

DEAD GIRLS DON'T WEAR DIAMONDS

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Chapter One

In the final weeks of her pregnancy, my sister Libby inexplicably took to wearing an enormous tie-dyed shirt that magnified her belly with a nauseating swirl of pink and green that vaguely depicted a pair of lovesick whales.

When she waddled into my kitchen at Blackbird Farm one crisp afternoon in October, I said, "Paint a peace sign on your stomach, and you'd pass for the Partridge Family bus."

"How about if I just give you half a peace sign?" she asked, plunking a plastic bag from Home Depot on my kitchen counter and making a beeline for the pantry. She returned with the box of assorted Godivas I'd been saving for a crisis. "When we're pregnant, the Blackbird women all get as big as Guernsey cows. Is there any danger of that, by the way? Does the gangster have you hanging onto the headboard for dear life yet?"

"Not that it's any of your business," I said. "But no."

"Darn. I don't even get vicarious sex anymore."

She sat down at the kitchen table and tore the gold cord off the candy box, and I opened her plastic bag to see what she'd brought. Over my shoulder, I said, "And he's not a gangster."

She put both her Birkenstocks onto an adjacent chair. “I thought the two of you had broken up. Now I see he’s back—and with reinforcements, no less. What are all those men doing out at the barn?”

“Working on an idea.”

That got her attention, and she looked up from the Godiva box with wide eyes. “Dear heaven,” she said. “What is it this time? Another tattoo parlor? A motorcycle shop? Or maybe something classy like a strip joint?”

“He doesn’t run any strip joints. He thinks there’s a way for Blackbird Farm to make some income by growing grass.”

Libby looked shocked. “Oh, Nora!

“Not marijuana! Lawn grass, for heaven sake! God knows I could use the money.”

I was still scraping every penny to pay the bill left to me by our tax-evading parents who were currently avoiding extradition while traipsing around Brazil in search of the ultimate pina colada as I struggled to keep the ancestral homestead out of the hands of land developers eager to turn two hundred years of family history into an outlet mall.

But of course Libby didn’t want to discuss anything as mundane as financial matters. My dear sister could easily be mistaken for a complete ninny, if she didn’t love her family to excess and prove it by way of an occasional selfless act and frequent butting into business other than her own. She frowned prettily over the selection of chocolate truffles. “Well, I was much happier when you weren’t seeing Sonny Corleone.”

“I’m not ‘seeing’ him,” I said.

“Your association with him is doing damage to our family reputation.”

I laughed out loud. “First our parents blew our inheritance and fled the country to avoid paying their taxes. Now we’ve learned they stole money from their best friends to make their escape in style. How much worse can our reputation get?”

“Well, you know what I mean,” Libby said, unapologetic. “At least they’re not connected to organized crime.”

“What will it take to terminate this discussion right now? And why are you bringing me plaster of paris?”

She popped a truffle into her mouth. “I need your help.”

I watched my sister lean back, close her eyes and savor the chocolate with bliss. Okay, maybe she deserved a break. Libby had buried her second husband just a few months earlier. But true to form, Libby managed to put all that unpleasantness out of her mind—at least, that’s the appearance she worked at keeping up--and seemed to be enjoying her pregnancy even if the father of the baby had been shot dead at a high society wedding. Of course, some of us secretly suspected that Ralph’s death was the result of his own suicide mission after he learned he was going to be a father to one of Libby’s demonic offspring.

So it was with the foreknowledge that my sister might require some service I was going to find highly unpleasant that I asked uneasily, “What kind of help do you need?”

“I want to do a belly cast.”

“A what?”

“We’re going to take the plaster and make a cast of my stomach.”

We both looked at her stomach, and I said, “I don’t think you brought enough plaster.”

“Nonsense. It’ll be a work of art. Or I can use it as a fruit bowl.”

Her sixteen-year-old son Rawlins chose that moment to come out of the downstairs powder room. He’d been using the mirror to examine his new nose ring, which nearly got lost amongst the eyebrow studs, lip post and the multiple hoops in both his large ears. He slouched into the kitchen chair furthest from his mother and proceeded to sulk on general principal.

I said, “Rawlins, would you like some hot chocolate? I’m going to make some for your mother and hope it brings her back to sanity.”

“May the Force be with you,” he said.

“Rawlins,” Libby said, “tell your aunt Nora what you’re doing in school these days.”

