

Private investigator Richard Steele must solve his most difficult case ever—his own murder—while caught between women on both sides of the grave.

THE DEAD LOVE LONGER

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Published at Smashwords by Haunted Computer Books

Original print title: *Transparent Lovers*

www.hauntedcomputer.com

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Rude awakenings sometimes dawn slowly, even gently.

When you're dead, they take even longer, whether you're on the sunny West Coast or in a land so cold and white even the angels are afraid to piss in the snow. Maybe this place was heaven, where nothing ever happens, or if it does, it happens again and again with little change besides the price of admission, which goes ever higher. Wherever I was, it didn't smell like L.A., a city where rude awakenings arrived by the millions each morning and didn't get any better after two cups of espresso.

I fell out of half-sleep and slid into awareness in the Waiting Room, on a bench as hard as granite. My fingers were numb, my head was cotton, my lips were as tight as a teddy bear's stitches. I figured it was another tequila sunrise, but usually I wake up alone after a slow dance with Jose Cuervo. Sitting next to me was some loser who had a steering wheel in his chest. His face looked like he'd cut himself while shaving with a scythe.

"What you in for?" he said, his mouth not moving. He had a lost look in his eyes, like a holiday shopper who'd been trounced in the toy aisle.

"In? I don't know. I don't even remember coming through the door." I shook my head and nothing rattled but cobwebs. Gin and tonic, maybe. Cheap stuff, third shelf. No doubt heaven is well-stocked with it.

He grimaced, and his face made wet noises. "I mean, how did you get it?"

I studied the bad art on the wall. Where was Santa's grinning evil face? The bearded geezer had been all around me the last thing I knew, plastered in every store window and ringing little bells on the sidewalk, dozens of them, armies of the fat little beggars. Christmas had wreathed the nightclubs and sleazy dives with green tinsel and red faces. "What do you mean?" I said to the stooge.

"Buy the farm, kick the bucket, go six feet south, win a one-way ticket to the dirt-shirt dance. How did you *die*, dummy?"

I didn't like being called a dummy. But I didn't have a chance to get mad because I was too busy mulling the evidence of his face. A vague memory floated into my head, but as I tried to surround it, the thought scattered like fake snow in a Santa Ana wind. A woman sat across the room from me, eyes closed and sunken, black as Goth pudding. Loose skin hung from her cheeks, her skull visible through a crevice of rotted flesh. She didn't look a day over a hundred and fifty. Some mortician must have skimped on the formaldehyde.

On the wall above her was a clock, a round and plastic relic from a 1950s elementary school. Its two black hands ran in opposite directions while the red hand, presumably marking seconds, jittered one notch clockwise and two notches counter.

I put my hands to my jacket and ran my fingers over the tweed. There were four holes in it, just above my heart, not that I was often accused of possessing such an organ. I stuck my pinkie in one of the holes. It went through the cloth and kept going for a while.

“Bullets, eh?” said my bench mate. He tapped the steering wheel that had reorganized his rib cage. “Beats the fuck out of a car crash.”

“This suit cost me a hundred bucks.”

He laughed, making a sound like someone grinding a frog in a blender without the ice. “Don’t worry. They’ll dress you up real nice before they bury you. You should have seen my funeral. The makeup was so good, my wife even kissed me on the forehead. First time she kissed me in two years.”

He smiled, and his lone tooth glinted like a broken Chiclet. I looked away from his obituary face and checked out the holes in my chest. I’m a deductive kind of guy, one who likes to put all the little pieces together. I like to see things coming, so I can brace myself. I’ve always hated rude awakenings, no matter how slowly they hit me.

I’m like everybody else, I believed I was immortal. Not in that afterlife or eternal-soul sense, but in the sense that I was quite fond of the lumpy bag of meat I’d been dragging around for forty years. I’d even grown accustomed to that off-kilter bristled face that stared back at me from the mirror each morning. Death was one of those intellectual issues, something poets debated in high school while they were busy not getting laid. Death was something that happened to the other guy, never to you.

“Yeah, kinda threw me for a loop, too, when I first realized,” said the crash test dummy beside me.

“How...how long have you been dead?” It’s a question I never thought I’d ask, even though I’d been around my share of corpses. It’s also a question I never thought would be answered. I’d read some Stephen King like everybody else, I’d watched a few episodes of *The X-Files*, and I’d browsed the good parts of The Holy Bible—where Jesus got betrayed and nailed, and the Revelation, all the bloody, scary stuff. Now here I was waiting for a stranger to tell me the facts of life—or the afterlife.

“About five days, on Earth. It’s my second time through. You may have noticed time is kind of weird here. Sort of like catching a bus to Cleveland. You can’t wait for the bus to pick you up, then you get in a big hurry to arrive, but you dread where it’s going to take you.”

“What are you here for? Where do we go? What now?” I fell back on asking a lot of questions. I guess human habits die a lot harder than humans do.

“Oh, I got red-flagged for lying on my application,” he said. “See, after your funeral, you’re supposed to get promoted to the afterlife. Only, they got so many rules here that you’re guaranteed to be on Social Security before you’re good and proper dead.”

He held up a manila folder stuffed with enough pages to start a sacrificial bonfire. "I'm what they call a 'tweener.' I was on my way to church with my mistress when some clown in a pickup ran a red light in front of me. As my soul was drifting away, I saw him open his door and walk over to where my '64 Buick was tilted on its side. I had only three payments left on that baby, and it was totaled. The lunkhead didn't have a scratch on him."

"What happened to your mistress?"

"She broke an arm and some fingernails. The lunkhead asked for her phone number. She gave it to him. Talk about your rude awakenings."

"Wait a second," I said. "I don't remember getting killed, or any 'drifting.'"

Buick-brains shrugged. "Maybe it's different for different people. You'll just have to ask one of the experts." He nodded down the long hall that broke into a half dozen offices.

I figured action was the best course of action. Besides, Buick-brains was starting to smell bad. Or maybe it was Pork-Chop Face across the room. Or maybe it was me.

I tried to stand, but my rear felt like a sack of wet cement. Gravity was pretty serious here. And I thought ghosts were supposed to be light, vapory, able to sneak and flit around. Being dead was a terrible fad diet.

"You got to wait your turn," Buick-brains said. A few tiny squares of bloody glass fell from his bare grin.

I leaned back and looked around for a newspaper. No luck, but there was a copy of *Time* on the coffee table beside me. Right under a plastic potted plant.

The cover featured John the Baptist. Man of the Year. The magazine was wrinkled and smelled like a pool hall. I put it back and noticed an ashtray under the plant. I checked my jacket pocket.

Buick-brains made a clucking sound, snapping his tongue off of a bare upper gum. He pointed to a "No Smoking" sign that was duct-taped to the cheap paneling.

"Are you sure this isn't Hell?" I asked.

"That's what they tell me. And I don't think *they* would lie."

I sighed and folded my arms. Another year or two passed. I wondered if, back in my old life, the Christmas cards I had mailed were in a dead-letter box somewhere. Including that one special card, sealed with seven kisses and some ribbon.

"What's your name, pal?" asked my seatmate. Obviously a chatty type.

I'd always hated small talk. If talk didn't get me what I wanted, it was a waste of time. But it looked like I had plenty of time to waste. The clock was still ticking sideways. "Richard Steele."

"Steele, eh? What did you do...back *there*?"

I didn't like the way he said "there," as if reality were a place from which we had been paroled.

"I'm a—" I hesitated. This gig made my head spin. Past, future, and present tenses jumbled together in a mess that made Mrs. Dempsey's seventh-grade chalkboard look as simple as the ABC's. "I *was* a private detective."

"A detective? For real?" His snicker brought another shower of glass.

"Yeah. What of it?" Everybody thought detectives wore Bogart slouch hats and Columbo overcoats. But costumes didn't really help with the undercover work or the legwork, or the waiting that was 90 percent of the job. Pulp novels had given us an undeserved reputation as callous, alcoholic womanizers. As if there were any other kind of womanizer.

"You're a dick," he said, a little too gleefully. "A dead dick!"

If I could have moved, I'd have slugged the clown in the face and claimed his final tooth, or at least given the steering wheel a twist deeper into his chest. But I didn't know what my karma situation was. If this was the crosswalk between heaven and hell, a bit of last-minute good behavior couldn't hurt. So I closed my eyes and thought of Lee.

Ah, that was a think for sore mind's eyes. Lee, with short blond hair that curled around her face just *so*, naturally, without any visits to the hair salon. And grass-green eyes, speckled with yellow and brown, the kind you can look into for a lifetime or two. And her body...nice and meaty, not one of those brittle stick figures that the magazines use to sell contrived fashion and migraine-inducing perfume. She didn't break when you bounced her.

She was the most interesting person I'd ever met, and contradictory, too. Loved books and guns, gardening and NFL football, karate and boutique shopping. She'd been a member of the rifle team in college, but despised the National Rifle Association's politics. She would never dream of shooting a live animal, but I had no doubt she could take down a fleeing rapist with one shot.

We liked only a few of the same things, but respected each other's tastes. When she turned on the TV set on late-autumn Sunday afternoons, I'd go for a drive in Santa Monica. When she did one of her karate routines, I'd watch admiringly and smoke cigarettes from the safety of the couch, half afraid she'd challenge me to step onto the mat. Now I was dead and she was somewhere on that mythical "other side."

"Lee, if you can hear me, wherever you are, I love you," I whispered to myself. To her.

I should have said those words more often while I had the chance. But, hell, that wasn't my style. I hated sentiment and Valentine's Day and Peace on Earth and all that other confusing touchy-feely horseshit. Lee put up with me anyway. So far.

But others hadn't.

"Mr. Brumfield, please come to the office," came a static-filled voice from a cheap speaker. I opened my eyes with reluctance, because Lee was looking damned fine inside my head. Buick-brains got up and staggered down the hall, leaving a trail of lug nuts and paint chips. A door slammed around the corner.

More years passed, years that weren't all bad with a dream Lee as company. The clock on the wall spasmed, the fat hour hand heading for some distant dawn while the minute hand reached toward the night before. I thought of all the dead people who had gone before me and wondered if I would see them. That thought sent a chill through my cold, amorphous flesh.

You see, there was someone I had betrayed once. Someone who had loved me back before I knew such a thing was more than just a word in a Beatles song. I didn't understand at the time, but I enjoyed the hell out of the fringe benefits—someone to make me coffee in the morning, nurse me when I caught the flu, bed me without my having to make a fool of myself in a sleazy dive. We didn't have a care in the world, and I wouldn't have hurt Diana for a million bucks and a British Bentley. Then I inflicted the most horrible punishment imaginable.

I married her.

Pork-Chop Face groaned across the room. I thought she was having a seizure, but it turned out she was trying to sing "Amazing Grace." I always liked that melody, despite no one ever knowing the second verse. To hear her crippled caterwauling, though, was about as far from a religious experience as you could get.

I slipped back into my reverie. The popular afterlife image was of "going toward the light" where all your loved ones waited around to welcome you. I didn't have any loved ones, unless dogs were getting into heaven the way Mark Twain believed they should. My parents were still alive, and I'd never met my grandparents, so I didn't have any feelings for them one way or the other. They were nothing but faded Polaroids to me. There was only one person close to me who was dead, and Diana would probably not be petitioning St. Pete on my behalf.

After all, she blamed me for putting her here.

Said as much in the note she scrawled, just before she taped the garden hose to her car muffler and ran the business end through the driver's-side window.

As I waited, I had a thought that grew into a hope that graduated into a full-fledged burning desire. Lee was an angel, no doubt about it. And if I could get to heaven, then, some day, some way, I'd find her again. I didn't understand this death business, but I was a detective, wasn't I? I'd figure it out.

So when my name was called, I stood up, feeling airy with determination, balls loose in my pants, chin up just a smidge. I went down the hall, passing Buick-brains on his way back out. His lower lip protruded in a pout that would make any adolescent girl proud.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"They're sending me to Detroit."

"Hey, I thought you loved cars. That sounds like heaven."

"Yeah. But my mission is to bring back the Edsel."

I slapped him on the back, causing something to rattle inside him. "Sorry, pal. I feel your pain."

I went into the door he had exited. Filing cabinets lined the walls, the drawers overflowing with forms, fliers, and receipts. Stacks of paper teetered on the desk like flimsy monuments. Apparently computers hadn't made it to the netherworld. A female voice crawled out from behind the mess. "Take a seat, Mr. Steele."

I sat in a wooden chair that made the waiting room bench seem like a throne by comparison. Through a gap in the mountain range of paperwork, I saw a wrinkled woman with a flowered hat and librarian glasses. "Uh...hello," I ventured.

She was reading from a folder that I assumed was my *dossier*. Her mouth twisted in an expression of clerical torment. "Why do I always get these cases?" she said, rolling her eyes.

