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THE SHADOW KILLER

GAIL BOWEN

“For all of us, being dead would be better than living with him. When Charlie said ‘no man is a man until his father dies,’ I knew what I had to do.”

It's Father's Day weekend, and it looks like some of the well-intentioned wisdom that Charlie D dispenses on his late-night radio call-in show might blow up in his face. One young listener seems intent on killing his father and the rest of his family. Unfortunately, no one knows where he is. Time is running out, until Charlie's own long-estranged father enters the picture.

This is an advance reading copy of the uncorrected proofs.

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Summary: Late-night radio host Charlie D has only two hours to find a troubled young boy and then convince him not to kill his father and the rest of his family. (RL 5.0)



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For Finn, a boy who stands in no one's shadow

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CHAPTER ONE

When the sun goes down, the only people on the streets of the neighborhood where I work are people who have something to sell. The women who stroll in skimpy outfits and platform shoes with five-inch heels sell love. Or what passes for love in the dark. The tattooed men in wife-beater shirts, ripped jeans and scuffed black combat boots sell drugs that take their clients up, down or out. Wherever they need to go to dull the pain of being alive.

I'm in the pain-dulling business too. What I offer is a voice that helps people get through the dark hours. My name is Charlie Dowhanuik. I host "The World According to Charlie D"—the late-night call-in show on CVOX radio ("ALL TALK/ ALL THE TIME").

I started out as the midnight deejay. When people began phoning in to talk about their lives, my producer and I decided to cut down on the tunes and focus on the voices.

It was a solid decision. Now we just use tunes to fill the gap between stories. I'm not a shrink or a social worker. The only special skill I have is that I know how to listen. People are hungry for that.

Most nights I ride my bike to work. But the city is in the middle of a heat wave, so tonight I'm on foot. The pavement beneath my feet is soft with heat. The stench of rotting garbage hangs heavy in the air.

It's not a pleasant walk, but this is my neighborhood. And as I pass by, the hookers and drug dealers mumble greetings. I mumble back.

One of the girls calls out, "Happy Father's Day, Charlie."

"I'm not a father," I say.

"If you ever decide you want to make a little Charlie junior, I'm available," she says. Her laugh is a bray.

The first fingers of a headache reach up from the back of my neck into my skull. Aspirin time.

Our local drugstore is grim. Its windows are crisscrossed with protective bars. Several signs announce security cameras and warn that there is minimal cash on the premises.

Tonight there's something new: a sign with a picture of a fancy set of golf clubs and a reminder that says *Don't forget Dad on His Special Day*. Ours is not a neighborhood where people have reason to remember

Dad on his special day. Or on any other day. Most people in this part of town would be hard-pressed to identify their dads in a police lineup.

But inside the store, the greeting card racks are bright with images of fathers and sons doing what fathers and sons are supposed to do together—play baseball, shoot hoops, catch fish, golf. When I try to remember if I ever did any of those things with my own father, I come up empty. My eyes move to the metal security mirror overhead and I see myself. For thirty-three years, I've lived with the wine-dark birthmark that covers half my face. Mirrors have never been my friends, but my image, distorted by the shiny convex curve of metal, stuns me. I look as if I'm wearing a blood mask. My reflection has caught the attention of a child whose mother is checking out the greeting cards.

The boy is perhaps four years old. He stares at the security mirror for a few seconds, and then his gaze shifts to me. His eyes widen, and he draws near to get a better look. His mother is a dishy redhead with a tennis tan, very brief white shorts and a white T-shirt that showcases her considerable assets. Everything about her shouts money and privilege. What she's doing in this store is a mystery.

When she notices her son staring at me, she hisses, "Don't stare at the man. It's not appropriate."

"He's got blood all over his face," the boy shouts—his voice is high and piercing.

Quick as the flick of a snake's tongue, the mother reaches out a perfect hand and slaps her son's cheek. He howls.

I meet her gaze.

"*That* wasn't appropriate," I say. As I walk over to the cashier and take my place

in line, I feel the perfect redhead's eyes boring a hole in the back of my head.

There's a stack of local newspapers on the counter by the cashier. I pick one up. For once, there is something new in the news. Two photos share pride of place on the front page. The first is of a man and a woman in evening clothes. His name is Henry Burgh; her name is Misty de Vol. They are beaming at one another with the satisfaction of two people who have found what they want out of life. He is a tough-looking old bird of eighty-three; she is a curvy blond of twenty-five. The photograph is their engagement picture.

The second photograph is of a man with a three-hundred-dollar haircut, hard eyes and a snarl for a smile. His name is Evan Burgh. He owns the network of which CVOX is the crown jewel. Henry, the groom-to-be, is his father.

For the past month, there've been whispers that before Henry has a chance to make Misty his bride, Evan Burgh will attempt to have the courts declare that his father's "best before" date has expired. The headline above the pictures tells the tale: *DAD'S IN LA-LA-LAND SAYS SON*. It appears that Evan's first kick at the can is to go public. I've locked horns with him enough times to know that he's a prick, so I'm on the side of young love.

The paper's other stories are the usual—a gang murder, an armed robbery, the threat of a garbage strike. There's a shot of the rising star in the political party my father led for many years. Rising Star is barbecuing ribs for his family. The wife and kids look as if they'd rather be eating ground glass than sharing a family moment with Dad. Mrs. Rising Star's smile is frozen. The faces of the two pretty teenage daughters are grim. And the third child, a boy on

the cusp of adolescence, is staring down at the picnic table, his face expressionless.

Only Leader Dad is beaming, clearly oblivious to his wife and kids. Although he has proposed slashing programs for youth at risk, single mothers and the working poor, he is being packaged as a proud protector of families. Not my kind of guy. But I look hard at the picture, especially at the boy.

My father, Howard Dowhanuik, was a politician—a successful one. I grew up being dragged into family publicity photos. Nobody wanted a gap in the picture where the third child should be.

The camera was not kind to the supporting cast of the Dowhanuik family. My activist-mother always looked as if she couldn't wait to break away and do something meaningful. My beautiful sisters flashed smiles that were clearly fake, and my birthmark made me look as if

I belonged to some bizarre face-painting cult. But the camera loved my father. Bathed in the glow of the successful politician, he always looked great. And why not? Howard Dowhanuik was the king of the castle, the people's choice.

I pay for the paper and the Aspirin and leave the store. When I turn at the corner, I see the fluorescent call letters on the roof of the radio station. The O in CVOX is an open red-lipped mouth with a tongue that looks like Mick Jagger's. It may be cheezy, but it's the beacon that leads me to the place that is the closest thing to home I know.

As I step through the glass doors that open into the station's foyer, my cell phone vibrates. I check the caller ID. It's my father. He makes an effort to contact me three times a year—once each on the anniversaries of the death of my mother and of the woman I loved, and once close

to Father's Day. After a life in politics, Howard knows how to turn the knife.

I drop the cell back in my pocket, pass through security and make my way down a hall hung with over-sized photographs of CVOX's heavy hitters. "The World According to Charlie D" is our station's top-rated show, so my picture, taken in profile to feature my "good side," is front and center. I'm proud of our show. I think we do good work, but there are nights when I feel as if I'm swimming upstream. I look again at the newspaper in my hand and my spidey senses begin to tingle. That's when I know that even though it's still ten minutes to showtime, I'm already in over my head.