

DEADTOWN

NANCY HOLZNER



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

“Holzner’s prose combined with a spunky protagonist with a dark side, woven together with fast-paced action, emotional reveals, and engaging plot twists, makes *Deadtown* a MUST-READ.”

—Phaedra Weldon, national bestselling author of *Phantasm*

“Fast, fun, and feisty, Holzner’s *Deadtown* is chock-full of supernatural action, danger, and creatures who do more than go bump in the night.”

—Devon Monk, author of *Magic in the Shadows*

AND THEN THERE WERE ZOMBIES...

I was there when it hit. I was on my way to a drugstore near Downtown Crossing to buy lightbulbs before a lunch date with Kane. Funny how you remember little details like light-bulbs. One minute, I was in the middle of a crowd of lunchtime shoppers; the next, I was standing alone on the sidewalk, surrounded by fallen bodies. It was as if, on cue, everyone around me had agreed to play dead—except they weren’t playing. I bent to the woman lying facedown at my feet. She’d hurried past me ten seconds ago; I’d admired her leather jacket. Now, her neck was warm, but my searching fingers could find no trace of a pulse. I turned her over. Her eyes were open, their whites bright red, and thin trails of blood trickled from her nose and mouth. She wasn’t breathing. I checked another body, then another. They were all the same—whole and warm, with red eyes and dribbles of blood. And very, very dead.

I screamed and ran, not knowing where I was going; all I knew was that I had to get away before the same thing happened to me. But there was no “away.” Every corner I turned, every block I ran down, was the same. Dead bodies. Everywhere. Dead bodies strewn all over the ground like trash at a landfill. Some wild part of my brain believed I was the only living thing left in the entire world.

Then, three days after the plague, the zombies began to rise. And Boston has never been the same.

“Zombies, demons, and a sassy slayer. *Deadtown* sparks with an incredibly realized world and cast of vivid characters. I can’t wait for the next book!”

—Chris Marie Green, author of *The Path of Razors*

DEADTOWN
HELLFORGED

DEADTOWN

NANCY HOLZNER



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada

(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

DEADTOWN

An Ace Book / published by arrangement with the author

PRINTING HISTORY

Ace mass-market edition / January 2010

Copyright © 2010 by Nancy Holzner.

Cover art by Don Sipley.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

ISBN: 978-1-101-15967-5

ACE

Ace Books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

ACE and the "A" design are trademarks of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

To Steve, for more reasons than I can count

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe my biggest thanks to the amazing Cam Dufty, who plucked my manuscript from the slush pile and then edited it with equal measures of insight and enthusiasm—not an easy thing to pull off! And thank you, Cam, for your assistance and patience throughout the editorial and production cycles.

Gina Panettieri is an active, engaged, and tremendously helpful agent, and I'm grateful for her advocacy.

Don Siple created the awesome cover art, and I wish he could have seen my jaw drop the first time I saw it. Thanks also go to art director Judy Murello and to Edwin Tse for cover type design.

Production editor Michelle Kasper and assistant production editor Andromeda Macri kept the production phase running smoothly. Thanks to copy editor Jessica McDonnell for her sharp eye and astute comments—and for saving me from a couple of real bloopers! I also appreciate the excellent work of proofreader Rob Farren and text designer Tiffany Estreicher. And thanks to my publicist, Rosanne Romanello, for her help in getting the word out.

My daughter (and newly converted urban fantasy fan) Tamsen Conner has always been supportive of my writing. Thanks, sweetie!

Finally, undying gratitude and love to my husband, Steven Holzner, who's published more than 12 books and understands what goes into writing one. He never minded when I'd disappear for hours into my fantasy world. And he bought me endless cups of coffee as I wrote, night after night after night, in coffee shops around town. His love and patience, his support and encouragement, are truly what made this book possible.

Table of Contents

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TWO RULES I LIVE BY: NEVER ADMIT TO BEING A shapeshifter on a first, second, or third date with a human. And never, *ever* bring along a zombie apprentice wannabe on a demon kill.

Lately, given my lack of a social life and my kinda-sorta relationship with a workaholic werewolf lawyer, Rule Number One hadn't presented much of a problem. At the moment, it was Rule Number Two that was giving me trouble. Of course, I'd only formulated Rule Number Two about thirty seconds ago, but I intended to uphold it for the rest of my life—assuming that I'd make it out of here and have a rest of my life to live.

Rule Number Two was thanks to Tina, who—against my orders—had followed me into my client's dream. I was here to exterminate a pod of dream-demons, and the last thing I needed was a teenage zombie in a pink miniskirt.

"Hi, Vicky. I thought you might need this." Tina waved my flamethrower, then looked around. "Whoa. It's *weird* in here."

Weird didn't half describe it. We stood in the middle of a huge circus tent, the top stretching up and up until it disappeared somewhere in the stratosphere. Eerie music from an out-of-tune calliope swirled through the air. All around us loomed dozens of crate-sized boxes painted crayon-bright red, blue, and yellow. Suddenly, a box to my right flipped open. With an earsplitting screech, an evil-faced clown sprang out, jack-in-the-box-style. I raised my pistol, aimed, and squeezed the trigger. The bronze bullet nailed the demon-clown right between its eyes. It shrieked, bobbing around on its springs, then dissolved into a puff of sulfurous mist.

"Cool!" Tina brandished the flamethrower. "Let me do the next one."

"Uh-uh. You're getting out of here. Now. Before the client wakes up." I went over and nudged her toward the dream portal, but she shook me off and walked away.

"Don't worry. Georgie-poo's sleeping like a newborn baby."

"Mr. Funderburk to you."

"Whatever. Anyway, how can he wake up? That was, like, an industrial-strength sleeping pill you gave him. I want to look around. I've never been inside somebody's dreams before." Her mascaraed eyelashes fluttered against her spongy, gray-green skin. "Well, once, when I was alive, Joey Tomasino told me he had this dream and I was in it." She sighed. "But I didn't *know* I was in it, you know?"

I made a snatch for the flamethrower, but Tina spun around and danced out of reach. As she did, the ground rolled under our feet, sending up puffs of sawdust and making Tina stagger.

"What was that?" she asked.

"A bad sign." The ground shook again, ominous, like the shudder that runs up your spine before something really, *really* awful happens. "You're trespassing in Mr. Funderburk's dreamscape. You've gotta go."

She laughed. "I bet the earth moved more than that in Joey Tomasino's dream."

I grabbed her arm and tried to drag her toward the dream portal, but she dug in her heels. I'm stronger than a human, but zombies have incredible strength—something happened to their muscles between death and reanimation. I couldn't budge her.

