



*The Always  
Wore Red*



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*She Always Wore Red*

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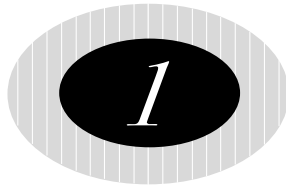
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For Jane O.

When we warm to others  
In whom we see ourselves,  
We may be startled to discover  
Otherness.

—Darien Haynes,  
“Impromptu”





The nameless cadaver on the cover of my anatomy textbook—a middle-aged man who is no longer black, white, or brown—would be counted among the orange in a census of the embalmed.

Someone should have adjusted the tint before they juiced him.

I flip the book open and study the color photographs of the cadaver's aortic arch and brachiocephalic veins, then close my eyes and try to commit the multisyllable words to memory. Here I am, near the end of my first semester of mortuary school, and I'm still having trouble keeping my veins and arteries straight.

Behind me, an irate mother in the carpool line is honking, though we have a good three minutes before kindergarten dismissal. She probably has to pick up her child and get back to work before the end of her lunch hour. While I sympathize with her impatience, I wish she'd lay off the horn so I can concentrate.

I open one eye and examine the book propped on my steering wheel. The right internal jugular branches off the right and left brachiocephalic veins, which lie outside the brachiocephalic trunk. *Brachiocephalic* sounds like some kind of dinosaur. Bugs would like that word.

I turn the book sideways, but the photograph on the page looks nothing like a prehistoric animal. In fact, I find it hard to believe that anything like this jumble of tunnels and tubes exists in my body, but skin covers myriad mysteries.

I snap the book shut as the bell at Round Lake Elementary trills through the warm afternoon. The kindergarten classes troop out into the sunshine, their hands filled with lunch boxes and construction paper cutouts. The tired teachers stride to the curb and peer into various vehicles, then motion the appropriate children forward.

My spirits lift when my red-haired cherub catches my eye and waves. Bradley “Bugs” Graham waits until his teacher calls his name and skips toward me.

“Hey, Mom.” He climbs into the backseat of the van as his teacher holds the door.

“Hey yourself, kiddo.” I check to make sure he’s snapped his seat belt before smiling my thanks at his teacher. “Did you have a good morning?”

“Yep.” He leans forward to peek into the front seat. “Do we hafta go home, or can we stop to get a snack?”

My thoughts veer toward the to-do list riding shotgun in the front passenger seat. I still have to run to the grocery store, swing by the dry cleaner’s to pick up Gerald’s funeral suit, and stop to see if the bookstore has found a used copy of *Introduction to Infectious Diseases*, Second Edition. Textbooks are usually pricey, but medical textbooks ought to come with fixed-rate mortgages. Still, I need to find that book if I’m going to complete my online course by the end of the semester.

“I’ll pull into a drive-through,” I tell Bugs, knowing he won’t mind. “You want McDonald’s?”

He nods, so I point the van toward Highway 441.

“Mr. Gerald make any pickups today?” Bugs asks.

I ease onto the highway, amazed at how easily my children have accepted the ongoing work of the funeral home. “None today.”

“See this?”

I glance in the rearview mirror and see Bugs waving his construction paper creation. “Yes.”

“It’s a stegosaurus. Can I give it to Gerald?”

“I think he’d like that.” I force a smile as an unexpected wave of grief rises within me. Like a troublesome relative who doesn’t real-

ize she's worn out her welcome, sorrow often catches me by surprise. Gerald, the elderly embalmer at Fairlawn, has become a surrogate father for my sons. Thomas, my ex-husband and my children's father, has been gone for months, but in some ways he's never been closer. He lies in the Pine Forest Cemetery, less than two miles from our house, so we can't help but think of him every time we drive by.

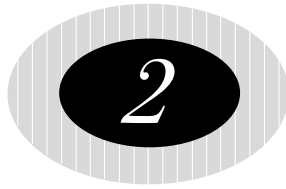
I get Bugs a vanilla ice cream cone at the McDonald's drive-through, and then we run to the grocery store and the dry cleaner. I'll call the bookstore later. No sense in going there when a simple phone call will suffice.

Finally we turn into the long driveway that leads to the Fairlawn Funeral Home.

Gerald has poured a new concrete pad next to the garage, and as I park on it, Bugs notices that the call car is gone. "Uh-oh." He looks at me. "Somebody bit the dust."

I press my lips together. A couple of months ago I would have mumbled something about the old station wagon maybe needing a wash, but now I know there's no reason to shield my children from the truth—we are in the death care industry. The squeamishness I felt when we first arrived vanished the day I walked into the prep room and gloved up to help Gerald lay out my ex-husband.