"Punishment for a fun-filled past life, maybe?" I couldn't resist a little stab at sarcasm. That was my defense mechanism, the way I dealt with uncertainty. Dying changes some things, but not others.

She didn't look at me as she thumbed through the documents. "Some good...a lot of bad...but then, a few really, *really* good deeds. You know what you are?"

"A megalomaniac?" I answered. I'd picked up the word from some paperback I'd read while casing an adulterer's love nest. I didn't know what the word meant, but it sounded impressive.

She took off her glasses and stared hard at me. Her eyes were like oil drops. "You're a tweener. A tough call. A half-baked excuse for a soul that could never figure out what its deal was."

"And...that's a bad thing?"

She flapped some papers, and in that moment, I knew she had made it to heaven. Exasperation was her favorite mode, and she had been rewarded with an eternity of it. "Well, I can work with it. But it depends on what you want."

She was making it sound like I had a choice, here, now, dead. So much for living right on the mortal coil. I briefly regretted the sinful opportunities that I had let pass unsavored. Not that there were many. "Why does it depend on me?"

She put her glasses back on so she could glare at me over them. "Do you want to go to heaven or go to hell?"

"Heaven, of course."

"That's what they all say, but think about it a little. Hell is easy, and your friends will be there. You'll get a decoder sheet to Led Zeppelin's backwards recordings. There are lots of cats, and plenty of Hollywood agents around to pick up your lunch tab. But getting to heaven takes sacrifice. And a hell of a lot of faith."

Now, sacrifices I could make, but faith was one of my weak points. Back in the land of the living that I had so recently departed, half the world was getting ready to celebrate the birth of their savior, though I'd bet most of them would go into shock if they opened the door to find Jesus Christ standing there. I'd never taken the dude's birthday personally myself, but I did go in for candy canes and eggnog a little. And I had a weak spot for "Silent Night."

Getting to heaven was probably a long shot, but I'm the kind of guy who likes challenges. A self-motivator. Before my death, I wouldn't have given two seconds of reflection toward religion and virgin births and God and schmoozing my way toward an eternity of further servitude. But dying changes things. Some day you'll find that out for yourself.

I folded my hands in my lap, like an undertaker who is feigning solemnity for the sake of business. "Well, I guess you can sermonize me the Gospel and I'll believe it, if that's what it takes."

She slammed her fist down on the desk, causing the paper stacks to tremble precariously, threatening an avalanche. "It's not about God or the Devil, Mister Steele, or even good or evil. It's about *faith*, a belief in right and wrong and justice and hope and love. *Love*, as in caring about something bigger than your own sorry ass. And, based on what I see, I don't think you've got the equipment for it."

I thought of Lee, I thought of her face, and how I ached to touch it one more time. Then I thought of Diana.

If Diana was in heaven, I could finally clear the decks with her. While alive, I had stared down the barrel of a .38 Colt Python, I had left the road airborne doing ninety, I had fallen three stories and bounced off the railing of a metal fire escape, and apparently capped it all off by taking four bullets from an unknown murderer. Yet nothing had ever frightened me as much as those words that sometimes came from Diana's luscious lips: "We need to talk."

I somehow avoided talking for three whole years, through two affairs and countless bottles of Scotch. I may have talked to her when she was in her coffin, but the lid was closed, so she probably hadn't heard me. Carbon monoxide poisoning does ugly things even to a beautiful face.

"A moral dilemma?" the clerk said, lifting one corner of her mouth. "Unfinished business?"

Maybe she was a mind reader. I didn't know what sort of job qualifications were needed to get you hired as one of the afterlife's gatekeepers. If she already knew everything, then why the torture? Then I realized it was just like with the God thing. God understood, but which of us are strong enough to own up to our failures?

Hell offered booze, casual sex, an obligation-free Sunday, and, best of all, rock'n'roll cranked up to eleven. Who wanted to hang around someplace hearing fruity harp music all the time? But heaven offered second chances. I could make amends to Diana, or at least tell her how sorry I was. And Lee would eventually arrive, and we'd have forever to fulfill that "Love you forever" promise.

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

The clerk's face was as cold as that of the clock on the wall, another whose hands spun in different directions.

"Sure," she said. "I'm here to serve, like a Hooters waitress but with saggier boobs."

“What’s *your* religious belief?” I figured she was wiser in these matters than one freshly dead.

“Jewish, of course.”

“And how does that work in with heaven? It’s not like you guys believe the Savior has arrived or anything.”

She waved her hands at the paperwork piled around her, at the Labrador retriever calendar on the wall whose days went unnumbered, at the empty can of generic cola on her desk. “The answer’s in here somewhere. Jews believe in living right on Earth for the sake of righteousness, not for eventual reward. And it doesn’t change in *this* world.”

I wondered if maybe it was all a karmic wheel, an endless reincarnation, going through the same stupid motions again and again. Yet that couldn’t be right. Because she had offered me a choice. I don’t know upon whose authority she was acting, but she obviously had no ulterior motives, or she would have shuttled me toward whatever corridor was most convenient to her. Her sincerity was as pure as my stupidity.

I pointed to my file opened before her. “Umm, I assume the thing with Diana’s in there.”

She snapped the file closed, creating a breeze that rushed through the holes in my chest. “It’s all in here. You can lie to yourself until you’re blue in the face, but we have it down in black and white. We know the truth.”

I’d always thought of the truth as a flexible thing, something tapped when convenient and avoided when it carried consequences. In other words, I expected honesty from other people but was always amazed when people expected it from me. But up here (or down here, because I still couldn’t shake that Protestant idea of the afterlife as a “place” in physical relation to Earth), the truth was apparently universal.

Bummer.

“So what do I do about her?”

“She was only your wife. The woman you promised to cherish and love until death did you part. And you sure as fuck kept *that* promise, didn’t you?”

I blinked. Truth be told, I was batting my eyes because, just maybe, a couple of tears were collecting. Sometimes if you act like a gnat flew between your eyelids, you can get away with squeezing off a few without anyone noticing. “Mistakes were made,” I said.

“Passive voice,” she said, as if she were a former grammar teacher. “That way, it’s not your fault. It’s the fault of the big old uncaring Cosmos, and all of it was out of your control. God dealt you a bad hand. Fate took its whoop-ass stick to your life while you stood by helpless. You couldn’t lift a finger to stop it.”

“That’s right,” I said, blinking faster.

She almost grinned. “But you can lift a finger now.”

The door to the room slammed open, the same door I had walked through minutes or hours before. Except the corridor had changed; it was no longer drab,

with gray industrial carpet and the occasional vapid nature print on the wall. Instead, tendrils of flame curled forth like the tongues of a hundred snakes, whispering, sibilant, seductive. In the midst of those flames I saw Diana's face, as beautiful and lusty as it had ever been, but the lust had taken an ugly turn. She was Eve after the first apple's bite, wicked and knowing, bloated with the Devil's spunk and utterly unapologetic. Her amorphous eyes fixed on me in that familiar glare, the one of simultaneous accusation and self-loathing.

"Mistakes were made," came her voice in a rush of volcanic wind. "Mistakes were made."

I swallowed what felt like a fistful of ground glass. Volleys of agony sluiced through my chest as if someone had poured battery acid in my bullet holes. My eyes were dry as shriveled grapes. You'd think the dead don't feel pain, but we do. It's a different kind of hurt, and it runs graveyard cold and soul deep and there are no aspirins for it.

"Diana?" I said, as her face coalesced into the flames. Figures undulated in the red-and-yellow chaos, performing a hateful war dance. Occasionally an arm or knee would pop out, changing to black bones and ash, a puff of gray smoke marking the transformation. Diana's laughter flickered and crackled.

I turned toward the clerk, expecting an answer, or maybe some help. The room was empty except for the clock on the wall. Now its hands drooped like Dali's mustache, the clock face soft and sagging. Four dirty impressions the size of quarters marked the floor where the desk had been.

I backed away from the well-lighted door and its whirling dervishes. The Diana face emerged again, leering against the border of the fire. "Till death do us part, huh? Did you really think you'd get off that easily?"

I wished it were only the bright licking of the flames, but it was her voice. Her words. Her anger.

I wanted to back away some more, but the room had gotten smaller. It seemed the size of a coffin. I couldn't breathe, then remembered I no longer had to.

"You're going back, but I'll be with you," she whispered. "Because you owe me."

"Owe you?" Anyone who has ever been married can tell you the arguments tend to run in circles, and each spouse falls into old, painful patterns. Shameful patterns.

"You loved me, or at least you said you did."

"That's right, I did." I *had* loved her. I think. Who could ever know such things except God? Even dead, I wasn't sure God existed. After all, He had yet to show His holy face, and a merciful God would have spared us this post-suicide encounter. And if God was love, then both of them shared the same lack of existence.

"When you love somebody, you owe them," she said. "Forever and ever. Amen."

The word “love” was delivered with a nasty edge, as if every broken heart throughout human history had been my fault. Maybe all lovers are star-crossed. After all, there can be no perfectly happy ending, unless you believe in life after death and both partners are lucky enough to end up in the same place. Love could cook up its own kettle of hell. But love could allegedly douse the flames, soothe the fevered brow, chill the hot and strange ardor that drove people to insane acts. Or maybe I’d listened to too many pop songs.

“I’m sorry for...you know, back then,” I said. Talking feels weird when you’re dead. The words come out of your throat without any air behind them. It gives you the feeling that the words have no substance. Maybe being dead wasn’t going to change my communication style, at least with Diana.

She wasn’t buying my brand of baloney. “You think you can make up for it now.”

She coalesced into a more solid thing, and the fire dimmed behind her. Her eyes were hot sparks of hurt, both hoarding and projecting pain. The flames crawled along her bare skin like the fingers of a hundred rapists. Then they evaporated, as if she had soaked the fire into her soul. She stood before me naked, the hallway dark and endless behind her. The bloated, gray pallor that marked her death was gone, and her skin was flushed pink by some obscene ardor.

She was beautiful, damn her.

“You can’t turn back the clock,” I said, the cliché lame as it left my lips and the contradictory clock on the wall mocking me.

“What’s done is done,” she said in near sarcasm.

I shrugged. “I did love you.”

“Did.” She smiled, and I remembered that smile from a hundred candlelit nights, her hair splayed against the pillows, the bedsprings singing and the headboard like a castanet against the wall. “What’s stopping you now?”

Lots of things. Diana was dead. Lee was alive. I hadn’t yet accepted my own death, and somehow believed I still had more in common with Lee. Not that I made a habit of comparing women. Each has her virtues and flaws, each of them are utterly beguiling and beyond understanding, and I never understood why love was supposed to be a mutually exclusive condition. Love was a big thing, as wide and strange and complex as God, and who was I to attempt to explain it or contain it?

“You deserve someone better than me.” There. The perfect distancing mechanism. Throw the fault back on myself, so she could feel good about rejection.

“I thought you were the best,” she said. The hallway and the room had both grown cold, the lingering heat from the flames now faded. Funny how hot and cold, pain and anxiety, lust and disgust still affected me. You’d think the lack of a heartbeat would strip all those hollow, mortal things. Yet in a way, they seemed more vivid and intense, as if their ephemeral nature painted them in brighter colors, like dying leaves in autumn.

“I was maybe the best once,” I said. “The best for you. But people change.”

“People change even when they’re dead.” The smile came again, but this time it flickered. Fire crawled between her teeth. “But you’ll learn about that the hard way.”

The hard way. Wasn’t death difficult enough without an extra round of trials and tribulations? How cruel *was* this invisible God? “Look, Diana. I cared about you. I mean, *care...*”

“I still love you. I’ve always loved you.”

Shit. I hate it when that happens.

“I don’t think we have much in common anymore,” I said.

“We’re both dead.” She sounded almost pleased, as if now I had no door to walk through, no competing lips to kiss, no warm bed on the other side of town to share with someone who asked fewer questions and demanded less attention. As if now we were the only two dead people in the world, and so were meant to be together.

I wondered if Diana knew about Lee. I didn’t even meet my one true love until two years after my original one true love had straight-piped herself into a casket. This was an awkward moment.

“We’re here, now, you and me, and that’s as good as it gets,” I said, and it sounded like a crappy come-on line even to me. The desperation ploy. We’re doomed so let’s sleep together. Or, we’re doomed, so let’s not bother.

“You don’t even know where ‘here’ is,” she said.

She was still naked, and I had trouble keeping my eyes on hers. My moist orbs wanted to wander, to make sure physical glories were untouched by the stain of passage. I had to remind myself that she had first manifested as a ball of indignant hellfire, not as a succulent sex kitten. This could all be a front. I knew how women were when they thought they wanted something.