Rawlins didn’t answer. He picked at the tablecloth.

“What’s going on in school?” I asked. “Are you playing basketball this year?”

“Nuhuh,” he mumbled and began to gnaw at his thumbnail.

Libby gave me a helpless look. Libby liked the idea of having lots of children, but she didn’t cope terribly well with the houseful she already had. Her baby would make five children by at least three different fathers, who were either dead or missing in action. Like all Blackbird women, she had bad luck with husbands.

She said to me, “Do you have a plastic bucket?”

“Under the sink.”

“Great. I’ll mix the plaster.”

She began rummaging under the sink while I got a quart of milk from the refrigerator and some cocoa from the pantry. Then we heard a truck in the loop of

driveway behind the house, and an instant later the door slammed. Our younger sister Emma strode into the kitchen in boots and riding breeches. The three of us were tall with auburn hair and very pale skin, but Emma looked like Barbarella with a punk haircut.

She said, "I love the smell of testosterone in the morning!"

"Go wipe your feet," I said automatically. "You've been riding horses."

"No, I haven't," she said, and plunked a large, filthy puppy on the counter.

"There. I brought you a present."

"This is a joke, right?"

It was either a very large puppy or a young water buffalo. It had matted black hair and slightly crossed blue eyes, a blunt Newfoundland's nose and white toes on his enormous front paws. Emma pinned the squirming beast firmly on the counter. "You need a dog, Nora. You shouldn't be living out here all alone."

"I don't want a dog. I don't need a dog. I certainly don't want a dog on my kitchen counter!"

"Try him out. You'll get to like him."

"It's not a question of liking," I said, trying to keep the hysteria out of my voice.

"I'm too busy to take care of a dog properly. Take him back where you got him."

"Look at this face!"

I looked at the puppy's face. I'll admit he was cute. He had floppy ears that reminded me of my mother's cousin Cuss. But I didn't need a dog to make myself feel safe. Certainly not one that looked like he might grow into a marauding grizzly that overturned garbage cans and minivans for sport. I said, "Take him out of here immediately."

With a sigh Emma handed the puppy to Rawlins and plucked a pickle from the array of sandwich ingredients I had spread out on the counter. I guessed she'd given up smoking again. "Why are all those men out in the barn? Is Mick planning some sort of assault on your virtue with those troops?"

"We were just discussing that," said Libby, pouring white powder into the bucket of water. "Rawlins, dear, wouldn't you like to go play with the puppy outside?"

"No," he said, tussling with the delighted dog. "I'm old enough to hear about Aunt Nora's sex life."

"I have no sex life," I assured him.

Emma looked into Libby's bucket. "What are you doing?"

"You're going to help me make a belly cast. Where have you been this morning?"

Emma pulled a beer from the refrigerator despite the clock clearly stating the time was not quite noon yet. "Shopping."

"In those clothes?"

"For horses," she said, twisting off the cap with a practiced yank. She always managed to look stunning, even with a smear of mud across one of her perfect cheekbones. Emma wore dirt with as much aplomb as an eighteenth century French courtesan displayed her beauty spots, and men fell at her feet even when she had manure on her boots. She said, "I've decided to go into the training business for myself. I bought a jumper this morning. Can I rent some space in your barn?"

"You'll have to get in line," said Libby, already elbow deep in plaster. "She's letting Mr. Abruzzo do something out there."

“Yeah, I know all about that.” Emma dug into her pocket and came up with a grubby business card. She tossed it onto the counter. “Look what I found down at the gas station yesterday.”

She drank her beer while Libby leaned over and peered at the card.

“Oh, my God,” said Libby. She read aloud, “The Marquis de Sod.”

“You’re going into the sod business?” Emma asked me.

I snatched the card off the counter and read it for myself. “He said he was only going to grow grass!”

“And sell it to rich people who want instant lawns.”

“Oh, Lord,” Libby said, “that man has no sense of propriety, no sense of—of—“

“It’s not a bad idea, if you ask me. But that name, Nora,” Emma said, cocking an eyebrow at me, “isn’t exactly your style.”

“Catchy, though,” Libby admitted before going back to the plaster.

I threw the card onto the table. “I’m not a part of that business. It’s his idea. He’s just leasing fields from me!”

“Well, everybody is town assumes you’re partners.”

