

A DELIA SANCHEZ MYSTERY

**HOW
TO SURVIVE
GHOSTS, CATS
& PSYCHOPATHS**

DIANA K.C. GILL

I dedicate this book to two extraordinary females: my mother, Karen Davis Clark, who taught me the language of cats, and my friend, Sassy, who has been my role model in facing health adversity with grace.



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How to Survive Ghosts, Cats and Psychopaths
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CHAPTER ONE

Would you believe my love for a house almost killed me? And I shouldn't have been surprised considering that the blood-red maple leaves trailing like blood splatter across the outside walkways were the first things I noticed upon my initial visit. Santa Ana winds, which were the culprit for the strewn maple leaves, had though no effect on the overwhelming smell of old paper permeating the interior, giving off the vibe of a cozy library stacked to the rafters with ancient leather-bound books. Everything about that house was different from all the other houses for sale that my cousin / best friend / real estate agent had thus far shown me. I felt instinctively as I walked around the home's interior, that it had substance, a *soul*. So, honestly, even if I had recognized any of the signs as portents of doom, I doubt I'd have taken a different path. I was a woman running from loss and grief, the kind only the enormity of one really huge risk, such as buying the Loring Mansion of Santa Clotilde, California, could possibly erase.

The first time I stood in the mansion's spacious front living room, a shiver of delight ran down my

spine and frustrated hope burned a hole in my heart as the Santa Ana whistled around the slate roof overhead. My *abuela* had called this wind the *Caliente aliento de Satanás* or ‘the hot breath of Satan’ for a good reason. My shiver turned to sweat as I wandered slowly amidst a crowd of other hopeful homebuyers, all of us attending the real estate open house, each of us hoping for a chance to catch this architectural butterfly.

That was when my cousin Dora stepped on my foot as she was trying to avoid being run over by a heavily made-up woman in Ferragamo pumps, who was carrying fabric swatches. I barely noticed the pain because the few rooms I’d already seen in the house were enough to convince me that I’d come home. Truly this place was triggering the kind of coveting I usually feel only for my *abuela*’s recipe for Mexican milk fudge. The deep honey-tone patina of the oak furniture (could that be real Stickley?) perfectly matched the eight-inch cornice trim between the walls and the ten-foot ceilings. I couldn’t help but notice the hand-troweled plaster walls, the Tudor-arched doorways, and the real hardwood flooring creaking beneath my feet. The interior was so beautiful that I almost couldn’t bear to look at it. Because, you see, I was hoping that if I failed to swoon over the 1920s masterpiece, I wouldn’t be so hurt when a different buyer snatched it away.

Dora’s expression was wary but speculative as she scanned the crowded room. Most of the crowd at the open house were couples, some young, some old, but all dressed impeccably, with both genders sporting

expensive scents emanating from designer leather shoes and handbags, and upscale perfumes and after-shave lotions that I guessed didn’t include knockoffs of Paco Rabanne.

Dora sniffed, narrowing her eyes, and I guessed that my plump cousin was comparing her own immaculate pumps, pantyhose, and powdered golden complexion with those of the other women. Dora and I were the only obvious Latinos in the White-looking crowd. Looking defiant, my cousin smoothed her black hair back toward the low chignon near the base of her neck. “This is the weirdest open house I’ve ever seen,” she hissed at me. “I’m not seeing any agents in this crowd.”

I rolled my eyes. “What does your conspiracy blogs say about that?”

Dora hissed back at me, “I’m just asking, *why* are we even here? The bungalow I wanted to show you is barely a block away. That’s where we’re supposed to be. Not in . . .” She looked up at the high ceilings festooned with spider webs. Her shudder was so theatrical I almost snorted. “. . . here.” Her right hand automatically moved upward, again smoothing loose hair strands back against her scalp. “What a dump!”

“Are you kidding me?!” I almost shouted, garnering startled glances. “Did you see this?” My gaze turned starry as, followed by Dora, I bulldozed through a knot of people so that we could study the mantelpiece of the massive fireplace.

