



SORCHIA DUBOIS

ZORAIDA GREY  
AND THE  
FAMILY STONES

### **“Tell me the truth!”**

His whisper sinks into my stomach like rotten meat. His fingers tense on my neck.

He is in my head, but I'm in his as well. “This is why you brought me down here. You've been playing me along all day.”

“Of course I have.”

“What makes you think it will be so easy?”

His tone is measured, not cruel, but not comforting either. “Do you think you can waltz in here and do as you please? You're not in Kansas anymore.”

“You mean I'm not in Arkansas anymore.” My voice rasps under the pressure of his fingers.

Pain in my temples pulls me deeper into the abyss. He pushes the spell into my head.

Losing myself,  
losing myself,  
losing myself.

I open my mouth to scream but forget to do it. How much of this ensorcellment is due to his spell and how much to the smell of peaty whisky on his breath, to the warmth of his muscular arms, to the solid weight of his body against mine?

What is this strange pleasure, even as he pries open my mind, as he pushes his will into mine, as he touches my most private thoughts? All memories of the healing crystal, Granny, and the temptation of the black stone disappear in a puff of desire.

## **Praise for Sorchia DuBois**

“*ZORAIDA GREY AND THE FAMILY STONES* will enchant you, and its cast of bewitching characters will weave their spells that keep you grinning and gasping and turning the pages quicker than a sorcerer can conjure. A fabulous read!”

~*Parris Afton Bonds,*  
*co-founder of Romance Writers of America*

“Sorchia DuBois’ writing is like a whisper in your ear...the kind that makes you shiver a little even while you’re enjoying it. You don’t need to dive into her books because they reach out from the first word and grab you. I just hope she keeps them coming!”

~ *Laura Strickland, Author*

# Zoraida Grey and the Family Stones

by

Sorchia DuBois

*Zoraida Grey Series*

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

## **Zoraida Grey and the Family Stones**

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## **Dedication**

To the ladies of the Ozark Scenic River Writers Guild  
for their undying support and positive energy  
and to my family for tolerance.

Chapter 1  
Granny Tightens the Knot

*Granny started it. I can lay the whole mess at the feet of that cantankerous old pelican. Funny, isn't it, how a solid, normal life twists into something else? Makes you wonder if it was ever so solid or so normal in the first place.*

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Her snow-white hair spreads like a halo on the purple pillow. A dried apple of a woman, Granny's hummingbird fingers tug knots into a brown jute cord. The frayed cord cascades across an amethyst quilt and down to the gray board floor. From beneath the bed, a cat's soft black paw bats the dangling end.

Late afternoon sunshine flickers through the leaves of the giant oak outside the window. Shadows and sunbeams dance across the floor, across Granny's bed, across the knotted cord growing in her hands. The familiar musty aroma of sandalwood incense wafts through the silent shack.

I survey the view of hazy Arkansas woodland from the window, but I watch her out of the corner of my eye. She looks as she has looked for the twenty-nine years of my life, yet ice crystals grow in my heart. The white light of her essence flickers and flutters like a moth's wings against the window. What if she really is sick this time?

“Zoraida.” Granny’s voice snaps me to attention. “Stop gawking. I ’spect you’re already plannin’ my funeral, ain’t you? More’n likely figuring out what you’ll do when I’m dead and you have all of this to yerself.”

I cast my gaze around the one room she calls home. The wood cookstove and sink on the east wall serve as a kitchen. Oak pollen lies in a fine, yellow-green dust, coating dried flowers, bottled herbs, and candles on the stained wooden table. Parchments and books cascade from two frayed wicker chairs onto the rough board floor. The corner of the window screen folds back, torn to allow easy access for cats. With each breeze, Arkansas black flies, freshly hatched and thirsty for blood, swarm in through the hole.

“Yes, Granny.” I swat a fly on my arm before it gnaws to the bone. “I’m living for the day when I can bask in all this luxury. It can’t come soon enough.”

“Now, don’t you be a smartass.” Her eyes glitter. Sarcasm is the only language the old bat understands. She’s up to something, that’s for certain. “Git over here and sit beside me. I have somethin’ to tell you.”

“If you’re expecting me to clean this place, you’ve got another think coming.” I push a gray cat out of the cane rocking chair and sit down.

Unimpressed, the cat flops on the floor. I shed my shoes and sink my toes into the soft fur on his tummy.

“I’m dying.” Granny whips the jute around her fingers and knots it into the pattern. Her shiny, black eyes match the beads she strings into the cord.

My breath stalls somewhere between my lungs and my throat, but I know better than to let it show. I grit my teeth and shake my head. “You’re at death’s door

every other time I come out here. What's wrong with you now?"