“We’re not!”

Emma’s grin broadened. “Everybody thinks you own the used car lot, too.”

Libby moaned. “A Blackbird reduced to selling old cars!”

I’d found myself entangled with Michael “The Mick” Abruzzo about five months earlier when he and Rory Pendergast conspired to buy some of Blackbird farm to start one of Michael’s dubious businesses. Despite his building Mick’s Muscle Cars just a stone’s throw from my front porch, we’d hit it off, if I could put it so mildly, except on

the subject of his wheeling and dealing. Not to mention the shadier aspects of his life which I admit I found both frightening and annoyingly magnetic.

Safe to say I didn't care for the various ways he made his living. Michael argued that I was being unnecessarily righteous about finances when I really should have been searching for every possible source of income to hang onto my admittedly ramshackle inheritance. If I wanted to keep Blackbird Farm, he said, I ought to be ready to make sacrifices. My job as a society columnist for the Philadelphia *Intelligencer* barely paid me enough to live on, let alone help with my tax problem. But most of Michael's ideas seemed to involve the sacrifice of too much dignity for me.

This grass-growing venture was business as usual for Michael. He didn't care if he looked ridiculous as long as he made money. Except he wanted to use Blackbird Farm again to make it happen.

The Marquis de Sod indeed.

The man in question appeared at the kitchen door just then. He was six-foot-four with a well-used face and incendiary blue eyes, not to mention the kind of shoulders most women dream about clawing during the throes of passion. "Lunch ready yet?"

I picked up a knife and sent him a look.

"What?" he asked. "What did I do?"

"We'll talk later," I vowed. "Lunch will be ready in fifteen minutes."

"She's a terrible cook, you know," Libby volunteered, laboring over the bucket.

"Usually she only eats food that microwaves in plastic."

"Careful," I said. "I'll find another use for that plaster."

Michael grinned at my other sister. "Hey, Emma."

“Hey, yourself, Mick,” she said back, and they shared a look that communicated something amusing in the secret language Emma had with men.

“That your dog?”

“I tried to give him to Nora, but she’s stubborn. You want him?”

He laughed. He’d been the first to bring a puppy around for me, and I assumed he was still trying to find a home for the gangling Great Dane he’d procured somewhere in New Jersey. “No, thanks,” he said.

“You gonna take me for a ride on your motorcycle later?”

“Nope,” he said. “You’re too scary for me.”

“Nora scared you off, too, I notice, but that didn’t last.”

“Not for long,” he agreed, and turned his grin back on me. I felt as if he’d trained the guidance system of a nuclear missile in my direction.

It surprised me that any man would pass up Emma, who oozed willing sex appeal from every pore, in favor of anyone else. She was thinner, bolder and more available than I would ever be. I’d been widowed two years ago, and still hadn’t found a way to understand what had happened to my life let alone trust any member of the male persuasion. But Michael had made his choice, and from the looks of things, it was going to be very difficult to steer him off-course.

And the wobbly sensation in my knees every time I got close to him was pretty hard to ignore, too.

He said, “We need somebody to sit behind the wheel of the tractor while we tinker with the engine. Any takers?”

“Not us,” said Emma. “We about to hear Nora’s side of your breakup. Take Rawlins.”

“Okay,” he said peacably. Then, to Rawlins, “That hardware in your face help you communicate with Mars?”

“No,” Rawlins said.

“Can you drive?”

“Yes.”

Michael jerked his head towards the barn. “Then hustle.”

To his mother’s amazement, Rawlins obeyed with alacrity, hitching up his loose jeans and trailing Michael out of the house at a trot, puppy in his arms.

“Okay,” said Emma when the three of us were alone. “Tell us everything.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” I said, going back to stacking Kaiser rolls with layers of capicola, provolone and other Italian delights, as instructed.

“They’re not sleeping together,” Libby reported. “I got that much out of her.”

Emma grimaced. “How can you resist, Nora? That man is so hot for you!”

“There are other issues,” I replied.

“Yeah,” Libby chimed in. “In addition to his very tacky businesses, there’s his family. And of course the little matter of his jail record.” She held up a handful of wet plaster for me to see. “Think this is ready?”

“It’s still lumpy. He was a kid at the time. Younger than Rawlins.” I was determined to avoid discussing the complexities of the Abruzzo crime family and my almost rock-solid conviction that Michael had no contact with them. “He grew up differently than we did.”

