



Her Last Whisper: A Novel (Dr. Charlotte Stone)

By Karen Robards

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Readers who relish heated passion and chilling suspense love *New York Times* bestselling author Karen Robards’s acclaimed novels featuring Dr. Charlotte “Charlie” Stone. A heroine with a keen mind for catching killers and a soft heart for bad boys, Charlie is back in this third sizzling paranormal romance thriller.

HER LAST WHISPER

Madness and murder invaded Dr. Charlotte Stone’s life when she was just a girl—and made her a woman determined to save others from the horror she survived. An expert in the psychology of serial killers, she’s faced down more than her share of human monsters. But Charlie can also communicate with the spirits of those who die violently, an extrasensory skill that has helped the FBI bring lethal predators to justice. Now, after narrowly escaping death a second time, Charlie’s ready to step away from the edge . . . before her luck runs out.

Too bad Charlie is too dedicated for her own good—and too devoted to federal agent Tony Bartoli to say no when he asks her to ride shotgun on yet another risky mission. Of course, she already has her hands full with Michael Garland: the handsome, roguish ghost with whom she’s hopelessly in love—a spirit who depends on Charlie to keep him from slipping forever into the dark side of the afterlife. But in the mortal world, beautiful single women are vanishing from Las Vegas hotels at night. All signs indicate that a psychopath is on the prowl in Sin City, and Bartoli’s FBI colleague Lena Kaminsky has reason to fear that her missing sister may be just the killer’s type.

In a town full of fast players and few rules, flushing out a smooth-talking stalker like the Cinderella Killer might be a loser’s game. But for Charlie, the only way to cage her quarry is to plunge back into the homicidal hell she vowed to leave behind—and may not leave alive.

Praise for *Her Last Whisper*

“A tightly written ghostly romantic suspense novel with intriguing supernatural

elements and sizzling sexual tension.”—***Kirkus Reviews***

“An absolute winner . . . explodes with both passion and mystery . . . a tale that will haunt you, providing both thrills and chills.”—***Bookreporter***

“Outstanding . . . Robards is truly a master storyteller.”—***RT Book Reviews***

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“One of the most popular voices in women’s fiction.”—***Newsweek***

“Draw a line between two extremely popular genres, mysteries and romance novels, and in the middle you will find the bestselling Robards. She merges the two worlds like no one else, deftly interlacing plot and passion.”—***Albany Times Union***

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Editorial Review

Review

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From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

Karen Robards is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of forty-six books and one novella. The mother of three boys, she lives in her hometown of Louisville, Kentucky.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Chapter One

Whoever said that only the good die young had obviously never met Michael Garland.

He was thirty-six years old, sexy as hell, a total badass—and dead as a doornail. Right at that moment, he was also in the process of driving Dr. Charlotte “Charlie” Stone totally around the bend.

“We could be on a beach right now,” he grouched, referring to the fact that she had elected to return to work rather than take the extended vacation that had been recommended after her most recent death-defying experience. His tone was light. His eyes on her were dark and watchful. He was worried about her, she knew. To tell the truth, she was worried about herself. “Sand. Sun. You in a bikini. Come on, Doc, confess: you’ve got something against fun.”

He only ever called her Doc anymore when he was seriously ticked off at her. Short version: he felt she needed to take some vacation time while she disagreed. At thirty-two years old, Charlie had been in charge

of herself since her early teens. She did not need a man—ghost, whatever—constantly second-guessing her decisions.

Her brows snapped together.

“Go away,” she mouthed at him soundlessly, after a quick glance assured her that her living companion’s attention was occupied elsewhere.

Michael snorted. “Not in this life, buttercup.” One corner of his mouth quirked up slightly. “Or in this death, either.”

Oh, ha, ha. But she didn’t—couldn’t—say it aloud. If they’d been alone, Charlie would have done more than shoot him an exasperated look. She would have told him to take his fun and stick it up a bodily orifice. Fun was not what life was all about. Life was serious. Purposeful. Sometimes painful. And—well, definitely not fun.

But they weren’t alone. In fact, they were even less alone than he thought they were.