Besides, the forms that had frolicked behind her in the flames had suggested well-oiled masculine muscles. She wasn’t the type to go without company for too long. Perhaps the afterlife was like closing time at the meat market, when no one went home alone. Maybe she had recruited an army of admirers in the land where sin inspired no hesitation, promised no punishment, and perhaps offered the most eternal of rewards.

“Like you said, we’re both dead.” Repetition did not make the idea any easier to swallow.

“Except I’ve been dead longer,” she said. “I’ve had time to wait for you. Plenty of time to think and plan.”

I thought time no longer existed in the afterlife, or at least not in any progressive sense, as evidenced by the contradictory clock. On Earth, you were always fed the company line that the afterlife was a fixed, unchanging state. A place where it was too late to repent. I’d always accepted that with some relief. After a few decades and a few ounces of lead in your chest, you get tired of saying “Sorry.”

Yet here I was again. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You're still an arrogant asshole even dead," she said, the corners of her lips tucked up in a smirk. "You think my suicide was all about you."

The walls continued to close in, though now so slowly I no longer paid attention. I suppose I thought they were insubstantial, some sort of hallucination. After all, the fire had faded, the clerk and her desk had disappeared, and even the clock had taken a vacation. But the wall behind me bumped my ass and nudged me forward. Closer to Diana and those flames of hellfire she courted.

She was naked, all right, but somehow she produced some pages from nowhere, as if she had hidden pockets in the delightful folds of her flesh. The paper was immune to the flames, thin clay tablets etched with a familiar hand. Mine.

"Remember this classic?" She cleared her throat with a belch of sulfur and quoted my own words back to me. "'I'm tired of saying I'm sorry. The failure is mine, but it's a failure that haunts both of us. Cut me out of your heart, wipe my memory from your mind. Burn everything I ever touched. Change your goddamned sheets. I love you, but we can't have each other.'"

My words, hurled back at me via that flickering and wicked tongue, became the pathetic poetry of a serial loser. In my youth, I'd discovered that words had an effect on females. A few scribbles on ragged notepaper could make a sneaky circumference of the classroom and find the right pair of soft hands. The brightest of women could fall victim to some carefully chosen sentences. It didn't matter how outrageous the lies were, all that mattered was the presentation. Something poets, players, and politicians all learned very early in their respective games.

"The first time we broke up," I said.

"We got better with practice."

"In everything." There was an old song that said breaking up was hard to do, but I'd found the third time was the charm. Even poets go for the cliché once in a while.

"You know what happens to suicides here?"

I figured they probably carried their pain with them forever, but I was beginning to suspect we all did. At least until we reached that better land hinted at by my dead Jewish caseworker. If only I could find the door to the rapidly shrinking room, because Diana's heat was making me sweat. When you're dead, your sweat smells like gone-over goat cheese and has the consistency of tar. Besides, I couldn't think with Diana crowding my space. Some things never change, all right.

"Suicides need special redemption," I guessed. "Because it's the most selfish of sins."

"Coming from the world's most self-centered prick, that means a lot." Her inflamed face flickered into a smirk.

"I already said I'm sorry. If there's anything else I can do to...help you cross over, pray for your absolution, whatever, let me know."

“Yes,” she said. “You’ll get your own mission. But my mission is to make your death as miserable as possible. I’ll be haunting your every step. I’ll follow you to Hell and back.”

I had a feeling that if I ever wound up in Hell, it would be a one-way trip, for me if not for Diana. But the afterlife was turning out to be nothing like the preachers and Hollywood writers had painted it.

“I never stopped loving you,” I said, and it was partly true.

The kindness hidden in the words must have had some sort of power, because the flames began fading just as the walls pressed close enough to force me up against her flesh. She was a hottie, all right. I could hear my skin sizzle beneath my suit, but there was no pain. No physical pain, but I was in anguish because I didn’t know whether to wrap my arms around her, grab her wrists to keep her from slapping me, or try to ignore her. My sleepy little magic wand stirred in my pants. I guess maybe all of me wasn’t dead.

The room was now the size of a mausoleum crypt. I closed my eyes and ignored the press of her figure, whispering some throwaway lines. “It was so hard to go on after you died,” I said. “If I had known we’d have a second chance over here—”

“Then you would have waited for me?”

Well, a man’s heart is like a beer mug. It doesn’t stay empty for long. If you don’t stop drinking, you never get a hangover.

“I would have waited,” I lied.

“So we could try yet again.”

I was close enough to kiss her lips, but I was put off by the fact that no breath issued from between them. “Honey, I think we’ve changed. People grow together or they grow apart.”

“I know about *her*. The other woman.”

Shit. Well, it didn’t make much difference. It’s not like I was cheating on Diana, because we’d been on separate sides of life and death. But maybe cheating was a thing of the heart and not the flesh. I didn’t know a damn thing about the heart, and precious little about the flesh.

Diana grinned, her lips bending like baby snakes. “You owe me, Richard. I don’t know what it is yet, but you owe me.”

Despite the radiation of her ethereal flesh, a chill raced up my spine. Did this mean she was the Devil? Or just an agent of the pointy-tailed guy with the bad attitude? Then again, Diana hadn’t ever needed marching orders to mess with my head. She was a self-starter when it came to inflicting misery on me.

She looked over her shoulder as if summoned by an inaudible command. “Got to go now, dear. But I’ll be back.”

The walls began receding and Diana faded like the light of a candle that had been suffocated, leaving behind only an oily thread of smoke. I blinked as the room regained its former shape. As the clock, posters, and desk came back into focus, I thought of the pledge I’d made to Diana on that June afternoon.

Till death do us part.
And then some.
Women didn't know anything about love, but they certainly understood possession.

2.

The clerk blinked. The clock on the wall had actually moved backwards three minutes, as if I had encountered Diana in a past life.

"Did you see her?" I asked her.

"See whom?"

"Never mind. It's my problem, not yours."

"And you got plenty of them." She tapped my *dossier*. "I don't think you can get to your happy place."

"I can do it. I have a lot of willpower."

"It takes more than willpower. It takes faith."

"I thought you said religion was so much horseclabber."

"Faith isn't the belief in invisible deities or dead things. Faith is a belief in life."

"Well, I guess I can't believe in life anymore, can I? I mean, I've always played the cards I was dealt."

She pursed her pale blue lips and began sliding my folder toward the edge of her desk. It scooted off and plopped into a trash can I hadn't noticed before. I hadn't noticed it because it hadn't been there.

"Hey, hey, hey," I said, rushing forward on feet that felt like feathers. I dug around in the trash can and pulled out the papers. They were stained by some old coffee grounds, dregs of a spilled beer, and a banana peel, but still legible. I slammed the file down on the desk, pissed at Diana, scared that somebody wanted a piece of my soul, angry that someone was probably getting away with murder at my expense.

Life was unfair, because I was dead. Life was sacred, because the living said so. Life was beautiful, because death was as honest as a mirror. All I had were some broken memories and a lingering mental image of Lee, but I had a desire that no spiteful spouse could ever wipe away.

I stood and leveled a finger at the clerk. "I've got a *lot* to look forward to. I've *got* to get to heaven. I want it. Just tell me what I have to do."

She sat back and tented her fingers, and her lips slithered into a reptilian smile. "Why, Mr. Steele, I believe there's hope for you yet. But I can't tell you what to do. You have to figure that part out for yourself."

Hope.

If ever a word deserved to be wrapped in gaudy gold foil, it was that one. Hope, the thing that got the living up in the morning, that put strong men on their

knees, that melted the hearts of ice queens. The word that drove us to take the next breath, at least those among us whose lungs still worked.

She slid some papers toward me and gave me a pen. I spent what seemed like ten years filling out my application for heaven, though heaven's official name turned out to be The Bright Place, Inc. It had a pretty nifty logo, too, the letters "BP" with the sun rising over them.

"Say, what's the deal?" I said. "I thought Christians had cornered the market on heaven. Isn't that why they say God sent Jesus into the world? What about nirvana, Valhalla, paradise, and all that?"

The clerk's wiry hands pressed together as if she wanted to slap me but was forced to follow protocol. She regained her composure and feigned patience. "Jesus died for the sins of those who believe in Jesus. Others have their own way of shedding their earthly burdens. Buddha, Satan, Higher Power, Dora the Explorer, Jiminy Cricket, whatever gets you through the night. It all goes to the same place. Now, please, pretty please, get on with the paperwork before I waste another couple of eternities on this case."

"Merry Christmas to you, too," I said.

When I finished, I gave the forms back to her, accidentally brushing her fingers. Her flesh was cold.

She noticed my shocked expression. "Titanic victim," she said with some pride. She checked over my application.

"Un-huh...un-huh..." she muttered under her breath as she read. "Okay, we can work with this. Ready for your assignment?"

"Assignment?"

"Yeah? Didn't life teach you anything? If you want something, you have to work for it. It's not as easy as getting on your knees and sucking up to some invisible deity."

I nodded. "Just tell me what to do."

"You've got to go back and solve your own murder. And you've got to do it before your funeral."

"Back?"

"To Earth," she said, distracted, already thumbing through the next file.

"Does that mean I get to be alive again?"

"You were barely alive when you were *alive*, if you know what I mean. You never knew how to live."

"But I'll be real?"

"You'll be able to interact with the world of the living. But it will cost you."

Well, that was nothing new. And the afterlife wasn't shaping up as any great shakes in the "free ride" department, either. But at least I'd have a chance to nail down one last case. Justice always prevailed, at least on the TV shows.

"What's the cost?" I said. As far as I remembered, I'd left behind a couple of hundred in my bank account, an ashtray full of change in my car, and some cheese dip from Thanksgiving in my fridge. Not much when facing a cosmic debt.

“You’ll find out,” she said. “That’s part of your job.”

A nobody like me doesn’t end up with holes in his coat for no good reason. If solving the case meant Lee and I had a chance, then I was anxious to tackle it. And, I must admit, a little old-fashioned revenge is always a pretty good motivator. I didn’t like loose ends, especially when my own end was blowing in the eternal breeze.

“Give me the facts,” I said, falling ever so easily back into my old profession. Finally, something normal. Like fear, it was familiar and safe.

“There are no facts. That’s why we need you, so we can get the records squared away on your murderer.”

“Say, wait a second,” I said. “I thought you guys already knew everything.”

“I don’t know nothing until somebody sends me a memo,” she said by way of dismissal.

3.

Just like that, like magic or some film editor’s trick, I was flat on my back, my chest burning and my lungs gurgling. My mouth was filled with the taste of lead and copper, my head was a plastic bag stuffed with thorny cotton. I opened my eyes and saw the ceiling of my apartment. You could see faces in the stucco swirls, if you looked hard enough. One face, actually. Diana’s, multiplied by twenty. She seemed happy to see me dead.

I arose, a real ghost this time, not some heavily burdened human who was a few thousand sit-ups in arrears. I looked around quickly, hoping to catch the perp in the act. But I should have known I wouldn’t pass my test of faith so easily. This had been no close-range assault.

The room was the same as I had left it, except one wall was pocked with four gashes in the Sheetrock. One of the bullets had passed through my Pet of the Month calendar, right through the beagle that was Mister December. Another had sheared my little artificial Christmas tree, cutting a plastic candy cane in half. The clock on the wall said five minutes until four, and it appeared to still be ticking. That gave me a great deal of comfort, though it meant my opportunity to solve the case and save my soul was ticking away with it.

The wall with the holes was to the north, so the bullets had come from the south. Through the open window. I drifted to the window and looked out. Los Angeles was spread out beyond me like broken toys on a brat’s bedroom floor.

The sharpshooter must have been in one of the buildings across the street. A motel, one of the old fake-adobe kind that rented rooms by the hour, was the most obvious choice. But as a detective, I’d learned that the most obvious choice was

often the wrong choice. I'd learned that lesson as a man as well, at least when stepping into the snake pit known as womanly love.

I scanned farther. The used bookstore and the Armenian food joint were on ground level, and my digs were on the second floor. A Scientology church had some Hubbard books arrayed under a neon star in the front window, but the church appeared to be locked up tight. The angle was all wrong for a good clean shot from any of those places. I shifted my gaze to the right. The Hollywood Hype. Bingo.

The Hollywood Hype was one of those combo deals, a tacky souvenir shop on the bottom and suites upstairs. Four windows faced me, leading into rooms named for movie stars. The Marilyn Monroe suite, the James Dean, the Ginger Rogers, and so forth, the sorts of places that tourists gobbled up so they could brag to their friends back home about getting lucky in Marilyn's room. Each room was tastelessly decorated with old publicity stills and commemorative towels, the kinds of "unique" items that the Hype management hoped the guests would steal as souvenirs. Then they could ring a hefty charge onto the tenants' credit cards.