"I'm spent, Zoraida," she whispers to the cord of jute. "The gray days of my life stretch behind, but when I look ahead, I see the void. This'll be my last summer."

"You need to get outside in the sunshine. You'll feel better then."

"Sunshine ain't got nothin' to do with it." She squints at me, sizing me up. "But you can help. If you want to."

I squint back at her. "I knew you wanted something. Why can't you just ask straight out without pretending you're about to die?"

She jerks a knot tight. "I ain't foolin' this time. If you want me to live to see another full moon, you'll do what I tell you. Get me back my healing crystal. They stole it five-hundred years ago. It's the only thing as can save me."

"What healing crystal, you crazy old woman? Who stole it?" I feel her pulling me into her web. This is how she operates.

"You always was the brightest one in the litter, though they was all clever. Not counting your cousin Clyde. That boy didn't have the brains God gave a head of lettuce. If you can't steal my crystal, nobody can. You'll have to sneak in at night when they ain't expecting it." She laughs a cackling laugh to herself. "They won't never be expecting the likes of you, anyhow."

"I may skate on the edge of the law, but I don't lie any more than I have to, and I certainly don't steal." Any twinge of conscience dissolves in righteous indignation that she, of all people, would ask me to

commit a crime after all the lectures and punishments she dealt out as I grew up.

“You and that man of yours sell pot in your little store. Callin’ it ‘smoking supplies’ don’t change the facts.” She narrows her beady eyes at me and squinches up her face. Without her teeth, she looks like a shrunken head from the Amazon. “And you lie whenever the urge strikes you.”

“What I do is my own business, but you’re crazier than I thought you were if you expect me to run out and start stealing stuff just because you say so.”

“Don’t be sassy. You ain’t but thirty years old and don’t know much about nothin’ yit.”

“I won’t be thirty for three and a half more weeks.” I chew the inside of my lower lip, partly because Granny is driving me nuts and partly because I really do not need a reminder of my pending natal commemoration.

“I reckon I’ll have to tell you the whole nine yards, then.” Granny heaves a tortured sigh. She lays the knotted cord on her lap. “I swear to goodness. How you got to be so old without walking headfirst off a cliff is a miracle.”

“I thought you were about to drop dead any minute. Don’t you think you better get on with this story while you have time?”

“I never said I planned to die today, sassy boots. Jist you hush up and listen.” She grins with toothless gums, ornery as ever. “Centuries ago, our family lived in the worst part of Scotland—way north where the wind blows nonstop and it rains nine-and-a-half days out of ten. We had a nice cozy castle and a passel of servants, though, and everything was going along as

good as it could—what with the other clans wanting to fight if you looked at 'em cross-eyed. One fine day, a gal in the family started throwing her weight around. She and her cronies was dead set on taking over the family land and fortune, but the rest dug in their heels. The two sides got to fighting, hot and heavy.”

As relieved as I am to note the customary twinkle returned to Granny’s eye, I have trouble processing what she says. This is the first I’ve heard of Scotland or stolen crystals or feuding relatives.

“Our side lost.” Granny presses her lips tightly together. Losing rankles her.

Cold, ancient anger flashes in her thoughts before she shields them from me. She picks up the jute cord and resumes her work and her story.

“Them as was left lit out as fast as they could. Some died in the fight to escape. Others died on the way to America. It wasn’t the worst time in our family, but it was pretty durn bad. Many bright lives were cut short and many beautiful things were left behind.”

“How do you know all this? Why haven’t you told me before?”

I’ve never been able to penetrate her mind when she doesn’t want me to. The old woman has secrets in the labyrinthine recesses of her thoughts. I’ve tried the doors and tapped on the walls while she slept. I try again now, gently, carefully, creeping through the hallways, searching for a way in.

She flips the jute cord and glances at me sideways. “Zoraida, what have I told you about diggin’ into somebody else’s noggin when they don’t want you to? You’ll find out all you need to know in good time. Now quit your pecking around and pay attention.”

I flounce back in my chair in a most undignified manner for a woman of my advanced years. “Fine. Get on with it.”

“One of the things left behind was a hunk of smoky quartz, nearly forty pounds, it was. Raw, you understand, as if just yanked from the ground. Yet it glimmered like a star through a misty night.”

Jute whispers across her dried fingers. She strings black wooden beads, knotting them in with bony white fingers. She blinks away what could be tears. I look closely because I always assumed she was born without tear ducts.

“That crystal belongs to us.” No trace of tears lingers in her voice, that’s for sure. Her tone would make a black bear tuck in his tail. “It’s a Healing Stone, and it’s the only thing that will keep me alive. You have to go steal it back for me, Zoraida.”

“I can’t just pick up and go to Scotland anytime I want to, you know. My life is complicated. I have a house and a business. Who’ll take care of Johnny Lee Hooker?”

