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Opening Extract from...

The Dead Girls Detective Agency

Written by Suzy Cox

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The dead girls Detective Agency

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CHAPTER 1

Pop quiz: What would you do if you only had one day left to live? Just one clear day. A few short hours to fill with a list of your 'lasts.' Tough call, isn't it? Would you steal your mom's credit card and brutalize Barneys, because – let's face it – you might as well go out looking your best. (And you can't be grounded in the grave.) Go tell that senior you've always had a crush on just how much you heart him and end it all on a kiss? Get blind drunk, act obnoxious, vandalize something – just because you could? Or would you find your family, apologize for any time you've let them down, and spend the day telling them you don't want to let them go?

Me? Well, if you'd asked me on that *morning, my answer would have been simple: I would have wanted to spend my last precious hours with my boyfriend, David. Yeah, whatever, I know how that sounds – all Bella and Edward bleh – but give me a break, I was really into him. His floppy blond hair. His skater-boy pants. Those sea-blue eyes that made me think of . . . Oh God, I'll stop. I'm even making myself feel sick. Anyway, if you'd asked me then, I would have wanted to grab David's hand, walk through New York's autumn-air streets to*

the Plaza, duck into Central Park, and climb our rock. We'd lie back, talk about books we'd read and places we wanted to see, and watch the perfect Simpsons *sky above us. Then, when the sun started to slide, we'd laugh and do shots until the edges of the world began to blur – so that when I left it, I wouldn't be sure what had happened, much less be aware of everything I'd just lost.*

How I wouldn't want to spend my last day? By sleeping through my alarm because I'd been up watching reruns of Gossip Girl *(I know: tragic). Being late for first period and a chem test that had completely slipped my mind. Or, afterward, slamming into Kristen, head cheerleader/head bitch extraordinaire, causing her to drop all her books and me to (probably) be the recipient of her evils for the rest of the semester. To leave school, step right into a muddy puddle crossing Fifth and 49th, writing off my mom's new suede DVF boots. Which I'd borrowed without asking. I certainly didn't want to get down to the F-train platform, hot, sticky, stressed, and – for once – desperate to get home, only to find the train delayed. And when it finally did steam in, I didn't want to die after feeling the sharpest push to the small of my back, then falling – as someone behind me screamed – onto the tracks.*

But when I woke up that morning, I didn't know I only had six hours of my life left. Why would I? When it comes to the end – biting the bullet, kicking the bucket – it's not like someone walks up and warns you. You don't see blonde girls dressed all in white, flapping their big old angel wings. Or a particularly menacing black crow. Your iPhone doesn't suddenly install a Reaper app.

Because life's not like that. Life – as your mom says – isn't always fair. And when it comes to your afterlife, well, there's a whole new book of rules to learn. Not the normal ones like,

'Only go for the hot meal in the cafeteria on a Monday' or 'Don't make eye contact with the lacrosse team unless you're in twelfth grade.' Oh nooo. Rules far more serious than that. Ones that actually matter. Ones that can change your death forever . . .

CHAPTER 2

Wind sucks back hair. The F train chugs. Foot feels wet. Headlights in the dark. There's that push. Heat. Someone screams. Then . . .

'Charlotte! Charlotte! Open your eyes. It'll be fine, I promise.'

For pretty much the first time since sixth grade, I did as I was told. I opened my eyes. And saw a girl in a blue-and-white-striped top standing over me, smiling in a nervous way. I blinked.

'Charlotte . . .' The girl pushed a strand of her thick squirrel-red hair behind her ear, making the black frames of her glasses wiggle. She looked about my age, sixteen, maybe seventeen.

'Okay, so this is going to be incredibly weird, but please try not to freak out. It'll only make things worse.' She was talking above me, looking at me hard. Like she really, really needed me to concentrate, but wasn't sure I could. She paused. 'Do you remember being on the train platform?'