"Come in the house," I tell my son. "I'll pour you a glass of milk."



## 2

Randolph Harris crosses his leg at the knee and runs his fingers along the trouser leg to reinforce the pleat.

The private detective across the desk swivels his chair toward the wall and brings the phone closer to his mouth, employing body language intended to remind his guest that he is not part of the telephone conversation.

Randolph folds his hands and struggles to be patient. He set this appointment for one, canceling two patients in order to drive to this shabby strip mall and meet with Dexter Duggan. He expects a modicum of professionalism in return, but no secretary greeted him at the door, nor did the sandy-haired detective invite him into the inner office until five minutes after the appointed time. When the phone rang at six after, Randolph expected Duggan to ignore the call, but instead the man picked up and launched into a whispered conversation.

Randolph heaves an indiscreet sigh and looks around the office. A laminated map of North Carolina hangs above the desk, with pushpins marking the cities of Raleigh, Charlotte, and Asheville. A bookcase against the paneled wall holds rows of phone books, city names printed on the spines above logos of walking fingers. The second shelf holds camera equipment—several old Nikons, long lenses with capped ends, a battered leather bag, a stainless steel canister with a black lid.

A couple of framed photographs balance on the lowest shelf, crowded by a pair of mud-caked boots, a Durham Bulls baseball cap, and a smudged panama hat. He focuses on the photographs: a smiling boy, probably six or seven, and a bikini-clad woman standing next to a ski boat.

Oh yes, Dexter Duggan is a class act.

Randolph will stand and walk out if Mr. Duggan doesn't end his call by one fifteen. The hands on the clock behind the desk shift, trimming Randolph's wait to three minutes.

Content now that he's decided to waste no more than a quarter hour on this appointment, Randolph studies the detective. Duggan's jeans and flannel shirt would be more appropriate for a hunter than the owner of a detective agency, but perhaps the fellow has been spying on someone from a pickup. The cramped office suggests that the Duggan Detective Agency is a one-man operation, though someone must be employed to answer the phones. Then again, perhaps a detective can get by with voice mail, call forwarding, and a cell phone. After all, a private snoop doesn't have to deal with insurance companies, physician referrals, and clients who are mentally unbalanced.

Randolph smiles when the clock advances to 1:13. Duggan is nodding now, submitting to whatever is being stipulated on the phone. Is he talking to an unhappy client? No, this has to be a wife or a girlfriend. For Duggan to take the call in the middle of a meeting with a prospective client, whoever's on the line must wield considerable influence in the man's life.

The minute hand moves again. In sixty seconds Randolph will leave and find another private detective. The Charlotte yellow pages list twenty-eight independent investigators; any one of the other twenty-seven is bound to have better manners than Dexter Duggan.

Randolph lifts his chin and watches the second hand sweep around the clock's face. He'll be on his way in—

"Sorry." Duggan drops the receiver onto the phone, then leans forward and folds his arms on the desk. "I've got a woman checking out a suspected industrial theft in Gastonia, and I've been expecting her call." The way Duggan hunches in his chair like a scolded puppy



contradicts his story, but calling attention to his prevarication will not strengthen the client-detective bond.

Randolph straightens in his seat. "I'm assuming my case will receive the same care and attention . . . should we come to an agreement."

"Of course." Mr. Duggan flashes a boyish grin. "What brings you to my office, Mr. Harris? Asset investigation? Suspected infidelity?"

"It's *Doctor* Harris. I'm a psychiatrist in private practice." Randolph clears his throat. "I'm here because my daughter, McLane Harris, is missing. I'd like you to find her."

Duggan lifts a brow. "I don't search for children until the police have exhausted their resources."

"This is not a criminal matter, nor is my daughter a kidnap victim. She's twenty-four and quite independent. She left home two and a half months ago, and I haven't heard from her. I'm beginning to worry."

Duggan's gaze darts to Randolph's bare ring finger. "Could she be living with your ex-wife?"

"My wife died several months ago."

"Oh. Sorry." The man doesn't miss a beat. "Have you spoken to the police? You know, to rule out foul play?"

Randolph folds his hands. "I see no need to involve the authorities when it's quite clear my daughter purposely left home. She packed suitcases and took most of her belongings."

Duggan takes off his reading glasses and deliberately cleans the lenses with his shirttail. "A twenty-four-year-old woman has every right to leave home. She may not want to be found. If you contact her, she may be upset."

"I'm her father," Randolph drawls, his voice heavy with irritation. "Why should she be upset?"

"I'm just saying. Not everybody wants to be found. If she's done nothing illegal and she's not in danger, she may take offense at your snooping into her business. Some people are better if you leave 'em alone awhile; they come around once they have time to think."