“Cats don’t need no tending. Johnny Lee will be glad to have you out of his way, I reckon. That man of yours can manage it.”

“His name is Al,” I say. “We broke up anyway.”

She snorts. “I’ll believe it when I see it. You ain’t never known what was good for you.”

“Al is good. He’s sweet, and he takes care of things for me. Even you can’t say he hasn’t been good to me.”

She’s never approved of Al and me as a couple. I don’t want her to feel like she’s won this battle just because he and I aren’t together anymore. At least, we aren’t as together as we usually are. It’s complicated.

“I never said he wasn’t good. I said you didn’t know what was good for you. You ain’t got no sense when it comes to men, neither.” She flashes me an I-told-you-so look. “But that ain’t what we’re talking about right now. Pay attention. This is important business. You’ll have to go to Scotland. There ain’t no other way.”

I am not concerned about my house or my shop and certainly not Johnny Lee, the black cat who lives with me. I’m not even worried about Al who has survived worse things. I’ve lived in Bear Hollow, Arkansas, all my life. The thought of leaving my neatly-ordered, comfortable life sends little jolts of lightning up and down my spine. What worries me is I can’t tell if those little jolts are excitement or fear.

“That bunch in Scotland won’t like it one little bit.” Granny attends to her knots, flipping the jute strands. “They’ll be keeping the crystal hidden, I’ll wager, the wicked thieves. Up that fer north, the sun don’t set till late, so you won’t have much time for sneakin’. There’s no cure for it. It wouldn’t have done no good to send you sooner.”

“Now wait just a minute.” I mentally count pennies, wondering how to manage a plane ticket, what to pack, where to leave my truck. I am caught in her web and already halfway to Scotland. She knows it, too.

“You shouldn’t go alone.” She leans over and I reach to catch her before she falls. The wiry old crone slaps my hand away and pulls a small basket from under the bed. She hoists it onto her lap and unties the black cord holding the lid in place. From the basket, she takes a wad of bills big enough to choke a hardy Ozark goat.

“Don’t gawk, Zoraida. Ain’t you never seen money?”

“Looks like the crazy-old-witch business is doing pretty good these days. I hope nobody else knows you’ve got that kind of cash way out here.”

She smiles slyly and counts out enough money to keep me in Skittles and beer for twenty years. Pyewacket, the gray cat, pats each bill softly as Granny adds it to the growing stack on her lap. He winks at me with amber eyes.

“Take that little dark-headed gal with you.” Granny shoves the bundle of bills into my hands. She snaps the basket shut and returns it to its place under her bed.

*That little dark-headed gal* is Zhu, my best friend forever, a tiny creature with the porcelain skin, glossy black hair, and exotic eyes of a China doll. We are yin and yang, but behind Zhu’s delicate Oriental camouflage lurks the temperament of a wolverine with a toothache. She and Granny are a lot alike.

“I’ve got it all figured out.” Granny outlines her entire plan in less than fifteen minutes, her words as quick and sure as her fingers around the jute cord. I wonder if she practiced cat burglary as a young girl—whenever that was. “Close your mouth and get busy. There ain’t no time to lose.”

“Scotland is a long way from here. Are you sure this Healing Stone will keep you breathing?”

“I ain’t makin’ no guarantees.” She presses her lips together and cocks her head to the side, fixing her beady eyes on me. “I could be dead before you get back.”

“Why don’t we just go see Doctor Merryweather? If there’s something wrong with you, he can help.” My

wits buzz with a million reasons to forget this and go home. I have the horrible feeling I'm standing at the edge of a cliff, looking for a reason not to jump. And not finding it.

"There ain't no doctor can help. The Healing Stone is what I need. I wouldn't send you if'n I could go myself." She exhales a frustrated sigh. "But I can't. You're all I've got, Zoraida."

I swallow hard. She is all I've got, too. "Can't I just ask them to borrow the Healing Stone? Surely—"

"Don't you ask them people fer nothin'." She sits up straight and grabs my arm. Her fingernails cut into my wrist. "You sneak in like I told you and you grab that stone and you hightail it home. If they ask you any questions, don't answer. They are a pack of villains."

"But they are relatives, aren't they? Maybe these people aren't as bad as the ones who stole the stone."

She releases my wrist and returns to the knotted cord. "They are just the same as they ever was, I reckon. If you meet up with any of 'em, you'll see."

"And just how in the blue blazes of hell am I supposed to sneak a forty-pound hunk of rock out of Scotland? They search you at the airport, you know. I don't think I have an orifice that will be sufficient for this."

Granny pulls the twenty-seventh knot tight. She presses the finished cord into my hand and wraps my fingers around it, her black eyes ablaze.

"That will be the least of your worries."