

DRIVING DEAD DAISY

By Laura Brennan

As I stared down at the dead body, I unexpectedly thought of my favorite grandmother. Not the French grand-mere who hated me, but my unflappable Nanny Joyce. “Theresa, my darling,” she would have said to me, “this one’s a puzzler.”

Not that there was any mystery whose body it was. Even if I hadn’t been chauffeuring her around town for the past three months, I would have known that signature sunshine-yellow couture anywhere. Daisy Mac, born Deborah Anne McCullough, had shot up the pop charts almost as fast as she’d taken over the covers of tabloids everywhere. Gorgeous, talented, dysfunctional as hell. The world was waiting for her to crash and burn. Now she had.

Right in the back seat of my limo.

But she’d had help shuffling off her mortal coil. The bruising on her neck was a dead giveaway, if you’ll pardon the pun. I was appalled at myself as one irreverent thought after another popped into my head, until I realized my legs were giving out. I found myself sitting down suddenly and hard on the manicured lawn. It was as close as I’d ever come to fainting and I refuse to be a woman who faints.

I scrambled to my feet and took a quick look around. Robbie Voth’s estate, like most in the Hollywood Hills, was really an oversized lot with an ugly modern house and ridiculously high walls to keep out the paparazzi. A couple of security cameras monitored the front gate and the yard, but I knew for a fact they had been disconnected at the time of the murder because I was the one who had shorted out the system. So while there was no visual record of me (nearly) fainting, there was also no footage of the guy who had killed her.

Definitely a puzzler. I ran through my options. Calling the cops was out. They would want to know why, after helping Daisy's current beau into his house (where he promptly threw up and passed out), I hadn't returned right away to my equally-drunk client. It would take very little digging to discover that I'd been mucking with the security system for the last couple of months, ever since Daisy's social calendar had given me access to Robbie and his garage. After weeks of carefully-crafted gremlins and false alarms, Robbie hadn't even bothered to set his system tonight. It was the moment I'd been waiting for. My team was ready and waiting for my call to relieve Robbie of his 2010 Ferrari 458 Italia. By morning, it would have disappeared onto a cargo ship, in a crate marked (truthfully, if you think about it) "used car parts." With it would be six other high-end vehicles destined for private buyers in Hong Kong. All I'd had to do was short out the security cameras one last time...

Oh, yeah. That would go over big with the cops.

When I'd made the career move to grand theft auto, I'd known it would come with risks. I'd done my best to minimize those and maximize profits. It had taken me two years to slowly develop contacts in Africa, South America and Asia. Over the last six months, we'd tested the waters with several small batches of specialized parts, untraceable to a specific chopped car. It had been lucrative, sure, but it was chump change compared to tomorrow's shipment. Now, finally, my patience would pay off. Robbie's Ferrari was going to tip us over the million-dollar mark and make us the go-to source for our overseas clients. Steady seven-figure paydays were worth a few hazards.

Already, Daisy's death was slipping away from tragedy and into the realm of hideously bad timing. I shook it off. I had a responsibility to my team and I'd delayed long enough. I pulled out my phone and dialed a number I knew by heart. Frankie answered, over-eager as always. I

had found him eight months ago, trying to smash-and-grab a Mercedes. He was so green, he didn't even know the car's windows don't shatter. I shook my head at the memory as his voice squeaked over the phone.

"Are we a go?" Frankie wanted to know. "I got everything ready at the garage."

I told him to shut up -- not too unkindly, he's a good kid -- and to put Grey on. Grey Smith was my right-hand man and sometime lover.

"Grey left an hour ago," Frankie said. "The team's already in place." That bespoke confidence. Or nerves. Usually the crew didn't leave until after I gave the go-ahead. "Are we a go?" Frankie asked again, insistent.

I took a deep breath. "Code Yellow," I replied. Then I hung up and dialed Grey's cell. I had two hours while Frankie and the rest of them dismantled our entire operation and covered our tracks before vanishing into the night. It was a hell of a call to make right before we got the biggest paycheck of our lives, but money loses some of its luster when you're doing fifteen-to-twenty. Grey picked up on the first ring. He always did that, impatient for the conversation to be over before you even said 'hello.' I filled him in and told him we'd gone to Yellow. There was an uncharacteristic pause.