“I won’t tell.” The agonized whisper made Charlie’s heart thump. Her fingers tightened around the pen she was holding. The (living) convicted serial killer chained to a seat on the other side of the poured concrete table from her never changed his expression. Neither did the dead convicted serial killer—that would be Michael, looking as alive as she did herself, in a snug white tee, faded jeans, and boots—who leaned broad shoulders against the beige-painted cinder-block wall to her left as he played self-appointed spectral bodyguard. Which was a complete waste of time, as she had told him when he’d insisted on following her into the interview room rather than waiting outside in the hall as she would have preferred so that she could concentrate fully on her research subject. Number one, there was no need: in this heavily guarded maximum security prison, of all places, she was perfectly safe. And number two, if something were to go wrong, if she were to find herself in danger, there was nothing he could do about it anyway. He was ectoplasm; ether; air. He couldn’t so much as swat a fly, because in this earthly plane he no longer existed. In the past, he had occasionally managed to manifest physically for the briefest of moments, but because in typical-for-him aggressive fashion he had pushed the boundaries of that until he had gone a heavenly bridge too far, he had, apparently permanently, rendered himself as insubstantial as a breath. And even if he could once again manage to manifest physically, he still couldn’t: he’d been warned that if he did, if he once again took on a corporeal aspect, the bond holding him here might very well snap like a rubber band and he would be sucked up into Spookville, as he called the purple twilighty, monster-filled place that was his immediate afterlife destination, possibly never to return.

Therefore, as Charlie had pointed out to him earlier, as a bodyguard Michael was useless.

And even if he wasn’t useless, even if he could manifest, there was still nothing he could do to protect her from what was currently disturbing her: the voices.

The voices were all in her head.

Sort of.

At least, she seemed to be the only one who could hear them. Her gift, or curse, depending on how you looked at it, was that she could see/hear/communicate with the spirits of the newly, violently dead (which was how she had found herself saddled with Michael, a former subject of her research who’d been stabbed to

death shortly after leaving this very room about six weeks back). But Charlie could only hear this woman. Whom she couldn't be completely sure was real. Or dead.

"When's the last time you even took a vacation?" Folding his arms over his chest, Michael narrowed sky blue eyes at her. At six-foot-three, with tawny blond hair that didn't quite reach his shoulders and a face and body that would make any female between the ages of twelve and ninety drool, he was one of the best-looking men she had ever seen. Too bad he was a total pain in the ass. Not to mention dead. Among other problematic things. He continued, "A real vacation, that didn't involve work, where you just went somewhere sunny and hung out in your bathing suit and relaxed. I'm betting it's been years. Hell, I'm betting you don't even own a bikini. Am I right?"

She shot him a look that should have singed his eyeballs. And not just because the only swimsuit she possessed was a five-year-old black one piece.

"I'm right," he concluded with grim satisfaction.

"Where's my candy?" whined the live serial killer she could actually answer without seeming nuts. Her attention instantly redirected toward her job, Charlie pulled from the pocket of her white lab coat the Hershey bar that she had elected to use as a reward (bribe) for this particular subject for responding to her questions, one of which he had answered just before Michael had distracted her. Opening the wrapper, she broke off a section and slid it across the table, then watched her test subject scoop it up and eat it with a great deal of lip-smacking satisfaction. The shackles joining his wrists clanked as he moved. He also had manacles around his ankles securing him to the floor, and a chain around his waist that was fastened to a sturdy metal ring in the wall behind him. It prevented him from rising, or getting close enough to actually put his hands on her.

She might be the goat to his deceptively harmless-looking tiger, but in this controlled environment he was the tethered one.

"You didn't give me chocolate," Michael objected. "Hell, I didn't know chocolate was even an option."

Charlie ignored that. She was administering a simplified version of the Myers-Briggs personality test to the hulking, balding fifty-two-year-old convict in front of her. They were alone except for Michael (since he was invisible to everyone except her, she wasn't sure he even counted) and the guard, Johnson, who periodically checked on them through the small glass window in the metal door. Outside the walls of Wallens Ridge State Prison, where they were currently seated in the tiny, windowless room next to her office, her test subject was known as the Snake River Killer. His given name was Walter Spivey, and he was a hairdresser by trade. He was also notorious as the murderer of fourteen young women whose flesh he had liked, post-mortem, to gnaw from their bones, and he had been on various death rows for the past twelve years. Two months earlier, he had been moved to Wallens Ridge for the express purpose of participating in her government-sponsored study. An apparent anomaly among serial killers, who tended to have higher than average IQs, Spivey was of special interest to her because his IQ of record was 82. Her meetings with him had convinced her that this was an error, or possibly an attempt by some psychiatrist in the pay of Spivey's defense lawyers to circumvent a death sentence, because in many jurisdictions a low IQ was considered a mitigating factor. Whatever, it had been satisfying for her to determine that a serial killer who had at first seemed like the exception to the rule probably was not, after all. He was crazy like a fox—in other words, cunning and manipulative.