Randolph forces himself to take a deep breath and temper his frustration. "I didn't say she wasn't in danger, but she could be. She's being

inappropriately influenced by a man who does not have her best interests at heart.”

“Are we talking scam artist, pimp, or bad boyfriend?”

Randolph tamps down another spike of irritation. This man deals with human garbage every day. He can't be blamed for assuming the worst. “Listen,” he says, resting his hand on his knee, “my situation is serious, but it's not what you're thinking. My daughter is involved with a man; she imagines herself in love with him. It's impossible, of course, and marriage would be unthinkable, but I'm sure they've either eloped or they're living together somewhere. The man is a marine, so he shouldn't be hard to locate.”

Duggan pulls a legal pad from beneath a stack of magazines and picks up a pencil. “Does your daughter have credit cards?”

“She has two Visa accounts. I'm a cosigner on both. She took the maximum cash advance on both cards the day before she left. I don't think she'll be using them again.”

“Stuck you with the bill, did she?”

“I don't care about the money. I care about my daughter, and I want her home before this man ruins her life.”

Duggan makes a note, then taps his pencil on the tablet. “Does she have a cell phone?”

“She left it on the nightstand. She's no fool. She knows I know that number. I would imagine she's bought a new phone.”

“Did she take her car?”

“Yes. A 2006 Altima, dark green, North Carolina plates. I can get you the tag number.”

“Have you reported the car stolen?”

Randolph shakes his head. “How could she steal what's rightfully hers? I'm not reporting her to the police.”

“Fine. So tell me about the boyfriend.”

“She's known him only a few months. He's older than she is. They met at some club she frequented with her college friends. I never met him.”

“She never brought him home?”

“I wouldn't allow him in the house.”

“Why not?”

Randolph stiffens at the question. “Is that germane?”

The detective blinks. “Beg pardon?”

“I fail to see why my reasons should apply to this conversation.”

Duggan shrugs. “I’m curious, is all. Your daughter meets a young man, but you won’t let her bring him home. She’s twenty-four and in love, but you won’t support her. Anybody would want to know what you have against this guy.”

Randolph grits his teeth. “You don’t understand.”

“If you don’t explain, I never will.”

In the office next door, someone flushes a toilet. The sound of swirling water and humming pipes fills the office as Randolph leans forward. “Look here, Mr. Duggan—I raised my daughter to be a God-fearing Christian woman. Some kids come out of college with crazy ideas but not McLane. She maintained a sterling character and impeccable reputation until she met *him*.”

Duggan leans back and sets his tablet on his knee. “So what he’d do? Besides sweeping your daughter off her feet.”

“He met her in bars, for one thing, and McLane wasn’t the sort to hang out in such places. One night, worried about her, I found her car and waited in the parking lot until she came out. That’s where I saw him—and that’s when I decided she would never bring that man to my house.”

A mischievous grin tugs at the detective’s mouth. “Drunk, was he?”

“I don’t know, but he had his hands all over her. Completely inappropriate.”

Duggan nods and makes another note on his tablet. “You know this man’s name?”

“Jeff—Jeffrey, I suppose—Jeffrey Larson of the Marine Corps. Second Marine Division, my daughter says.”

Duggan scribbles on the tablet. “Has this Larson gone AWOL?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve made no inquiries about the man, nor do I intend to. He’s not my concern.”

A thoughtful look enters Duggan’s eyes. “What will you do if I find them together?”

Randolph grips the armrest of his chair. “Have you a daughter, Mr. Duggan?”

The detective snorts. “I can barely hang on to a wife.”

“Well, a father has certain expectations for his daughter, and Jeffrey Larson is not what I expected for McLane. She graduated from college with honors and was well on her way to becoming a doctor before she met this man. Jeff Larson, on the other hand, apparently joined the marines because he has no higher ambitions than to blow things up and kill people.”

Duggan makes a strangled sound deep in his throat, then looks up. “Well. Uncle Sam likes to know where his soldiers are, so it shouldn’t be hard to find this guy. Let’s hope your daughter is with him.”

“You’re missing the point—I’d like her to be as far away from him as possible.” Randolph retrieves his wallet from an inner suit pocket and slides a picture from the plastic sleeve. “This is McLane.” His throat tightens as he studies the girl smiling up at him. “The photo is fairly recent; I snapped it on her birthday in March. Two days before her mother passed away.”

The detective hesitates. “Had your wife been sick? Perhaps your daughter took off because she was tired or depressed—”

“Shana’s death was an accident. She was driving home after dark, misjudged a turn, lost control, and hit a pylon.” Randolph’s throat clogs with emotion.