I was about to go to the door and head for the stairs when I remembered that I was a ghost. It took a little mental effort, but I put my hand through the wall. Cool. I was going to enjoy this case. But I wondered about the "cost" the afterlife caseworker had warned me about.

I looked around my apartment, then down at my body. I looked dopey, my mouth open as if I'd been asked an algebra question. My fly was half-open, a button was missing on my shirt, and I had ring around the collar. And I wasn't quite as handsome as I'd always thought. Nothing like being dead to give you a whopping dose of reality.

A red blotch was spreading out across the frayed carpet. I knelt and checked my pockets, just the way I would do if the body were someone else's. The good thing about being a ghost was that I wouldn't have to worry about leaving fingerprints. Of course, they would be mine anyway, and presumably my fingerprints were all over my stuff.

Cigarettes. A butane lighter. A few dollars. Very few.

And a note. Of course. I remembered it now, jotted down on torn wrapping paper. Handwritten, in jagged cursive: "Meet me in the lobby. 4 p.m."

I glanced at my wristwatch. It was spinning backwards, so I checked the clock on the wall. 3:58.

Sirens were blaring, still six blocks away and caught in the permanent rush-hour traffic. I was almost tempted to stay and wait for the cops. But what would I tell them? I still didn't know my limits, or how I'd be able to interact with the living. Besides, I had a feeling I had to solve this thing on my own. Which was okay. I always liked working alone.

Except in one certain endeavor. Lee's photograph was on top of my television, and she was much better than any sitcom diva. I went across the room, moving my legs out of unneeded habit. Could I lift the photograph?

Time to test my powers. You'd think they'd give you a user's manual when they sent you back. But I guess this was part of the test. You had to earn it, baby. That was what faith was all about.

I found that if I concentrated hard enough, if I *believed*, then my ether would harden just enough to actually function in my former reality. I lifted the photograph and brought it to my lips. She tasted of dust when I kissed her.

Something rumbled under the floor and a blast of warm air crossed the room. I thought it was the heat pump kicking on, but even in late December, Los Angeles can throw you into a sweat. The con men, sexual predators, and street gangs can do that. But this was spawned by no earthly source.

"So *that's* the bitch, huh?" came Diana's voice from the air ducts.

I didn't have time to argue with my late wife. I was about to be late for an appointment. But you can imagine the comfort it gave me, knowing she'd be looking over my shoulder at every turn. Just like during our marriage.

With great effort, I returned the photo and took one last look around. Nothing here that I would need. Still, it gave me a creepy feeling to drift through the wall for probably the final time. Just when you think you've come to accept your lot in life, or even in death, reality comes along and slaps you in the face.

I was in the lobby right at four. The desk attendant was bored, and he looked like a goober in his little red vest. He'd sneered at me that time I'd locked myself out of my room in the middle of the night, caught in my underwear. I thought about playing a trick on him, taking advantage of my invisibility and spooking him good, but I didn't want to waste my energies.

4:01. While I waited, I tried to guess who would show up. I put two and two together, and came up with either three or five. Math was never my strong point.

4:02, and the bell jingled above the lobby door. The attendant raised one eyebrow, then faded back into his all-consuming funk. He should have looked closer, or else he was gay, because she was a knockout.

Hair that hung like black silk. One of those Anastasia fur hats. A leopard-skin dress whose familiarity with her curves brought out the animal in me. Legs that went all the way down to the floor, and back up again. I know, because I checked twice just to make sure.

Her eyes were almost as pretty as Lee's, and nearly the same color. She looked at the stairs and the elevator, then clutched her purse to her chest. She was anxious and scared. And in a hurry.

I went around the corner and composed myself while out of sight. I took on flesh and form, and I felt pretty good for a dead guy. I flexed my fingers as if they were in gloves. I was almost normal again, except for the headache I got from concentrating myself back into corporeal existence. And my jacket still had the holes in it. If there was any spiritual cost besides underarm stench, then I assumed I was running a tab somewhere up there on the heavenly ledgers.

I walked into the lobby as if I'd just come from the restroom. "Meet me in the lobby?" I quoted from the note.

She nodded. "Richard Steele?"

"In the flesh."

"Hi, I'm Bailey DeBussey."

A porn star's name or a budding actress. Usually the same.

She glanced at the door to the street outside. The sirens were louder now, audible even over the Muzak strains of "O Christmas Tree" that permeated the lobby, and the attendant snapped out of his stupor long enough to rubberneck. "Let's go out the back way," she said, taking me by the elbow.

I'd never minded a woman's taking charge, especially if she might become a client or lover. The closing of the door sounded frighteningly like one of Diana's patented hisses of disapproval. We went into the alley behind the apartment building. A wino was leaning against the dumpster. I tossed him all my spare change and wished him happy holidays. Having no need of money was a freeing experience, especially when the cash registers were going full guns all across the city, ringing in the season.

"God bless yaz, suh," he said, flashing me three yellow teeth with his grin.

"I think I'll need it."

"Over there," the impatient Bailey DeBussey said, pointing across the street.

She took my hand and led me through a gap in the chain-link fence. We went across a parking lot into what used to be called a coffee shop. Now it was a "casa de cafe." Same deal, only guys like me didn't hang out there anymore and coffee was three bucks a cup. Still, any port in a storm.

We were seated as the first of the police cars pulled up to the Hollywood Hype. It would take them a while to find my body. Maybe even a day or two, after Lee called five or six times and received no return call. For a moment, I regretted my casual treatment of her. But in a way, I was glad to delay the breaking of her heart. Because, unlike a lot of women I'd known, she had one.

"So why the mystery?" I asked the woman after she had ordered a cappuccino. I didn't order anything myself, because I wasn't sure how food or liquid would play in my newly fabricated body. Plus I didn't know how long I could hold this human act together. I kept expecting something strange to happen, like the wall opening and spilling out a horde of deranged demons.

"I wasn't sure if I could trust you," Bailey said.

Trust? *Me*? I had a pretty decent rep, if she'd even gone to the bother of a background check. If she had received a personal reference, I'd need to worm the information out of her somehow. I figured I'd play the tough guy. I'd watched the Sam Spade movies like almost every two-bit gumshoe, and the rule of thumb was to cut gorgeous dames quick and cold and hard like you would the diamonds that were supposedly a girl's best friend.

I almost wished I had a cigarette to mutter around. "Well, at my rates, you better learn to trust me fast, because the meter is running."

"It's..." She fluttered those long eyelashes and studied the cracked polyurethane coating of the table. "It's my husband."

Husband? A looker like her, and *she* can't keep a man faithful? Made you wonder about the human race, at least the male half of it. But I'd handled dozens of adulteries for divorce court. Those were bread and butter for private investigators, and rarely were more dangerous than the occasional indignant middle finger flashed in anger. That kind of case had never earned me a lungful of hot lead.

"Is he running around on you?" I was blunt, because my flesh could dissolve away at any moment, and then some wet-nosed waitress would be selling an eyewitness account to *Sightings* or *Unexplained Mysteries*, probably pitching a screenplay at the same time.

"Nothing like that," she said, and there were honest-to-goodness tears in her eyes. Tears. In Los Angeles. Who would have thunk it? But this was a female, and tears come to them as conveniently as lies did. Only men know how to cry, and believe me, we keep it in the dark whenever possible.

"What is it, then?" My head ached. I felt like death warmed over, which I suppose I was.

"It's these," she said, pulling three printed-out digital snapshots from her purse. She waited until the waitress brought her steaming drink before sliding them across the table. "I need to know where he got them."

I glanced at the photos and was about to ask which "he" she meant when I felt myself go lightheaded. My stomach did a flip and my feet felt as if they had fallen asleep. I was losing it. My tab was coming due.

"I got to go," I said. "I'll keep these and get in touch later." I pushed the photos into my pocket, then stood and hurried to the door. Clean-cut yuppies and actors-in-waiting stared at me from their booths. I felt like a stack of clothes, nothing more.

Bailey called out as I battled with the front door. "I love you, Richard. See you at your place?"

I thought maybe I'd misheard in my panic to leave, and that word "love" added to whatever panic I was experiencing at the time. But then she yelled, "Lee can't keep us apart."

I staggered into the street. I wasn't sure if I had gone *out* the door, or *through* it. I hope I was in the shadows by the time I fully dissolved. Only the wino behind my apartment building knows for sure.

4.

I didn't feel like going to my room to watch my body decompose. I hung out in the bottom of the elevator shaft. There was an odd assortment of junk in there: a few used condoms and liquor bottles, some spare steel cable, a man's hat, and a

teddy bear. A teddy bear. I spent fifteen or twenty minutes putting my hand in the stuffing, then animating the bear and making it do funny little dances.

Eventually my head cleared. By playing the puppet game, I had learned one of the rules of ghostly existence. Solidifying myself took a lot of willpower, and the more thinking I did while solid, the lower the juice in my metaphysical batteries. That's why my encounter with Bailey DeBussey lasted only a few minutes: she'd been taxing my deductive powers while simultaneously triggering some deep and patently offensive sexual fantasies.

The other thing was that objects I carried, like the photographs and my clothes, seemed to borrow a little of my nothingness, because they came through the walls with me. I even sent the teddy bear through the wall a few times, but it took a lot of willpower. Maybe the bigger the object, the harder to "ghost" it.

I studied the photographs. Nothing much on first examination. Two of them were of Bailey and a man I didn't know, standing on the beach with the Santa Monica Pier in the background. Bailey filled a bikini as well as she did a leopard-skin dress, maybe better. The guy with her looked like an extra from one of those California angst TV dramas, perched under his moussed hairdo with biceps the size of grapefruit. He wore the same smarmy expression in each of the photos, his "money smile."

The third photograph showed Bailey on a fishing boat, one of those that rich people chartered for the half day so they could squeeze in some serious drinking. A white-haired man in a captain's hat and a knit short-sleeved shirt had an arm around her, his fist clenched in a buddy-buddy hug. The Golden Gate Bridge was barely visible in the background, and *S.S. Lady Slipper* was emblazoned on the bridge bulwark.

What did all this have to do with Lee? Why had Bailey called out her name? And what was all that staged nonsense about Bailey's claim of loving me? Had she been setting me up for something? She couldn't know about Diana—maybe that my wife had committed suicide, but certainly not the part about returning from the dead and knocking back espresso twenty feet from where we sat.

I played over the coffee shop scene in my mind. The two gay lovers in the corner booth, the skinny punk with the baggy jeans and skateboard, the mouse-haired girl with the Kurt Vonnegut hardcover displayed so all could be impressed by her intellect. Then something clicked. On one of the counter stools sat a woman in a trench coat, collar turned up to her ears. I hadn't thought much of it, because that close to Hollywood, everybody was either an actor, pornographer, screenwriter, or plain, out-and-out schizophrenic figments of their own imaginations.

But now I remembered how she'd taken her coffee hot and steaming from the waitress, gulped it down as if it were lemonade, and exhaled with an air of satisfaction, without a hint of steam or wince of pain. As if she'd absorbed the heat. I wondered if she'd worn anything beneath the trench coat, because the bit of

her hair that was exposed had been slightly curly and dark. Like the style Diana had apparently adopted in the afterlife.

No. Surely I would have recognized her just by her mannerisms. When you know somebody, when you've slept with them and held them and watched them, when you've let them a little into your soul, you know their gestures, the way they move their fingers, the way they lean forward when they sit. That wasn't Diana.

Then again, people change. And dying was the biggest change of all. If it *had* been Diana, she had disguised herself well. But I couldn't imagine her sitting there in silence while I chatted up a beautiful woman. It was the kind of thing that would have ignited her jealous nature back during our marriage. She would have doused us both with scalding coffee, turned over the table, and tried to stab me with a butter knife. After that warm-up, she'd turn nasty. Judging by our initial encounter in the afterlife, I suspect she hadn't let go of that particular character defect.

I started to light a cigarette, then decided I didn't want the smoke mixing with my mist. I studied the photos until my head was tired. You wouldn't think a ghost could get tired, would you? I figured it was just another part of the test. Hell, if being a ghost were easy, everybody would be doing it.

In fact, I wondered why I hadn't encountered other lost souls, those who had been sent back to accomplish missions of their own. I didn't for a second think I was getting some kind of special treatment from the gods. Maybe we were all invisible to each other. In everyday life, people pass in total ignorance and apathy all the time, ghosts in their own lives. We each built our own realities as breathers, to some degree, so why should death be any different?

I guess I sort of dozed off, despite the cantankerous screeching of the elevator. When I came back around, my head was clear and I realized I had made my first mistake. I should have drifted on over to the Hollywood Hype while the assassin's tracks were still fresh. By now, the cops had already dusted and powdered everything, tracked down the shell casings if the killer had been dumb enough to leave them lying around, and probably were trying to figure out why and when the shots were fired. No body yet, so it wasn't officially a murder investigation. Except in *my* book.

