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Undead and Unwed

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

The day I died started out bad and got worse in a hurry.

I hit my snooze alarm a few too many times and was late for work. Who wouldn't hit the snooze to get another nine minutes of sleep? No one, that's who. Subsequently, I almost always oversleep. Stupid snooze button.

I didn't have time for breakfast. Instead, I gobbled a pair of chocolate Pop Tarts while waiting for the bus. Mmmm . . . chocolate. My mom would have approved (who do you think got me hooked on the darned things?), but a nutritionist would have smacked me upside the head with her calorie counter.

The bus was, of course, late. You gotta love the Minnesota Transit system. Six buses for a population area of a quarter million. When they weren't late, they were early—I'd lost count of the number of times I'd stepped outside only to see my bus disappearing down the street. Schedule? What schedule?

When the bus, late again, finally did lumber into sight, I climbed on and sat down . . . in gum.

At a nine A.M. meeting (to which I arrived at 9:20) I found out the recession (the one the economists have been denying for years) had hit me right between the eyes: I had been laid off. Not unexpected—the last time good old Hamton & Sons had been profitable I'd been in high school—but it hurt, just the same. Losing a job is the worst. You know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that somebody doesn't want you. Doesn't matter if the reasons are personal, financial, or practical. They just don't want you.

Hamton & Son, realizing about a year too late that they had to slash costs, decided administrative layoffs were the way to go as opposed to, say, cutting the six figure salaries of senior management. The clerks and secretaries had been deemed expendable. But vengeance would be ours. Without us, those twits couldn't even send a fax, much less run the company.

With this cheerful thought, I cleaned out my desk, ignored the way my coworkers were avoiding looking at me, and scuttled home. I consoled myself by stopping at Dairy Queen for a blueberry milkshake. Signs of spring: robins, new grass, and Dairy Queen opening for the season.

As I walked through my front door, still slurping, I saw my answering machine light winking at me like a small black dragon. The message was from my stepmonster, and from the racket in the background, she was calling from her salon: "Your father and I won't be able to make it to your party tonight . . . I'm on new medication and I—we—just can't. Sorry." *Sure you are, jerk.* "Have fun without us." *No problem.* "Maybe you'll meet someone tonight." Translation: Maybe some poor slob will marry you.

My stepmonster had, from day one, related to me in only one way: as a rival for her new husband's affections. Worse,

she never hesitated to play the depression card to get out of something that was important to me. This ceased bothering me about a week after I met her, so I suppose it was just as well.

I went into the kitchen to feed my cat, and that's when I noticed she'd run away again. Always looking for adventure, my Giselle (although it's more like I'm her Betsy).

I looked at the clock. My, my. Not even noon. Time to do laundry and gouge out my eyes, and the day would be complete.

Happy birthday to me.

As it turned out, we had a freak April snowstorm, and my party was postponed. Just as well . . . I didn't feel like going out, putting on a happy face, and drinking too many daiquiris. The Mall of America is a terrific place, but I've got to be in the mood for overpriced retail merchandise, rowdy weekend crowds, and six-dollar drinks.

Nick called around eight P.M., and that was my day's sole bright spot. Nick Berry was a superfine detective who worked out of St. Paul. I'd been attacked a couple of months before, and . . .

Okay, well, "attacked" is putting it mildly. Like using the word "unfortunate" to describe World War II. I don't like to talk about it—to *think* about it—but what happened was, a bunch of creeps jumped me as I was leaving Khan's Mongolian Barbecue (all you can eat for $11.95, including salad, dessert, and free refills—quite the bargain if you don't mind your clothes reeking of garlic for hours).

I have no idea what my attackers wanted—they didn't take my purse or try to rape me or even babble about government conspiracies.

They came out of nowhere—literally. One minute I was

yawning and fumbling for my keys, the next I was surrounded. They clawed and bit at me like a bunch of rabid squirrels while I fended them off with the toes of my Manolo Blahniks and screamed for help as loud as I could . . . so loud I couldn't speak above a whisper for three days. They stank—worse than my kitchen that time I went to the Cape for two weeks and forgot to empty my garbage before I left. They all had long hair and funny-colored eyes and they never talked to me.