The platform. Oh yeah. How did I get from the F train

to here? Did I miss my stop? And where *is* here anyway? I sat up – too fast, I guess, because the room whirled. It looked like I was in some sort of art deco hotel lobby. The floor tiles were black and white and there were these plush red-velvet drapes around the doors. Yes, it must be a hotel, because there was a reception desk and above it a sign with – duh – Hotel Attesa, written in curly, swirly letters.

'Charlotte. I need you to listen.'

I looked at the girl and tried to think back, but it was as if I were looking at my memories through a window smeared with Vaseline. I was on my way home after class. I was getting on the train. So how did I end up in a hotel? Oh God, I bet I blacked out on the platform. It *was* hot down there, and I'd fainted that one time during detention last summer. Now, that was mortifying. What if I was one of those people who pass out on the platform, then have to be taken off someplace to sit down – someplace like this old hotel – until they feel better. I hoped I wasn't that lame. I'd die of embarrassment if . . .

'There's no easy way to say this, but something bad has happened to you, Charlotte.'

Oh no, I *was* pass-out girl. I knew I should have eaten breakfast and had more than a salad for lunch. Mom was always telling me that. It's just that I couldn't face food that early in the morning. It feels weird to eat straight after you've brushed your teeth and . . .

'Charlotte, you're . . . dead.'

'I'm d— *What*?'

Suddenly, I was focused. Focused enough to know this girl was deranged. Who the hell thought it was a

good idea to leave an ill person like me with a psycho like her?

Or, wait a minute, I knew what was happening! This was all some weird fainting-dream thing. I was *still* passed out on the platform. In a minute I was going to come around, then they'd call my mom and everything would be fine. Maybe I'd even get out of school tomorrow.

'You're dead. And from what we can tell' – she looked down at an ancient-looking letter in her hand – 'someone pushed you onto the tracks just as the F train came in. And, well, I'm sorry, but you didn't make it.' She smiled in a nice 'oh well' way. Like she'd just told me I didn't make the swim team or that the last dress in my size was out of stock in every branch of Urban Outfitters.

Wow, I must have really hit my head, and hard, because this was some trippy Dorothy-goes-to-Oz hallucination I was having. My English teacher, Ms Jackson, would totally pass me if she knew I was subconsciously *this* creative.

I looked down at my body. Nope, it was the same as always. I hadn't imagined myself with train-track marks or anything. Instead I was sitting, all nice and comfortable, on this big, black, squishy leather couch in this hotel lobby.

'This is a very confusing time. I know that. Which is why I'm here to help you all I can. I'm Nancy, by the way. Nancy Radley. I'm dead too.'

The girl held out her hand. And because I had no better plan of action right then, I smiled and took it. She was super-polite for a figment of my imagination.

'Now, I think the best way to get you acclimated to the situation is to just throw you in at the deep end. Tell you

everything you need to know in one go, then you can absorb it at your own rate.'

Acclimated? Absorb? Dead Girl Nancy must have been working her way through the SAT word list before she 'died.'

'Sure.' I smiled serenely and stood up to follow. I just hoped I'd remember all this when I woke up. David would get a total kick out of my imaginary friend.

'Come on then, let's get you up to your room. I'll fill you in on the way.'

Ha! Here we go. This was totally not right.

'Room?' I asked. In what underworld would a ghost actually need a room? This was so dumb. I just wanted to wake up, call David, and dry out Mom's boots before she realized they were missing.

Nancy looked at me with a little smile. 'Well, to be honest you don't *need* a room,' she said. 'After all, ghosts don't sleep. But we figured, seeing as we've got this hotel, and there are rooms here, why not give them to people when they arrive? You had a room while you were alive, right? So we give you one when you're newly dead. We think it makes the transition from that life to this one feel a little less weird. Well, we hope it does.'

'*We?* So you're not alone?' Jeez, my imagination must be doing overtime. I'd not just dream-invented one ghost but a whole bunch of them.

'Yes, of course. You'll meet the others later.' She opened a door and led me into an elevator. Which also seemed a little stupid. If I were a ghost, surely I'd be able to walk through walls? I tried pinching my arm.