The ground was rippling in steady waves now, making it hard to stay upright. "This is bad," I said, shaking Tina's arm. "If the client wakes up, we'll both fade into dream limbo. You want to be stuck here forever?"

Tina yanked herself away and strolled across the bucking ground, her arms out like those of a

tightrope walker. She stopped beside a box and knocked on its lid. “Yoo-hoo. Any demons in there?”

The box flew open and a figure emerged. Tina stumbled backward and hoisted the flamethrower. “Don’t!” I shouted.

Too late. A blast of fire roared from the weapon, incinerating the figure and shooting past it to burn a hole in the wall of the circus tent. Tina fell, landing on her butt and dropping the flamethrower. The jet of fire whipped back and forth like an angry snake, igniting more jack-in-the-box boxes, the calliope, the Eiffel Tower—who knows how *that* got in here, but it was blazing now. I ran over and picked up the weapon, snapping the safety on before the whole damn place went up in flames.

Tina stared at the ashes of the box she’d blasted. “That wasn’t a clown.”

“No, it wasn’t even a Drude.” Drudes are dream-demons, the kind I’d been hired to exterminate. “You just torched Mr. Funderburk’s mother.” No question about it; I’d seen her photo on George’s nightstand.

“Oops.”

A howling began in the distance, from somewhere outside the dream. The noise got louder and louder, and the dreamscape bounced around like an earthquake redefining the Richter scale. The howling shaped itself into a word: “Mama! *Mamaaaa!*” Outside, George was moaning and shaking his head—signs he was waking up. If that happened, Tina and I would be trapped forever inside this freak show circus or, worse, locked in the basement that stored the symbols and themes of George Funderburk’s subconscious. I’d seen enough topside to know that was *not* a place I wanted to be.

“Mama!” George’s heartbeat thundered through the dreamscape. Sleeping pill or no sleeping pill, he was working himself into a state that would catapult him out of his dream—the way it happens when you wake up suddenly, your heart pounding and a scream dying on your lips. We had ten, maybe fifteen seconds left. I shoved Tina, hard.

“Get through the portal! No more screwing around!”

This time, Tina listened. She scrambled, half-crawling, to the dream portal, a doorway of shimmering, multicolored light, then jumped into the beam. Immediately she bounced backward, like she’d tried to hurl herself through a trampoline.

All around us, the circus tent was going up in flames, roaring and popping, throwing lights and shadows across Tina’s terrified face. George was screaming now; in here, it sounded like a million fingernails screeching down a million blackboards. Tina put her hands over her ears and again tried to shoulder her way into the portal.

“Vicky! I can’t get through!”

I caught up with her. “There’s an exit password. Keeps the Drudes in.” I mouthed the secret word and shoved Tina into the portal. Her body shimmered for a second, dissolving into a Tina-shaped outline of sparkling colors. Then she disappeared, sucked back into the real world.

Damn, how I wanted to follow her. But I couldn’t. Not until I’d finished the job.

With Tina gone, the place was shaking a little less, so maybe George was settling back down and I could—

An explosion ripped through the air, knocking me to the ground in a shower of sparks and hot ash. I scrambled for cover, then checked out the situation from behind an abandoned clown car. Fire raged through the big top as, one by one, the boxes blew up. That would get rid of some Drudes—and God knew what other dream figures were hiding in there—but I couldn’t let the flames destroy George’s whole dreamscape. If that happened, he’d never dream again, and that meant a one-way ticket to insanity. Not to mention the fact that I’d burn to cinders along with everything else.

Think, Vicky, think. Dreams don’t follow the same rules as reality. I had to use dream logic to put out the fire, then try to repair the dreamscape—if the chaos in here didn’t jolt George into waking up first. It was a plan, or the closest I could come to one at the moment.

I tried wishing the fire away. Sometimes that works in dreams. Closing my eyes, I pictured a bright happy circus scene: a bright, happy tent (flame-retardant) filled with bright, happy people. “Make it real,” I whispered. “When I open my eyes, this is what I’ll see.” Taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes.

The ringmaster ran past me, screaming, his top hat on fire. To my right, a snack cart exploded, showering flaming cotton candy over the stands as spectators trampled each other while trying to find an exit. So much for bright and happy.

Time for dream logic, take two. I tried free association. Fire. Out. Water. Lots of water. As soon as I thought water, I thought of elephants—don’t ask me why. It made perfect sense at the time. A line of elephants pedaled into the ring, each on its own tricycle, trumpeting sirenlike wails. It sounded a little bit like a brigade of off-key fire engines, and I crossed my fingers. The elephants triked over to the pool at the foot of the high-dive platform, then stopped. Each elephant rolled off its tricycle, did a ballerina-style pirouette, then began using its trunk to siphon up water and spray it on the flames. Sizzling sounds hissed through the air. Within seconds, the fire was out.

“Thanks, guys,” I called, waving as the elephants floated skyward, then disappeared. Their trikes turned around and pedaled themselves out of the ring. Everything was back to normal, or as normal as it gets in a dream.

Except that all around me, everywhere I looked, George Funderburk’s dreamscape lay in ruins. Steam rose from piles of wet, stinking ashes. The circus tent was three quarters gone; here and there, a few singed ribbons drooped. Beyond them, a charred, dreary landscape stretched out in all directions, the kind of dreamscape that brought depression and despair to waking life. Gray, gray, and more gray—the fire had burned out all the colors. Don’t let anyone tell you that people dream in black and white; that’s a severely damaged dreamscape. Dreams are supposed to be in hi-def, razorsharp color. No way could I leave the place like this—the poor guy would be worse off than before he hired me.

Years ago during my training I learned a technique for rebooting booting a person’s dreamscape, but I’d never actually tried it in the field. Today would be my chance—if I could remember what to do. It was the only hope I had of putting things right.

First things first, though. I couldn’t attempt a reboot until I’d flushed out all the demons. Otherwise they’d reinfest the place and we’d be back to square one. So before I did anything else, I’d finish the job I’d been hired to do. I pulled out the InDetect I wear on a cord around my neck and turned it on. It hummed to life, then was silent. Turning in a slow circle, I held it at arm’s length and listened. After a quarter turn it clicked, softly at first, but as I took a few steps, sweeping the InDetect back and forth, the volume and the speed of the clicking picked up. Drude, dead ahead.

Following the clicking, I pulled out my pistol. I’d gone forward about a dozen feet when a demon leaped in front of me, gnashing its teeth and snarling. No more evil clowns. This one was in typical demon guise: long, pointed tongue and cloven hooves, bristling with sharp things—horns, fangs, claws—and spewing bad breath. It howled—*whoa*, make that *really* bad breath—then charged. I shot. One bronze bullet from my pistol, and the thing dissolved into a murky cloud and a whiff of rotten eggs.

