



RAPID READS



LOVE YOU
TO DEATH

GAIL BOWEN

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Summary: Successful late-night radio call-in show host Charlie D must discover which of his longtime listeners is killing other members of his loyal audience.

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*To Kelley Jo Burke, who understands the
power of radio and uses it wisely.*

CHAPTER ONE

A wise man once said 90 percent of life is just showing up. An hour before midnight, five nights a week, fifty weeks a year, I show up at CVOX radio. Our studios are in a concrete-and-glass box in a strip mall. The box to the left of us sells discount wedding dresses. The box to the right of us rents XXX movies. The box where I work sells talk radio—“ALL TALK/ALL THE TIME.” Our call letters are on the roof. The O in CVOX is an open, red-lipped mouth with a tongue that looks like Mick Jagger’s.

After I walk under Mick Jagger's tongue, I pass through security, make my way down the hall and slide into a darkened booth. I slip on my headphones and adjust the microphone. I spend the next two hours trying to convince callers that life is worth living. I'm good at my job—so good that sometimes I even convince myself.

My name is Charlie Dowhanuik. But on air, where we can all be who we want to be, I'm known as Charlie D. I was born with my mother's sleepy hazel eyes and clever tongue, my father's easy charm, and a wine-colored birthmark that covers half my face. In a moment of intimacy, the only woman I've ever loved, now, alas, dead, touched my cheek and said, "You look as if you've been dipped in blood."

One of the very few people who don't flinch when they look at my face is Nova ("Proud to Be Swiss") Langenegger.

For nine years, Nova has been the producer of my show, “The World According to Charlie D.” She says that when she looks at me she doesn’t see my birthmark—all she sees is the major pain in her ass.

Tonight when I walk into the studio, she narrows her eyes at me and taps her watch. It’s a humid night and her blond hair is frizzy. She has a zit on the tip of her nose. She’s wearing a black maternity T-shirt that says *Believe It or Not, I Used to Be Hot*.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Mama Nova,” I say. “You’re still hot. Those hormones that have been sluicing through your body for nine months give you a very sexy glow.”

“That’s not a sexy glow,” she says. “That’s my blood pressure spiking. We’re on the air in six minutes. I’ve been calling and texting you for two hours. Where were you?”

I open my knapsack and hand her a paper bag that glistens with grease from

the onion rings inside. “There was a lineup at Fat Boy’s,” I say.

Nova shakes her head. “You always know what I want.” She slips her hand into the bag, extracts an onion ring and takes a bite. Usually this first taste gives her a kid’s pleasure, but tonight she chews on it dutifully. It might as well be broccoli. “Charlie, we need to talk,” she says. “About Ian Blaise.”

“He calls in all the time,” I say. “He’s doing fine. Seeing a shrink. Back to work part-time. Considering that it’s only been six months since his wife and daughters were killed in that car accident, his recovery is a miracle.”

Nova has lovely eyes. They’re as blue as a northern sky. When she laughs, the skin around them crinkles. It isn’t crinkling now. “Ian jumped from the roof of his apartment building Saturday,” she says. “He’s dead.”

I feel as if I've been kicked in the stomach. "He called me at home last week. We talked for over an hour."

Nova frowns. "We've been over this a hundred times. You shouldn't give out your home number. It's dangerous."

"Not as dangerous as being without a person you can call in the small hours," I say tightly. "That's when the ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties can drive you over the edge. I remember the feeling well."

"The situation may be more sinister than that, Charlie," Nova says. "This morning someone sent us Ian's obituary. This index card was clipped to it."

Nova hands me the card. It's the kind school kids use when they have to make a speech in class. The message is neatly printed, and I read it aloud. "Ian Blaise wasn't worth your time, Charlie. None of them are. They're cutting off your oxygen."

I'm going to save you.” I turn to Nova.
“What the hell is this?”

“Well, for starters, it's the third in a series. Last week someone sent us Marcie Zhang's obituary.”

“The girl in grade nine who was being bullied,” I say. “You didn't tell me she was dead.”

“There's a lot I don't tell you,” Nova says. She sounds tired. “Anyway, there was a file card attached to the obituary. The message was the same as this one—minus the part about saving you. That's new.”

“I don't get it,” I say. “Marcie Zhang called in a couple of weeks ago. Remember? She was in great shape. She'd aced her exams. And she had an interview for a job as a junior counselor at a summer camp.”

“I remember. I also remember that the last time James Washington called in, he said that he was getting a lot of support from other gay athletes who'd been

outed, and he wished he'd gone public sooner."

"James is dead too?"

Nova raises an eyebrow. "Lucky you never read the papers, huh? James died as a result of a hit-and-run a couple of weeks ago. We got the newspaper clipping with the index card attached. Same message—word for word—as the one with Marcie's obituary."

"And you never told me?"

"I didn't connect the dots, Charlie. A fourteen-year-old girl who, until very recently has been deeply disturbed, commits suicide. A professional athlete is killed in a tragic accident. Do you have any idea how much mail we get? How many calls I handle a week? Maybe I wasn't as sharp as I should have been, because I'm preoccupied with this baby. But this morning after I got Ian's obituary—with the extended-play version of the note—I called the police."

I snap. “You called the cops? Nova, you and I have always been on the same side of that particular issue. The police operate in a black-and-white world. Right/wrong. Guilty/innocent. Sane/Not so much. We’ve always agreed that life is more complex for our listeners. They tell us things they can’t tell anybody else. They have to trust us.”

Nova moves so close that her belly is touching mine. Her voice is low and grave. “Charlie, this isn’t about a lonely guy who wants you to tell him it’s okay to have a cyberskin love doll as his fantasy date. There’s a murderer out there. A real murderer—not one of your Goth death groupies. We can’t handle this on our own.”

I reach over and rub her neck. “Okay, Mama Nova, you win. But over a hundred thousand people listen to our show every night. Where do we start?”

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Nova gives my hand a pat and removes it from her neck. “With you, Charlie,” she says. “The police want to use our show to flush out the killer.”