I mentally thumbed through the cases I had been working on at the time of my death. A few alleged insurance scams, delinquent dads, petty embezzlement on the order of a check-out drone swiping change from the till. Nothing big enough there to justify murder. A missing persons, some kid from North Dakota who ran away to make it in movies. That case was a low priority. Even if you find the runaway, she won't believe you when you tell her the only films she'll ever star in are the kind that cost four quarters a peep.

None of my active files provided a link to this case, at least as far as I could tell. So why did somebody plug me on the off chance that I could help Bailey DeBussey? After all, I wasn't the only P.I. in town, even if I was probably one of the best.

Well, no need to lie anymore, was there? In my new state of existence, honesty was the best policy, unfortunately. I was actually pretty damned mediocre. Sam Spade, rest easy, wherever you are in that fictional character graveyard in the sky.

As usual, thinking was getting me nowhere. Another few minutes with the photos and I headed across the street to the Hollywood Hype. Maybe the police overlooked something. Maybe not even a maybe. The police were about as mediocre as I was, and every mortal's head was stuffed full of holiday gift ideas and jingles during that most wonderful time of the year.

Drifting is an awkward act. In the movies, it always looks graceful, with the ghost floating around all misty and mournful. Drifting takes its own sort of willpower that is in some ways even more demanding than jerking your leg muscles. I couldn't shake the old habit of stopping for traffic, either. I'd wasted about two minutes before I realized I could walk right through the cabs, limos, tour buses, low riders, and homeless people pushing shopping carts.

The lobby of the Hype was cavernous and musty, a row of faded scarlet holiday stockings pinned to the front desk. *It's a Wonderful Life* was playing on the television in the lobby. I wanted to tell Jimmy Stewart that the only difference between living and dying was the size of your credit card bill. But that was the old, cynical me thinking. This new me, the dead one that was full of hope, kept on plugging.

I could have just floated up to the second floor, but instead I took the stairs. It was a mock-up of those stairs where Clark Gable carried Vivian Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*. The rest of the Hype was just as cheesy. Painted stars like those on Hollywood Boulevard lined the hallway floor, but the stars were scuffed so you couldn't read the names. The walls were covered with framed movie posters and memorabilia that were definitely not licensed by the studios.

I checked out all the rooms with north-facing windows. In the first, the sheets were in such a quiver that I thought I had stumbled onto a fellow ghost, and then I realized I had walked in on a loving couple. I'm not a peek freak unless I'm getting paid for it, so I gave the windowsill a quick once-over for any sign of residue or marks. No dice.

The second and third rooms were unoccupied, though suitcases on the bed indicated recent arrivals. The fourth was empty, marked off with yellow crime tape. Why didn't I think to look for that? The truth is, my brain was getting a little foggy the longer I was dead. If I didn't solve this case soon, I wouldn't have enough brains left to attend my own funeral. Afterlife Alzheimer's was a bitch.

I searched the room but found nothing of merit. The police had given it the comb's teeth. They'd even snagged the chocolate off the pillow, though I suspect that never made it into an evidence bag. I was just about to skulk off to my elevator shaft when I noticed the mirror.

I didn't stop to admire myself, because I didn't want to waste the willpower it would take to don a face. But the dresser mirror had been carefully turned so that someone sitting at the desk had a clear line of sight to my room. The assassin

might have had me staked out for days. In that case, why wait until just before I was supposed to meet Bailey before pulling the trigger? Or maybe Bailey was just a coincidence, one of those red herrings life likes to throw at you to keep you confused.

If my murderer had watched me, he or she knew I was a creature of habit. If I had an appointment, I never showed up early. I tried to time my appointments so that the person I was meeting would be checking their watch at the moment I walked up. Gave you an edge on a person, in my opinion.

A quick drift downstairs to the front desk, then I tipped over a couple of boxes in the stockroom. When the hostess ran from the desk to check the commotion, I willed my hands into enough substance to flip through the sign-in book. Room 217 had been rented by a Mr. Raymond Chandler. Jeez. My killer was a damned comedian.

So the name was fake, but at least I learned that the room had been rented two days prior to my death. “Chandler” had paid for a week, cash in advance. The police had all that information, and no doubt were running Chandler aliases through their database, but they still didn’t have a body.

I was reminded of one of Lee’s little endearments, something she’d whisper in my ear on those nights when we lay under the sheets, our sweat drying.

“*Habeas corpus*, baby,” she would say. “You got the body.” A legal term never sounded so sexy. What I wouldn’t give for just one more night of her sweet whispering.

Lee. Would I ever see her again? I was afraid I’d never make it across town to her place, not with my soul juice tapped. I didn’t have any leads, and I was running out of time. I was down, so down that only another dead person would understand. It can get pretty dark down there.

Feeling like my stores of hope had drained, I drifted back to my apartment.

5.

“Where have you been?” Diana called as I entered. Just like old times.

She was waiting in the bedroom. Just like old times.

“Nowhere.” I hovered in the living room.

“Everybody’s somewhere. Who was that woman in the coffee shop?”

“Nobody.”

“That was some body, all right. 38D? I’ll bet those melons were fake.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Don’t play games with me, Richard. Get your ass in here.”

“This is my place. You can’t boss me around.”

The sliver of darkness under the bedroom door pulsed orange with flame and a sulfuric steam clouded the crack. "I said *get your ass in here*."

Shit. Never marry a Leo.

I opened the door instead of drifting through it, dreading the inevitable. She was on the bed, nude, glistening, 36C, throwing off her own candlelight. One leg was cocked in a way that made it seem as long as the bed. The other curled in a provocative arch.

"Is she as hot as me?" Diana said, her voice taking on a low purr.

I averted my gaze. It was damned hard, but her marbled skin, caused by carbon monoxide poisoning, was a bit of a mood killer.

"That woman in the photograph," she said, her voice low and taunting. "On your television. Does she do that thing you like?"

That thing I like. When you are intimate with one person for a long time, you become vulnerable and slowly reveal your true desires. You let them try things that never happen during one-night stands. You bring your fantasies out of your head and onto the playground of love.

Then, when you are with the next person, or the one after that, you can't expect them to jump right to the full course. They have to sample the buffet, go through the entire menu, nibbling at things to see which tastes they prefer. You can't exactly say, "Well, my last lover did this, so why don't you?"

It sucks, except sometimes it doesn't.

Diana, for all her faults, was good at some things. She knew how to serve dessert. I couldn't help licking my lips. They were cracked and parched from the heat in the room.

"I'm aching," she said, stretching the word out into a moan. Her legs spread and she rolled her hips forward. I swear, a tuft of steam rose. I reached up to loosen my tie or strangle myself.

"This isn't right," I said.

"It feels right to me," she said, moving a hand down to play.

"We're done," I said. "I can't—"

"Come on, honey. I'm your wife."

"No, that's over."

"This was yours. All yours. And nobody else could ever take it the way you could."

Damn. Hitting me at my male pride. She sure knew how to play me. My fingers tugged the tie free and I was messing with the buttons of my shirt.

"It's not cheating," she said. "You didn't make any promises."

"Not cheating," I said, glad Lee's photograph was in the other room. I didn't want her eyes on me. Even though she might learn a few things about me. Several fantasies and several realities.

My pants slid down easily. I didn't look. When you die, you want everything to work just as it had before. All your parts. I wasn't sure I felt anything. You don't throb much when your heart doesn't beat.

But I was game. She was Eve, Jezebel, Delilah, a Siren, a selkie, succubus, every temptress ever devised. 36C, just the way I like them. Forbidden fruit.

I reached for her, leaned over the bed, fell toward the steaming flesh, heedless of the burning I might receive.

I bounced naked off cold sheets. Her laughter purred from every corner of the room. Her voice came as if from a distant elevator shaft: "I wonder what Lee would think."

Diana had won this round. And she'd sapped my batteries. I could only lie there in my self-disgust and wonder if death really changed anything, if all grabs for redemption were futile, if we were destined to repeat the same mistakes on every spin of the karmic wheel. Could I succeed at anything besides failure?

I must have fallen asleep again, because I dreamed that I gave up. I took the elevator to the top of my building, skinned up the little ladder to the roof access, and looked down on all the lights. The city was like a giant Christmas tree, blinking red and green and silver. And that expanse of sky, the buildings stretching to the Pacific, the rounded and sandy hills, the tangle of highways, all left me feeling lost and small.

Through the smog I could see a cluster of dim stars. Those stars were forlorn and so far away, adding to my sense of insignificance. Why should I solve my own murder when I would be dead either way? Why did I matter at all, when I was nothing but a few wisps of mist, a palmful of dust, and a random scattering of thoughts? A memory to only a handful, a memory that would die along with those few people.

I was so depressed that I took the only possible exit: I jumped.

I'd never thought much of suicides, especially after Diana turned her little trick. I thought even less of those who tried it over and over again. My definition of a loser was somebody so miserable they even failed at the final failure. And there I was, a leaper, an airborne idiot. Even as the wind whistled past my head, I was thinking how impossible this was. How could you kill yourself when you were already dead? And my second thought was "Why am I not drifting?" even as the concrete rushed up to meet me.

And then all thought was lost as my mystical bones ground to powder and I found myself back in the Waiting Room.

This time a well-dressed woman in white sat beside me. "Hi, stranger," she said, and held out her hand.

The hand flopped downward, and I got a glimpse of the long red gash in her wrist.

She caught me staring. "Oh, that."

I looked away, patted my suit, checked to see if any bones were out of place. The bullet holes were still there, but now the fabric was scuffed, too. I was looking more like a rumpled, low-rent detective than ever.

“Got a smoke, sailor?” the woman said. She looked somewhere between thirty and three hundred, and I wondered how many rounds she had made through the Waiting Room.

I pointed to the “No Smoking” sign and shrugged. “Rules.”

“Tell me about it. Rules, rules, rules. You can’t get away from them, no matter where you go.”

“Been dead long?”

She must have taken it as a come-on line, because she tilted her face down and batted her eyelashes. “Long enough to know better but not long enough to be bored with it yet.”

Before I could translate the dame-speak into English, the speaker kicked on with a hiss of static. The voice was my caseworker’s, Miss Titanic, and she was joyously annoyed. “Steele. Get your sorry rump in here, right this second.”

I nodded to my self-loathing seatmate and headed down the hall. I was barely through the office door when I got the treatment with both barrels.

“Richard Stanley Steele. I was hoping to God I’d never set eyes on you again. I gave you the pep talk and laid everything out for you plain as day, showed you right up front the benefits of sacrifice and faith, and still you come crawling back through a door that’s only supposed to swing one way.”

If anything, the stacks of paper around her had grown even higher. She had to stand to peer over them at me. I hunched in the chair like a tardy third grader.

“It’s bad enough to get murdered,” she continued, and she punctuated her next words by slapping papers against her desk. “But—when—you—*kill*—yourself...”

Lee. What would Lee think, if she ever found out I was too much of a coward to stand up and keep fighting? Or that I’d suffered a moment of weakness with the person I hated more than anyone? Never mind that I hadn’t actually tasted the apple. I’d still climbed the tree.

My caseworker must have read the expression on my face. “Yeah, that’s right. You don’t know a damned thing about sacrifice. You’re nothing but a self-centered pile of—”

She stopped herself and made a quick hand gesture of penance that may have been from some obscure Eastern religion.

I no longer feared an eternity spent with Diana, an endless circle of apologies and blame. I was more afraid Hell was just an endlessly unsolved missing-persons case concerning a person who had never existed and a merry-go-round of guilt.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“*Sorry*. Christ on a Popsicle stick, Steele. You’re a real piece of work.” She held up my file, which had grown considerably thicker. “I’ve got addendum on top of memo on top of cross-reference. You think you’re the only bozo in the world I’m trying to move along?”

“No, ma’am.” I was beat. I had no get-up-and-go. I couldn’t even muster any sarcasm. They’d probably yank my gumshoe license and send me back to *noir* school to learn to twist off cynical one-liners again.

Miss Titanic sighed and sat back down. "You better be glad I like you. So what you got?"

"I'm still dead, as far as I can tell."

"And? Why the hell are you here again? You need to be back *there*, where you can do some good. If 'good' is even in your vocabulary."

"I've been good once or twice."

"Better make it two or three times, know what I mean? Because I'll bet you've got somebody back there worth believing in. I see it in your eyes, Steele."

"I wasn't getting anywhere. Everything was a dead end."

"Nonsense. Go back to the basics. What happened first?"

"It all started with the note, I guess."

"You guess? No wonder you billed only a hundred a day plus expenses. A private investigator is supposed to deduce, not guess."

