



Dead Is Just a Rumor

By Marlene Perez

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And Daisy's got even more on her plate: A talented amateur chef, she has won cooking lessons with celebrity chef Circe Silvertongue. After nosing around (with a little help from Circe's pet pig), Daisy begins to suspect the temperamental chef's secrets aren't only in her ingredients. . . .

The fourth installment in this favorite series is full of surprises and scares!

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Dead Is series

"[Perez] delivers a wise-cracking, boy-lusting, determined sleuth of a high school protagonist . . . this quick, lighter-than-air spoof of the undead, cheerleaders and popularity is pure pleasure."—*Publishers Weekly*

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"Breezy style and comic-book plot. . . . Fun."—*Kirkus*

About the Author

MARLENE PEREZ is the author of *Dead Is the New Black*, *Dead Is a State of Mind*, *Dead Is So Last Year*, *Love in the Corner Pocket*, and *Unexpected Development*, an ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers. She lives in Orange County, California. www.marleneperez.com

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Chapter One

"I heard a rumor about you," Penny Edwards said to me. The gym was crowded and noisy, so I had to move closer to hear what she had to say. The girls' volleyball team was practicing at one end and Samantha was at the other end, barking orders like a gorgeous blond drill sergeant. I couldn't hear Samantha from where I stood, but whatever she said sent her minions scurrying.

I smothered a sigh. Penny had never been one of my favorite people, but I thought she'd changed over the last few months. Apparently, I was wrong.

"What rumor?" I said, not really wanting to hear the answer.

"That you and Ryan are shoo-ins for king and queen of the Midnight Ball." She smiled at me and I caught a glimpse of the kinder, gentler Penny.

"I hope not," I said. "Samantha's been working really hard on the ball. I hope she and Sean win." Samantha Devereaux was my best friend, who for a time had been my worst enemy — or at least a thorn in my side — and was back to being my best friend again.

We'd been through a lot during our junior year at Nightshade High, but I was expecting smooth sailing for our senior year. Or as smooth as it could be, considering that we lived in a town that was a little different, to

say the least.

"Samantha's definitely a contender," Penny said. "Especially since everyone who is a resident of Nightshade gets to vote."

"Well, please tell everyone I don't want another crown." Last year, I'd been crowned homecoming queen in a bizarre turn of events. I didn't want to sound ungrateful, but that was enough glory for me. Samantha thrived in the spotlight. I did not. Now that she and I were finally friends again, I wasn't going to let some tinsel crown come between us.

Penny gave me a half wave and headed to the locker room. I watched her go.

"Daisy, look out!" Samantha warned me as a giant orange jack-o'-lantern rolled down the aisle. I put out a hand and concentrated. It rolled to a stop in the nick of time and narrowly missed squashing me flat.

You had to stay on your toes when you lived in Nightshade, and having psychic powers helped. I looked around the gym to see if anyone had noticed my public psychic slip, but everyone's attention was on the volleyball game going on at the other end.

"Halloween is over a month away, you know," I said, gesturing toward the bright decoration.

Samantha peered at me from behind a huge box of orange and black streamers, cardboard black cats, and ghosts. "It's not just any Halloween," she replied. "It's Nightshade's two hundredth anniversary celebration. I'm one of the chairs."

"I know. I was just telling Penny how hard you've been working." Samantha volunteered for practically every committee the high school had. Now that it was finally our senior year, she didn't seem to be slowing down at all.

"Gotta go!" I said, as I remembered the other thing Sam liked to do, which was rope me into volunteering for whatever pet project she was involved in. I'd wait for Ryan somewhere far, far away from my volunteering happy friend.

"Don't you dare take a step out that door, Giordano!" she said, only half teasing.

I repressed a sigh. Sam was unstoppable. Besides, I had to admit, I had fun when I was around her. At least, most of the time.

"I have plans for those psychic powers of yours," she continued. "How else are we going to hang these decorations on the ceiling?"

"Okay, if you promise not to try to squash me with a squash again."

"Who's trying to murder you this time?" Ryan said. He put his arm around me and gave me a hello kiss. My boyfriend was the best thing about senior year, although I had to push away the thought of what would happen to us once we graduated. I'd worry about that when the time came.

"Hi, Ryan," Sam said. "Where's Sean? He promised me he'd help." Sean was Samantha's boyfriend and Ryan's best friend.

"He's still in the locker room," Ryan replied. "But he mentioned you guys might need another hand."

Samantha's momentary irritation at her boyfriend disappeared. "Can you haul these outside?"

Ryan took the box from Samantha. "Where do you want these?"

"I rented a truck," she replied. "It's in the first stall in the parking lot." The first stall in the parking lot was Principal Amador's, but if anyone could get away with commandeering his spot, it would be Samantha. Sean walked up, carrying a green gym bag under his arm.

