "He probably just forgot to mention it to you." This was the hard part. Getting the information I needed to Millie without having to say her dead husband told me. "I remember eight months or so ago he came into the flower shop one day and he mentioned he had been to the lawyer. Are you sure he didn't leave a will somewhere in the house?"

"I don't think so. He never mentioned it to me." Millie's face looked hopeful.

"Where would Juba have hidden something important? Is there any special hiding place he might have used? Did you check there?"

“Well, I....no, I didn’t think to look because I didn’t know there was anything to find.”

“Maybe we should look around now? I’ll help.”

After a few false starts, Millie finally thought to check in the old cigar box on the top shelf in the hall closet where I knew, thanks to Juba, the will would be. She was so happy she was in tears, especially when she learned she wouldn’t have to move. I waited while she called the lawyer on the document and made an appointment to go see him that very afternoon. The lawyer even offered to send a car to pick her up so I felt better when it was time to leave knowing that she was in good hands. The last thing I saw before I headed off to my coffee ‘date’ was Jubilee Daniels sending me a little salute before he faded into the light. Not a bad day’s work.

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