I noticed an embarrassed-looking Dora mouthing ‘sorry’ to those I pushed past and reminded myself that

being curt with others was something I wanted to stop doing. My behavior I credit as a result of being a Los Angeles police officer for fifteen years. Taking charge, regardless of the feelings of others, was a deep-rooted trait by now. I had to admit, my take-charge attitude was also a way of protecting myself. By treating others impersonally, I shielded myself from them, keeping them from knowing who I'd become after seeing so much human frailty and evil on my job. This is a common enough way of life when you're a police officer, but I really had to face the fact that my life had changed. I retired from the force five years ago, so the time had come for me to adopt new ways of interacting with others.

"Sorry," I told an elderly couple whom I'd brushed past and who were looking offended. "It's a lovely house, isn't it?"

They both sniffed at me and turned away. Dora gave me half a smile. She knew that I was working on my public behavior. "Better," she said.

Meanwhile, my good arm rose to allow my fingers to stroke the old oak of the mantelpiece, hand-carved with gargoyles and cupids. "This place is *gorgeous*. Look at this craftsmanship." I let out a breath. "I bet it was hand-carved in England."

Dropping her volume even lower, Dora bore her eyes into mine. "Poker face, Delia. Poker face!"

I forced myself to stop caressing the quarter-sawn oak mantel. Mentally asking its forgiveness, I sniffed

dismissively, observing loudly, "Probably particle board."

"Waaaaaa! Waaaa!" again came the noise that I'd heard a few minutes earlier. I flinched. I'd convinced myself that the earlier sound had been an illusion. But no. An incredibly petulant cry filled the room. I'd almost demanded to know if an actual baby was on premises, but after a millisecond of considering this scenario, I jumped to a second conclusion. Ever since I was a child, I've been deathly afraid of only one thing, and it wasn't killers, pedophiles, or sadistic drug lords; I was afraid of cats. And this sound definitely came from a cat.

Oddly, this comforted me because a black mark against this house, with which I'd already fallen in love, was what I needed. I loudly cleared my throat to hide my panic, rounded on Dora, and hissed, "I thought you said the owner had died."

My cousin's eyes blinked the way that real estate agents are taught to blink: rapidly while assuming a blank stare as if your question's answer is tediously obvious. The beast chose then to make its appearance at the arched doorway leading to the back of the house. I gasped. Shielding my eyes, I steeled myself from the horror that its tail, whiskers, and imperious gaze triggered in me. I wasn't quick enough, though, to completely miss seeing that my adversary was an orange tabby with white paws. Walking stiffly as if past middle-age, the cat was still meowing, eyes creasing to slits, brow furrowing, and its mouth opening especially

wide as if protesting the cruel world. The resemblance of the cat's facial expression to a cranky human baby's which I'd initially thought to be the source of the sound was eerie.

I glared at Dora even as she went on the attack, saying, "Don't take that tone with me, Delia Sanchez!" Voice sharp and her round little body vibrating with annoyance, Dora stared me down while glaring up into my face. I was more than a foot taller than her. But, after a minute, my eyes dropped first. We'd been friends literally since birth (our moms were sisters who gave birth the same week), and no one knows how to whip me into shape like Dora does.

I've always thought that Dora was the one who would've made one hell of a cop. My cousin's intimidation skills were of the highest caliber. Like now when she waved her phone dangerously close to my face and said, "The listing says that the owner *has* passed, just as I mentioned. But you might remember, I also mentioned that the house had not been cleared of *her things*." She glared down again at the mobile's screen. "The listing says . . ." Her eyes widened in surprise. ". . . That can't really be the price, can it? I know Santa Clotilde is considered the sticks, but—"

"Things?" My eyebrows lifted as I stepped farther away from the creature. I, myself, hadn't worked as a Los Angeles police officer for almost two decades without learning how to inject suspicion into a single word. "Are there any more things like this one currently living here?"

Dora looked up from her phone screen as her perfectly outlined lipstick puckered. "Well . . .," she began but interrupted herself, nodding toward a blond couple who were moving proprietarily through the rooms, ducking between other house hunters.

She hissed, "Aren't they the hopeful buyers?" The two were murmuring between themselves while making rapid notes on their cell phones. Dora stopped glaring at them long enough to roll her eyes at me, renewing the unspoken kinship of love and blood between us. "Entitled much?" she stated drily.