"Sounds like a Red to me," he said finally. Code Red, the panic button. Everyone grabs their personal stuff and gets the hell out of Dodge, never to be contacted again. I wasn't ready for that.

"Not yet," I answered. "There are only two guys I can think of who wanted Daisy dead. If I can figure out which one killed her, I may be able to keep the cops from looking into us."

"You said Voth is passed out drunk?" Grey asked. "Maybe he did it."

"No, she was alive when I took him into the house."

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Of course I’m sure. She helped me get him on his feet...” Then I realized what Grey was saying. Let’s dump this on the rich drunk and be done with it. I paused a second to wonder why I hadn’t thought of that myself. The answer was instant: I might be a car thief, but in my heart I wasn’t a killer. Setting up a lost soul like Robbie, who was even gentle as a drunk, felt like drowning a puppy. I couldn’t do it, no matter how much I wanted to get my hands on his car.

“Take Russell and Linc back to the warehouse and help Frankie clear it out,” I said. “I’ll check in soon.” I hung up without waiting for an answer. I had a body cooling in the back seat; this was no time for democracy.

It was also no time to be squeamish. I reached under Daisy and felt around for her purse, a hideous neon sunflower confection some up-and-coming designer had created for her. My initial instinct when I’d met Daisy Mac had been utter revulsion. Her clothes, her makeup, her lifestyle had all screamed “look at me!” It had nearly been more than I could handle. I’m sure my team thought I’d become a limo driver in order to steal cars, but in fact it was the uniform that had drawn me in. People see a uniform and rarely look deeper. In livery, I became invisible. As my white driving gloves rummaged through the yellow clutch, I wondered if Daisy’s unique sense of style had served the same purpose. The flamboyant armor had kept all eyes on her but made them unable to see deeper than her outer trappings. The inner woman had been private. Safe. Well, until tonight.

I found her phone. To me, social media was a modern circle of hell. Besides, what would I tweet? Just lifted vintage Jag. RT if you loved #gonein60seconds. Not my thing. But it was Daisy’s. She tweeted, posted and pinned her every move. So did everyone else in her circle, including her quick-tempered ex. Malcolm Dread was a British punk rocker and my best hope. I

was heartened to discover he was in town, at a club not fifteen minutes away. Twitter might lie but Foursquare didn't.

I buckled Daisy in and started the limo.

Not having a celebrity to unload, I parked on a side street a couple of blocks from the club. I wiggled out of the livery and slid into my back-up uniform: a Spandex mini clubwear dress that fit in the glove compartment and guaranteed no one seeing me would look at my face. Fingerprints trumped fashion; the driving gloves stayed on. I ditched the cap and let my hair down. I glanced in the mirror. An oversexed club bunny stared back at me. One of a million in Hollywood. Perfect.

I hated to leave Daisy in the car, but a dead body is not a trendy accessory. I slid her glamor sunglasses on her face, which made her look pretentious and hung-over, but alive. A close peer through the tinted windows might reveal her silhouette, but there was no way even the nosiest neighbor would see the damage done to her neck. I patted her shoulder because I couldn't think what else to do, then I left for the club.

It was after midnight and the dance floor was packed. As I navigated the drunken, gyrating bodies, I once again thought of my grandmothers. Nanny Joyce would have clicked her tongue. All these young souls, she would have said, so desperate to connect. But her foot would have tapped to the pulsating beat. Grand-mere would've been too busy scouting for unattended purses to notice the music.

I paused halfway up the stairs that led to the VIP lounge and surveyed the bar. No sign of Dread. I was resigned to sweet-talking my way into the lounge when I heard raised voices above me. Two burly clichés were giving a green-haired drunk the bum's rush right past me and down the stairs. I recognized Dread at once, though less from the hair than from the inventive curses

pouring forth with a South London flair. A woman was hurling anything she could find at the back of his green head. She had run out of ammo and was slipping off a silver sandal when I stopped her.

“Better not,” I said. “He’s not worth ruining a Jimmy Choo.”

She turned bloodshot eyes towards me and struggled hard to focus. “No,” she managed. “He’s not.” She tottered a little. I steadied her as she got the sandal back on. “Men!” she added.

I nodded in sisterly commiseration. “Although he must’ve set a world record,” I added, “for getting thrown out of this place.” She looked puzzled, so I continued. “I thought I saw his green ’do slide in the doors ten minutes ago.”