"The note, then. Somebody slipped it under my door."

"Who?"

"Maybe the person who shot me."

"Then why didn't the person just knock on the door, wait until you answered, then shoot you?"

"Plot complications? Fool the cops? Fool me?"

"Right. It's never the most obvious answer. Who else?"

"Well, the note was from Bailey DeBussey, I think."

"Bailey DeBussey. DeBussey." Miss Titanic went to the filing cabinet, prowled for a moment, then pulled out a slender folder. She opened it and whistled. "Pretty."

"I seen worse."

She closed the folder and slipped it back into its proper place in the chaotic universe. "So why would Bailey want you to meet her at a certain time, which you say happens to be the exact same time you got a chestful of hot lead?"

"My killer must have known about the note."

"Jeez, Steele. You're so quick on the draw, maybe we'll reincarnate you as a postmodern Billy the Kid."

"She must be in on it, then. She was putting on quite an act in the coffee shop."

"And you thought she was after you for your looks."

I stood up. "Hey, Lee likes my looks just fine, and she—"

My caseworker leaned back in her chair and smiled. "Aha. I knew there was somebody back there worth fighting for."

Busted. The worst thing about real love, the kind you feel in your guts and soul, is you can't really keep it secret. You can hide names and places, but there's something different inside you that bursts out when you least expect it, a light you can't hide. Even to yourself, the one person who is often the easiest to fool.

She stooped down and rummaged in a bottom drawer, then came out with a piece of paper. "Here, fill this out. Form 3716, a deadline extension. Forgives the penalty you should have drawn for committing afterlife suicide. And don't let

anybody know I did you a favor. Word gets around fast up here and no good deed goes unpunished.”

I fidgeted with the paperwork. When I was done, she said, “I see something else in your eyes, Steele.”

“What?”

“The thing you’re running from.”

“I’m past it now.”

“Really? It looks like the kind of dead weight that makes a lovely anchor in the lake of fire.”

“Well, it’s my problem, not yours.”

She pursed her ice-blue lips. “Okay. But don’t make it my problem. I’ve got to clear up this clutter or I don’t get to move on myself, and I want to get my lovely bones out of here and meet five people in heaven.”

“Sounds like you’re bound for the great Oprah Book Club in the Sky.”

“It beats learning to play a harp.”

“Hey, wait a minute. I thought you were Jewish.”

She shrugged. “Did I say any of this made sense? If we knew what we were doing, life would have no point.”

She waved me out the door and returned to the heaps of business on her desk. I didn’t ask the way out. I figured there would be an exit sign somewhere. I’d discovered God had a great sense of humor, despite being a heartless bastard.

6.

The hall was empty. The woman in white no longer occupied the bench, and presumably she’d been swept off to some make-good mission of her own. There was a door at the end of the hall, but the sign above it said “Emergency Exit Only.” What were they going to do, slap me with a civil fine? Give me the death penalty?

I pushed the door open and took a step, expecting a set of corny golden stairs. Instead, I found myself fighting for balance in a river of red lava. Heat singed my eyebrows as I slipped waist-deep into the bubbling morass. Though the air was hot, the lava itself was clammy against my skin, as thick as sewer sludge and about as odiferous.

The river flowed into a dark cavern that yawned like an afternoon wino. Was this the route I was supposed to take? Because of my slip-up, was I now to take the hard road home?

Turned out harder than I expected.

“Get your ass down here,” she roared. “*Now!*”

Diana. I turned, fighting my way back up to the landing and the hall I'd left behind. But you know how these things work by now: the doorway had changed and was now a glass wall, with silver rain on the other side, so that it cast a million shards of reflection. In those shards, I saw myself as a multitude, and behind me was a legion of oversize scorpions, something laughable in a cheesy sci-fi movie but not so funny when they were creeping toward you with tails quivering in the air.

Tails full of poison.

I turned to face her wrath. "This relationship is over."

Laughter again, the whoosh of rising flames, the crackle and drag of a whip uncoiling and testing the air. "You owe me."

"I said I was sorry."

She mimicked me in a high-pitched voice, the mockery all the more disconcerting coming from those arachnid lips. If scorpions even had lips, that is. "Sorry, sorry, sorry. I wish I had a rosary bead for every time I've heard that word. Maybe I could pray my ass out of here."

I had the feeling she didn't want to be out. Some people are gluttons for punishment, masochists, misery addicts. She'd married me, after all.

"I have nothing to pay you with," I said. Back on Earth, when I committed transgressions, she'd sought payback in a straightforward expression of commerce. Staying out late merited a bouquet of flowers, Godiva chocolates compensated for bold-faced lies, and the bigger offenses required breaking the bank for shiny baubles. I was a pretty decent liar back then, so the corner candy store hadn't seen much business. But when I had the first affair, she'd been fairly content with a set of ruby earrings, especially as I'd had to moonlight as a bartender for three months to pay them off. If the punishment fit the crime, I'd never seen it.

"I want my pound of flesh," she said.

The lava flowed around my ankles, then up my legs, teasing me with heat. When it was waist deep, it suddenly cooled and solidified. I couldn't run. She had me right where she wanted me, just like always.

I pinched my wrist and let my finger and thumb meet in the middle. "I don't have any flesh to offer," I said.

"I don't care whether I win or lose," she said. "As long as you lose."

"Look, I'm doing my best to clean up the past. I know I made mistakes but all I can do now is make amends and move on."

"Richard."

I lifted my palms in the universal sign of surrender. "It's the best I got."

"Always a disappointment."

"Yes, dear."

"You don't get it. I don't care if you jump off this little carnival karmic wheel and land on your head. But you're never going to have Lee."

The anger came easily, self-righteous indignation, the only kind of righteousness I'd ever known. "You stay away from her. She has nothing to do with you."

Her forked tongue flicked out the crevice of her smile. "I'm on a mission."

She shimmered, the atmosphere around her glistening like iced jewels dangling from thin blue threads.

"Live and let live," I said, a corny peace offering.

"If I can't have you, nobody can." She grinned again, but her eyes were an arctic cemetery as she faded to mist.

I closed my eyes and clenched my muscles against the hardened lava, willing it to shatter and release me to the bigger cage of my eternal life.

7.

I took a dead breath, opened my eyes, and I was back in the lobby of my apartment building. I let my fingers do the walking near the lobby telephone. Bailey's address was on one of those fancy streets just up in the hills below the Hollywood sign, so I drifted over. The house was a Moroccan-Mediterranean type, with a lot of ceramic work and bougainvillea climbing all over the place. Probably cost a mere half-million. Wait till she got my bill. I'd been known to adjust my rates both up and down, depending on a client's ability to pay.

Darkness was falling by the time I checked the place out. Bailey was sprawled in the hot tub, nude except for some bubbles. She was listening to that song of the dogs barking "Jingle Bells," which definitely wasn't mood music. I discreetly left her to her champagne and ice bucket, though I noticed two glasses were set out.

Nothing else aroused my interest except for the photographs on the den wall. Bailey was in one, with the white-haired boat captain from the digital photo. A black-and-white portrait hung below that, of an actress whose name I couldn't remember. She had a '60s housewife hairdo, a strand of pearls, and a plunging neckline, and her cheekbones were as strong as Bailey's.

A Fiat pulled into the drive, the top down and the hunk from the photos all smiles and sunglasses. He let himself in and went straight to the hot tub. I was right behind him, a real sticky gumshoe.

"It worked," he said to Bailey. "So far."

She flicked some water toward him with her toe. "I told you it would."

"Hey, it was *my* idea."

"I'll remember to tell the cops that, if they ever catch on to us."

The hunk took off his sunglasses, then the rest of his clothes. He slid into the tub and popped open the champagne. He filled the glasses and toasted. "To our future."

“Eight million,” she said dreamily. “Acapulco or the Riviera?”

“We have to stay here until the storm blows over.”

“No problem. We’ve got a good lawyer.” She laughed, a chilling sound.

“They’ll find Steele’s body soon. But it’s a risk we had to take. We couldn’t have Lee’s sweetheart finding out that she was set to inherit a fortune.”

Fortune? Lee couldn’t inherit anything. She was an orphan. At least, that’s the story she gave me. Many nights I’d held her as she cried about the not knowing, the lack of roots, the yawning gray emptiness of her childhood. I’d even been looking into it for her, tracing her lineage, but without much luck.

“Think I can manage to look bereaved at Lee’s funeral?” Bailey asked, quaffing some champagne.

“You can pull off anything for a buck. And slipping that love note was a streak of pure genius. No fingerprints, right?”

“We handled it with kid gloves. Except for when I stripped in Steele’s apartment.”

“I hope our friend didn’t touch anything,” he said, his face sweating and his moussed hair going limp.

“Hey, you jealous or something? All he did was take the pictures.”

“Well, let’s just say that you’re a natural for the role of the ‘other woman.’ So you planted the photographs?”

“Yep. They’re in Steele’s pocket, right where the police can find them. The one you took, too, behind the building.” Bailey was getting less attractive by the minute, or maybe it was the presence of Mister Charm.

“Lee will be so guilt-ridden over what she’s done that no one will be surprised. Jealousy does strange things to a person.”

“I’ve noticed. Did you pay him?”

“You mean ‘Raymond Chandler’?” He laughed. “Bet the cops loved that one. I dropped off his down payment right after he ditched the rifle.” He shook his head, dripping sweat from his damp hair. “Damnedest thing, though. He says he shot Steele at four o’clock.”

Bailey sat up. I cursed her for taking away all my enjoyment of nude women. “But it had to be at least 4:15 before Steele went back to his apartment. And ‘Chandler’ met me there at 4:30.”

He-man shrugged. “He’s got enough money now to buy himself a decent watch. Anybody see you go to Steele’s room?”

“I was practically invisible,” she said.

He kissed her and she giggled. He put down his champagne glass and went for her. I left before the scene got disgusting.

My apartment was suffocating in its stillness. The blood on the floor had congealed. My body stank. My flesh was colder than a lawyer's heart.

I checked the answering machine. No calls. If Bailey set me up to make Lee think I was having an affair, Lee would have called by now. She wasn't really the jealous type. She just liked to know which way the wind blew.

I didn't want to pay Lee a visit just yet. That would be too draining. I'd probably waste all my emotional energy tearing my heart out at the sight of her. I had too little reserve left as it was. So I just had to trust her to take care of herself for a while. I spent the night in the elevator shaft.

Do you know what the dead dream?

They dream about being alive.

I woke up to a commotion. I floated up the shaft to my floor, then went down the hall. The cops had discovered my body. The super must have noticed the smell and thought the toilet had backed up again.

The cops parted like the Red Sea before Moses as a hulking figure arrived. Lt. Lars Uhlgren. Ugly Uhlgren, they called him, but only behind his back. His face looked as if he could drive nails with it. His eyes were manholes filled with sewer sludge.

"The door was unlocked, Lieutenant," said a uniform. "Body's stiff. Dead maybe a day, maybe less."

Uhlgren nodded and brushed past. "Now we know what happened to those shots from the Hype. What you got?" he asked a mousy-looking tech holding a plastic bag.

"Dug some bullets out of the wall, sir. They were embedded in the concrete lathe."

Uhlgren glanced at them through the baggie. "And some people get nothing but coal in their stockings. Send them to ballistics."

Mouse nodded and scurried away. I'd worked with Uhlgren a time or two, and I'd also learned to scurry when he barked. I was a little cheered that he was on the case. He had a good solve rate.

Then I remembered that I was supposed to solve the case on my own. I couldn't count on human intervention, and my supply of divine intervention was dwindling. But I had as much right to be in the apartment as the police did. I'd paid rent through the month. So I shadowed Uhlgren.

He put on rubber gloves and searched my pockets. He found the note that Bailey had left. Next came my cigarettes, change, and lighter, then he dug into my breast pocket and pulled out three photographs.

I stood behind Uhlgren and craned my neck. The door opened and the breeze knocked me off-balance and I leaned into him. Not just against him, but *into* him. He shivered and glanced around, his heavy eyebrows low.

I drifted backward, stunned by what I had seen. Two photos were of a nude Bailey, her face hidden but her melons clearly recognizable, lying seductively on

my bed. The other photograph was of Bailey and me holding hands, taken when we were heading to the coffee house. The way we were hunched made it look as if we were lovers sneaking off for a rendezvous. Obviously, that photo hadn't been in my pocket when I died, because Bailey had been walking with a ghost at the time the picture was taken.

"Hmm," said Uhlgren. "Old Steele got himself a babe. What they say must be true. It ain't looks that women are after."

You're one to talk, Ugly, I thought.

Uhlgren glanced around the room and saw Lee's portrait on the TV set. He looked from the photos in his hand back to Lee again. "*Two* beauty queens? I'm starting to lose my faith in romance."

