

## THOSE WHO SEEK FORGIVENESS

by Laurell K. Hamilton

Laurell K. Hamilton is the best-selling author of the Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter series, which began with *GUILTY PLEASURES* and was continued most recently with *BLOOD NOIR*. Another popular series of Hamilton's is the Meredith Gentry series, which began with *A KISS OF SHADOWS* and will continue with *SWALLOWING DARKNESS* later this year. Hamilton has written a number of other novels as well, such as her first, *NIGHTSEER*, an epic fantasy, as well as the media tie-in novels *RAVENLOFT: DEATH OF A DARKLORD* and *STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION: NIGHTSLADE*. Her short work has appeared in magazines such as *DRAGON* and *MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY MAGAZINE*, and in the *Sword and Sorceress* series of anthologies.

"Those Who Seek Forgiveness" is the first story Hamilton wrote about her iconic character Anita Blake. In her collection, *Strange Candy*, Hamilton says that the cemetery in this story is based on the cemetery where her mother is buried. "It was a place I knew very well, because my grandmother, who raised me, took me often," she says. "I guess it was inevitable that I would write about the dead: my childhood was haunted by death. Not real ghosts, but the ghosts of memory and loss."

"Death is a very serious matter, Mrs. Fiske. People who go through it are never the same."

The woman leaned forward, cradling her face in her hands. Her slim shoulders shook quietly for a few minutes. I passed another box of tissues her way. She groped for them blindly and then looked up. "I know you can't bring him back, exactly."

She wiped at two tears, which escaped and rolled down flawless cheekbones. The purse she clutched so tightly was reptile, at least two hundred dollars. Her accessories—lapel pin, high heels, hat, and gloves—were all black as her purse. Her suit was gray. Neither color suited her, but they emphasized her pale skin and hollow eyes. She was the sort of woman that made me feel too short, too dark, and gave me the strange desire to lose ten more pounds. If she hadn't been so genuinely grief-stricken, I could have disliked her.

"I have to talk to Arthur. That's my husband... was my husband." She took a deep breath and tried again. "Arthur died suddenly. A massive coronary." She blew delicately into a tissue. "His family did have a history of heart disease, but he always took such good care of himself." She finished with a watery hiccup. "I want to say good-bye to him, Miss Blake."

I smiled reassuringly. "We all have things left unsaid when death comes suddenly. But it isn't always best to raise the dead and say it."

Her blue eyes stared intently through a film of tears. I was going to discourage her as I discourage every one of my clients, but this one would do it. There was a certain set to the eyes that said *serious*.

"There are certain limitations to the process." My boss didn't allow us to show slides or pictures or give graphic descriptions, but we were supposed to tell the truth. One good picture of a decaying zombie would have sent most of my clients screaming.

"Limitations?"

"Yes, we can bring him back. You came to us promptly. That helps. He's been buried only three days. But as a zombie your husband will only have limited use of his body and mind. And as the days go by, that will grow worse, not better."

She stood up very straight, tears drying on her face. "I was hoping you could bring him back as a vampire."

I kept my face carefully blank. "Vampires are illegal, Mrs. Fiske."

"A friend told me that...you could get that done here." She finished in a rush, searching my face.

I smiled my best professional smile. "We do not do vampires. And even if we did, you can't make an ordinary corpse into a vampire."

"Ordinary?"

Very few people who came to us had even a remote idea of how rare vampires were, or why. "The deceased would have to have been bitten by a werewolf, vampire, or other supernatural creature, while alive. Being buried in unconsecrated ground would help. Your husband, Arthur, was never bitten by a vampire while alive, was he?"

"No," she half laughed, "he was bitten by my Yorkshire terrier once."

I smiled, encouraging her turn of spirits. "That won't quite do it. Your husband can come back as a zombie or not at all."

"I'll take it," she said quietly, all serious and very still.

"I will warn you that most families find it advisable to lay the zombie to rest after a time."

"Why?"

Why? I saw the happy family embracing their lost loved one. I saw the family sick, horrified, bringing the decaying corpse to be put down. The smiling relative reduced to a shambling horror.