'Right now you are in the Hotel Attesa, just off Washington Square in New York City,' Nancy explained. 'It's

right next to a regular old human hotel. Of course, the Living can't see the Hotel Attesa, only we can. Otherwise you'd get all these ghost hunters popping in with their electromagnetic detectors or PKE meters or whatever other crap they saw in *Ghostbusters* trying to prove we exist. Which is the last thing we want – especially when we've got such important work to do.'

I pinched again. And again. Nope, still not awake.

Ping! The elevator stopped and Nancy led me down a red-carpeted corridor. I couldn't help but think that, if I were conscious and this hotel didn't just exist in my dream, it was exactly the kind of place I'd love to stay in. If my parents didn't think hotels were 'a complete waste of our money,' that is. It was super-classy, old yet pristine.

Nancy opened the door and the room inside was even more gorgeous than the lobby – white walls, antique lights, prints of old Hollywood movie stars in sleek black frames, a sink-into-me bed and floor-to-ceiling windows on one wall. I walked over to the windows, which looked out on Fifth Avenue and the Empire State Building. Wow. Nice imaginary view.

'Don't get *too* excited by the location,' a high-pitched voice said. I turned around to see a blonde girl standing über-close to me. Another ghost? Awesome. This one was like something from an Abercrombie ad, all glowing skin, Mac-counter makeup, and perfect hair. She wouldn't look out of place in one of those frames on the wall.

'Want to know the suckiest thing about the afterlife?' she asked. 'It's all look, look, look, but don't touch. Like, there's all this on our doorstep . . .' She motioned to the streets below. 'And us? We can't even enjoy it.' She leaned on the window so closely she would have left a

breath mark. If she was still breathing, that is. 'I'm Lorna by the way.'

This was getting ridiculous. 'What are you talking about?' I asked.

'Oh, Nancy didn't tell you that little Rule yet? It's a bummer. Totally and utterly hideous. I mean, there are some great things about being dead: no eating equals no dieting. No more split ends or breakouts. Of course, style-wise, death sucks. The rule is that we ghosts have to spend all our time in whatever outfit we died in. Which as you can see, for me, is a baby-blue Marc Jacobs Spring/Summer '06 dress. Not a bad choice. I mean, I'd totally be seen dead in it. It's just that I'll never get to wear anything else. Ever.'

I looked down at my outfit and saw my gross school uniform: a blue-and-yellow plaid skirt, white shirt, my navy blazer . . . and Mom's DVF heels. Wouldn't my favorite Seven jeans and Converse have been more eternity appropriate?

I smiled politely, all the while pinching my arm like a crazy person. Like the worst thing about being dead would be the limited clothing decisions. What about missing your family or your friends or, I don't know, being alive? Then, on the eighteenth pinch, something in my brain clicked. A memory broke through. When I was on the platform, right before I opened my eyes here in the hotel, I felt something. What was it? A push. In my lower back. So hard I lost my balance. Then there was that scream. And the heat. And then I was here.

What if this *wasn't* a dream? What if I had been pushed? Right onto the tracks and under the F train. What if . . . what if, like Nancy said, I was dead?

Shut up, Charlotte, I told myself, stepping backward and landing awkwardly on the bed. I mean, come on. There was no tunnel with bright lights at the end, no big pearly gate, no old bearded guy welcoming me in. I held up my hand to the light – I couldn't suddenly see through it. I hadn't turned into Casper or anything.

'So what else do I need to know?' I asked, trying to play along and make sense of whatever was happening. Maybe this was some elaborate practical joke. 'I mean, this whole hotel thing is nice and all, but I always thought heaven would be more sitting on a cloud with unlimited Ben and Jerry's and less downtown fancy hotel.'

'Sorry, sorry,' Nancy said, turning her attention back to me. 'I was getting to that. So here's the deal.' She sat on the bed beside me and gave me another of her reassuring smiles. Worrying, I realized that she had the air of someone who had done this before. A lot.

