

An Uncollected Death

The Charlotte Anthony Mysteries, Volume 1

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AN UNCOLLECTED DEATH

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Written by Meg Wolfe.

For Steve:

Thank you for making it possible.

One



Friday, September 13th

Charlotte Kleid Anthony took a big red mug of black coffee out to the deck, and the first cold barefoot steps in the morning dampness shocked her head clear. The hot mug felt so good in her hands. She took some deep breaths of fresh air, just making out the first ripe tang of autumn, and heard the crows calling to one another in the pines behind the house. Back in the kitchen the letter from the lawyer sported several purple rings from the Merlot she drank the night before. Her mouth was dry, she'd burned her breakfast bagel, but, all in all, it had been worth it.

She squinted from the bright reflections of the sun off the lake, and off the bank of windows at Helene's old house across the way, where it nestled amid the tiers of other hillside houses and trees. It was almost time to go to Olivia's, but she took a few more moments to ground herself, her fingers stroking the bleached cedar deck rail. Her instinct was to commit the texture to memory, because at some point that is all it would be. The crucial clause the lawyer quoted from the settlement played over and over in her mind: *"...or at such time as the child should begin college or professional training, at which time the support money will cease and the expense will be borne by the father."*

He was right. It was always there, had been for the past ten years, of course, only not in the front of her mind in her rush to prepare Ellis, who had just turned sixteen, to attend the Paris Conservatoire to continue her piano studies. And not in front of her mind after the news last Friday (had it only been a week?) that both *Fine Design* and *Emerson Home Monthly* suddenly ceased publication, leaving Charlotte without a quarterly check for the first time in years.

Diane, her accountant, boiled it down: "You can't afford to live in your house anymore. You can't afford anything much, actually." Then came a flurry of phone calls to the bank and the publishers, all to no avail.

Charlotte realized that she was going to have to throw over her entire life for the second time in ten years. But a few hours of wine and brooding in front of the fireplace was enough to get past the initial panic and see, if she was perfectly honest with herself, that she welcomed the distraction from suddenly having an empty nest. And now, as she surveyed the sparkling blue water surrounded by hills, architectural homes, and dozens of For Sale signs, she no longer saw Lake Parkerton as a magical valley but as a money pit.

Snap out of it, she told herself, and strode back into the house. Time to get ready. Charlotte added a cardigan to her white tee and straight jeans, and slipped on a pair of loafers. At the last minute she dabbed on a bit of lip color, and bent down from the waist to fluff up her shoulder-length hair. Helene warned her not to wear anything that required dry cleaning, describing her sister Olivia's house as "cluttered" and "a bit heavy on the potpourri," but it was the little things, thought Charlotte, that gave one confidence. Strictly speaking, she was qualified for the job, but her academic chops were rusty.

The news was on the kitchen TV, and her attention was caught by the young female reporter standing in front of Warren Brothers' Pawn and Payday. One of the pawnbrokers hit the jackpot when he found a rare first edition of the novel *Least Objects* and sold it at auction for some ungodly amount of money. The story was getting a lot of play, and now everyone thought they might have a valuable book, too.

Charlotte watched as the camera panned the parking lot full of cars, pickup trucks, and potholes, to a line of people with books extending out the shop door across the length of the strip mall. She was working up the nerve to go there herself and pawn her jewelry and silverware. The Jeep needed work, and Diane warned her not to use credit cards anymore, no matter what.

The reporter wrapped up. "There you have it, Floyd, rare book fever among the truck stops. This is Judy Sargent, reporting from Elm Grove, Indiana."

Floyd the news anchor followed it up with a two-sentence bio of the book's author, Seamus O'Dair, whose photo was up on the screen next to him. Charlotte wondered if someone at the studio chose it deliberately, playing up the dullness of the blow-dried talking head on the left side of the screen with the auburn shock and hollow cheeks of the genius on the right. Couldn't blame them if they did.