I scoped out the rest of the dreamscape and blasted three more Drudes back into the ether. When the InDetect didn’t pick up any more, I holstered my pistol, put my hands on my hips, and tried to remember the reboot technique. If I did it right, George would wake up demon free, with a vague memory of pleasant dreams. Tina’s trespassing, Mama’s live cremation, the trashing of his dreamscape—all of that would be gone. Overwritten. Not even a trace lingering downstairs in his subconscious.

If I did it right.

This much I remembered: to reboot somebody’s dreams, you had to use the dream portal as a conduit to import, from the real world outside, the raw materials to rebuild the ruined dreamscape.

Essences, not actual objects. I didn't want to pull in the bedroom dresser or, God forbid, Tina. Instead I needed colors, emotions, thoughts, memories—the ingredients we all use in an infinite variety of recipes to cook up our dreams.

There was a spell to pull in those essences. A word, a phrase maybe, that summoned the raw materials of dreams. What was it? Aunt Mab made me memorize it when she taught me how to use the dream portal, but damned if I could remember it now. I tried *essence* in English, then in Welsh. The dream portal sat there, empty, doing nothing but sparkling in shades of white and gray in this colorless world. Raw materials—I was sure the spell had something to do with that, so I tried all the synonyms I could think of: *ingredients, core, infrastructure, primary elements, source*. I also tried the Welsh equivalent when I knew it. I thought I'd had it when I tried *dream-stuff*, but nothing happened. Nothing worked.

Beneath my feet, the ground trembled and shifted. A sigh blew through the dreamscape like a gust of wind. George was stirring. I checked my watch, then shook it. The damn thing said it was 4:37 on Wednesday, February 1, 1792. The guy who'd sold it to me said it would work in here, and, like an idiot, I'd believed him. Time has no meaning in dreams, even though it keeps ticking away relentlessly in the real world. I must've been in here for hours by now; George's sleeping pill would wear off soon.

"Work, damn you!" I shouted at the portal, kicking it and causing a shower of sparks. My voice echoed, and the trembling intensified.

What was the magic phrase? I needed Aunt Mab's help. I'd have to try calling her on the dream phone. The Cerddorion, the race of Welsh shapeshifters to which I belong, have a psychic link to others of their kind that they can use while sleeping. All you have to do is concentrate on the person you want to connect with, and you open the connection. In your dream, the air begins to swirl and shimmer with that person's colors—all souls have their own colors—and, if they're willing to talk to you, you can have a conversation. Sometimes it worked when you called from inside another person's dreams. And Mab was powerful enough to answer even if she was awake.

I pictured her, a straight-backed, iron-haired woman sitting in the library of her house in North Wales. Like an out-of-focus black-and-white photo, the scene was blurred and Mab's usually sharp features were indistinct. I concentrated harder, envisioning her baggy cardigan, her long black dress, her sensible lace-up shoes. Her face was set in its familiar, you-can-do-better scowl. I watched for her colors, blue and silver, to emerge. Nothing. Just flat, blurry gray. And then I realized—I was in a place where there were no colors.

Now what? If Mab's colors couldn't get through, was I cut off from Mab? I had no clue. It had never been an issue before.

Mostly because I couldn't think of a plan B, I kept picturing my aunt. I took concentration to a whole new level, squeezing my eyes shut and scrunching up my forehead. I tried adding other senses: her sharp voice that contrasted so strangely with the softness of her accent, her scent of lavender water and mothballs. Gradually the image sharpened, like a figure emerging from the fog. Mab sat in her favorite wing chair by the fireplace, a book open on her lap.

"Mab, thank God you're there! I need to reboot this dreamscape, now."

Her mouth moved, but there was no sound. Damn. Bad connection. No wonder, since I was calling from someone else's damaged dreamscape. But I didn't have time to try again. Next time, the connection might be even worse.

She seemed to be able to hear me, so I asked, "What's the magic word?" She smiled, closed her book, and turned it so I could read the cover. *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare. Something literary. It figured.

"For heaven's sake, Mab, I don't have time for English class! Just tell me. Write it on a piece of

paper.”

Mab tapped the side of her head, the gesture that meant, “Think, child.” Her image began to fade. The book-lined walls of the room where she sat wavered and thinned. In a moment, all that remained was the damned book, floating in the air.

I remembered when Mab had made me read that play. I hated it—the language was old and hard to understand, and the story didn’t make sense. A bunch of weird spirits and castaways running around on some island—it figured a book like that would hold the key to re-creating a dreamscape. There was something important in that play, something I needed to remember.

The ground convulsed, knocking me to my hands and knees, and a snort ricocheted around me. I was doomed. George was waking up, and Mab wanted me to read Shakespeare. Another snort, louder, knocked the book from the air. It whacked me hard on the back of the head, bounced, and landed on the ground in front of me. I sat back on my knees, rubbing my head. Jeez, if Mab could send a book through the dream phone, why couldn’t she just send herself and get me out of this mess? But that wasn’t how my aunt operated—never had been.

The book was open to a scene near the end, where the magician Prospero speaks to Ferdinand and Miranda. I scanned the words. “*Our revels now are ended. These our actors,*” blah blah blah. “*The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,*” yadda yadda yadda. I’d never find it. I kept reading, faster, skimming over the words. Suddenly, my eyes hit the brakes. A phrase glowed and lifted itself off the page. “*We are such stuff as dreams are made on.*” That was it. That was the spell. No wonder I’d felt close with *dream-stuff*.

“Such stuff as dreams are made on!” I shouted.

Immediately the portal expanded and a rainbow of colors poured in. Multihued streams of light shimmered around the dreamscape, touching things, washing them with color, bringing them to life. The portal widened further, and a strong wind entered, pushing me backward. Squinting through watering eyes, I peered into it. Dozens, hundreds of shadowy figures flew in, whirling through the dreamscape, breaking off into tornadoes that spun and leaped as far as I could see. Here and there, figures would jump out and strike a pose or sink down into the ground to wait their turn down cellar, in George’s subconscious.

The lights and colors intensified, growing so bright I had to close my eyes. Next, sounds blasted their way in: voices, clanging, music, drumbeats, screeches, whistles, wails, chirping, sobbing—you name it. When every sound you might ever hear in a dream lets loose all at once, the din is unbelievable. I pressed my hands over my ears and crouched beside the portal. Blinded, deafened, pinned down by galeforce winds, I was helpless until the reboot was complete. *Don’t wake up now, George*, I thought. *Please don’t wake up now.* This dreamscape wasn’t even such a great place to visit—I definitely did not want to live here.