'When teenagers die in mysterious circumstances – like you being pushed under that train – they don't pass straight over to the Other Side, as people do when it's their natural time to go. Instead, in New York, they come here, to Hotel Attesa—'

'It's kinda like a waiting room,' Lorna interrupted. 'But adults, they go to this other hotel uptown. It's, like, way nicer because it's more modern and it's nearer the park and whoever decorated it did this thing with pink paint and . . .'

'Lorna! Be quiet?' Nancy glared at her friend. Note to self, do not cut Nancy off mid-sentence. 'While you're here, you're stuck. You can't go over to the Other Side until you've worked out who killed you and why.

Basically, you need to set things straight before you can move on. And we – me, Lorna, and Tess—'

'Yes, you so need to meet Tess,' said Lorna.

'*And* Tess.' Nancy ignored her this time. 'We're here too, trying to help out those who come in because, you know, then they might get to the Other Side faster.'

'Nancy calls us the Dead Girls Detective Agency,' Lorna said, smoothing down her skirt. 'And she's actually proud of it.'

I tried to focus. Maybe, just maybe, if this actually was some big, stupid, fainty dream, if I solved my murder, I'd wake up. Like, it was a coma and not a dream. Ohmigod, if I was in a coma my mom was going to freak. And she was going to know I stole her boots.

'So this Other Side,' I said, trying to stay calm. 'If we figure out who killed me, how do I get there?'

'Through the Big Red Door,' said a new voice behind me. I spun around to see a brunette standing in the doorway. She was not channeling Nancy's reassuring smile or the kindness in Lorna's eyes. Instead she looked bored. As if she'd been here a million times before and couldn't care less. I wondered how long she'd been standing there, just listening.

'That's Tess,' Lorna said, checking out her cuticles. 'She's been here the longest of all of us girls. Tess is the best, but she can be kind of . . .'

Nancy shot Lorna another look and gave me an eye roll. 'Subtle, Lorna.'

'I can be kind of what?' Tess asked. 'Honest? Harsh? A mega-bitch?'

When Lorna shrugged vacantly, Tess turned to me. 'Well, seeing as I appear to have a rep, I may as well live

up to it. All those little fantasies you're currently having? The ones where you're trying to convince yourself that this isn't real and any second now, Mommy dearest will come into your bedroom and wake you up? Forget them. They're all lies.'

She carried on talking before I could tell her I'd already worked out I was in a coma.

'These two' – she paused to gesture toward Lorna and Nancy – 'they're all, "Let's make it easy for newbies, let them come to terms with it in their own time." Well, that tactic didn't help me. In fact, nothing helped me. So here's the truth: you're dead. End of story. The only thing you can do is deal with it and hope you're lucky enough to move on.'

Tess gave me a look that practically screamed *capisce?* and walked out of the room, leaving Lorna and Nancy gaping after her. Outside a cab horn honked.

'Got to say it,' Lorna said eventually. 'That girl has a way with words. You're totally dead, Charlotte.'

And that's when I tried to throw up. Except I couldn't throw up anymore. I couldn't do much of anything anymore. I, Charlotte Louise Feldman, of Twenty-One West Seventy-First Street, was, apparently, no more.

My head was swimming. I wasn't sure if it was the having-just-died part or the it's-impossible-to-take-in-all-this-information bit of the situation that was freaking me out the most; but on reflection, I guess it was probably the part where I was dead. That morning all I had to worry about was where to meet David for lunch, whether I'd get tickets for the portrait exhibit at the Met, and what Dad was going to say when he heard I'd flunked chemistry. Again. Now? Now I had to deal with

the fact that (a) I was dead, (b) OMG, I was dead, and (c) someone really didn't like me. As in, didn't like me so much that they had decided to murder me.

What about my poor parents, did they even know yet? And David? Did this mean we'd broken up?