She switched off the TV, packed up a notepad, pen, bottle of water, sunglasses and reading glasses (that badge of one's middle age), and loaded everything into her sand-colored Jeep. She let out a breath of relief when it started up. Day by day. It was Friday the 13th, but she felt that enough bad things had happened lately that, even if she was superstitious, the odds were against her luck going any further south.

The thirty-minute drive on the four-lane highway from Lake Parkerton to Elm Grove was a lovely stretch of rolling farmland and trees, save for the billboards every half mile or so. Most of them featured giant grinning proprietors of real estate agencies, car dealerships, jewelry stores, insurance companies, and law firms. There was a new one, featuring a linebacker type wearing a backwards baseball cap and a hammy surprised expression. He was holding a book, and next to him was "ASK BOSLEY," under which was, "*It might be worth more than you think!*" It was the pawnbroker whose shop was on TV that morning, and it looked like he didn't lose any time taking advantage of his good luck.

Luck, thought Charlotte, had an amazing amount to do with whether or not one was successful in a bad economy. She thought it was pure luck, for instance, that Helene thought of her for Olivia's project just as the magazine work dried up. Gratitude surpassed whatever pretense to dignity she harbored about needing the work. But when Charlotte expressed that she hoped to be able to return the favor one day, Helene shook her head and said, "Just finding a way to work with my sister will be favor enough. Trust me."

Olivia Targman, *née* Bernadin, turned out to be a crabby, impatient nonagenarian with a hard-done-by attitude who had been keeping a series of notebooks, part memoir, part novel, for the past forty or fifty years. When Helene performed the introductions, Olivia just grunted and asked, "So what do you *do*?" It took a while to assure her of Charlotte's credentials, but she seemed to relent and handed over a spiral-bound notebook.

"You must find *all* of the notebooks," she asserted. Her bony finger pointed at Charlotte for emphasis, and her dark eyes framed by an aquiline nose warned against argument. "The one you're holding is the *last* one. They are in order. I don't remember exactly where the first ones are anymore, some upstairs, some in the basement; it'll come back to me as we find them. I'll show you when you come over. I can't lift things much or go up and down

those stairs. But I know they are in order and that there are nine or ten of them.”

Once Charlotte found all the notebooks, she was then to work with Olivia to transcribe, edit and prepare them for publication.

Charlotte’s Internet search for Olivia Bernadin yielded a single paragraph in an article about “Women of the Beat Generation,” in which she was described as having written a well-received book of poetry and a few short stories in *The New Yorker*, and was briefly an editor of the literary journal *Sibylline*. From there Charlotte searched *Sibylline* and learned much the same, along with the fact that Olivia was commissioned to co-write a screenplay for a French New Wave film, but then “disappeared.”

The prospect of editing and publishing the novel/memoir of a writer presumed missing for half a century was irresistible, and an incredible bit of luck. Charlotte’s enthusiasm for the project grew as she realized this was no mere indulging the bucket list of an elderly eccentric, but a potentially important contribution to the literary world, depending on the quality of the notebooks. It would be good to work on a project different than the articles on trends in the design industry that had been her bread-and-butter for years, a fresh start that might even lead to a completely different path as she rebuilt her career.

Her enthusiasm for the project, in fact, made up for her reluctance to spend so much time back in Elm Grove, a picturesque college town with well-preserved brick storefronts, an ornate 19th-century courthouse, and several streets of stately old houses. It was also graced with many large, shady trees, although, as in most communities these days, few of them were elms. At one time she loved its quaint, almost story-book appearance, before it came to represent everything she hated once her marriage was no longer happily-ever-after. Her cell phone beeped as she turned off the highway onto winding Sheffield Street, which led to the downtown area, and a quick glance showed it was Diane. When the traffic slowed to stop-go, she called back.

Diane’s near-tenor voice was both mellow and chipper, as usual. “Good morning, glory.”

“Hi Diane. What’s up?”