The vortex of sounds, lights, and colors swirled and roared. Then, gradually, the chaos subsided, until a single sound emerged: *thumpa thumpa thumpa*. Fear tickled my spine. Was that George’s about-to-wake-up heartbeat? No, it was too even for that. More like some kind of drumbeat. A rhythmic track. Cautiously, I lifted my hands from my ears. Music—it was music. Not the calliope melody of before, this was dance music—loud, insistent, pulsing with a heavy bass line. I opened my eyes, then blinked. Spots flashed by in random patterns. It took me a minute to realize that they came from a mirror ball rotating overhead. The circus tent was gone. I now stood on the dance floor of the tackiest seventies-style disco you could imagine—raised dance floor, mirrored walls, a light show to make you seasick.

Over at the bar, George’s mother waved to me. She raised her drink—something creamy and pink with skewers of fruit and a little umbrella stuck in the top—and smiled. She tossed the drink back in one gulp and wiped her mouth on her sleeve. Then she got up, tied on a frilly blue-and-white apron,

and left.

Disco music is not my thing. I've got all the dance moves of a three-legged camel. But as soon as Mama was out the door, I felt an overwhelming compulsion to dance, to boogie, to get down and shake my groove thing. *Thumpa thumpa thumpa*. The beat was hypnotic; the bass line throbbed through my bones. I tossed back my long black hair—which was odd because my hair is short and strawberry blonde. But I forgot about that as the music swept over me in waves of sound and moved my hips for me in a sexy, swaying motion. *Thumpa thumpa thumpa*. I looked down in surprise, wondering where I'd learned to move like that.

Oh, God. My clothes were dissolving. My T-shirt, which for some reason was soaking wet, was already half transparent, and my bra was missing. Okay, pretty obvious what kind of dream *this* was shaping up to be. No wonder George's mom had left. The dreamscape was rebooted and working just fine. A little too fine. And I was getting the hell out of here.

I ran for the portal, shouting the password, and dove into the beam.

GEORGE FUNDERBURK WAS AWAKE.

His open eyes were the first thing I saw as the bedroom materialized around me. Maybe my abrupt exit had woken him up, but I'd made it out of his dream with maybe half a second to spare.

His lips curling in a sleepy smile, George stared at me and murmured, "Wow, you're real. I thought I was dreaming." His comb-over had fallen across one eye; he pushed the hair back in place with stubby fingers.

"You were dreaming." Realizing what he was staring at, I crossed my arms over my chest. My skin was still wet, and the bedroom was cold. "Tina, can you hand me my jacket, please?" I glanced in the mirror over the dresser to make sure everything else was back to normal. Strawberry blonde hair that kept short because no matter what style I tried, it reverted back to this one after a shift. Heart-shaped face, amber eyes. Yep. That was me. Victory Vaughn, scourge of demons.

Tina, stationed in a chair by the window, tossed me the jacket and I put it on. The wet T-shirt remained clammy against my skin, but at least there was a nice, thick layer of leather between my nipples and George's leer.

"How are you feeling?" I asked him.

"Fine." He sat up in bed and stretched. Then he put his hands behind his head and regarded me. "I'm just sorry to wake up. I was having a great dream—first good one I've had in weeks." He waggled his eyebrows.

The best way to deal with this guy was to ignore the innuendo. Be professional. I opened my duffel bag and started packing my equipment. I unplugged the dream-portal generator (it shuts off automatically when a client wakes up) and wound the cord around its base. That went into the bag, followed by my InDetect, my utility belt, my pistol, and my extra bronze ammo. As I packed, I talked.

"Only sweet dreams for you from now on, George. You had about two dozen Drudes in there, but I got rid of them all."

"Hey, I helped." Tina sat up straight in her chair. Next to her loomed a small mountain of empty food containers: frozen pizza boxes, candy wrappers, an empty cellophane Oreo package, a squashed flat potato chip bag. While I'd been putting out fires, she'd been cleaning out my client's kitchen. George glanced at her, then his eyes widened. Confusion etched lines across his forehead.

"Weren't you...? I mean, didn't you...?" He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts.

Holding up a warning hand to keep Tina quiet, I watched George as he struggled with the wisp of a memory of Tina invading his dreamscape. "What is it, George?"

He shook his head again. "Nothing. I thought I dreamed about a zombie, but I can't remember. It must be I saw her here, before I fell asleep, huh?"

"Must be." I needed to make sure the reboot had taken hold. "Do you remember anything else about your dreams tonight?"

His eyes returned to my chest, like he had X-ray vision through leather, and he smiled again. "You were there. In a disco."

"Anyone else?"

"Oh, um. My, uh, my mother." Poor George's cheeks couldn't have been redder if I'd given him the slap he deserved.

I shot Tina a look. She was scraping the bottom of a carton of butter pecan ice cream. She had no clue what a huge problem she'd caused. She dropped the empty carton on the floor, then ripped open

box of Twinkies. She'd popped two into her mouth before I caught her eye. She shrugged, then unwrapped another Twinkie.

I was feeling confident that George's dreamscape was whole and functioning, so I walked him through the usual post-extermination procedure. I read down the list of fears he'd provided at our first meeting: clowns, heights, elevators, falling, big dogs. With each item, he shook his head.

"Nope," he said. "None of that stuff bothers me now. Amazing. I've been scared of clowns since I was two years old." He scooped down in bed, closed his eyes, and started humming in a nasal falsetto. "Stayin' Alive"—the song from his dream-disco. Well, if he was picturing himself as a young John Travolta, he was *still* dreaming.

I sat on the edge of the bed and held out a list of instructions, rattling the paper in his face. He blinked and sat up again.

"Follow these post-extermination instructions. You've already arranged to stay home from work tomorrow, right?" He nodded. "Because you need a full day's rest. For the next week, no alcohol, no spicy food, no caffeine. And don't eat sugar or sugary foods after nine P.M., either." That last part shouldn't be hard, since Tina had scarfed down every speck of sugar in the place.

George nodded again, still humming. He shimmied his shoulders and made little pointing gestures that were almost in time with the song.

"George, knock it off for a minute and listen to me."

He blinked, slapped his own hand, and said, "Naughty Georgie."

Tina's bark of laughter sprayed Twinkie crumbs across the room.

I sighed and went on in my most businesslike tone. "It's important for you to understand that Drude extermination is a temporary measure. I can offer some relief, but only you can slay your personal demons once and for all. That's why I've included a list of local therapists who specialize in conquering phobias. Drudes feed on fear; unless you overcome your fears, the demons will return."

Like most clients, George didn't seem worried about that now. The demons were gone, and that was all they cared about. For the first time in weeks, months—even years, for some clients—they'd be able to get a good night's sleep. And George was looking ready to snuggle back in for another round. His eyelids drooped and he leaned sideways on the pillow. His humming slowed to the tempo of a ballad, then faded out mid note.