I felt my shoulders slump and the arthritis in my injured arm flare. Yes, entitled. Multiply that by twenty other entitled buyers, and I didn't stand a chance. Obviously, none of these people had ever bought clothes from a sales rack or had to wait to buy groceries until the store marked down their soon-to-be-expired items. This was a BMW crowd while I was just a Hyundai gal. But even as my shoulders sagged in defeat, I resisted these interlopers who were trying to steal my house.

Because that is what it felt like: my house. For two reasons mainly. First, it's vintage appearance, which I adored. And then because of its location. It was set in the small town of Santa Clotilde, a city within Los Angeles County, California, but one that had never been so rich that it could afford to tear down the old to build new. An anachronism in Southern California, Santa Clotilde's obviously older homes and infrastructure gave it a faint "Back East" flavor, but one hybridized with palm-lined avenues. And while technically

within driving distance of the rest of my LA family, its constantly clogged freeway access made it ideal for my general goal of avoiding impromptu family visits.

Santa Clotilde would also be a pleasant change from my current neighborhood of Reseda by the Sepulveda Basin. I'd rented the apartment in Reseda seven years ago, before being wounded while on the job and retiring from the police force; before my mother's death; and before my childlike thirty-three-year-old brother, Jimmy, came to live with me after Mami died. Of the three, Jimmy living with me definitely had the most impact on my life.

Jimmy had always been my angel. Developmentally disabled since a medical mishap during birth, Jimmy was both my brother and the child I'd never had rolled into one. Disabled by a bullet that ended my career, I'd been so lost after quitting the police. I'd literally thought my life was over. Never married with no children, the police force had been my whole identity.

But, in the depths of my despair, Jimmy saved me. Every afternoon, he good-naturedly pushed me to do my physical therapy exercises while HGTV shows blared from the television. He was the one who got me hooked on vintage-house shows. He loved the before and after pictures. He said they were magic, and in the depths of my despair I saw his point. They *were* magic. They took damaged buildings and made them useful again. I loved those shows.

He gave me a reason to go on every day up until last May, when he died of an undiagnosed heart condition. I

know my two sisters and older brother always felt guilty that our Mami's will had 'stuck' me with Jimmy, but I'd felt privileged. His loss still hurt deeply, five months out, and my arm wasn't nearly as flexible now that I skip my exercises half the time.

I still watch the HGTV shows, though. Most of my days are spent doing just that, lying on the couch while flipping between television shows that deal with old houses or antiques. Now I was ready for an old home of my own, someplace to love and bring back to life. My purchase of an old home would be aided by the tidy, but not exorbitant, amount of malpractice money left over from Jimmy's trust and my own disability checks that I received monthly. All I needed now was an inspiring place from which to pursue my new path as a writer. Obviously, not just any place would do.

Anyway, these were the circumstances that led to, less than an hour ago, Dora and my walking in the historic residential and commercial district of Santa Clotilde with its modest 1960s office buildings and food trucks competing for parking spaces along Main Street. I'd felt something pull my gaze from across the street. I'd been admiring a busy café with its outside tables shaded by festive umbrellas against the backdrop of the snow-capped San Gabriel Mountains. I went from enjoying their multicolor cloths, which were being whipped around by the Santa Ana wind, to gazing up at the stately houses on the hillside above, where we were walking. That's when the house captured me. Literally! It seemed to possess my feet without my awareness,

without my choice. Despite the dry, hot breeze, I was already halfway up one long line of stone stairs set into the hillside, my cross-body purse bumping against my hip, before Dora's voice calling up to me registered in my brain: "Get back down here right this minute!" Dora's voice hadn't been loud, but it had been stern, like the time I'd borrowed her favorite pair of jeans when we were sixteen.

My path took me right past a 'For Sale' sign plastered with a vinyl banner reading "Open House!" and onward to the deep front portico of one particular house that seemed to tower over the rest of its neighbors. And like when we were teenagers, I didn't so much ignore Dora as tune her out like an unwanted radio station. I was already through the iron front door and striding through the timber-framed entry hall of the house by the time she caught up with me, her two-inch pumps clicking furiously on the stone flooring.