"What took you so long?" Samantha said.

"Sorry, babe," he replied. "I got caught up talking to Wolfgang." She made a face. "What were you doing talking to him?" "He's helping Coach with the stats," Sean said. "I can't ignore him." "Why not?" she replied. "After what he did this summer, he deserves to be ignored." Wolfgang Paxton was a freshman who had been giving some of the football players a little something extra in their Wheaties, and the summer had ended with half the football team becoming werewolves. The ones who weren't already, I mean. Fortunately, the side effects of Wolfgang's "hairballs" turned out to be temporary.

"Don't worry," Sean said, soothing her. "He's calmed down since the summer." Samantha held out her hand. "Keys, please. I need to take this stuff to the Wilders."

Sean opened his bag and dug through the contents. He didn't notice when a heavily embossed envelope fell out and landed on the polished floor.

I stooped down and picked it up. I wasn't trying to be nosy, but the blood-red wax seal aroused my curiosity. It looked like a fancy invitation, with creamy white stationery that was silky to the touch.

I handed it to Sean. "That's not mine," he said. He shoved the envelope into a pocket, then peered into the bag. "I must have grabbed the wrong bag." He hurried off to the locker room.

He returned a few minutes later, carrying an almost identical gym bag. "I grabbed Wolfe's by mistake."

Sam checked her watch. "C'mon," she said. "We're late."

Ryan and I just stood there until Samantha barked out, "Are you coming?"

"Coming where?" I said.

"The Wilder mansion," she replied. "I'm storing stuff there until we can clean up the haunted house."

"What haunted house?"

"That old deserted mansion up by the Wilders—Merriweather House. It's going to be the centerpiece of the town celebration. We're having the Midnight Ball there. It's supposed to be haunted."

"It sounds . . . monumental," I said aloud, but I was thinking that it sounded like a monumental amount of hard work. Everyone in town knew the dance would be the culmination of the anniversary events, but I had just assumed it would be held at the Wilder estate, which was the biggest, fanciest place in town.

After loading the truck, Ryan and I got in his car and followed Samantha and Sean to the Wilder estate.

"How's your dad?" Ryan asked.

"He's . . . okay," I said.

"That bad, huh?"

Another thing I loved about Ryan. He could tell what I really wanted to say, without me having to say it.

"He's getting better, but he's still . . ."

"Distant?" Ryan guessed.

I nodded. "He says he doesn't want to talk about it." My Dad had been through a traumatic experience. Most of Nightshade had thought he'd run off with another woman, but the truth was he'd been abducted and held captive by the Scourge, an anti-paranormal group. Mom had rescued Dad from their clutches, but not until he had been gone for six long years.

Dad hadn't left the house much at all since his return. Mom had made a few tentative noises about him going back to teaching, but he hadn't even called his old department at the university. He even talked about writing a book, but I hadn't seen any evidence that he was actually working on it.

The Wilder mansion was one of the oldest places in Nightshade. We pulled up the long driveway and parked. There was a restaurant on the property, but it only took up a minuscule part of the main house.

Samantha rang the doorbell, and it was the elegant Mrs. Wilder herself, the elderly matriarch of the shifter clan and the owner of the estate, who answered the door. She pointedly looked at her watch and said, "We start serving dinner in one hour."

"We'll be finished by then," Samantha promised. "Excellent," Mrs. Wilder replied. "Bianca will show you the way."

Bianca materialized from the shadows. Bianca worked at Wilder's Restaurant, but her duties didn't end there. Bianca was a shape-shifter, too. She took the form of a sweet looking black kitten, but looks could be deceiving.

Instead of the severely chic dresses I was accustomed to seeing her in, she was dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. She still managed to look gorgeous. A familiar looking envelope with a red seal was shoved into the back pocket of her jeans. Interesting.

"Hi, Bianca," I said.

"Daisy," she said. "Did you get your letter already?"

"Letter?" I said, confused. My mind flashed to the heavy envelope Sean had dropped earlier.

"You haven't received it yet? Oh, forget I said anything."

When I frowned, she added, "Don't fret. It's not anything bad. I just don't want to spoil the surprise."

"If you say so," I replied. I'd had enough surprises to last a lifetime. She smiled.

"I do." Bianca handed Samantha a key. "Mrs. Wilder has instructed me to give you the key to the room you'll be using to store the decorations. This way, please."

Bianca's midnight-black hair was in a ponytail and it swayed back and forth hypnotically as she led us to a part of the mansion I'd never been to.

We went through rooms even more luxurious than the converted restaurant and ballroom. Sean couldn't keep his astonishment in check and let out a low whistle.

"These are the estate's guest rooms," Bianca said. "It's documented that a famous buccaneer once stayed in one of the bedrooms."