"Hang on, George. We've got some paperwork to take care of."

I made Tina clean up the debris from her pig-out while George signed the standard forms and—my favorite part—wrote out a check. As he handed it to me, a shadow darkened the room, like a huge, fast, pitch-black cloud flying across the face of the sun. The temperature plummeted about twenty degrees; the sudden chill prickled the back of my neck and raised goose bumps all over. I was glancing at the window to see if Tina had opened it to the October night air, when pain shot through my head and gut like a million-volt shock, doubling me over. My right hand clenched into a fist so tight I thought my fingers were breaking. I couldn't breathe, couldn't even begin to remember how.

And then it was gone.

When I could speak, I said, "Holy— Did you feel that?"

"You know"—George scooted closer—"I've been feeling *something* ever since I woke up and saw you here. What do you say you and I have dinner tomorrow night?"

From the doorway, Tina made a sound halfway between a snort and a squeal.

I felt too shaken to glare at either of them. "Sorry. I don't date clients." The trembling in my voice surprised me. Physically, I felt fine. Now. A slight tingle in my right forearm was the only trace of whatever the hell had blown through that room.

"Too bad." George yawned. "Well, then, if you don't mind, I'm feeling kinda tired."

"We'll let ourselves out. You get some rest. Come on, Tina." I hoisted my duffel bag to my

shoulder and walked to the doorway. Another chill hit me, and I looked back at George. He was already asleep, his mouth hanging slack like a child's.

“DID YOU NOTICE ANYTHING STRANGE BACK THERE?” I tried to keep the apprehension out of my voice as we cruised through predawn suburban streets toward Boston. My right arm still tingled from whatever I'd sensed—if it was anything more than my imagination. Sometimes a strong dreamscape can make the outside world feel surreal for a while.

Tina laughed. “Strange? Are you kidding? This has been the strangest night *ever*.” She held her arms straight out in front of her, pretending she was turning a steering wheel. “Even sitting on this side of the car is kinda weird.”

We rode in my baby, a 1964 E-type Jaguar in classic racing green. My father had shipped it across the Atlantic when he moved here from Wales in 1975. Because of its right-hand drive, I sometimes got puzzled looks from other drivers. But Dad had taught me to drive in this car, and I loved it.

“I don't mean ordinary strange,” I said. “I mean, did you feel anything creepy right before we left?”

“I can't think of anything creepier than Georgie-poo asking you out on a date. He had snot in his moustache—did you see? Eww.”

If Tina had felt the force that swept through that bedroom, she wouldn't be thinking about George Funderburk's snotty moustache. Whatever it was had felt—there was only one word for it—*evil*.

But Tina hadn't noticed. George hadn't seemed to, either. I relaxed a little, feeling like I'd been holding my breath since Concord. I rubbed the tingling spot on my arm. The sensation was fading. It must've been the aftereffect of spending all that time in George's dreamscape; I'd never been inside someone's dreams for so long.

“So anyway,” Tina asked, “what happened in the big top after I got out of Weirdoland? I mean, you came through the portal looking like the third runner-up in a wet T-shirt contest.”

I ignored the third-runner-up crack. So what if Tina, zombified at fifteen, had a couple cup sizes on me? Slender but strong—that was how I liked to think of myself. Besides, it was time to tell her off for the trouble she'd caused.

“I had to extinguish the fire you started, remember?”

“Yeah, right. Uh-huh.” Tina's smirk was just visible in the light from the dashboard. “You sure lit Georgie's fire. Burn, baby, burn.” She launched into “Disco Inferno” in an ear-splitting soprano.

Was I going to have to spend the entire night listening to *Disco's Greatest Hits for the Tone-Deaf*? I clicked on the radio, set to my favorite classic rock station, and turned it up loud. “Born to Run” blared from the speakers. No way Tina could compete with The Boss at full volume. After a minute of trying, she shut up. I reached over and turned the volume back to a level that didn't threaten hearing damage.

“So when's our next job?” Tina asked.

“*Our* next job? Let me see. That'd be when hell freezes over or snow falls in July. Take your pick.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means there is no ‘next job.’ I'm not taking you with me again.”

“But—”

“But nothing. You ignored everything I said and acted like Mr. Funderburk's dreamscape was your personal playground. That man hired me to kill his demons, not to cause permanent psychological damage—which you almost did. You blasted his mother with a flamethrower, for God's sake.”

Tina didn't answer. She folded her arms and slouched in her seat. As much as a zombie can slouch.

“I said you could come with me tonight as research for your school project.” Zombies had only recently gotten a school of their own. Tina had been in tenth grade when she died. Three years later, she was finally getting the chance to go back to high school. “I never said we were going into business.”

together.”

“But... you told me you had more work than you could handle.”

It was true; I had said that. I was the only professional demon exterminator in Boston, and in the past year there'd been a spike in personal demon attacks. Not that I was complaining. The money was good, and I loved my work, being on the side of the forces of good and all that. It was just that sometimes I wouldn't mind a little help.

But not from Tina. She'd ignored my instructions by jumping into George's dream in the first place; once there, she made the proverbial bull in a china shop seem like some prim old lady at a tea party.

“Sorry, Tina. I'm not cut out for a partner. I work best alone.”

She started arguing, and I turned up the radio again to tune her out.

Up ahead on the right was a 24/7 Donuts. At the moment, coffee seemed like a wonderful idea. I pulled into the lot. Tina sat up, then pumped her fist in the air and shouted “Yes!”

“Nothing like a little snack to lift your mood, huh?”

“Hey, zombies eat. It's what we do.”

“Yeah, but all that sugar?” I chose a space and shifted into Park. “You ate enough back at Mr. Funderburk's to give an entire kindergarten class a week-long sugar rush.”

“I could eat every donut in that shop and I wouldn't gain an ounce,” she said, getting out of the car. “It's the only thing that doesn't suck about being reanimated.”

The donut shop was typical of the kind you find in Boston—bright pinks and purples splashed across the walls and table-tops, long rows of donuts climbing the wall behind the counter. A fiftyish woman stood behind the cash register, her scowl clashing with her perky pink uniform. She held out her hand like a traffic cop.

“You got a permit for that thing?”

It took me a second to realize she was talking about Tina. Legally, restaurants couldn't refuse to serve a zombie unless the zombie had left Deadtown—the nickname for Designated Area 1, the part of Boston where all of us monsters had to live—without a permit. In that case, most humans would call the Removal Squad. And when that crew removed a zombie, the zombie never came back.