“Uhuh,” said Emma, the youngest and therefore the sister who hadn’t been raised during the luxury years. “He knows how to make a buck when he needs it.”

Libby sighed and went back to mixing. “Filthy lucre. It’s too bad we’re poor now, isn’t it?”

“Get you,” I said, glad to change the subject. “How was Disney World?”

She didn’t take offense. “The children were having a hard time getting over Ralph’s death. For that matter, so was I. And in another month, I’ll have this baby to take care of, so we need to be well-rested.” Typical for Libby, she avoided further discussion of unpleasant business by throwing up a diversion. She said, “You’ll understand when you’re a mother. Emma, don’t you think it’s time Nora had a baby, too?”

I dropped my knife. “Now wait a damn minute—“

Emma said, “Does my opinion count?”

Libby said, “Open that jar of Vaseline while I take off my shirt. Nora, you told me just a few months ago how much you regretted not having children with Todd.”

“I said that in a weak moment.”

“That’s usually when instinct kicks in. Hormones cause a chemical reaction in your brain to come up with the idea just in the nick of time, you know.” She began rinsing the plaster from her hands under the tap. “You’re not getting any younger. Just think, if you got pregnant soon, we could raise the children together. I could babysit while you go to your parties. I think I should do this without the bra, don’t you?”

Emma said, “God help the next generation.”

“We know you, Nora.” Libby dried her hands on a tea towel. “You aren’t as calm and reasonable as you pretend. You’re just as likely to be impetuous as any of us. I’m

only afraid you're going to suddenly make up your mind to have a baby, and Mr. Abruzzo will be too convenient to resist."

Emma muttered, "I can't believe she's resisting at all."

"Well, I'm genuinely worried," Libby concluded and began wrestling out of her shirt. "Do we really want a union with the Abruzzo family?"

"She can't marry him, if that's what you're blathering about." Emma looked into the extra large jar of Vaseline and warily sniffed the contents. "She's a Blackbird. If she marries him, he'll die."

It was true. Family legend had it that all Blackbird women married rogues who died young. My sisters and I were just the latest in a long line of Blackbird widows who sent regular flower deliveries to gravesides. And although Libby's husband Ralph appeared to have contributed to his own demise, there were some opinions that he'd still be alive if he hadn't married a Blackbird.

Emma said to Libby. "I like Mick. I don't want him dead. But if she wants a kid, I think he'd be a good choice."

"Well, he's obviously got sturdy genes," Libby agreed, as if I had suddenly disappeared in a puff of smoke. "And I suppose she could give her children nose jobs for their sixteenth birthdays. But if she needs a father, why not consider somebody else? What about that Jamie Scaithe? Or Hadley Pinkham? They'd make darling babies."

"Can I get a word in edgewise?" I asked.

"Hadley Pinkham is gay," Emma said. "And Jamie lives on cocaine."

Libby finally got her tee shirt off and stood in my kitchen wearing nothing more than an enormous brassiere over a pair of drawstring pants and her Birkenstocks.

“Hadley’s gay? How astonishing. I’m not good at figuring out that sort of thing. But I’ll get better with practice.” She peered into the box of chocolates again, letting her last remark float suggestively in the air.

Over her head, Emma and I exchanged glances.

I said, “What do you mean? You’ll get better with practice?”

“Nothing serious.” Libby waved her hand. “Sometimes you need a man, that’s all.”

“Are you looking for another husband?”

“I’d rather catch a cold than another husband. No, I need a Lamaze coach.”

“I told you I’d do it,” I said. “I’ll be your coach.”

Libby shook her head. “A sister isn’t right.”

“Why not, for crying out loud?”

“It takes a man. I know these things. Can you help me unsnap? I have a lifetime of childbearing knowledge stored up. I know what kind of coach I need.” Libby continued to struggle to reach her bra hooks. “I’m determined to do everything right this time. After all, this might be my last child, so—“

“Might be?” Emma repeated.

“--so I want everything to be perfect. The whole family will be there. Well, except for Ralph, of course. And we’re videotaping this time. The twins are recording the birth for a class project.”

“What class?” Emma demanded. “Who encourages thirteen-year-old boys to videotape their own mother in childbirth?”

“Well, they won’t actually see much,” Libby went on. “I’ll be underwater.”