We finally reached stairs much less opulent than the ones near the front entrance. The surroundings grew shabby.

"This part of the house is rarely used," Bianca explained. The wallpaper was faded and torn in places, and I detected the distinct odor of dust and mold, combined with a less familiar smell.

We reached our destination and Bianca motioned for us to enter. We stepped into an enormous room. A row of long narrow windows spanned one wall. At the opposite end, there was a jumble of tables and chairs, and a couple of large trunks. There was even a framed oil painting propped against a dressmaker's dummy. I couldn't decide what to look at next.

I set down the box I'd been carrying. "This is amazing!"

"Well, I'll leave you to it," Bianca said. "Daisy, I'll see you later."

After Bianca left, Samantha said to Sean, "Be an angel and get the folding table first."

"What are you going to do with the folding table?" I asked, after Ryan and Sean left.

"We don't have nearly enough decorations," she replied. "Even with the stuff I've managed to borrow. So, we're going to make more," she said.

"Who is we?" I said suspiciously.

"Relax, Daisy," she said. "I've already asked the cheerleading squad to help."

"Great," I said.

"I have bigger plans for you," she said. "I thought you could whip up something for the volunteers to snack on."

"How many volunteers?"

"Just a few," she said airily. "I asked Mrs. Wilder if we could use the kitchen here, but she said her new chef is temperamental."

"I can make some simple stuff," I said.

I had thought I was getting off easily, but my muscles were aching by the time we'd hauled all the supplies to the room. Half of the stuff would have to be moved again when we set up the haunted house.

After we were finished, Ryan took me home, even though Sean lived next door.

"Want to come in?" I was sweaty and tired, but he'd been busy with football practice the last few days and I hadn't seen much of him.

"Nah, I'd better not," he said. He shifted in his seat uncomfortably. I knew what he was thinking. Despite my best efforts, he and my dad hadn't really clicked.

"Let's go out tomorrow night," I said. "It's Friday."

He gave me a hug. "That sounds great, but I know you want to spend time with your dad."

"I want to spend time with you, too. How about Slim's?"

Slim's Diner was where I worked part-time, but business there had slowed down. Lately I'd only been working the occasional Saturday. It worried me. I didn't know what I'd do if Slim's went out of business. Nightshade wouldn't be Nightshade without the diner.

"Side Effects May Vary is playing at the Black Opal," Ryan said. "But maybe we can hit Slim's after the show."

The front porch light went on, which was my signal to kiss Ryan good night.

When I went inside, my dad was waiting for me.

"Where have you been?" he demanded. His hands were shaking.

"Helping Samantha," I said. "Are you okay?"

"Then why did Ryan bring you home?" That's what his agitation was all about.

I drew in my breath. "Ryan was helping, too. And he brought me home because he's my boyfriend and he wants to be with me," I said. "You like Ryan, remember?" Dad had never seemed to have a problem with Ryan back when we were little kids who played in the sandbox together, but it was a different story now. It was hard for me to remember how happy I had been when Mom brought Dad home. Even though I was mad at him, at least it wasn't a doppelganger I was fighting with, which had happened when someone had created doppelgangers of Nightshade residents and tried to pass them off as the real people. This was my real dad and we were having our first real fight.

I stomped up the stairs — ignoring his "Daisy, come back here!" — and made a beeline for my room, but Poppy waylaid me outside the door.

"What was that all about?" Poppy asked.

"Dad again," I admitted. "I don't know what his problem is with Ryan."

"It's not Ryan," she said. "It's you."

"Huh?" I said. I had no clue what Poppy was talking about.

"Think about it," she said. "You're the baby, and when Dad disappeared, you were twelve."

"I'm following you so far," I said.

"Well, when he came back, he probably still had that image of you in his mind. But you're not twelve anymore. And Ryan just reminds him of that."

"What can I do to make it easier?" I asked.

"Just give him time," she said. "He needs to get used to the idea that you're not his little girl anymore."

"Makes sense," I said. "How'd you get so wise?"

"Psychology 101," she replied. "I love college!"

My two older sisters, Poppy and Rose, both attended UC Nightshade. Poppy had just started her freshman year and Rose was a sophomore.

I retreated to my room, less angry at my dad, but still not in the mood to deal with him. I knew he'd been through a lot, but so had the rest of the family. My mom most of all. And for everyone's sake I needed to try to be more patient with my father.

With that in my mind, I went to find him in the kitchen. "Something smells good," I said.

Dad held up a spoonful of marinara sauce. "Want a taste?"

"Sure," I said. Dad was a great cook, possibly even better than I was. It was delicious. "Dad, you're the best cook."

Rose came into the kitchen, carrying a pile of mail. She handed me an envelope. "This is for you."