I slapped the permit on the counter. “My friend's name,” I said, “is Tina. Not *That Thing*. Tina. Got it? And if you refuse to serve her, I'll have this place shut down so fast it'll make the cockroaches' heads spin.” I could do it, too. That's what workaholic werewolf lawyer kinda-sorta boyfriends were for.

Gloria—that's what the woman's name tag said—gave me a look that I hoped she didn't use on the coffee. It'd be way too bitter. “What can I get you?” she growled.

“How about a new attitude?”

“Look, you wanna order something or are you just gonna stand there? We don't allow loitering, you know.” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder at a sign that hung behind her. Sure enough, its big red letters proclaimed NO LOITERING.

I was half ready to turn around and walk out, but that would've made Gloria's day. So instead I smiled sweetly. “Ask Tina.”

“Huh?”

“She's your customer. Ask her what she wants.”

Clearly, Gloria did not want to ask Tina. She didn't even want to look at her. Suddenly, the woman seemed fascinated by the way her own fingers drummed the countertop. I hated that kind of attitude. Tina could have been Gloria's granddaughter. It was just chance—being in the very wrong place at the very wrong time—that had killed and reanimated the kid. Not to mention a couple thousand other Bostonians just like her.

“Are you refusing to serve my friend?”

Gloria mumbled something.

Tina stepped forward. “Did you say something, ma’am? I couldn’t hear you.”

“Whaddaya want?”

Tina looked up, down, and around, whistling. Then she turned to me. “I don’t know who she’s talking to, do you?”

“Yeah, you know, it’s pretty confusing.” There was nobody besides the three of us in the place. “I guess Gloria ought to use the name of the person she’s talking to.”

Gloria looked like she was ready to explode. “Goddamn it,” she muttered under her breath. Then she looked Tina in the eye and said, “Whaddaya want, *Tina*?”

Tina bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. “Gee, Gloria, I thought you’d never ask. I’ll take a dozen donuts. For starters.”

Gloria whipped a box into shape, then Tina put her through a whole aerobics routine, bending and stretching and running back and forth as she hurried to retrieve the donuts Tina called out in rapid-fire succession: “A Boston creme, and a chocolate, and a cruller, and a buttermilk, ooh, and one of those pink-frosted ones with the sprinkles. No, make that two of those...”

After Tina had purchased a good part of their inventory, I ordered coffee and a pistachio muffin. “This is to go, right?” Gloria grumbled as she rang up the total.

“No, we’re eating here,” Tina said, wiping pink frosting off her face. Three boxes of donuts were tucked under her arm.

“It’s to go,” I said. “We need to get you home before sunrise.”

I paid. Tina waggled her fingers at our server. “Ta-ta, Gloria. See you soon.” She blew a kiss, then spun on her heel and flounced through the door.

In the parking lot, Tina dumped all three boxes into a trash can. Wordlessly, she got into the Jag.

“You okay?” I asked, buckling up.

“Fine. Just not hungry.”

I backed out of the parking space, then glanced at her. Zombies can’t cry. But if they could, Tina’s face would’ve been wet with tears.

“I wish I could shapeshift like you,” she said. “I’d have turned into a lion and torn that bitch’s head off!”

“She’s just a norm, Tina.” *Norm* was a paranormal nickname for human—especially the clueless ones like Gloria.

But I understood how Tina felt. When I was her age, there’d been times when I’d wanted to do the same thing. Different norms, different insults, but I knew that feeling. I’d had to learn to push it down before the anger took hold and I really did shift into a lion or something equally dangerous. For Tina, it was just a fantasy.

Tina pressed fists against her eyes, blotting tears that couldn’t fall. “Do you know that tonight’s the first time I’ve been outside Deadtown in over two months? Every time I ask my parents if I can visit, they’ve got some stupid excuse. They wish I was dead, really dead. I know it.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Everyone’s forgetting me.”

I wished I could say she was wrong, but I couldn’t—the same thing was happening to all the zombies. Three years ago, after the terror and confusion of the plague, the rising of the zombies had been cause for citywide celebration. Everyone treated the newly reanimated victims like heroes: loved ones snatched back from death’s claw. But the zombies were too different. Their skin was a funny shade of greenish gray, their movements stiff. They avoided sunlight and spent nights wide-awake. Their superhuman strength and insatiable hunger made them as terrifying as the zombies in any horror flick. And then there was the little problem of blood—the smell of fresh-spilt human blood sent them

into a frenzy of hunger. You could calm them down with any kind of food, but the bloodlust did make things awkward sometimes.

Slowly, people like Tina's parents began to realize that they hadn't gotten their daughter back; instead, there was this creature, this monster, a mocking reminder of what they'd lost. Zombies couldn't cry, but they could still hurt. It was easier for the norms not to see that.

"I don't know why I even bother going to school," Tina said. "I'll never have a career. I'll end up doing manual labor like everyone else. That's all a zombie's good for."

"What about your teacher? She's a zombie with a career."

"That makes one."

Her voice sounded so utterly without hope that I found myself saying words I knew I would regret. But I said them anyway. "You really want to learn how to exterminate demons?"

She stared at her hands, folded in her lap. Then she nodded.

"Okay, I can teach you, but—"

"Great!" She bounced in her seat like one of George Funderburk's jack-in-the-boxes. "When's our next job?"

I shook my head. "Uh-uh. I said no, and I meant it. You can start learning the way I did: by studying."

She huffed and muttered *studying* in a tone more suited to a word like *maggots* or *entrails*. "Okay," she finally said, flipping her hair back over her shoulder. "How do I start?"

"I'll give you some textbooks. Once you've convinced me you know everything in them—and I mean *everything*—we'll go over the different pieces of equipment. Then we'll start practicing how to use each one. It's a long apprenticeship, Tina. It'll be years before you're ready to face a real demon. Suddenly, I felt like Aunt Mab. I'd just described the exact training program she'd used with me.

Tina chattered happily as we drove the last few miles back into town, but I tuned her out. I was busy wondering whether I was making the biggest mistake of my life. Probably. Well, so far, anyway—after all, I was still young.

WE WERE ABOUT THE TENTH CAR IN LINE AT THE TREMONT Street checkpoint, waiting to enter Deadtown, the roughly rectangular, several-block-long area that was home, by law, to all of Boston's paranormals.

They'd opened the express lane for vampires, so it had to be nearly sunrise. As we sat there, customers stumbled out of the bars in the no-man's-land between Deadtown and human-controlled Boston, a stretch everyone called the New Combat Zone. The buildings here had stood vacant for a couple of years; when bars began to open in the dusty storefronts, the owners made no attempt to spruce things up. The more derelict and dangerous a place looked, the bigger the thrill for the norms who ventured here to mingle with the monsters.

Tina nudged my arm. "Isn't that your roommate?"