"I ran through your numbers again and created a budget for you, if you'd like to come by and pick it up. It'll give you a better idea of how much you should downsize."

"Downsize. Is that what they call hitting the skids now?"

Diane chuckled. "You knew the risk, Charlotte, when you moved there."

"I know, I know. It's okay. I don't have any regrets; it's just that it's all happening so suddenly. I'm on my way to a client's, so can't stop by for a while yet. Give it to me now. How much can I afford a month?"

Diane paused. "Twenty percent of what you have been living on."

"*A fifth?*" The sun glared off the back window of the car in front, flattening the world around her. Her ears rang with the noise of cars, the chatter of young mothers pushing strollers to the park, the music playing from speakers attached to the streetlights, the breeze through the maples and oaks around the courthouse square. She remembered pushing Ellis in a stroller down these sidewalks, too, and buying hot dogs and sweet, quickly-melting vanilla cones from the vendors setting up on the corners.

Her hands were cold and clammy on the steering wheel. To live on a fifth of what she was accustomed to meant not only no house, but no new car, no manicures, no hair salon or massages, no good wine or gym membership, no food deliveries, no eating out, and no shopping whatsoever. No new shoes, new coats, not even a bandana. No cleaning lady. No laundry service or dry cleaning. No lawn service, gutter cleaning, guy to plow the driveway in the winter. Most of all, no trip to Paris to see Ellis. "So I'm supposed to, what, live in a tent?"

"Hopefully, no. But you need to eliminate as many expenses as possible right away. Cancel memberships and subscriptions, cable, all that kind of stuff. Watch the eating out and clothes shopping. Minimize, minimize, minimize. Get everything you can down to zero, and of course get that house on the market a.s.a.p. Cut up your credit cards like, *now*, and pay off anything you owe on them, though thank god that doesn't look too bad. You'll want to avoid accumulating debt. That way, after selling your house, you'll have enough to live on while you get your career back on track."

Charlotte could think of nothing to say. The words did not come, just a sensation that life as she knew it had stopped, right there in the middle of a street in a busy village, while she inhaled exhaust from an idled truck. A fifth.

The delivery truck started moving again and she drove on through the downtown to the residential area, as if on automatic pilot.

Diane cleared her throat, reminding her that she was still on the phone. “Charlotte, I’ve got another call I should take. If you can, come in this afternoon to pick up the packet I’ve prepared for you, and we can take it from there. I’m really sorry all this is happening. It’s like a perfect storm.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Diane. I’ll see you later.”

She sighed. The news was even worse than expected, but on the whole she felt better knowing. Good news or bad, having the facts gave things *shape*. With facts, she thought, one can take action. Wondering and worrying about what you didn’t know just led to all kinds of problems. It was actually easier now to give Olivia’s project her full attention. Or so Charlotte told herself as she turned off Sheffield and onto Pierce Street, passing by Helene’s condominium and a row of 1920’s bungalows until she reached Olivia’s house, the last one on the block.

She pulled the Jeep left into the driveway that led to the detached garage, then backed out and turned to park on the street in front of the walk to the front door. It felt strange to be going to someone’s house for a job. She saw that it could use new paint around the door and window trim, the bridal wreath shrubs around the raised foundation were overgrown and covering the windows, and the chain link fence enclosing the yard had dents here and there. A few large branches in the patchy grass looked like they’d been there for a while. The gate squeaked as she went through it, but it worked and latched just fine. Charlotte recalled passing this very house many times when she lived in Elm Grove ten years before, following as Ellis learned to ride her first bike. She might have even seen someone on the old-fashioned swing on the front porch. The breeze carried the cheerful sound of children playing in the schoolyard across the street and up one block.

Olivia did not answer when Charlotte knocked, but the door was unlocked, so she tentatively opened it a crack and called out, “Hello, Mrs. Targman? It’s Charlotte.” Still no answer. “Hello? Olivia?” she inquired again, as her eyes adjusted to the gloom of the front room after the glare of sun outside. She was sure she’d gotten the appointment time right.