Help didn't come, but the bad guys ran away. Maybe they were rattled by my voice—when I scream, dogs howl. Or maybe they didn't like the way I stank of garlic. Whatever the reason, they ran away—skittered away, actually. While I leaned against my car, concentrating on not passing out, I glanced back and it looked like a few of them were on all fours. I struggled mightily not to yark up my buffet, ginger tea, and sesame bread—no way was I pissing away that $11.95—and then called 911 on my cell phone.

Detective Nick was assigned to the case, and he interviewed me in the hospital while they were disinfecting the bite marks. All fifteen of them. The intern who took care of me smelled like cilantro and kept humming the theme from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Off-key. This was actually more annoying than the sting of the antiseptic.

That was last fall. Since then, more and more people—they didn't discriminate between women and men—were being attacked. The last two had turned up dead. So, yeah, I was freaked out by what happened, and I'd sworn off Khan's until the bad guys were caught, but mostly I was grateful it hadn't been worse.

Anyway, Detective Nick called and we chatted and, long story short, I promised to come in to look through the Big Book o' Bad Guys one more time. And I would. For myself, to feel empowered, but mostly to see Nick, who was exactly

my height (six feet), with dark blond hair cut regulation-short, light blue eyes, a swimmer's build, and dimples! He looked like an escapee from a Mr. Hardbody calendar. I've broken the law, Officer, take me in.

Making Nick my eye candy would be the closest I'd gotten to getting laid in . . . what year was it? Not that I'm a prude. I'm just picky. Really, really picky. I treat myself to the nicest, most expensive shoes I can get my hands on, which isn't easy on a secretary's budget, and never mind all the money my dad keeps trying to throw at me. If I used his money, they wouldn't be my shoes. They'd be his. Anyway, I save up for months to buy the dumb things, and they only have to go on my feet.

Yep, that's me in a nutshell: Elizabeth Taylor (don't start! I've heard 'em all), single, dead-end job (well, not anymore), lives with her cat. And I'm so dull, the fucking cat runs away about three times a month just to get a little excitement.

And speaking of the cat . . . was that her telltale *Riaaaooowwwww!* from the street? Well, super. Giselle hated the snow. She had probably been looking for a little spring lovin' and got caught in the storm. Now she was outside waiting for rescue. And when I *did* rescue her, she'd be horribly affronted and wouldn't make eye contact for the rest of the week.

I slipped into my boots and headed into the yard. It was still snowing, but I could see Giselle crouched in the middle of the street like a small blob of shadow, one with amber-colored eyes. I wasted ten seconds calling her—*why* do I call cats?—then clomped through my yard into the street.

Normally this wouldn't be a problem, as I live at the end of the block and it's a quiet street. However, in the snow on icy roads, the driver didn't see me in time. When he did, he did the absolute worst thing: slammed on his brakes. That pretty much sealed my doom.

Dying doesn't hurt. I know that sounds like a crock, some touchy-feely nonsense meant to make people feel better about biting the big one. But the fact is, your body is so traumatized by what's happening, it shuts down your nerve endings. Not only did dying not hurt, I didn't even feel the cold. And it was only ten degrees that night.

I handled it badly, I admit. When I saw he was going to plow into me, I froze like a deer in headlights. A big, dumb, blond deer who had just paid for touch-up highlights. I couldn't move, not even to save my life.

Giselle certainly could; the ungrateful little wretch scampered right the hell out of there. Me, I went flying. The car hit me at forty miles an hour, which was survivable, and knocked me into a tree, which was not.

It didn't hurt, as I said, but there was tremendous pressure, all over my body. I heard things break. I heard my own skull shatter—it sounded like someone was chewing ice in my ear. I felt myself bleed, felt liquid pouring from everywhere. I felt my bladder let go involuntarily for the first time in twenty-six years. In the dark, my blood on the snow looked black.

The last thing I saw was Giselle sitting on my porch, waiting for me to let her in. The last thing I heard was the driver, screaming for help.

Well, not the *last*. But you know what I mean.

CHAPTER 2

Being dead really makes you think. Mostly, it makes you think about all the stuff you screwed up, or didn't do.