I followed her gaze to a short, curvy woman with long hair so black it had blue highlights. She stood in the doorway of our usual hangout, a bar called Creature Comforts, nuzzling a man I'd never seen before. "Yeah, that's Juliet."

"Call her over. She can get us through the express lane."

Juliet wrapped one leg behind the guy's knees as he threw back his head. "Does she look like she wants to be interrupted? Anyway, the Jag only has two seats."

"She can share with me. We'll fit."

"I don't think so. Watch. And don't blink."

Juliet released the human from her embrace. He staggered backward, leaning against the wall, one hand pressed to his throat. Juliet herself simply disappeared. One second she was there, surveying her conquest with heavy-lidded eyes. The next second, she was gone.

"Hey," said Tina. "Where'd she go?"

"Home. She's there by now."

"Really? How?"

"Vampire trick. Juliet doesn't like waiting in line, not even the express lane." You'd think a six-hundred-fifty-year-old vampire would've developed patience, but not Juliet.

"Can't she get in trouble for skipping the line?"

"Trouble?" I laughed. "Juliet's been poisoned, burned at the stake, thrown off cliffs, and dumped in the ocean to drown. Trouble doesn't faze her."

"God, I wish I were a vampire. They're, like, so much cooler than zombies—I mean, if you've got to be undead. Check out that hot guy she was with."

On the sidewalk, Juliet's bedtime snack opened his eyes and blinked. He looked up the street, then down, then toward the Deadtown checkpoint. His shoulders slumped as he realized Juliet was gone. He pulled a scarf from his coat pocket, wrapped it twice around his neck, and walked toward the human checkpoint back into Boston. I couldn't tell for sure because the Jag's windows were rolled up, but he looked like he was whistling. Nothing like a vampire hickey to put a guy in a good mood.

"They should let zombies use the express lane," Tina complained as we moved up one car length. "The sun's not good for us, either."

"Yeah, but zombies don't go up in a puff of smoke."

"We don't heal, though. If I get sunburn, my skin will be all cratered and orange-splotched for life." She sighed, and I knew we were thinking the same thing: whatever "for life" means to a zombie.

THREE YEARS AGO, THE ONLY PEOPLE IN BOSTON WHO believed in zombies were teenagers who'd watched *Night of the Living Dead* a few too many times. That was before the plague hit.

At the time, some of the city's monsters had begun venturing out of the closet, out of the coffin, out from under the bed. This was a change from when I was growing up, when someone like me had to keep my true nature hidden. I knew about my own kind, of course, but back then I had no clue that vampires and werewolves were more than scary bedtime stories. Then, about five years ago, in Boston and a few other cities around the country—Chicago, San Francisco, Dallas, Miami—paranormals began organizing for legal recognition and social acceptance. They were led by Alexander Kane, werewolf and lawyer. Oh, and my sometime companion for dinner, movies, and the occasional overnight romp. Kane's legal practice gave him a toehold of respectability among the humans, and his goal was full legal equity at the federal level for humans and monsters. (Except, if you're talking to Kane, don't say *monster*. Say *Paranormal American*, or PA for short.) He'd recruited a good-sized group to further the cause: werewolves, vampires, even a few humans. But no zombies. Because there were no zombies until the plague.

I was there when it hit. I was on my way to a drugstore near Downtown Crossing to buy lightbulbs before a lunch date with Kane. Funny how you remember little details like lightbulbs. One minute, I was in the middle of a crowd of lunchtime shoppers; the next, I was standing alone on the sidewalk, surrounded by fallen bodies. It was as if, on cue, everyone around me had agreed to play dead—except they weren't playing. I bent to the woman lying facedown at my feet. She'd hurried past me ten seconds ago; I'd admired her leather jacket. Now, her neck was warm, but my searching fingers could find no trace of a pulse. I turned her over. Her eyes were open, their whites bright red, and thin trails of blood trickled from her nose and mouth. She wasn't breathing. I checked another body, then another. They were all the same—whole and warm, with red eyes and dribbles of blood. And very, very dead.

I screamed and ran, not knowing where I was going; all I knew was that I had to get away before the same thing happened to me. But there was no "away." Every corner I turned, every block I ran down, was the same. Dead bodies. Everywhere. Dead bodies strewn all over the ground like trash at a landfill. Some wild part of my brain believed I was the only living thing left in the entire world.

Then I saw movement to my left. I quit running. A woman I knew from Kane's activist group, a werewolf, stood in the middle of the street, turning in slow circles. She stopped when she saw me. We stared. I was afraid that if I blinked, she'd disappear. The next thing I knew, we were holding each other like shipwreck survivors clinging to a raft in a sharkinfested sea.

As scientists learned later, the virus was a one-in-a-billion mutation that happened to hit downtown Boston, the only place in the world to be so lucky. Only humans were vulnerable to it. The rest of us—werewolves, vampires, and yours truly, Boston's only active shapeshifter—were immune. The plague was the best thing that could've happened to human-PA relations in Massachusetts. Suddenly, the humans needed us.

We agreed to enforce a quarantine zone and gather up the dead. Every PA in Boston came forward to help. We strung up yellow DO NOT CROSS tape and spray-painted DED, for "Disease Enclosure District," on every available surface around the perimeter. (More than one norm noticed how *DED* could be pronounced as *dead*, and so Deadtown got its name. Well, from that and the fact that there were a couple thousand corpses within its borders.) We kept away the morbid thrill-seekers; nobody knew then that the virus had already mutated again, into something no worse than a bad cold. We gathered the dead and stored them in makeshift morgues. We went through belongings, making lists of the names and addresses of nearly two thousand humans who, in minutes, had been cut down. We even patrolled against possible invasion, since there were rumors of biological attack—a theory that's never been proved.

Then, three days after the plague, the zombies began to rise. And Boston has never been the same.

I LEFT TINA AT THE GROUP HOME SHE SHARED WITH FIVE other teenage zombies, promising to drop off some demonology textbooks before school the next night. Then I parked the Jag in the climate-controlled, secure garage I rented two blocks from my building. It was expensive, but I lived in a neighborhood where the residents possessed both superhuman strength and nasty tempers. Besides, nothing was too good for my baby.

It was six thirty on a Wednesday morning, and Deadtown was quiet. The sun was high enough that all the vampires were tucked safely into their coffins or relaxing behind blackout window shades. Deadtown, the area where the plague had hit, looked pretty much like any other part of Boston. Shops, offices, apartment buildings. There was a lot of construction going on; restricting all of Boston's PAs—two thousand zombies and several hundred assorted other monsters—into such a compact area had created a demand for high-density housing. Offices got converted to studios, and high-rise apartment buildings sprouted all over. Everything was silent now, of course. All the work happened at night.