She was still wearing her lab coat. She had a part-time job at a lab on campus. This time, it wasn't working for a mad scientist. She'd worked for her idol Dr. Franken, but that had ended badly when we discovered the professor was in league with the Scourge.

I examined the outside envelope, but it didn't tell me much. I ripped it open and scanned the contents. "It's from the contest I entered this summer," I explained. Natalie, my boss Slim's girlfriend, had convinced me to enter.

"What's it say?" Rose said. "Did you win?"

I read aloud. "We are pleased to inform you . . ." My heart sped up. The grand prize was a trip to Paris, to the famous Cordon Bleu culinary school. "You've won second place."

I stopped reading. Disappointment clogged my throat. I handed the letter to Rose.

"Daisy, this is fabulous!" she said.

"It is?" Had I won after all?

"You've won twelve cooking lessons with a local chef," she said. "And it's Circe Silvertongue." "Circe Silvertongue?" I said. "She's famous. What's she doing in Nightshade?"

"Didn't you hear?" my dad said. "She's the new head chef at Mrs. Wilder's restaurant." Was that what

Bianca was talking about when she mentioned a letter?

"How did you ?nd out?" I asked.

My dad looked away. "It came up when I, er, attended a city council meeting."

Normally a city council meeting would be one of the most boring things imaginable, but this was Nightshade. Nightshade City Council was made up of paranormals, which made for lively meetings. But my dad was a norm, while my mom and sisters and I all had psychic powers. Rose was a telepath, Poppy was telekinetic, and I had a combo pack of powers — part telepathic, part telekinetic, part clairvoyant — but my powers were not exactly reliable.

"Why were you there?" I asked him. I knew the council was anxious to gather information on the Scourge, but I didn't see why they couldn't leave him alone. He hadn't been home that long and was still recovering from his ordeal.

Dad was too thin. Although the shadows in his eyes had faded, they hadn't disappeared entirely. He laid his hand gently on my head. "Don't worry so much," he said. "I volunteered to go. The council just wanted to ask me a few questions about . . . the Scourge."

"Nicholas said the council thinks the Scourge is lying low while they plan something big," Rose chimed in. Now I was really worried, but I tried not to show it. Rose's boyfriend, Nicholas, was in the know. His dad was the head of the Nightshade City Council. And Nicholas was a werewolf. So was Ryan. Poppy's only serious boyfriend had been a ghost, but Gage had moved on. Literally.

I changed the subject. "It's not the Cordon Bleu, but it sounds pretty cool," I said slowly.

"And it'll look great on your college applications," Rose said.

"College? Already?" Dad said. He sounded a little out of it. Rose said, "Daisy's a senior, Dad, remember?" I sent a thought her way. *Is Dad really okay?*

Mom says it'll take time, she sent back.

Mom walked into the kitchen. "How was everybody's day?" She asked cheerfully, but I noticed her eyes ?ickered anxiously.

"I made dinner," Dad said. He crossed the room to give my mother a lingering kiss.

"Time to set the table." Rose announced loudly, and she and I busied ourselves with cutlery to give them a little privacy. But seeing my parents together, and so obviously still in love, gave me a twinge of hope that everything was going to be all right.

At the dinner table, Mom cleared her throat. "What were you talking about when I came home?" she asked curiously.

"Daisy won cooking lessons with Circe Silvertongue," Rose said quickly. She obviously didn't want to mention Dad's bewilderment to Mom.

"Circe Silvertongue," Mom said. "I'm sure you'll learn a lot from her." But she didn't look happy. When she caught me staring at her, she pasted on a smile, but it didn't take a psychic to ?gure out that Mom didn't like Circe. I thought about asking her then and there, but Dad looked pale and shaky. He was still sleeping a lot, but had nightmares.

As if he could hear my thoughts, he said, "I think I'll head to bed."

"But you hardly touched your dinner!" Poppy said, then caught herself. We'd agreed we wouldn't hover.

"You go ahead," she said, covering her blunder. "I'll clean up."

As soon as Dad was out of sight, dishes began to ?oat off the dining room table and into the kitchen.

"Hey, that's not fair," I said.

"You do it your way, I'll do it mine," Poppy replied. "In fact, you should be practicing with me." She was right. My telekinesis skills weren't getting any better with me just sitting there.

"I'll practice by loading the dishes into the dishwasher," I promised.

"There has to be more for you girls to do with your skills than household chores," my mother said. "I appreciate the help, but it just seems like—"

"We can't all solve crimes for a living," Rose reminded her. "Although Daisy's getting close to doing it as a serious hobby."

It was true. I'd helped to solve several mysteries in Nightshade, but it had been awfully quiet in the past few weeks.

"Maybe I'll have a nice, safe senior year," I said. Poppy snorted with laughter.

"Or maybe not." I hated it when my sister was right.

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