

1.

I was standing there naked when a dead man sauntered into my bathroom.

That was the first frightening thing. I knew he was dead. I'd seen him buried beneath the cold clay of the old cemetery. His gravestone was due to be delivered within the week.

He sauntered. He didn't shamle.

That was the second frightening thing, because I always thought such creatures did. Stumble and stagger, that is.

I emitted an "*Heep*"—like a paralyzed parakeet—and skittered backward until the shelves holding soaps and pretty bottles bit into my bare behind.

"Nathan!" I gasped. I shouldn't have. His name stopped the slow, blind swing of the sleek blond head and gave the viscous brown eyes focus. On me.

He curled back his sulky lips and leered.

That was the third frightening thing. I knew what he was and I knew that look.

So I heaved my entire container of lily-scented sea salt at him. The spew of crystals caught him full in the face and halted him in midstep.

He smoked and dissolved, all lacy and pockmarked, with a sizzling, eating sound of dissolution, like ice dumped in a sink and hot water poured over it. Even his clothes, the funereal black suit, writhed and curled like burning paper until the figure collapsed in a drift of dark dust on the bathroom tiles. A pall of charcoal smoke hung in his shape

for another long moment and then abruptly vanished, leaving behind a stink—sharp as teeth—that overpowered the floral essence rising from the running water.

I threw up in the tub.

It seemed I'd managed to kill my husband a second time.

I dropped the empty container on the edge of the vanity and watched it clatter into the sink. After three tries, I managed to turn off the bath taps and pull the plug.

A little over two weeks ago, I had kissed him goodbye where he lay, tubed and swathed and oxygen-masked on a gurney in the emergency ward—and very dead. An awkward kiss of regret for all that hadn't been and now could never be. He never made it as far as intensive care. This was just dust. Ashes and fine, sifting dust, plus crumbly bits of bubbled floor tile.

No, not quite. Something gleamed in the fragments. Nathan's wedding ring that had gone to the grave with him. Inside the embossed gold band was inscribed a date from less than a year ago. And my name. *Lillie*, it said.

Ah, well, tears are salt too.

In the normal course of events I had expected to be haunted by Nathan, to encounter his ghost, in daylight or in darkness, by his desk, at the turn of the stair, by my bed. I had prepared myself for that, for I had felt both guilty and glad that he was doornail dead.

This had not been his ghost.

But Nathan as a revenant? A Repossessed? A filthy zombie?

Bullshit. Not without outside help. I couldn't see it. It did not compute.

Unlike most people, Nathan had been singularly devoid of the slightest psychic spark. He had been proud of it, even boasted of his lack of sensitivity. He believed it made him invulnerable to spirit influence. Alive, Nathan was capable of holding a grudge beyond reason; dead, he could do no

more than haunt. No way could he self-animate as a revenant. Someone had raised and aimed him.

I fumbled myself back into my bathrobe and lurched across to the other bathroom door, the one to the master bedroom. I had to check the downstairs doors. I knew I had locked them, I was sure I had locked them, but this thing, ghoul, zombie, whatever it was, had gotten in somehow.

The sweet, cool wind of an April evening fluttered the terry robe around my trembling knees as I tottered along the hall and down the stairs.

My front door stood wide open. With a key in the lock.

Nathan's key had been unaccountably missing from his effects when the police turned them over to me.

I risked a quick glance outside. Nothing stirred on the porch. No sign of Dumbarton either.

Why hadn't Dumbarton warned me?

These old walls were thin. Surely, I would have heard him howl.

Loath to touch anything that *thing* had touched, I used the wide sleeves of my bathrobe to extract the key and slammed the door shut. This time I shot the dead bolt. I leaned my forehead against the cool wood. Then I had second thoughts. Maybe the double lock was a mistake. Maybe more than one indecent thing had entered. Maybe I'd locked some hell-spawn in with me. For a long moment, while my heart beat loud as a bodhran, that thought tempted me to run screaming down the street.

Screw that.

Only one way to settle that fear. Search and destroy. Still, it took me several minutes of deliberate deep inhalations to switch the flight impulse to fight mode.

With a baseball bat from the umbrella stand clutched in both hands, I went hunting through the house, flicking light switches with an elbow. Every few feet I stopped and listened. The house listened and breathed with me, each

creaking floorboard sharp as an inhaled breath. The furniture seemed to crowd around and after me as if for protection.

The back door remained secure. So did all the ground-floor windows. I searched every room, cupboard and closet. Upstairs, I stood by the footboards of the beds and thumped mattresses with the baseball bat. I jabbed under beds and behind dressers, like a child after a nightmare, fearful yet determined to flush out monsters. I paid particular attention to the massive antique wardrobe that still held Nathan's clothes.

As I stole through the rooms a single thought drummed in my head in harmony with my pounding heart.

I should have burned him. Ignored his wishes. I should have burned him. Flung his ashes on the wind and water. I should have burned him.