Shrugging, I stopped at the threshold to the living room where the stone floor transitioned to ten-inch-wide planks of antique oak. I scanned the room hungrily while covertly readjusting my right pants leg to cover the 9mm in my ankle holster, for which I have a concealed carry permit, just like any other law-abiding citizen. Bedazzled by the home's size and architectural grace hidden under ugly wallpaper, I walked to the middle of the living room, literally open-mouthed with wonder. Only partly was I aware of taking a sheet of paper and a pencil from one of the two men in dark business suits. The duo were sitting silently at a folding

table by the room's large leaded glass window that overlooked Main Street.

I filled out the paper handed to me in less than a minute. I assumed it was a market research sheet asking for my current credit score and what I'd budgeted for a home price. The younger of the two men dressed in dark business suits then plucked it from my hand as the sight of the vintage California tiles surrounding the firebox literally took my breath away. I stood frozen in the middle of the room, soaking it all in. The young blond couple was orbiting around me as if I were a co-track. "This is my do-over," I whispered over and over, my new mantra. Outside the winds had risen, whistling in the cracks of the slate-covered roof. I glared at my competitors for the house. I'd lost too much these last few years. I couldn't lose this house too. I refused to be the nice guy anymore. When I'd been on the police force, my kindness had been seen as a weakness, and I was mercilessly called 'Officer Bleeding Heart.' "But no, not today," I vowed silently.

After a few minutes, I began though to notice that the walls needed to be stripped and painted, the floors refinished, and probably the out-of-date plumbing pipes and electrical wiring replaced completely. Not to mention that the size of this house was certainly larger than what I'd been looking for.

Leaving Dora, I made a quick patrol of the house and noted two small bedrooms on the ground floor back by the kitchen, which were likely designed to accommodate live-in servants. Then there were six larger

bedrooms, all with elaborately tiled bathrooms en suite, on the second floor, which sported a stair landing large enough for a sofa and a reading lamp. And then above, on the third floor, was a massive loft area and a full bath. Odd, purpose-neutral rooms were squirreled away throughout the floor plan like hidden Easter eggs, making the house feel charmingly eccentric.

The house was, however, going to need some serious elbow grease and cash to fix up. I saw telltale signs that some DIY fanatic had started a couple dozen projects and simply walked away without completing them. Wallpaper hung limply off of walls where it was only partially pasted to the plaster. Paint stopped mid-brush on many of the walls. And at least two bathrooms upstairs were unusable because the old pipes had been ripped out and never replaced, despite the substitute PVC pipes lying nearby on the floor. The wall-to-wall carpeting in the upstairs hallway that ran the length of the mansion had been ripped up with no replacement. The loft on the third floor had a brand-new Pella window leaning against the window trim of the cracked window with no less than three missing panes that it was supposed to replace.

The whole effect was more than a little creepy. I felt like I'd stumbled into one of those urban legends where a group of people vanish leaving only their half-eaten meals behind. The smell of old paper that I'd noticed immediately upon entering the house had drawn me down a long, spacious ground-floor hallway. This space, a fifteen-foot-wide gallery, was one of the most

dominant features of the floor plan as it divided the house into two equal sides and allowed passage from the entry hall, at the very front of the house, all the way to the kitchen at the rear of the house, a distance of at least two hundred feet. That first day that I saw it, the library, about halfway down the gallery, looked in poor shape: the shelves were in the process of pulling away from the wall in some spots, endangering the dusty books lined up like soldiers along its surface. I was the bookworm in my working-class family, and the neglect of the lovely space, with its high ceilings and reading nooks, almost physically hurt me.

The only room that was neat and tidy, at least on the ground floor, was the large glass conservatory on the home's south side. It sported black and white tile flooring and tons of leaded glass windows overlooking the garden. Obviously, its walls would require constant cleaning. Not really practical for a one-armed wonder such as myself. Not that I'd thought of that when seeing the room for the first time. No, instead I fantasized about using the creative writing degree I'd earned twenty years ago on scholarship. This space would be the perfect place in which to employ all the composition techniques I'd learned then to write the great American novel on my laptop.

I gulped. The term 'mansion' would not have been inappropriate when speaking of this house. What was I thinking? Hysteria bubbled up from my diaphragm. The place had a library for God's sake, not to mention a ballroom and a billiard's room. The dining room