It's not that I had this tremendously exciting life or anything, but jeez, I would have liked to have lived more than a measly thirty years. And when I thought of the way I wasted the last year . . . the last ten years . . . ugh.

I was never a genius. Strictly C-plus average, which was just fine. Who could worry about Geometry and Civics and Chemistry when I had to work on my talent number for the Miss Burnsville pageant? Not to mention keeping three or four fellas on the hook without them realizing they were on the hook . . . sometimes I was exhausted by lunchtime.

Anyway, I tolerated high school, hated college (just like high school, only with ashtrays and beer kegs), flunked out, modeled for a bit, got bored with *that* . . . people never believed me when I told them modeling was about as interesting as

watching dust bunnies. But it was true. The money was okay, but that was the only good thing about it.

Modeling, contrary to the idea projected by the media, wasn't the least bit glamorous. You spend your days going to cattle calls with your portfolio tucked under one arm and a desperate smile on your pretty face. You get maybe one job in ten . . . if you're lucky. Then you get up at 5:30 in the morning to do that job, and often work an eighteen-hour day. Then, maybe five weeks later, you finally get paid. And that's after your agent holds the check for ten days to make sure it clears.

Still, I had some fun in the beginning. Runway shows were made for the strut. It was a kick to tell people what I did for a living—this is America, after all, land of the shallow. Announcing the way I earned my money was always good for a free drink or three. God knows, men were certainly impressed.

Print ads were awful, though . . . shot after shot after shot and smile, smile, smile, and sometimes you were on your feet for ten hours at a stretch. And the attitude—smile big, honey, then sit on Daddy's lap—was worse.

And don't get me started on the male models! Much more vain than the ladies. To this day I can't watch *Zoolander;* it just hits too damned close to home. I'm sure Ben Stiller thought he was making a comedy, but it was really more like a documentary.

It was tough work, dating someone who spent more on hair products than I did. And never being able to catch their eye because they were always checking out their reflection. And a lot of them were hounds—turn your back to get a drink, and you were likely to find your dates du jour chatting up some other bim . . . or feeling her up. Or feeling up the waiter. I hated being the last to know I was a beard. So embarrassing!

About two years into it, I'd had enough. All at once. I was sitting in a room full of tall blond women with long legs and hair . . . women with my height and coloring. And it occurred to me that the men waiting in the back to interview me didn't care that I loved steak and risotto, and scary movies (with the exception of *Zoolander*) and my mom. They didn't care that I was a member of P.E.T.A. and a registered Republican (contrary to popular belief, the two aren't mutually exclusive). Hell, they didn't care if I was a wanted felon. The *only* thing they cared about was my face and my body.

I remember thinking, *What am I doing here?*

Excellent question. I got up and walked out. Didn't even take my portfolio home with me. My friend Jessica has called me a woman of instant decision and I guess there's some truth in that. Once I make up my mind, that's it.

Anyway, I started temping around the Twin Cities, which, like all the jobs I ever had, was fun until I mastered the situation and got bored. Eventually I had so much experience as a secretary they made me a supersecretary . . . excuse me, an executive assistant.

Which brought me to Hamton & Sons, where my job was fraught with excitement and danger. Excitement because there was rarely enough money to pay the company's bills. Danger because I was often worried I'd succumb to the urge to throttle my boss, and go down for homicide. Triple homicide, if the brokers got in my way.

Most people complain about their bosses—it's the American way—but I was serious: I truly despised him. Worse, I didn't respect him. And there were days when I wondered if he was really crazy.

Last week had been typical. I got to work just in time to be met at the door by wide-eyed brokers who had, in the ten minutes they'd been unsupervised, broken the copy machine. The *brand-new* copy machine. I swear they were like children.

Little children whom you cannot turn your back on. Little chain-smoking children.

"It's not working," Todd, the head of the broker posse, informed me. "We'll just have to send it back. I told you we didn't need a new one."

"The old one got so overheated all our copies were brown and smelled like smoke. What'd you do?" I said, hanging up my coat.

"Nothing. I was making copies and then it clanked and then it stopped."

"What. Did. You. Do."