He passed the photos to a detective, a guy who looked like a budget Fred Astaire. "See anything strange?" Uhlgren asked.

Budget Fred held the snapshots close to his face. He shook his head. "Nope."

"Steele's legs."

"Looks like a bad exposure."

Uhlgren smiled, a rare sight. "Damned feet ain't touching the ground."

"Maybe he was jumping for joy. I know *I* would be, playing smoochie-face with her."

Uhlgren looked down at my body, then knelt again with a pop of his knee. He reached inside my jacket to my shirt pocket, his tongue tucked in the corner of his lips. He came away with another note that I didn't know I'd had. Uhlgren was making like a modern-day Houdini. Next I expected him to pull out a rabbit or maybe a bouquet of dead flowers.

I hovered over him as he unfolded the note. Written on scrap paper were the words, *Forget her, Richard my love. So what if she threatened to kill me? She can't keep us apart. Thanks for the great time last night. Love always, Bootsie.*

Wonderful. I couldn't think of a single witness who could prove that I'd spent the night before my death with a James Herbert novel. I hadn't even snored loudly enough to wake the neighbors. As far as the cops were concerned, I was a two-timing dirty dog they would have envied except for the fact that they were still alive and I was headed for a toe tag.

Sure, they'd be able to figure things out eventually, with all the powder tests and databases and interrogation tactics the police used these days. Plus there was the obvious thread leading to whoever had snapped the photo behind the building. But I didn't have time for the modern machineries of criminal justice to creak into action. I'd be deep-sixed in a couple of days at the most, with maybe an extra day thrown in for an autopsy.

"Who's this 'Bootsie'?" Uhlgren said to nobody, holding the snapshot and the letter side by side. I almost materialized so I could make my lips move enough to give him an address. But let him have his fun. It didn't matter to me if Uhlgren was on the trail or not. I had what I needed.

Now it was time to figure out who the white-haired man in the captain's hat was. He was the link between Bailey and the man who had ventilated my chest.

9.

I reached San Francisco just before dawn. Usually, the fog and rain there wraps you up and digs its way into your bones. But when you have no bones, the chill doesn't bother you as much.

Nothing compares to being a ghost in the fog. Drifting from marina to marina, I was consumed by a peace I had rarely known, the kind they sing about in "Silent Night." I would have been content to drift for an eternity, succumbing to the pull of tides and shore breezes. But I still had an emptiness inside me, an ache and longing that kept me on task. No eternal peace would be complete without Lee.

There are thousands of boats in San Francisco. I passed over half of them before I found the *Lady Slipper*. I had hoped at least to learn the captain's name. I didn't think I would be lucky enough to find him sitting in the cabin. A half-empty bottle of Scotch, a cup of cold coffee, a cellular phone, and a revolver were on the table in front of him. He was crying.

The mahogany walls were covered with plaques, certificates, and framed photographs, and a trophy case filled one entire wall, brass and silver gleaming even in the dimness. Two of them were Oscars. I checked one of the photographs. The captain, in his younger days, posing with Natalie Wood. I *thought* he'd looked familiar. The photo beneath it looked like an autographed portrait of Spencer Tracy, but I didn't study it closely.

Because the captain had picked up the revolver.

His hand trembled, and his eyelids twitched as he kept them clamped shut. He brought the revolver slowly to his head. I understood the darkness that might push someone over the edge. But now I knew the true value of living. I knew what it was like to die with regrets. I was willing to bet the captain had at least one regret.

I materialized. The captain's eyes were still closed.

"Don't do it," I said, my head throbbing from the effort of wearing flesh.

The captain's eyelids snapped open and his finger tensed on the trigger. I thought for a second he was going to blow himself away in the shock of seeing me. Because of the suddenness of my incorporation, I hadn't finished the job. I was milky, translucent.

His mouth opened, and he glanced groggily at the cabin door. I came fully back into human form.

"Who—what?" he stammered.

"I'm the ghost of Christmas Yet to Come," I said.

"How did you get in here?" He pushed himself back in the chair. "The door's locked."

I held up my hand and wiggled my fingers. Then I made them invisible. I tried to will myself back to flesh again, but I was weak. I panicked, fought, suffered a moment of doubt. He pointed the revolver in the direction of my heart and fired.

10.

This time I skipped the Waiting Room. “Jingle Bell Rock” was playing through the speakers, and I wondered if this time around I had been sent directly to Hell. But then I recognized the office. Miss Titanic was standing over me, scowling down.

“Steele, you miserable piece of dirt. How many second chances do you need?”

“I didn’t kill myself this time. Some guy shot me.” I fingered the fifth and newest hole in my jacket.

“You’re a tweener, like I told you. You got special protections, but you also have special responsibilities. Like not getting yourself killed in the meantime.”

“I didn’t know a dead person could die. Especially not twice.”

“We’re all dying, all the time, over and over. Or hadn’t you figured that out yet?”

“I’ve had other things on my mind. What’s with the bad Christmas music?”

“We’re equal opportunity up here. Before this, it was a Tibetan chant, ‘Hava Nagila,’ ‘Kumbaya’ and something which might have passed for a Unitarian hymn, if they even have one. But that doesn’t concern you, because you still don’t believe in any of them, or *anything*, for that matter.”

“I believe in Lee.”

“Sure you do. So much that you jumped off a building and then went and got yourself shot. And your funeral’s coming up as soon as the medical examiner finishes the autopsy.”

“I’m going to make it work. For her sake.”

“No. Do it for *yourself*. That’s the first lesson of love. Settle your own soul before you go mixing up with somebody else’s.”

I looked at the clock. “Jingle Bell Rock” mercifully ended, and an African tribal hymn came on. “I owe it to Lee to finish this job,” I said.

“I can tell. You got to have a little faith, remember?”

“I’m starting to believe there’s a higher power at work.” I said it not as a hollow, rote acknowledgment that might score me some brownie points with somebody on a golden throne. I was getting as many second chances as I needed, apparently, and so far I had done little to prove I could handle my affairs on my own.

Because I couldn’t. And I’d always been too stubborn and scared to ask for help.

“That’s a good boy. Only took you forty human years and a couple of trips through afterlife administration. Hell, if we gave you a few extra eternities you might even turn out to be somebody.”

“Glad you have such faith in me.” I stood and turned toward the door. “I’d better hurry. If Lee’s involved in this, my killer could be planning to get rid of her, too.”

Miss Titanic’s sarcasm stopped me. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

I faced her desk and she waved three pieces of paper. “Schedule X. An override for Form 3716. Sign three times in blood, and you’re out of here.”

11.

I smiled back at Wesmeyer in the boat’s cabin, enjoying the aroma of gunpowder and another chance.

“You didn’t die,” Wesmeyer said, shaking his head and rubbing his bloodshot eyes.

“We’re all dying, all the time.”

He looked at the gun, then back at me. “In my case, I just want to speed things along.”

“Nothing’s worth killing yourself over,” I said. “Believe me, I know.”

“Who are you? Really? Because you’re not real. You’re not even here right now.” He stared at the Scotch bottle as if I were its genie.

“I’m a friend.”

“Friend? I don’t have any friends.” The gun barrel tilted down but still pointed in my direction.

“Surely somebody cares about you. Got any family?”

“Two daughters,” he said, his sibilants mushy from the booze. “I lost one, and I never had the other.”

“You’ve got more than you know. Money, accolades, starlets’ numbers in your speed dial. You’re a producer who produces. *Dance of Dust*, *Love in the Afternoon*, *The Slow Parade*. Who wouldn’t want to trade places with the great Ron Wesmeyer?”

He waved the gun toward his head. “I’d like to get the hell *out* of Ron Wesmeyer.”

“Don’t be a damned coward. Surely you’ve got something to live for. Something besides yourself.”

“I’ve screwed it all up,” he said. “No hope for it now.”

I felt myself fading, dissolving. I fought to maintain my grip on existence. My anger helped, and the discovery that in solving someone else’s problems, I was facing my own.

"Listen here, buddy." I leaned over the table, trying to look menacing. "If you've got a chance to fix things, you better take it."

He blinked. "I must be as drunk as an agent. Talking to a freaking ghost." But the gun lowered again.

"You ever see *It's a Wonderful Life*?"

He nodded. "I was an uncredited gaffer for that movie."

"And you worked your way up. To the top, or least high enough that you're obscured by clouds."

"Yeah? So what? That doesn't make me a decent human being. I've failed in the only thing that matters."

"Don't stop the movie until the final credits roll. You can always set things right. Take it from me. I'm the world's greatest expert on remakes."

He put the gun on the table and took a swig of Scotch. "At least when I write my suicide note, I can honestly say I'm crazy. I've got a ghost for a shrink."

I gave him a line so good, he probably ended up using it in his next movie: "Well, you can learn a lot about life from a dead guy."

Here sat one of the world's most powerful movie producers, reduced to a leaking sack of self-pity. And I was presuming to inspire him. "Tell me a story, Ron. Make it true, and at least die with it off your chest, if that's the way you want it."

He sighed long and empty like a man with numb fingers and nothing to lose. "It's my daughters. When I was working my way up, I didn't want kids underfoot. Both were illegitimate. I had a lot of flings in those days. Hollywood's never been known for its wise mating decisions."

I interrupted. "I've got to dissolve now, but that doesn't mean I'm not listening. If you think being alive is a pain in the neck, maybe someday I'll tell you *my* story."

My substance slipped away, leaving only me. Wesmeyer's eyes widened, but he took a sip of Scotch and continued. "Their mothers gave them up to orphanages. I always figured one day I would track them down, see what became of them, maybe help them out if I could. But you know how it goes. I was always too busy making the next deal. Then one of my daughters found me first."

I threw my voice. "Bailey."

He nodded, beyond the capacity of surprise. "She knew about the other daughter, too. She also knew my estate is worth about ten million dollars, and the cancer has reached my liver and colon. This late in the game, I figured I'd do way more harm than good if I tracked them down. A year is hardly enough time to patch up such a big hate."

Sounded like Bailey had a good source of information. A source that must have skimmed a couple of mil off the top. The captain took another gulp of Scotch and chased it with the rancid coffee. I shuddered in sympathy.

He wiped his mouth. "I drew up a will, figuring that even if I'd been worthless as a parent, I could make up for it by giving them lots of money. A poor substitute for love, I know, but it's better than nothing. Somehow, even that turned sour."

Sure. Bailey found out about the money and wanted it all. And someone named Lee was standing in the way. My batteries were nearly tapped out, but I mustered my voice for a question. "Does anybody else know about your two daughters?"

"No," he said, staring through me at the wall. "Their mothers are dead, one in a car crash and one from pills. So...wait a minute. My lawyer drew up the papers for my will."

Bingo.

"Do me a favor," I said. "After you finish your story, pick up the phone and call your other daughter. Life's too short, and there's no hell as hot as one that's filled with should-haves and regrets."

I hoped my caseworker got wind of my good deed. Even Santa knows who's naughty and who's nice. If Santa could do it, anybody could. I wafted weakly toward Los Angeles, the city of angels.

12.

Lee has a little courtyard outside her La Brea apartment. She takes it upon herself to keep flowers growing, to add a little natural color to the asphalt, concrete, and neon that occupies much of the Pacific basin. She has such a green thumb that even the smog can't kill her garden. Columbine, posies, marigolds, violets, she can do it all.

I was glad I didn't have to crush the flowers. I floated, thin as a Pacific wind, to the window. I took a deep breath, remembered I'd given up breathing a long time ago, and peeked through the glass.

A man with a gun stood behind Lee. She was writing something on a piece of paper, probably something she didn't want to write. Her face was calm except for her trembling lips. Her eyes were puffy from crying, but I was sure the tears were for my death and not her own.

You ever know what it's like to be loved? Not a lot of people do. Lack of faith had dogged my every step as a mortal, even when wonderful women fully expressed their love, opened their hearts and souls, and invited me to consume all I wanted. Unconditionally. And still I doubted. But, at that moment, seeing my sweetheart weep, with my photo on the table surrounded by a dozen wads of tissue, I knew.

My, she was beautiful. I had been afraid that seeing her would drain me, rip my ethereal fabric into existential shreds. Instead, I was energized, boosted, fueled by anger and love and the hope of an eternity together.

Hope. There it was again.

So big and true even a phony like me couldn't deny it.

I went through the wall.

Into Diana.

Not just bumping into her, like when you see some ex-lover on the street and give that embarrassed grin and get through the "How are you?" and "See you later" with not much in between.

No, I was *into* her, merged more deeply than we'd ever managed when engaged in bedroom acrobatics.