Helene’s description of the house as “heavy on the potpourri” was an understatement, and Charlotte couldn’t help but think of the morbid rose-

heavy scent of funeral homes. It was going to take some doing not to feel queasy, and she wished she hadn't burned that bagel earlier. She rapped on the door again, in case Olivia was asleep, or in the bathroom or simply didn't hear, but there was still no answer. By this time Charlotte's eyes had adjusted to the light and she beheld a small living room with a mix of vintage furniture. There was a blue Queen Anne style sofa at the back, facing the front door, a heavily carved mahogany coffee table in front of it, a worn brown leatherette recliner by the sofa, and end tables with mismatched lamps next to the chairs. Near the door there was a tapestry-covered wingback chair and ottoman. A narrow space behind the sofa was filled with glass-fronted oak curio cabinets displaying porcelain and crystal figurines. There was a doorway opposite the front door that led through a dining room and into what was probably the kitchen. On the wall to her right there was a small writing desk with cubbyholes, a lyre-back chair, and a three-shelf bookcase. The entire wall to her left was covered with utilitarian board-and-bracket shelving crammed with a mix of new and old books, all surrounding a single window draped with sheer Priscilla curtains. Olivia was certainly a reader, if not much of a decorator.

There were some books scattered across the oriental rug, as if they'd fallen from the shelves or had been thrown, and a few loose pages had separated from the covers. Another step into the room revealed a floor lamp and small round chess table that had fallen over next to the wingback chair, along with a tea-stained cup and a book of crossword puzzles. Then as Charlotte turned, she saw the reason why there was no answer to her knock:

Olivia Targman was lying on the floor between the bookshelves and the coffee table, her limp hand holding a baseball bat.

Charlotte's heart fluttered as panic set in. Was Olivia dead? There was a nasty bruise on her forehead. Charlotte had never seen a dead person before, at least not outside of a funeral home, so she wasn't *sure* if she was looking at an actual dead person. She swallowed hard and stepped over the books to reach Olivia, and was relieved to feel that the "body" was still warm, if barely breathing. Her hands trembled as she struggled to call 911 for an ambulance, and then to call Helene. She hardly heard her friend's distress through the ringing in her ears, and took shallow breaths to calm down. It was as she waited for help and started to cover Olivia with a crocheted afghan from the sofa

that she noticed the sticky stuff at the business end of the bat: blood. And then she saw another big streak of blood across the rug, which she hadn't spotted at first against the dark red pattern. She called 911 again, this time for the police. Something very bad had happened here.

Two



Also Friday, September 13th

“Hello? Ma’am, are you there? Hello?”

Charlotte started at the dispatcher’s voice, and realized she had spaced out for a moment, staring at Olivia’s unconscious body, her permed steel gray hair, baggy brown polyester pants, a man’s oversized bright green sweatshirt, and skinny ankles sticking out of scruffy gray walking shoes, quite possibly the same outfit she wore when Charlotte met her the other day.

“Yes! I’m here.” Charlotte’s voice was hoarse, and she cleared her throat.

“Ma’am, are you alone in the house? Is there any chance the person who did this is still in the house?”

“Um, I’m alone, yes, and um—oh dear, I see what you mean—”

“Ma’am, please leave the house and stay on the line. Wait outside for the officers to arrive.”

Charlotte’s heart started fluttering again, and she staggered back onto her feet, feeling dizzy and short of breath. Of course! Whoever did this to Olivia could still be here, armed and dangerous, even! She picked up her bag and started to make her way out, but stopped cold when the front door opened and a tall man walked in, his features blacked out by the brightness of the light behind him.

She felt herself make a weird squeak as she gasped and clutched her bag even tighter, prepared to use it as a weapon. *Oh my god, oh my god—*

The tall man stopped upon seeing her, and then stepped further into the room, which made his face visible. He looked down at her with eyebrows raised in either surprise or anger, she couldn’t tell which in her fraught state of mind.