“Nah,” she said. “Couldn’t have been Mal. We’ve been here forever. He kept promising Daisy Mac would show, then Rihanna... Shit, all we got was a glimpse of the vampire guy. Not even Edward, the other one.” She glared at me, the unfairness of this fueling her rage. I made sympathetic noises, but forged on.

“Are you sure he didn’t run out for a bit, say, half an hour ago?” I pressed. “I was so sure. I almost asked for his autograph...” I let my voice trail off as she snorted.

“Half an hour ago, he was in the men’s room screaming my name,” she said. “Be nice if he could remember it now. But hey, honey, you want a rocker on your scorecard, you can have him. Good luck.” She stalked away. I let her go. Much as I wanted Daisy’s killer to be Malcolm Dread, it looked like he had an airtight, if pissed-off, alibi.

That left one possibility. Alexander Sorovsky.

Sorovsky was a celebrity photographer, but he was paparazzi like I was a chauffeur. Snapping pics for trashy mags got him access to the stars and the illusion that he was part of their lives. His -- let’s call it “intensity” -- had bordered on stalking for several young starlets. With

Daisy it had progressed into the realm of scary. The stream of calls and texts had been followed by Photoshopped pics of the two of them together. When he broke into her house to “borrow” some lingerie, she was finally able to get a restraining order.

He was fighting it under the guise that it prevented him from doing his job. Since his job was to take pictures of Daisy without her permission or even her knowledge, I thought this was a ballsy defense, but it was winding its way through the courts. In the meantime, Sorovsky stayed just far enough away from us to stay out of jail. A dead Daisy would make his life a lot easier, but was he crazy enough to kill his fantasy girl?

Only one way to find out. Sorovsky would be harder to track down than a flamboyant punk rocker and the clock was ticking. I did the only thing I could think of: I texted him. From Daisy’s phone.

Where R U? I waited a couple of minutes. No reply. So I sent, My neck hurts. What happened 2nite?? If he’d killed her, that should suitably freak him out. Sure enough, I got an answer this time: Is this a trick? I’m not supposed to contact you. I texted back: Stupid judge. We can talk it out. Where R U?

I held my breath. If he were smart, he’d turn off his phone and call his lawyer. But he wasn’t smart. He was obsessed. The lure of meeting Daisy one-on-one proved irresistible. He texted back an address.

Sorovsky lived in a ground floor apartment off Franklin. I double-parked in the shared driveway, blocking a BMW that had seen better decades and a funky VW bug complete with flowers on the dashboard. Now I needed something to prove my bona fides...

I needed Daisy’s underwear.

When I was a child, I had spent a blissful month every summer with Nanny Joyce, but when my parents died, it had been my grand-mere who had taken me in. From the first, I'd wondered why. Certainly it hadn't been from any joy in having me around, or even a sense of obligation, since she had cared for nothing after my father's death. Finally, I'd settled on the idea that I was a mulligan, a do-over, a chance for her to shape a child into a mini-me of her own paranoid self. Trust no one, love no one, leave no trace of yourself wherever you go. What had really stuck was her favorite phrase. "Theresa," she liked to say, "you're not very smart. But you're smart enough to let people think you're dumber than you are."

I don't know if sex made men dumb or if looking like I wanted to sleep with them made men assume I was brainless. But I knew dangling lacy lemon-yellow undies in front of Sarovsky's peephole would guarantee me entrée. I rang the bell. I heard footsteps, then a pause. The door flew open.

It took Sorovsky a few seconds to realize I wasn't the object of his desire. It was long enough for me to cross the threshold.

"What the hell's going on?" he asked. I could smell the alcohol on his breath. A loaded stalker with a quick temper? Better and better. "Where's Daisy?" he demanded.

"In the car." He turned to glare at the limo and took a step towards the door. I swung it closed and leaned against it, holding out the underwear. "She doesn't feel well," I continued. "She sent me with a peace offering."

Sorovsky waived a moment, then snatched the underwear and turned away. "What does she want?" he asked. He wandered deeper into the apartment. I followed. The rooms were dark and the walls were covered with photos. Shots of dozens of celebrities, mostly women, mostly young. Mostly Daisy.

“Something happened tonight,” I said.

He snorted and threw himself into an armchair, reaching for a bottle of Old Crow.

“Tell me what happened,” I pressed.