"Well . . . I tried to fix it. I didn't want to bother you," he hurried on at my murderous expression.

He tried to scurry away but I grabbed his arm and tugged him toward the machine, which was making an ominous wheezing sound. I pointed to the poster taped on the wall. "Read it."

"Betsy, I'm really busy, the market just opened and I have to—ow! Okay, okay. Don't pinch. It says 'If anything goes wrong, do not under ANY circumstances fix it yourself . . . find Betsy or Terry.' There, okay?"

"Just wanted to make sure you hadn't forgotten how to read." I let go of his arm before I gave in to the urge to pinch him again. "Go away, I'll fix it."

Twenty minutes and one ruined skirt later (stupid toner!), the machine was up and running. So I started to go through my mail, only to stop dead at the now familiar monthly letter from the I.R.S.

I marched straight into my boss, Tom's, office. He looked up when I shut the door behind me, spearing me with the dead stare of the classic sociopath. Or maybe he learned it in business school.

I shook the letter at him. "The I.R.S. is still—still!—looking for our payroll taxes."

"I can't deal with that right now," Tom said testily. He was of medium height—and resented the hell out of the fact that I was taller—and smoked like cigarettes were going to be outlawed within the week. Despite the strict Minnesota Clean Indoor Air Act, his office smelled like an ashtray. "Talk to me when the market's closed."

"Tom, we're almost a year behind! That money is our employees', to be paid to the government. You know, state and federal taxes? We can't keep using it to pay our bills. We already owe the government over a hundred thousand dollars!"

"After the market closes," he said, and turned back to his computer. Dismissed. And of course, at 3:01 P.M., he'd be out the door, avoiding any tedious meetings with me.

I stomped out. Not a day went by that Tom didn't try something sneaky. He either lied to his customers, lied to his employees, or used their money without telling them. If caught, he would blame me. And he had the uncanny knack of being able to convince people it wasn't his fault. He was a hell of a salesman, I'd give him that. Even I, who knew him well, could often be fooled by his enthusiasm.

I hated being his enforcer, writing up disciplinary reports for the brokers while he got to do the raises—Tom was strictly a fun-stuff guy. And I hated it when he made me lie to his clients. They were nice people and had no idea they were trusting a sociopath with their money.

But, damn it, the money was great. Even better, I was able to work four ten-hour days, which meant three-day weekends. Three days was just about long enough to muster the courage to go back to the office on Monday. It was tough to give up. Any other secretarial job and I'd have to save for a lot longer to get my shoes. I guess that meant I was a sellout.

I stayed until 5:00 P.M. and, as usual, I was the only one. The receptionist went home at 4:30, and everyone else left

at 3:30, after the markets were closed. But Tom lived in fear of missing a vital phone call, so I stayed until 5:00 every night. Well, it was a good way to catch up on my reading.

I left at 5:00 to meet my date . . . Todd's nephew, of all people. He assured me we'd get along swimmingly. Normally I avoided blind dates like they were split ends, but I was lonesome, and hadn't met anyone new in over a year. I was too old for club-hopping, and too young for bingo. So I went.

Big mistake. Todd's nephew was a foot shorter than I was. This didn't bother me—most men were shorter than I was. But some fellows seemed to take it personally, like I'd gotten tall just to spite them. All part of my diabolical plan.

The nephew, Gerry, was one of these. He kept looking up at me, then would glance away, and then, helplessly, look up at me again. It was like he was dazzled—or horrified—by my long legs.

After he'd made several off-color jokes, regaled me with the tales of how he defeated all the grasping, greedy Jews at his accounting firm with wit and cunning, and informed me that the United States should just blow up all the Third World countries and end terrorism at a stroke (presumably with terrorism), I'd had enough. Soul mates we were not. It served me right. I hated dating.

I submitted to a good night kiss only because I wanted to see how he'd reach. He stood on his tiptoes and I bent down. Soft moist lips hit the area between my cheek and my mouth, and I got a whiff of beer and garlic. I didn't mind the garlic, but I positively hated beer. I practically broke my wrist ramming the key through the lock so I could get into the house.

So, a day in the life. My life. What a waste. And now I was done. I never did anything. Not one thing.