A psychiatrist with her own dark personal history with serial killers, Charlie had thought she was immune to

the bad vibes that the worst of them emanated.

She'd been wrong. With his pale, sweaty skin and loose, damp mouth, Spivey creeped her out. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that she was a slender, pretty brunette like the majority of his victims, whose pictures she had seen in his file, but she didn't really think so. Before—meaning before nearly dying had totally messed her up—being shut up like this with him wouldn't have bothered her at all. She would have regarded Walter Spivey with the clinical detachment of a medical student toward a cadaver.

Now she found that being near him made her skin crawl. The only possible solution? Ignore it. Power through. And hope it went away.

“Again, please just answer yes or no,” she said to Spivey. From her calm voice, of which under the circumstances she was justly proud, to the up-twist in which she wore her shoulder-length chestnut hair, to her understated jewelry and the simple blue shirt and black pants beneath her lab coat, Charlie was to all outward appearances unflappably professional. If anxiety had caused her to chew her lipstick off when the voices had started up again just before she'd sat down with Spivey, and if there were shadows resulting from a certain amount of sleeplessness beneath her blue eyes, well, hopefully nobody would notice. “You usually place yourself nearer to the side than the center of a room.”

Michael snorted. “You think he's going to answer honestly? Take it from me, by the time you get to death row you've pretty much figured out that I as in introvert is bad, E as in extrovert is good. So he's going to say no, because everyone knows that preferring the center makes him more of an extrovert, and thus closer to an E than an I. Nobody wants to fry, babe. Everybody you're talking to in here is working every angle they can to avoid it.”

Charlie didn't know why she was surprised to discover how much Michael knew about the MBTI personality test. He was highly intelligent. Manipulating the test was something that he was absolutely capable of doing. If he knew that introversion was a mild indicator of a sociopathic personality, then she was pretty confident that he also knew that INTJ—Introversion, intuition, thinking, judgment—was the Myers-Briggs personality type most common among serial killers. She spared a minute to try to remember what Michael's type was—she hadn't gotten around to testing him herself before he was killed, although she knew he'd been tested before—and couldn't; when she got back to her office, she would pull his file and check.

“No,” Spivey responded with a sunny smile, and as Charlie recorded his answer, he looked pointedly at the Hershey bar. “Can I have my candy?”

“Told ya.” Michael's tone was smug as Charlie broke off another section of candy bar and slid it over. The tips of Spivey's fingers just brushed hers. They felt soft and damp. The contact made her stomach tighten, and she quickly pulled her hand back. Michael continued, “And just so you can quit racking your brain, I scored ESFP. And that was without being bribed by chocolate.”

The curious thing was, ESFP—extraversion, sensing, feeling, perception—was the exact opposite of INTJ. Absolutely not the mark of a serial killer. As far from it as a subject could possibly get, in fact. Charlie's lips twisted. No way had that been an accident. Michael had, no doubt, manipulated the test. As she reached that conclusion, she shot him a condemning look. He grinned, a slow and devilishly charming grin that admitted everything.

And just as easy as that he had her going all marshmallowy inside.

Damn it. She refocused on her test subject with grim determination.

“Please don’t do this to me.” The disembodied whisper came out of nowhere, snapping her right back into the Amityville Horror that her life was devolving into like a quick plunge into ice water. The terror in the voice sent chills down Charlie’s spine. Her instant, instinctive reaction was to glance at Michael, furtively searching his face to see if he’d heard it, too. If the woman she was hearing was present in spirit, even if the timing and circumstances of her death put her beyond the parameters of Charlie’s ability to see her, Michael should be able to see her, because as a spirit himself he could see other spirits in his vicinity, just like she was able to see any living, breathing human who might, for example, walk into the room.

But Michael clearly wasn’t seeing whoever was connected to the voice. He wasn’t hearing her, either.

Okay, deep breath. This was different. This was outside Charlie’s experience. This was a whole new facet of the freak show that was her existence. It had been happening to her only since she had died and been brought back.

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