I'll admit, my idea of love had mostly been skin deep, and my only expression of affection was to follow the one part of me that always seemed to be pointed off a cliff edge. I'd tangled with some wonders, and I treasured them all, even though there was no way I could ever respect anybody stupid enough to fall for me.

So this intense, abrupt intimacy really threw me off my game. Diana had never invaded my thoughts, not to any real level of depth, and now here she was in my spirit meat, her ethereal fabric woven into mine, two angels dancing on the same pinhead.

"We have to talk," Diana said/thought/screamed/whispered.

"What are you doing here?"

"I made a promise. To make your life a living hell. Why stop right when it's getting fun?"

I glanced over at Lee, and she was still scribbling, the Goon With Gun unperturbed. Diana and I appeared to be invisible.

"Get out of my goddamned head," I said.

"Come on, lover. You said I was your soul mate, remember? And now that it's literal, you're getting cold feet."

"Because my feet have been dead for a couple of days."

I tried to shrug her off the way you might shake a pet monkey off your back, but she was duct-taped to my innermost being. The deepest, blackest part of it.

I recalled something my caseworker had said, about regrets and using up second chances. And the big thing I'd been running from.

Guilt.

There, in the mausoleum of my heart, the "Diana" coffin was full of the most maggot-riddled, corpulent putrescence imaginable. I thought I'd walled it off, that it was so safely buried that the stench would never arise.

True, I hadn't killed her. She'd taken that particular choice herself, in consultation with whatever cosmic guide she'd consulted. My failure had been in refusing to let her be fully alive.

No, she hadn't been Diana Kelly Rognstad Steele, a creature of love and light, one of God's special children. She hadn't been a woman, a sacred entity that I nurtured and honored and celebrated. She hadn't been a temple of all that was valuable and worthy.

None of that.

She'd been nothing but a dump for my pain and darkness and selfishness.

I couldn't see her, but I felt her, and she took that journey with me, into the deepest hollows of my soul. Her eyes widened in surprise and maybe a little sympathy.

"Richard," she whispered, and it was the voice she'd used in her most tender and generous moments, when times had been good, when we were virgins to each other, exploring and brave and not walled off from one another.

"I'm sorry," I said, and that was enough. For the first time in my life, I'd said it without an inaudible "But..." trailing after it, backloaded with a litany of justifications and excuses for pathetic and cowardly behavior.

Tears ran down our shared cheeks, and they were as warm as the Pacific Ocean in August, as cool as lovers' sheets when the sweat is evaporating, as hot as Diana's cavorting flames of Hell, as icy as the finger of The Grim Reaper when he taps on your shoulder and beckons you home.

"Did you love me?" she said, and I embraced her as well as I could while wearing the same arms as hers.

"Yes, and I still do," I said, and it was true and not at all contradictory. I looked at Lee, who seemed frozen in the real world, hunched over the note, achingly gorgeous and radiating all the light I'd come to appreciate. This love didn't mean I was cheating or that I was in any way diminished or duplicitous.

I hadn't realized in my stinginess that there is not a limited supply of love, and that it flows through us from someplace beyond us, someplace better than us. And we are only conduits, and our job is to simply keep the pipeline open and let it gush instead of tightening the valves through our fears.

"I love you and I always will," I said. "Forever."

That confession must have leaked through the borders of the dead and living, because Lee's head lifted. She looked over at the portion of the wall where I was immersed in my dead wife.

"Finish it," the goon commanded.

Lee gave a wry twist of her lip, turning up one corner in a smile that somehow seemed a secret signal. Approval, maybe? Understanding?

Diana's warmth flooded me, all the verdant, fecund moistness in which she'd enveloped me countless times, and I felt her rising into the ether.

"Mission accomplished," she said. "I'm free now."

And the resentment was gone, just like that, swept up on a breeze as I wished her Godspeed and happiness.

The last echo was her whisper. "I love you, too."

Diana's work was done, but mine wasn't. I brushed the invisible tears away and took inventory of my powers. Even without flesh, I had carried a heavy weight around inside, and somehow dragging it into the light had killed the poisoned darkness inside. Still, my spiritual batteries had been drained by my stubborn clinging to old ways, past damage, and unrequited guilt.

I didn't think I could pull off another materialization. I had to do something, though. I couldn't bear the thought of seeing Lee die unfairly, even if dying brought her to my side of the spirit world.

The goon with the gun had an Errol Flynn mustache and was smart enough to wear gloves. I had no doubt that Lee's fingerprints were on the gun's handgrip, and the rifle that had killed me was planted in the closet. I hovered over Lee, sniffing her hair, reading the words she had written:

The guilt is too much to bear. I'm sorry for what I did to you, Richard. You were the only one I ever loved. And that's why I couldn't let you love somebody else. Wherever you are, I'm sure you understand.

I can't pay for my sins, but at least I can keep myself from hurting anyone else.

Lee

Anyone that knew Lee could see that her handwriting was wrong. She held the pen in a different position than usual, between two fingers instead of one and her thumb. What a smart woman. A gun at her back, and still rational enough to throw some kinks into a near-perfect crime by leaving a puzzle for the handwriting experts.

"Nothing personal," said the goon. He even *smelled* like a lawyer, pungent with cologne and garlic and wine.

"I hope you fry in Hell," she said.

"The only place I'll be frying is on the beaches of Singapore," he said, bragging with the confidence of a sleazy crook who thought he was getting away with murder. Make that *two* murders. And he'd been smart enough to stick a frame on Bailey as well, if worse came to worst. That and millions of simoleons would buy him plenty of time to skip the country.

Lee put the pen down. "The police are probably watching my apartment. They've already questioned me once."

"And the pressure has driven you to suicide," the goon said. "Guilt is a real bitch, isn't it?"

She sat back and looked out the window. The sun broke through, and the shadow of a palm tree fell across her face. Her eyes were hard, set in that determined look that I knew so well. She would not give her killer the satisfaction of making her squirm.

"You know what I can't forgive you for?" she asked, as if the gunman were a wayward child. "For taking away the only things I wanted to live for. You took my Richard, and now you're taking me from the father I've always wanted to have."

“Cry me a river.”

I concentrated, trying to muster some flesh. If the lawyer and Bailey DeBussey and Bailey’s jar-headed lover enjoyed a life of luxury, they won. If Lee died, I failed. If I couldn’t will myself into action, I lost. And eternal love wasn’t something you got many second chances at.

Now that I’d cleaned out the crypt inside my sorry soul, I had no desire to let dust gather in the corners.

I flitted to the goon’s ear and penetrated the canal until I was at his eardrum. *Come ON, I thought, Make it happen.*

What did my caseworker say? Faith. It’s all about FAITH.

I was screaming inside, but I only managed a slight whisper. “Hey, you.”

The lawyer cocked his head and scratched his ear.

Faith.

I looked at Lee’s face and tried again, raising my voice to gnat level. “It’s God, you idiot.”

“Huh?” The goon glanced around, his mouth parted in confusion.

“You’ve been a very bad boy,” I whispered. Psychic razors slashed at my essence, my batteries pulsed with the last flicker of a charge, but I kept going. “God doesn’t like bad boys.”

Maybe it wasn’t my place to play God. Maybe they’d hold that against me later. But the administration at The Bright Place set the rules, not me. They’re the ones who gave me power and a mission. And another chance.

They had taught me to hope. And, to hell with it, I was just a conduit, after all. “God’s not happy with you.”

The goon shook his head. His gun hand dropped to his side. He’d forgotten Lee in his surprise.

“God’s going to have to kick your ass now,” I whispered. Lee swung a leg out, making contact and sending the gun clattering across the floor. She exploded from her chair, delivering a flurry of chops and kicks to the poor guy’s neck and stomach. The air rushed out of him as I backed away to enjoy the show.

Lee was good. Took her thirty seconds to wipe him out, and she didn’t even make him bleed. He would have some nasty bruises, though. She’s merciful, but not to a fault.

She tied his hands and called the police. I tried to summon myself into flesh, desperate with desire, but I was gone, done, used up. She was already out the door.

If she had heard my God imitation, she hadn’t recognized my voice.

Later, I drifted through Uhlgren's office. He was telling the District Attorney about the case. Turns out that Ron Wesmeyer's lawyer had actually worked his way through law school as a hit man. When he saw a chance to make a two-million-dollar cut, he fell back on old habits, though his ultimate plan was to filch the whole 10 mil himself.

The lawyer fingered Bailey and her boyfriend. Bailey was the mastermind of the whole setup. I guess smarts run in the family, same as looks. Too bad Bailey wasted hers, unlike her sister.

That was my only regret. Lee had finally found her family, except one of the bunch had turned rotten. Well, you can't ask for everything, especially in Los Angeles, and doubly especially around Christmas time. You can, but in my experience, you're just wasting your prayers. I guess even hope isn't unlimited.

I spent most of my remaining time hanging around Lee's place. It was a joy just watching her daily rituals, her karate routines, her laundry, her visits with her father. They were getting along great. She was going to be just fine.

I only had one more piece of unfinished business on this Earth.

14.

I had a beautiful funeral. I didn't know I had so many friends. It was good to see Wesmeyer by Lee's side. The priest's eulogy was so inspiring that you'd think I was up for sainthood.

Lee put a gorgeous bouquet on my chest, white roses, bluets, and yellow lilies, all grown in her garden. The morticians had done a swell job. I looked as if I were sleeping and visions of sugarplums were dancing in my head. As the mourners filed out and got into their cars to drive to the cemetery, Lee went back to my coffin for a last look.

Faith.

It's about *faith*, a belief in right and wrong and justice and hope and love. *Love*, as in caring about something bigger than your own sorry hide, but also believing in yourself enough so that you had something to give. No, not just believing in yourself, but believing in your piece in the great puzzle, something that fits but not always to the shape you like. Somebody or something, maybe some grinning guru in a corner office of The Bright Place, had a better plan. I drew strength from those things. I could do it. I could live again, if only for a moment.

In the last pew sat Miss Titanic. She grinned, then frowned and pointed to an invisible wristwatch, then held up five fingers. Five minutes left to be dead and alive.

I spent the last of my energy incorporating myself. Lee's moist eyes widened, but she didn't scream. She's not the kind of lady that gets thrown all out of kilter

over a little thing like the ghost of her dead lover. Or maybe her father had told her about my visit.

“Hiya, honey,” I said, trying to be suave, which is kind of hard for a corpse.

“Richard?” she whispered.

“Yeah.”

“But you’re...you’re...”

I nodded. “That’s right.”

“Oh, sweetie,” she said, and more tears rolled down her pretty cheeks. I didn’t think you could squeeze that much water out of a person. It made me feel good, in a strange way.

“Listen, babe, I don’t have much time.” I wiped her tears away, glancing behind me to make sure the priest didn’t have his convictions rocked by my appearance. Only one ghost was sanctioned by the church, and that was the Holy Ghost, not Richard Steele. Fine by me. I had other temples to walk through.

The priest was occupied bottling holy water or something, so I went on with what I needed to say. “Here’s the deal. I didn’t say this as much as I should have. But I love you. Forever.”

More tears. This time they were mine.

Ghost tears are cold, serious stuff.

Lee gripped my hands. I stammered, shivering, my earthly molecules about to disintegrate for the final time.

“I don’t mind if you find another guy,” I said.

When she shook her head, I squeezed her hands. “You might not feel like it for a long time, but you might someday. I’m just asking one thing.”

“Anything,” she said, the heartache plain in her voice.

“Save the last dance for me, will you?”

She nodded, laughing and crying at the same time.

With a last effort of will, I kissed her hard enough for her to be sure she wasn’t hallucinating. My lips went numb, then my fingers, then all my borrowed flesh.

“By the way,” I whispered. “Thank you for the flowers. You throw a lovely funeral.”

Then I was mist, scattered on the winds of time and the universe, gone to whatever this nice bright place is.

I like to think it’s heaven.

I’m an optimist, you know.

THE END

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About Scott Nicholson:

Thanks for reading me! Sign up for my Tao of Boo newsletter for giveaways and book news: <http://eepurl.com/tOE89>.

I'm author of more than 30 books, including the *After* post-apocalyptic series, *The Red Church*, *Liquid Fear*, *Chronic Fear*, *The Harvest*, and *Speed Dating with the Dead*. I collaborated with bestselling author J.R. Rain on *Cursed*, *The Vampire Club*, *Bad Blood*, and *Ghost College*. I've also written the children's books *If I Were Your Monster*, *Too Many Witches*, *Ida Claire*, and *Duncan the Punkin*, and created the graphic novels *Dirt* and *Grave Conditions*. As K.C Carr, I wrote the vampire romance *Fangs in Bed*.

Please write a review if you enjoyed this book. Connect with me on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or my [website](#). I am really an organic gardener, but don't tell anyone, because they think I am a writer.

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