I dropped the wooden spoon.

“Underwater with incense. It’s very relaxing. Next week I’m having the incense specially mixed to match my pheromones. And, see? I’ve already started wearing my magnets and crystals.” From inside the depths of her bra, she pulled a packet filled with colorful stones.

“Where,” I demanded, “are you getting these crazy ideas?”

“I’ve been seeing this wonderful duenna.—she’s not exactly a midwife yet, but she’s hoping to get certification soon. She’s got a lovely Jacuzzi in her back yard.”

“Oh, my God,” Emma said.

“What’s wrong with a nice, sterile hospital?” I asked. “And lots of drugs? Remember all those drugs you took when you had Lucy?”

“You don’t understand,” Libby cried. “Giving birth can be a magical experience wherein the mother bonds not just with the newly born, but with her entire family.”

I put my hands on her shoulders and turned her around to face me. “Libby, your hormones have made you certifiable. Let me go with you to Lamaze class. You need somebody sensible by your side.”

“No, you should experience childbirth for yourself first.” Libby reached out and took my hands earnestly in hers. “Dear Nora. Trust me on this. Besides, I’d feel peculiar with a woman coaching me. I like panting with a man.”

The hot chocolate boiled over.

“Now,” said Libby, “who’s going to smear me with Vaseline?”

“Speaking of unpleasant tasks,” said Emma with admirable self control, “have you heard about Flan Cooper?”

“What about him?”

“You won’t believe it.” Emma drank another slug of beer.

I began mopping up the puddles on the stove, and Emma said, “Last night his wife Laura drowned herself in the family pool. He had to pull her out himself. She’s dead.”

All the sisterly squabbling evaporated in an instant, and some force of nature sucked all the air out of the room. I sat down hard on a kitchen chair.

Death has a way of overcoming me. I’m not physically fragile, or even especially squeamish. But terrible emotion can seize my heart and drain all the blood out of my brain. The doctors tell me it’s all psychological, and it wouldn’t happen anymore if I’d just start seeing a nice, calm therapist. But the therapists cost money, which was in short supply for a person living in a two hundred year old farmhouse with a slate roof and plumbing installed in a previous century. So I faint a lot.

“Laura Cooper is dead?” Libby repeated, sounding faraway.

“A shocker, huh?” said Emma. “Suicide. I heard she tied one of those concrete garden gnomes to her ankles and jumped in the pool.”

Libby said, “Isn’t her hubby an old boyfriend of yours, Nora? I can’t believe he’d have a gnome in his garden.”

I put my head between my knees. “Yes. Flan.”

Emma instantly sounded contrite. “Oh, God, I forgot about that. I’m sorry, Nora. You okay?”

The gushing wave of blackness threatened to swirl up and overwhelm me. I couldn’t gather my breath.

“Flanders Cooper.” Libby’s voice sounded about six miles away. “Now there’s a man with good genes.”

“Shut up, Lib.” Emma ran cold water into a glass and brought it to me. “Nora?”

I sat up unsteadily, accepted the glass and tried to sip. But I couldn’t get my throat to function, and I choked on the water. Emma patted my back until I stopped coughing. When I finally managed a swallow, she eased the drinking glass out of my shaking hands.

In a moment, I croaked, “I saw them last night. She was fine. Laura was just fine.”

“You were at their house?” Libby asked.

Emma remembered. “They were having a party for Oliver, weren’t they? To celebrate his nomination for something or other? Were you there?”

I nodded.

Oliver Cooper was a millionaire several times over thanks to his long ownership of Cooper Aviation, the aircraft manufacturing company most famous for the Cooper Wolverine fighter jet. Oliver had been nominated by the President to serve as the next Secretary of Transportation. His family, pleased and proud, had thrown a party in his honor before the confirmation hearings began. It had been a joyous occasion. The hard-drinking, fun-loving Coopers threw open the doors of their family estate and blasted rock and roll music loud enough to make William Penn dance atop City Hall in Philadelphia.

Emma sat down beside me. “You talked to Laura?”

“Yes, around nine o’clock. She was—she was—“

“It’s okay.” Emma hugged me around the shoulders.

Libby shoveled around in her handbag and came up with her handkerchief.

When I could speak again, I said, “She can’t possibly have killed herself.”

“Why do you say that?” Emma asked. “What happened at the party?”