But Duggan seems not to notice as he reaches for the photo. “Could your daughter’s disappearance have anything to do with your wife’s death?”

“What do you mean?”

Duggan studies the picture. “Sometimes people like to mourn in private, sorta process the change in their lives. Maybe she couldn’t do that with you around.”

“McLane was upset about her mother’s accident; we all were. But she accepted it. No, her disappearance has more to do with Jeff Larson than with her mother’s passing.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because the weekend before, she asked if Jeff could come to the house for dinner. I refused.”

“How’d she react?”

Randolph smiles. “Did she storm around and throw things? McLane and I do not have altercations. She was more sad than angry, I think—and I believe that’s when she decided to leave.”

Duggan squints at the map on the wall behind him. “Do you think they went to the marine base at Jacksonville?”

“I have no idea.”

“Does your daughter have friends near Camp Lejeune? Someone who might let her sleep on the couch for a few days?”

“She has college friends. None of them were in the military.” He takes a flash drive from his pocket and slides it across the desk. “She took her laptop with her, but I copied her address book from the desk-top computer in the library.”

Duggan’s eyes narrow. “Were you able to read her e-mails? You might find—”

“She erased every message or transferred them to her laptop. But she didn’t erase the address book.”

Duggan takes the flash drive. “I doubt this information will help us, Doc. Apparently your daughter’s a smart girl. She gave her departure a great deal of thought.”

“But you’ll take the case, correct? And you’ll call me if you find her.” He fishes a business card from his wallet and flips it across the desk.

The detective scans the card. “No home number?”

“It’s unlisted.”

Duggan flips the card back. “Might be nice for me to have it.”

Randolph takes a pen from his pocket and writes his home number on the card. “Anything else you need?”

“Just a deposit. My rate is \$100 an hour, plus expenses for travel or long distance calls. Five hundred ought to get us started.”

Randolph reaches for his checkbook. “How long do you think it’ll take to find McLane?”

The detective grins. “Not long. People run as much as ever these days, but it’s getting harder and harder to hide.”

## *About the Author*

Christy Award winner **Angela Hunt** writes books for readers who have learned to expect the unexpected. With over three million copies of her books sold worldwide, she is the best-selling author of *The Tale of Three Trees*, *The Note*, *Magdalene*, and more than 100 other titles.

She and her youth pastor husband make their home in Florida with mastiffs. One of their dogs was featured on *Live with Regis and Kelly* as the second-largest canine in America.

Readers may visit her Web site at [www.angelahuntbooks.com](http://www.angelahuntbooks.com).

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you read the first book featuring Jennifer Graham, *Doesn't She Look Natural?* How has she changed since her early days at Fairlawn?
2. What are some of the major themes of this novel? Did any of the themes particularly resonate with you?
3. How important is Mt. Dora as a setting in this story? Does it seem like the sort of town you might enjoy visiting?
4. Does Jen's description of the embalming process make the death industry less mysterious for you? Did you learn anything that might prove useful when and if you need to deal with a mortuary?
5. Do you think Jen made the right decision when McLane asked her for a ride to the abortion clinic? What would you have done? Why?
6. Jennifer says McLane and Jeff are "erasing the lines" between black and white as well as the prejudices of her past. How did the following section of Paul's letter to the church at Galatia "erase the lines" of his day: "There is no

# *Hot Chicken Salad*

. . . one of Fairlawn's most comforting funeral foods

## Ingredients:

- 2 cups cooked boneless chicken breast, cubed
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 1 (10.75 ounce) can cream of mushroom soup
- 1 (4.5 ounce) can mushrooms, drained
- ½ cup slivered almonds
- ½ cup chopped celery
- 1 cup grated sharp Cheddar cheese
- 1 cup crushed butter crackers or potato chips

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a small skillet, sauté the mushrooms in oil. Then mix together the chicken, mayonnaise, soup, sautéed mushrooms, almonds, celery, and cheese.

Place mixture in a 13 x 9 inch casserole dish that has been sprayed with nonstick vegetable oil. Top with the crushed crackers or potato chips.

Bake for 30 minutes or until bubbly.



## References

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Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep, an organization of professional photographers dedicated to preserving precious moments between infants and their parents. Remembrance photography is a wonderful way for moms and dads to have a lasting memento of children who die too early. Learn more about their work at [www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org](http://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org).

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One final note: Mt. Dora is a real city in Lake County, Florida. If you have an opportunity to visit that lovely town, you will discover that many of the buildings, landmarks, and streets described in this novel actually exist, *including the catacombs*. Unlike Clay and his friends, however, I have no idea where the bomb shelter is, nor have I ever been inside.

The location remains a carefully guarded secret.