Tears welled at the corners of my eyes. I tried my hardest not to think about the 'Living,' as Nancy had called them. Come on, Charlotte, I told myself, biting down on my lip and waiting for it to hurt. But it didn't. Hold it together. There must be a way to fix this.

'I better show you the Door,' Nancy said, all business-like again, desperately trying to distract me. 'I know it's a lot to take in, but we have to get moving. Every second we waste could mean we miss out on a vital clue to what happened to you and we can't have that, or we'll never find your Key.'

'My what?' I asked, pressing my finger to my lip. No blood.

'Your Key,' Lorna said. 'Don't worry, it's taken me four years to understand all this stuff. It's more complicated than applying a streak-free fake tan!'

I followed Lorna and Nancy out of the room. My new room. For that moment, at least. One thing was for sure: dead or not, I wasn't ready to leave my life behind just yet.

CHAPTER 3

I'd love to say that the Big Red Door – the mighty gateway to the Other Side that Tess had so *kindly* told me about without so much as a sit-down-this-is-major – was the most jaw-dropping thing I'd ever seen. But honestly? I'd seen more impressive entrances to clubs on the Lower East Side.

'This,' said Nancy, with all the drama someone under five foot five could muster, 'is it: the Big Red Door.'

I politely pretended to take a moment to admire it (Mom didn't raise me *that* badly), but in truth? Nancy hadn't given me a minute to deal with the whole train/death/afterlife issue. Sure, I heard her when she said that, if we were going to find my murderer, we didn't have time to waste, but I was too thrown to take it in. What felt like seconds ago I was standing on the subway platform. Now I was expected to be all breezy about my death and impressed by a door that might take me to some Other Side.

'Um, wow?' I finally managed.

You didn't have to be a Mensa member to see how

the entrance to the Other Side got its name. It was big (say, one story tall), red (wood, in case those kind of details interest you), and a door. Though it was hard to check off the last point, seeing as it was firmly shut. And apparently staying that way until I solved my murder and found my Key. Whatever that meant.

Big Red sat – almost hidden – in an unassuming alcove just off Hotel Attesa's main lobby. So this was what my way out of this nightmare looked like. So far, so unhelpful.

'Run me through how it works again.' I turned to Nancy and tried to look super-interested. Maybe the sooner I got the hang of things, the sooner I'd feel less . . . messed up, confused, and low-level terrified.

'Well, *where* shall I start?' Whether she sensed my bewildered horror or not, Nancy was clearly loving this part of her job. 'Rule One: the Door can only be opened by a ghost's personal Key. So, when we solve your murder . . .' She smiled as if that was a sure thing – like getting your period on the day of an important swim meet or your mobile battery dying just as the guy you like finally calls. 'You'll get your Key, put it in the door and – whoosh! – off you go to the Other Side.'

Whoosh. Just the sort of noise I imagined the entrance to the next world making.

Finally Nancy sensed my lack of okay.

'We have no idea how long it's been here,' she said, desperately trying to get me involved. 'It could have been around for hundreds or thousands of years in some form or other. After all, kids must have been murdered in New York ever since time began.' Nancy took a second. I got the impression that, for once, there was something she hadn't thought through. Shocker.

'Well, definitely since the Dutch rocked up anyway. Or the Native Americans. Or the . . . Or maybe even years and years before that,' Nancy finished unconvincingly.

Super. Now she was giving me a *history* lesson. This was getting more and more surreal.

'Though getting pushed under a T. rex was probably more painful than the F train,' Lorna said. She was examining the ends of her hair like a pathologist from *CSI*. I bet she massively regretted not booking a pre-death spa day. Imagine spending eternity with split ends or an imperfect manicure. How did she end up here? Someone spike her Mac lip gloss with cyanide?

'Let's start with the basics,' Nancy said. 'Rule Two: in the Attesa, things work in pretty much the same way as they did when you were alive – give or take a few little changes.' From the back pocket of her pristine, pressed jeans, she produced an equally pristine, pressed booklet with *The Rules* typed on its front cover. It was about as thick as the length of a thumbnail.