“Charlotte?” he asked.

How’d he know my name? Did he force it out of Olivia? She nodded, ever so slightly.

The dark eyebrows relaxed. “I’m Simon, Helene’s neighbor. She’s on her way over and sent me ahead to help. Where’s Olivia?”

Charlotte began to breathe again, if just a little bit, and cautiously moved to the side so that he could see Olivia. She heard the dispatcher still on the cell phone again. “Ma’am, are you alright? Do you hear me?” She stepped back more as this Simon fellow moved past her to check on Olivia for himself.

Her wits returned with her breath. “Yes! A friend of Olivia’s sister is here now, and I’m—I’m going outside now.” She clicked the phone off. But instead of leaving she watched Simon, who was moving around carefully, taking pictures of Olivia, the bat, the books, and the bloodstain on the bat with his cell phone.

“What on earth are you doing?”

“Getting the scene of the crime before the cops get here. If they’re good cops, it won’t matter. If they’re bad cops, these might help prove we didn’t do the deed ourselves, or at least didn’t mess with the scene.”

“That’s awfully cold.”

Charlotte looked more closely at him and realized they were roughly the same age, making him much older than the impression she first got from his thick hair, black leather jacket, long-legged jeans and energetic movements.

He didn’t even turn to look at her. “Not really. You’ll see.” He continued with pictures of the table and lamp, and even the chair, from several different angles.

This man has an impossible level of self-possession, she thought.

She also realized he had an English accent. Interesting. Didn’t the villains in movies and crime shows always have English accents? *Snap out of it*, she thought, this isn’t the time to be silly.

“Careful around the bloodstain.”

He nodded. “Spotted that. I wonder who it was she whacked. Was the door open when you got here?”

“It was closed, but unlocked. I was just about to clear out when you came in. The dispatcher said whoever did this might still be in here.”

Simon nodded as he looked around carefully, taking more pictures here and there. “Let’s check the other rooms,” he said, moving toward the door-

ways to the hall and the dining room. He stopped abruptly and Charlotte almost walked into him.

“Bloody hell! This is like an antique shop,” he said, trying to look around without knocking over anything.

Here the scent was decidedly floral, and emanated from two crystal bowls with potpourri on the lace-covered Duncan Phyfe table. It was a small dining room, yet still packed with the table and six chairs, a large sideboard, and two more glass-front curio cabinets. The top of the sideboard was covered with three tarnished silver tea sets, around a dozen large silver candlesticks and several tiered petit-fours stands. In addition to the bowls of potpourri, the table was laden with crystal candlesticks, candy bowls, footed bowls, and colorful McCoy and Roseville pottery vases. The curio cabinets were crammed with porcelain boxes, delicate Capodimonte floral baskets, and salt and pepper shakers.

They continued carefully to the kitchen, where there were stacks of mismatched dishes and crockery on the counters, cook books stacked four feet high on the chrome dinette table in the corner, and on the floor stacks of old margarine and whipped topping tubs, cardboard boxes full of empty glass pickle and jelly jars, and cardboard boxes of more glass jars, each filled with a single kind of item, such as buttons, screws, tiny toys, and marbles. Another box held several large rubber band balls. Shelves ran across an entire wall from floor to ceiling, filled with cookie jars, banks, collector liquor bottles, and what had to be a hundred souvenir models of the Eiffel Tower in various sizes and material from wrought iron to embroidered fabric stuffed like doorstops. There were also brightly-colored Fiesta Ware teapots, pitchers, and cup and saucer sets. Yellow vinyl dinette chairs sat against the wall on either side of the table and supported stacks of folded rag rugs and tablecloths in every imaginable color. Under the table were stacks of picture puzzle boxes, some of which looked quite old. The only semblance of the room being used as a kitchen was immediately around the sink, which had a plate and mug on the drain rack, and around the stove, which held a tea kettle. A chrome and vinyl high step stool was situated in front of the drain rack. A bottle of home fragrance stood open on the windowsill above the sink, and smelled of apples and cinnamon.