A figure passed on the other side of the street, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses, and a scarf wrapped around its neck and the lower half of its face, looking more like a scarecrow than the zombie I knew it was. Zombie skin disintegrates when touched by direct sunlight—the “zombie sunburn” Tina had mentioned—so the few zombies who venture outside in daylight look like walking piles of laundry. I turned the corner to my block, thinking about how good it would feel to crawl between the covers and sink into my mattress. Work was so busy I hadn't had a decent day's sleep all week.

And then there was a sight that made me stop in my tracks and forget about sleep—but not about crawling into bed.

On the sidewalk in front of my apartment building, a figure paced, talking on a cell phone and gesturing. At the moment, his back was to me, but I knew that back, broad and well muscled beneath the expensive wool coat. Kane. Pleasure shivered through me as I paused to admire the powerful grace of his movements, the way his hair gleamed in the early morning light. Kane's hair was silver—not gray but really and truly silver. It gave him authority without making him look older than his thirty-one years.

He turned and saw me, then waved. He held up a finger in a “wait a minute” gesture, then bent his head and spoke into the phone. I waited, enjoying the chance to watch him. It was no accident that Kane spearheaded the campaign for PA rights. Besides his passion for the cause, he had the good looks and charm to be its perfect poster boy. The All-American Werewolf. When he appeared at a rally, leaping onto the stage with the animal grace that powered his every move, women cheered and swooned. I couldn't blame them. Watching him pace back and forth, I felt a little weak in the knees, myself.

After another minute, he shut his phone and clipped it onto his belt, beaming at me. God, that smile. Kane had the most dazzling, gorgeous, feel-it-all-the-way-down-to-your-toes smile. It made his gray eyes sparkle from within, like they had a light of their own. I smiled back. He picked up his briefcase, then came over and kissed me on the cheek. I inhaled the woodsy, musky scent of his aftershave.

“Hi,” I said. “What are you doing out so early?” Most Deadtown residents were night creatures, but Kane, whose office was near Government Center, kept human hours.

“Early day at the office. But on my way out the door I realized it's been, what, over a week since I seen you.” Actually, it had been two weeks, three days, and fifteen hours, but who was counting? “I hoped maybe you'd be putting on a pot of coffee.” He nuzzled my neck. With his slightly rough lips exploring my skin, not only did I stop counting—I stopped seeing, stopped thinking, almost stopped breathing.

“What do you say?” he whispered. “Can I come up?”

For some reason, when I opened my mouth no sound emerged except heavy breathing. So I nodded then grabbed Kane's arm and pulled him into the lobby. We stumbled inside, intertwined, trying to move forward and grope each other at the same time.

A harrumphing noise pushed its way through the lust-filled haze. "Good morning, Miss Vaughn. Mr. Kane." Clyde, the zombie doorman for my building, poured about a hundred gallons of prim disapproval into his voice.

"Oh, um, hi, Clyde." I put some distance between Kane and myself, feeling like a cheerleader who'd been caught making out under the bleachers. Kane, who never got frazzled, merely nodded at Clyde, then winked at me.

Clyde harrumphed again. His face remained blank enough for a poker tournament, but he managed to glare his reproach from behind his sunglasses. Clyde had been a minister while alive—Presbyterian I think, or maybe Lutheran—and he frowned on public displays of affection. At the moment, he was frowning on us big-time.

I pressed the button for the elevator, and Kane and I waited side by side, not speaking and not quite touching. After a second, I forgot about Clyde's gaze burning holes in my back. Kane stood to my left, my body was so aware of his closeness that sparks of electricity skittered up and down my side.

The elevator door had barely closed when we pounced on each other, coming together in a full-bodied embrace, our lips hungry for each other's flesh. My hands sought the warmth inside his coat, inside his suit jacket, the smooth compactness of hard muscle under the Egyptian cotton shirt. By the time the elevator pinged at the fifth floor, I was half out of my leather jacket and Kane's necktie was on the floor.

As the doors opened, we came up for air. "I hope your roommate's asleep," Kane's voice, at once husky and breathy, sent tingles to places I didn't even know could tingle.

"Juliet hardly ever stays up past six."

"But I hear voices in there—don't you?"

"She probably left the TV on again." I don't think he understood what I said. It's hard to talk, nibble someone's ear, and turn the key in a lock all at the same time.

Finally, I got the door open. Inside, Juliet's huge television blared PNN, the Paranormal News Network. Kane's eyes locked onto the screen, his hands dropped away from my shoulders, and he stepped around me to get a better view. Damn. So much for the heart-racing promise of our ride up in the elevator. I walked to the coffee table and picked up the remote. Watching Kane's intent gaze, I was tempted to click the damn thing off; instead I lowered the volume to something slightly below "wake the dead"—which is pretty damn loud if you happen to live in my neighborhood. Juliet was nowhere to be seen.

Kane glanced at me. "Sorry, Vicky. I'll turn it off in a minute. I just want to see what's happening with this story." The reporter was talking about the zombies' application for a group permit to march in Boston's Halloween parade. Mayor Milliken had denied it. "This is why I'm going in early today," Kane said. "I'm filing an appeal as soon as City Hall opens. I was up half the night working on it." He flashed a half-apologetic smile and turned back to the screen.

So. There I stood, all revved up like an idling sports car with no one to slide into my driver's seat. For a moment I contemplated yanking Juliet's TV from the wall and hurling it out the window. The fantasy gave me a rush of pleasure—the only pleasure I was likely to get this morning, now—and my fingers itched to do it.

But I know a lost cause when I see one. I abandoned Kane to the news and went into the kitchen, where I measured coffee beans into the grinder. It was satisfying to hear the blades pulverize them into powder. I'd like to do the same thing to that giant, sixty-three-inch plasma monstrosity that dominated the living room like a yeti at a pixie convention. Juliet was fascinated by television and ha

sample content of Deadtown

- [click An Individual History: Poems online](#)
- [download Timescoop book](#)
- [read History of Political Philosophy \(3rd Edition\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [read online Historical Dictionary of Schopenhauers Philosophy](#)

- <http://growingsomeroots.com/ebooks/Programming-F--3-0.pdf>
- <http://berttrotman.com/library/The-Woman-s-Handbook-of-Healing-Herbs--A-Guide-to-Natural-Remedies.pdf>
- <http://cambridgebrass.com/?freebooks/In-Hot-Blood--A-Casebook-of-Historic-British-Crimes-of-Passion.pdf>
- <http://econtact.webschaefer.com/?books/The-Elementary-Middle-School-Counselor-s-Survival-Guide--3rd-Edition---Survival-Guides--Volume-162-.pdf>