Nancy handed the book to me, way too eagerly for someone about to talk about my death. 'Everything is covered in here' – she smiled encouragingly – 'but obviously it's my job to talk you through things too.'

Lorna groaned.

'As the Attesa exists in – what we assume to be – a kind of limbo, you interact with everything in here as you did when you were Living.' I looked at Nancy blankly.

Nancy sighed. I wasn't catching on as fast as she'd hoped. 'In other words, in here, you act like you did when you were alive. So you can open this curtain, use the elevator, move these pieces of paper.' She ruffled some stuff on the table in front of the Door for effect.

'Of course, as you're a ghost now and formed of a ball of kinetic energy rather than cells, you *can* walk through the walls if you really want to.' She put her hand clear through the white plaster to my left. 'But that's just showing off. Oh, and before you ask, no, you can't fly. That would be stupid.'

Riiight, trying to find Keys to another dimension and walking through walls = fine. Flying = stupid. Of course.

'On to Rule Three: like I said before, the Attesa is protected, which means the Living can't see it or us when we're in it. When we're outside, in the human world, the Living can't see or hear us *unless* we want them to.'

Wait a second – the Living could see us if we wanted them to? *This* sounded interesting.

'But we'll get on to that later.' Bummer. 'Right now, what I really want you to see is HHQ.'

'H-H- *what*?' I asked.

Nancy led us out of Big Red's alcove and pulled aside a velvet curtain to the left of the reception desk. Behind it was a set of winding stairs. I followed her down them, Lorna and her perfectly respectable split ends trailing behind, to a badly lit corridor below. From what I could see it was dark, dingy, like the areas of any hotel that guests weren't meant to see. Clearly the glamour of the Attesa didn't extend to the lower floors. Why were we here?

At the end of the corridor was a regular-size door. Above it was a cardboard sign with 'HHQ' written in very neat, deliberate letters. Whoever made that sign had probably practiced writing the letters over and over to make sure they were perfect. That said, the sign's effect was slightly ruined by being placed over the door's original,

professional hotel sign. The first and last letters (an *O* and an *E*) peeked out behind the cardboard. I decided the original sign had probably spelled out 'Office'.

'Now this,' said Nancy, opening the door, 'this is the *heart* of our operation: HHQ.'

She swung the half-wood, half-frosted-window door open a couple of feet and I squinted inside.

The room was about twelve by twelve feet in size. More than enough to 'swing a jackrabbit,' as my grandmother would have said, but certainly not as big as I'd expected from an HHQ. Whatever that was.

Nancy walked inside and beckoned for me to join her. Three oblong windows spanned the top third of the facing wall. Through them, I saw a pair of feet walk past. I realized that, having come downstairs, those windows must be at street level with the road outside. And, from down here, you could see people's shoes as they walked by.

It was so weird seeing them – Mr Nike, Ms Stiletto, oh and hello, Mr You-*Really*-Need-to-Visit-the-Shoe-Shine-Guys-in-Grand-Central – and thinking that even if they bent down right now, they couldn't see me.

I looked at the passing feet and wondered, Had I walked past the Attesa before? I must have. After all, there was that amazing boutique at the end of the street that always had great sales. And that basement dive bar where they never asked for ID. Even when David's mom had just made him get a haircut and he looked, like, two years younger than the week before.

Had some newly dead girl stared up at my sneakers as I stomped past? Wondering what kind of person stood in them? Had she thought how much easier everything

had been before? Before some idiot stole her future away and she ended up in this place, trying to solve her own murder.

I sighed and looked around the room properly. On the wall to the left of the windows was a map. A massive map of Manhattan. I leaned in more closely. Someone had drawn sharks in the Hudson river (um, not cute) and put a pin in a spot labelled 'School' on East 49th Street and Madison Avenue. Another on West 71st labelled 'Home'. And another at the Rockefeller Center F train stop, labelled 'Murder Scene'. And another . . .