A finger hook still latched the white door at the foot of the narrow steps to the attic crawl space. I didn't need to climb up there among the shadows and bat guano to investigate that dark, claustrophobic tunnel. I wasn't sure I could, even if the door had gaped open. Surely, nothing malevolent would bother to hide under the mounds of pink fiberglass insulation or hunker behind the unsteady piles of old *National Geographics* and grubby boxes of Christmas trimmings.

That left the cellar. This dwelling's underworld.

I eased open the cellar door in the kitchen, flicked the light switch and listened for movement set off by the sudden light. Silence from below.

A stealthy click and whir behind me. I pivoted, swinging the bat, ready to smash.

Bongbongbongbongbongbongbong.

Just the mantel clock on the kitchen shelf sedately announcing the hour.

I crept down the worn wooden steps, half expecting

something to reach out between the open risers and grip at my naked ankles. When a step creaked under my bare feet with a sound like a cackle cut short, I lurched off balance and nearly pitched headfirst.

Only twelve steps to the bottom, but it took forever.

I sniffed for some taint of putrescence. My twitching nose sensed nothing but the cellar's usual whitewash odor, a scent that managed to seem damp and dry at the same time. The air itself remained still, undisturbed, *uninvolved*—lacking any trace of presence, sentient or not.

In the dim light from the single hanging bulb, my shadow crept alone across the cracked cement floor. Except for countless dismayed spiders and a few frantic centipedes, the cellar remained as empty of life as an old cold cave. My panting breaths were alone in disturbing the cobwebs and the quiet.

Nothing leaped out at me from behind the furnace, or lunged up from under the battered workbench. Nothing lurked behind the hot water heater or chittered beneath the rough wooden shelves and the shabby, flabby cardboard boxes of old mason jars. Nothing hung from the ancient floor joists, scraped along the thick limestone walls or oozed from the scaling mortar between them. Nothing.

I leaned against a cedar jack post and let my hunter-mode tension drain away. I was an empty woman in an empty house.

I climbed back upstairs to the bathroom and collapsed on the vanity stool, telling myself my shakes were just the adrenaline effect. I didn't believe me. Eventually, my blood pressure approached stability and my heart slowed its frantic hydraulics.

The drift of evil dust that glittered strangely black still stained the white tiled floor.

No body, no slime—just debris, and little of that. That struck me as impossibly strange, but since I had avoided the

whole de-animation aspect of paranormal control, I wasn't certain about the sort of physical residuals to expect from the disposal of a revenant. Surely, destruction of the animated dead left more than a scant pile of ashes. One thing was certain: it had not been a ghost. Nothing ever marked a ghost's exorcism. Nothing visible.

On the way to the kitchen to get a brush and dustpan, and baggies for the door key and ring, I tried the telephone on the living room desk. Not to call 911 for emergency services, but simply to report this occurrence. I was not surprised to find the line dead. Not for the first time I wished I could carry a cell phone.

I took a sheet of bond and a manila envelope from Nathan's desk to hold the ashes. Though it seemed indecent to just sweep him up like dirt, I couldn't leave him there.

Talents don't make many friends, but it staggered me that I'd somehow managed to acquire secret enemies who hated me so much they would send a zombie-thing after me. And not just any entity, not some convenient, illicit corpse. My own husband. An act exquisitely intimate in its cruelty.

For that *thing* could not have been a legal animation. I didn't do zombies, but I remembered that much from my third-year course in paranormal law.

Since the courts had eventually ruled it cruel and sadistic to wrench dead persons from their graves, only the needs of justice and the potential for prevention of more deaths outweighed the dead's right of rest. It took subpoenas and show causes and all sorts of legal hoops to produce a court order to raise the dead. Usually animations were granted only for homicide investigations or, more rarely, for extraordinarily difficult estate settlements. I would have been officially informed.

For another thing, after the precedent of a case involving an exhumation order, a difficult transport of a casket from a distant cemetery, an unfortunate animation of the wrong and

wrathful corpse in a courtroom and the inevitable lawsuits, animations were always conducted at graveside and the revenant carefully controlled. Easier on everyone concerned, both the quick and the dead.

Of course, the psychic black market flourished, even after that ruling. Treasure hunters, historians, land claimants—all were eager customers. Likewise, so rumor had it, necrophiliacs.

Moreover, every half-assed psychic who had previously confined him- or herself to selling fortunes, crystals and beads, or repeating cheerful messages from the dear departed, promptly proclaimed themselves expert necromancers and raised their fees accordingly.

Some of them did possess that initial power. But those who were not natural Talents like me lacked the ability to control the corpse and lay the dead decently after. This discovery resulted in a sharp reduction in the number of available psychics—as well as the loss of some unfortunate bystanders. After a few famous rampages of this sort, public enthusiasm for body animation waned rapidly. But it still went on. Obviously. And made, I realized, for the perfect weapon. Murder by Animation.

I avoided the whole animation aspect. My job was elimination, not resurrection, and I stuck with ghosts. I would have nothing to do with animators or with the undead. It was in my contract with the independent municipality of Waredale.