“Why don’t you ask her boyfriend?” He snarled the words. I was surprised. He had always come across as creepy and delusional, but never vicious.

“Robbie Voth is dead to the world,” I answered. I circled him so I could watch his face as I said “dead,” but there was no reaction. Possibly he was too numb from the whisky to react at all.

“Not him,” Sorovsky growled. “The other one.”

“Who do you mean?” I asked. Daisy had been a mess, but a serially monogamous mess. I couldn’t picture anyone who would fit the bill, unless --

“The one making out with her in the limo.”

I felt a surge of energy. This was it, it had to be. “You followed her tonight?”

“What if I did?” He was instantly on the defensive. “I have a job to do. You’re not a celebrity unless someone celebrates you. Without my pictures, she is nothing.”

“Of course,” I soothed. “Daisy knows that. She understands.” He fingered the underwear and allowed himself to be mollified. “You always make her look so lovely in your pictures. The other photographers aren’t as kind.”

“That’s because they don’t care,” he said. “No one cares like I care.”

“Daisy knows,” I repeated. “She can see it in your photos.” He glanced over towards a desk and I saw a professional-grade digital camera with an immense zoom lens attached. “I bet she’d love the pictures you took tonight.”

His eyes narrowed. I'd pressed too quickly. I shrugged and moved away. "But then we both know you couldn't have taken any photos tonight. It would violate the judge's order." But the subtle threat was the wrong tack as well. He simply looked mulish. I sighed.

"Daisy's dropping the lawsuit," I told him. "After tomorrow, you won't have to worry about it ever again."

"You're lying," he said, but it came out automatically.

"I'm not," I told him. "But there's a price." At that, he looked up. "I need to see the pictures you took tonight. I don't need to take them with me and I won't tell anyone you took them, but I need to see them. Daisy trusts me," -- that was true, although the tense was wrong -- "and she needs me to look at those photos. Alexander..." I leaned over him and breathed his name. I was no Daisy Mac, but my cleavage was ample enough to distract a drunk. "I promise you, Daisy will be forever grateful. Grateful that you were there."

He was wavering. "I've already downloaded them," he warned. "It won't do you any good to hit delete."

"I won't try." I kept my gaze steady. I didn't want to spook him. If I had to, I could pepper spray, snatch and dash. But I didn't want to, which made no sense at all. There was no time, my Code Yellow was running out, I had to see those photos, yet I felt bound by my own spell.

I held my breath, and I held out my hand.

"For Daisy," I said. Whatever I felt, he seemed to feel, too. Without a word, he picked up the camera and handed it to me. I turned it on.

It occurred to me why Sorovsky didn't do well as a celebrity photog: he hoarded the best pictures for his own walls. Certainly the shots I was scrolling through wouldn't make him much.

There was a close-up of Daisy and Robbie in the limo. I had opened the door, but luckily I remained out of frame. There was another of Daisy helping a stumbling Robbie to his feet, then close-ups of her as I, unseen, walked Robbie to his door.

Then I clicked on the money shot and felt reality shift.

The last three photos clearly showed a man at my limo, one hand on Daisy's shoulder, the other caressing her neck. I knew those strong hands. Unlike Sorovsky, I couldn't mistake the moment for a lover's embrace.

The man in the photo was Grey.

"Why wasn't it me?" Sorovsky's voice brought me out of my thoughts. I handed him the camera and managed a smile.

"Wrong question," I told him. "The real one is, why wasn't it me?" I left him brooding in the chair, still clutching Daisy's underwear. Sorovsky had caught her killer. If he could bear to share those three photos, he'd make millions off her death. Somehow, I didn't think he would. Daisy owed him the undies.

I got back into the limo and checked the time. Half an hour until Code Yellow expired. It would take at least twenty minutes to get to Robbie's. It'd be close. I understood now why Grey had wanted to go to Code Red right away. It left the team more vulnerable, but the garage intact. Also, the rules were clear. We all melted into the night, left each other and everything else behind. While the rest of us were hopping the next plane, train and automobile out of L.A., Grey would have swooped in. Not only would the Ferrari have been his for the taking, but tomorrow's entire shipment, all my contacts, all my deals...

My calling a Code Yellow had delayed him and Grey lived for speed. He'd be counting the seconds until the Code Yellow expired. I went for broke and hit the gas, making it back to Robbie's with only minutes to spare. I did what I had to do there and made the call.