Hey, wait a minute! That was *my* school and *my* home and most definitely *my* murder scene. This map was all about *me*.

I swallowed, even though I had nothing to gulp down. School, my apartment, the subway . . . those things I could deal with. But murder scene? Seeing it written out like that was so . . . disturbing.

Someone had carefully tagged this map with all the places I'd visited on my last day – was that *still* today? – the very same person who had neatly written HHQ over the door. And I'd bet my afterlife that I knew who that was.

'Um, Nancy, not to sound all drama queen when we've only just met, but this map? It's all about me. I know it is. And it is freaking me out. What gives?' I asked.

Nancy took a step to her left – to reveal a large blackboard behind her, opposite the map wall. Oh, great, so we were back in school. Then I read what was on it.

17:01 Police arrive at CF's house.
17:04 Police enter.

17:10 Mother of CF informed of her death.
17:16 CF's mother contacts her father to pass on the news.
17:22 Police rule out foul play.
17:30 Case closed. Cause of death: accidental.

'Will someone *please* tell me what is going on?' I heard myself say.

'Okay, Charlotte, sit.' Nancy patted a chair beside her.

Sit? Sit on the black couch, sit on the bed, sit on the weird spinny office chair in HHQ. 'Sit' seemed to be Nancy's default setting when I looked like I was dangerously close to fainting.

I sat down with a thump.

'So when I got to Hotel Attesa – two years ago now, Tess and Lorna were here, but so was another girl called Lyndsay. She was the longest resident, so she taught me some stuff, just as she'd taught Tess and Lorna when they first arrived.'

My head was whirling more than ever.

'Lyndsay said that, when she'd arrived, another ghost had given her the Rules book – and told her to pass it on to whoever came in next before she left.'

So the Rules were passed down from dead girl to dead girl?

'But the Rules clearly didn't help you solve your murder,' I said. 'You're still here.'

'They might have,' Nancy admitted quietly. 'I'm sort of ninety-nine per cent sure who killed me.'

'So why haven't you gone through the Big Red Door?' The words tumbled out before I had a chance to worry that it might be too early to ask something like that.

Nancy looked down at her feet, tilting her head until

a wave of her thick hair fell over her face. 'I guess I . . . I don't want to move on yet,' she said in a small voice. 'The information Lyndsay gave me when I first showed up here . . . well, it was invaluable to me. In helping me, um, come to terms with things. I kinda figured: if I could stick around and help other kids the way she helped me, then maybe I wouldn't have died in vain.

'What I'm trying to say is that I have my reasons for sticking around.' Nancy gave me a small smile. 'You may find yours. Anyway! We've solved the murders of the last – what?' She looked at Lorna for reassurance. 'Six kids who have come through these doors.'

Six? *Six?* Um, that did not sound like a Series-winning stat to me.

'It seems that when we die, some power in the Attesa takes our stories from out there' – Nancy pointed to the window where the outside world was going on as normal – 'to here,' and waved the ancient-looking letter she was still holding out at me. 'One of these arrives just before each new ghost does. We don't know how or who sends it, but it's always the same. It tells us basic information: your name, how, and when you died.'

So there was some spectral scribe out there sending letters about teenage deaths? Awesome.

'Er, so if another one of those letter-things arrives, another dead kid is on the way?' I managed.

'Well, yes, but – aside from our current residents – it's not often that we have two new ghosts here at the same time. I mean, it does happen. But if you look at the *New York Times* murder map, around seventy-four people are unlawfully killed each year in Manhattan and only six per cent are under eighteen. Which means, in theory, we

get less than one new case a month. Quite a manageable workload, wouldn't you say, Lorna?'

I tried not to audibly gulp.

'Now, as you can see from the board, both of your parents know,' Nancy continued, as if she were reading out a grocery list. 'We did some basic recon when we got your letter before your arrival, and the police had already ruled your death an accident. That's quick, really. Especially considering how you went.'