The kitchen door to the basement was locked, as was the door to the back porch; Charlotte peered out the curtained window and saw stacks of newspapers and more plastic containers, and plastic bags full of more plastic bags. A clothesline stretched across the length of the porch, and hung low with the weight of drying towels and nightgowns. She turned to Simon, who was still taking pictures.

“Just more of the same out here.”

He turned to look at her, his mouth hanging slightly open, his eyes wide, and shook his head in amazement. “Good lord!”

Charlotte felt better for knowing that someone else found this house as overwhelming as she did, and just nodded.

They moved back out of the kitchen into the dining room, where they turned into a dark hall with several doors.

The first door was for the bathroom, an old-fashioned one with its original claw-foot tub, mosaic tiled floor, and heavy white pedestal sink, all of which had seen better days. Shelves over the old toilet were crammed with perfume bottles and containers of products that Charlotte hadn’t seen since childhood. The next room had bedroom furniture in it, but every inch of floor space was filled with garment racks, each of which was crammed with clothes on hangers. More floral potpourri was in a bowl on the nightstand.

The second bedroom was much the same, except the bed and dresser drawers were more accessible, and there was a small television set atop a chest of drawers opposite the bed. As in the rest of the house, the scent was as pervasive as the clutter.

I wonder if I would have been able to work in this house? She then realized that there would now be some doubt as to when, or even if, the transcription and editing project would happen. She could just make out the whine of approaching sirens as they moved back into the living room, where Olivia remained unconscious.

“I’ll go meet Helene,” she said, turning to leave, but gasped as she felt the floor soften under her feet. Simon moved quickly to grab her around the waist and nearly lifted her out the room and out to the swing on the porch.

“Hey there, now. You okay?”

“Oh, yes, I’m fine. The fresh air helps.” It wasn’t just the fresh air, she thought. It was the ease with which he was able to steady her five-foot ten

frame, and how it reassured her. Strange how certain things were noticed even when under stress.

Helene was approaching from her condo at the other end of the block, her white swept-back hair glowing like a halo in the sun. She was elegant and dignified, wearing a slim gray skirt, cream knit tunic, and gray and blue wool challis shawl; Charlotte thought that Helene could not look less like Olivia's sister. Simon helped Helene up the steps and went with her inside the house for a few moments until the ambulance and EMTs arrived. When she came out, she sat on the swing next to Charlotte and sighed. "Poor Olivia! Who could have done this?"

Charlotte's heart went out to her dear friend. She couldn't recall ever seeing Helene so distraught, even when her husband died. But the circumstances were of course so different. He had been ill for a long time, whereas Olivia was still going strong and had been assaulted.

The police arrived, to ask their questions and make their reports. It was going to be a long morning.

Tea was the only thing that would help, strong and black. Making tea was as soothing as drinking it, Charlotte thought as she sliced lemons and placed cups and spoons and a plate of cinnamon palmier cookies on a tray. The morning had indeed been long and stretched into mid-afternoon, full of questions from the police, and getting Olivia situated in the hospital, where she remained unconscious and under observation. Charlotte leaned against the countertop as she waited for the electric kettle to boil, enjoying the serenity and simplicity of Helene's kitchen. It could not have been more different than Olivia's: the surfaces were nearly bare, there were no boxes on the floor, the cooking things were contained within cabinets and drawers, and the space was suffused with natural light. Charlotte recalled that the kitchen in Helene's former house at Lake Parkerton, while much grander in scale and rich with granite, mahogany, and high-end appliances, had been equally serene.

Here in the white and birch galley kitchen, Helene still had her striking Belle Époque poster of Loie Fuller in swirls of reds, oranges, and yellows against a black background. And on the bistro-style table there was the same clear green-tinted longneck bud vase with a white orchid that had always graced her breakfast bar at Lake Parkerton. The simple white plates and tea

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