Frankie answered. "Code Red," I told him. "Let the others know. The Hong Kong shipment is compromised but the last payment from our Kenyan client came through. Your share cleared this morning. Get it and get out."

There was a pause. I could tell he was trying to hold it together. "I'll miss you guys," he said.

"Me, too." But I didn't mean it. I didn't know if Grey had acted alone. Suspicion tainted every memory of the last two years, when I was building what I'd thought of as my team. The easy camaraderie with Russell, the late nights working on engines with Linc, it all suddenly seemed fake and forced, a long con with me as the mark. As I hung up with Frankie, I realized that my Nanny Joyce had given me love, but it was my bitter grand-mere who had taught me how to survive.

I hid the limo on a side street and waited for Grey. Half an hour later, Robbie's Ferrari was his. I watched him pull out of the gates and vanish into the night.

Back in my livery, I walked over to Robbie's estate, unlocked the door with Daisy's key, and started screaming.

It took a few minutes to rouse him. Robbie had sobered up enough to panic when I got him to understand that someone had kidnapped Daisy and stolen his car. He called Daisy's manager first -- this was Hollywood -- but within minutes he was on with 911. It was time for me to disappear.

I went home to pack. Nothing, not even the limo had been registered in my real name, but however safe I might be, I'd be safer out of town. Barely an hour after I'd sounded the alarm, I was ready to go. I couldn't wait any longer. I took out my burner phone and dialed Grey's number for the last time. I wasn't sure he would answer.

I wasn't sure I wanted him to.

He picked up on the first ring. Some things are hardwired.

"I thought you were the one who wanted no goodbyes," Grey said by way of hello. "Or are you changing the rules?"

"How does the Italia drive?" I asked. "I've never been at the wheel of one myself."

Grey laughed. "You can't blame a guy for nabbing the consolation prize," he said. "So did you find out who killed your boss?"

"She was my client," I corrected. "I'm my own boss. And, yes, I know you killed her."

"I'm impressed. I should start calling you Sherlock. I will, if I ever see you again."

"So why wasn't it me?" I asked, echoing Sorovsky. "With me dead, you could've taken over the team." It was amazing how detached I felt. We might have been discussing the dinner menu or a Kings game. "It would have been simpler."

"For you, maybe," Grey chuckled. "But if I killed you, how long would it take the police to discover your set-up? What would be the point of killing you if I lost the infrastructure you'd so painstakingly built? God, you were slow. Do you have any idea how hard it was these last six months, with you insisting on test runs and safety measures, blah, blah, blah..."

I'd been afraid that Grey would pretend he had loved me and couldn't hurt me. It was comforting to discover that I was just a business venture.

“Besides,” he continued, “the rest of the crew adored you. They only tolerate me. Even if I could’ve somehow made you disappear without them wondering, they never would’ve stayed with me.” Grey was right. He was respected, but he wasn’t loved. The others would have followed him for a few weeks out of habit then they would have drifted away. “Plus now, I don’t have to share.”

“No,” I agreed. “It’s all yours. Everything you deserve.” Over the phone, I could hear sirens approaching. Grey started swearing.

“Is that highway patrol?” I asked innocently. “You really shouldn’t talk on your cell phone while driving.” I could picture him, behind the wheel, torn between believing he could talk his way out of anything and a pure desire to floor it to the border.

“Damn it, woman! What did you do?”

“Did you check the trunk?” I asked. There was a heartbeat of silence. He hadn’t, of course. I had known he wouldn’t. It was my policy to check backseat, side pockets and trunk before lifting a vehicle. I did not want to be caught with someone’s oxygen machine, sleeping toddler or coke stash, but I knew Grey privately sneered at my thoroughness. He valued speed. Stashing Daisy’s petite body, as well as her very traceable phone, in the trunk of Robbie’s Ferrari had been a risk, but a calculated one.

“Bitch!” Grey exhaled. I heard him hit the gas. I hung up quickly. I knew what would come next. The police chase, the media circus, the final mad acceleration off a bridge or into a wall. And in the wreckage, Grey’s vibrant body finally stilled, red blood seeping into the bright cheerful awful yellow of a sunflower purse.

I expected nightmares that night or certainly the next, but they never came. I guess in my heart I was a killer, after all.

END