'There must have been a real mess on the tracks,' Lorna said. 'They shut down the F train line for a whole two hours for you. Two hours! *And* in rush hour.'

My final achievement. Man, I hoped Mom was getting that put on my gravestone. 'Here lies Charlotte Feldman. She pissed off commuters. A lot.'

'Since the police have no clue you were murdered and in the absence of your murderer confessing in the next few days, finding out who pushed you is down to us,' Nancy said.

Super. Down to a Nancy Drew wannabe, AWOL Tess, the Abercrombie model, and me. What murder squad wouldn't want a lineup like that? I better get some posters for my bedroom wall. I was going to be here for some time.

'That's why Nancy calls this room HHQ,' Lorna explained with a look that said, *If you thought Dead Girls Detective Agency was lame, just wait till you get a load of this one*. 'It's the official dead girls' *Haunting* Head Quarters.'

Inspired. 'And the map?' I asked.

'I just put it up on the wall because it helps me visualize a case.'

'What about the sharks drawn in the Hudson?' I

asked. Did I really want to hear the answer? Was the river haunted by some supernatural sea life they'd failed to warn me about?

'Rule Four,' Lorna said. 'Ghosts can't travel over water. Nancy just drew those in to show that we can't go in the river.'

Of course. I turned to Nancy hoping she'd explain.

'Basically, ghosts are landlocked. Who knows why? Maybe so we'll stay in the city and concentrate on solving our cases. But if you are going to be stuck on an island, I can't imagine a better one than Manhattan, can you?'

Awesome – so now that I was dead and didn't appear to have a curfew, I still couldn't go and watch bands in Brooklyn. Double, triple, quadruple *fun*. Uh, unless I was about to find out that Rule 5 was that all teen ghosts did have a curfew after all.

'So is that it then?' I asked. 'Are those all the Rules? No water walking, lots of crime solving, and don't forget to treat the hotel and everything in it like you would if you hadn't been pushed under a subway train?'

Nancy tucked her hair behind her ear. 'Oh no, there are a *load* more.' She pointed to the thin red book. 'I just thought I'd ease you in with the simple stuff.'

Great.

'And what if I don't abide by these Rules?' I was getting sick of all the dos and don'ts. 'What happens to me then? According to you, I'm already dead. How much worse can it really get?'

Nancy looked shocked. Lorna actually looked up from her split ends. Crap. Had I gone too far?

'Now you sound like my kinda ghoul,' a low voice dead-panned behind me.

I swung around to see a guy with a sarcastic look on his face, leaning on the door frame. His coloring was as dark as David's was fair. His black bangs were swept to one side, but fell across his face, threatening to obscure his green eyes. He was wearing a tight black T-shirt and black skinny jeans. Even his Adidas – which were either vintage or a proof he'd been dead a lot longer than everyone else – were black. Something in the way he looked at me made me want to put my hands over my face and hide like a kindergarten kid. Why had everyone failed to mention that there was a dead boy next door?

'Just ignore him,' Nancy warned. 'He's used that line many, many times before. And not one new arrival has laughed at it yet, have they, Edison?'

'Tess did,' he shot back.

Tess? Was *he* friends with *her*? Not that I knew the girl, but I strongly suspected that made this Edison guy trouble.

'So you say, but seeing as you were both here before Lorna and me, we don't have any proof that's the case,' Nancy said. One thing I could not imagine Tess doing was cracking a smile.

Edison raised an eyebrow at her and smirked at me. Oh boy.

'See you around.' He walked out of the room. No 'hey, nice to meet you,' 'who are you?' or even a 'how did you die?' Men: clearly some were as incommunicative in death as in life.

'So, um, these Rules,' I said, trying to keep my voice steady. 'Sorry to sound stupid, but I'm not really getting them. Can we run through the important stuff again?'

Without making me read the book because it looks really, really dull, I silently added.

'Oh, we can do better than that,' Nancy said, brightening and leading the way out of HHQ. 'I'll show you how they work – out in the real world. In practice.'