"What exactly do you want Arthur to do when he arises?"

She looked down and shredded another tissue. "I want to say good-bye to him."

"Yes, Mrs. Fiske, but what do you want him to do?"

She was silent for several minutes. I decided to prompt her. "For instance, a woman came in wanting her husband raised so he could take out life insurance. I told her most insurance companies won't insure the walking dead." She grinned at that. "And that is what Arthur will come back as—the walking dead."

Her smile faltered, and tears came again. "I want Arthur to forgive me." She hid her face in her hands and sobbed. "I had an affair for several months. He found out, had a heart attack, and died." She seemed to gain strength from the words, and the tears slowed. "You see that I have to talk to him one last time. I have to tell him I love him, only him. I want Arthur to forgive me. Can he do that as a... zombie?"

"I've found that the dead are very forgiving of the living, when they die of natural causes. Your husband will have ample brainpower to speak. He will be himself at first. As the days progress, he will lose memory. He will begin to decay, first mentally, then physically."

"Decay?"

"Yes, slowly, but after all, he is dead."

The relatives didn't really believe that a fresh zombie wasn't alive. Knowing intellectually that someone smiling and talking is the walking dead is one thing. Emotionally, it is very different. But they believed as time passed and as he or she began to look like a walking corpse.

"It's temporary then?"

"Not exactly." I came from behind the desk and sat next to her. "He could stay a zombie possibly forever. But his physical and mental state would deteriorate until he was not much better than an automaton in tattered flesh."

"Tattered... flesh," she whispered.

I touched her hand. "I know it's a hard choice, but that is the reality." *Tattered flesh* didn't really touch the white sheen of bone through rotting flesh, but it was a term our boss allowed.

She gripped my hand and smiled. "Thank you for telling me the truth. I still want to bring Arthur back. Even if it's just long enough to say a few words."

So she was going to do it, as I had known she would. "So you don't want him for weeks, or days, only long enough to talk."

"I think so."

"I don't mean to rush you, Mrs. Fiske, but I need to know before we set up an appointment. You see, it takes more time and energy to raise and then lay to rest, one right after another." If she laid and raised quickly enough, Mrs. Fiske might be able to remember Arthur at his best.

"Oh, of course. If possible I would like to talk for several hours."

"Then it's best if you take him home for at least the evening. We can schedule putting him back for tomorrow night." I would push for a quick laying to rest. I didn't think Mrs. Fiske could take watching her husband rot before her eyes.

"That sounds good." She took a deep breath. I knew what she was going to say. She looked so brave and resolute. "I want to be there when you bring him back."

"Your presence is required, Mrs. Fiske. You see, a zombie has no real will of its own. Your husband should be able to think on his own at first, but as time wears on, the zombie finds it very difficult to decide things. The person, or persons, who raised it will have control over it."

"You and I?"

"Yes."

She paled even more, her grip tightening.

"Mrs. Fiske?" I got her a glass of water. "Sip it slowly." When she seemed better, I asked, "Are you sure you're up to this tonight?"

"Is there anything I need to bring?"

"A suit of your husband's clothes would be nice. Maybe a favorite object, hat, trophy, to help him orient himself. The rest I'll supply." I hesitated, because some of the color had crept into her face, but she needed to be prepared. "There will be blood at the ceremony."

"Blood." Her voice was a breathy whisper.

"Chicken, I'll bring it. There will also be some ointment to spread over our faces and hands. It glows faintly and smells fairly strange, but not unpleasant." Her next question would be the usual.

"What do we do with the blood?"

I gave the usual answer. "We sprinkle some on the grave and some on us."

She swallowed very carefully, looking slightly gray.

"You can back out now but not later. Once you've paid your deposit, it can't be refunded. And once the ceremony begins, to break the circle is very dangerous."

She looked down, thinking. I liked that. Most who agreed right away were afraid later. The brave ones took time to answer. "Yes." She sounded very convinced. "To make peace with Arthur, I can do it."

"Good for you. How is tonight?"

"About midnight," she added hopefully.

I smiled. Everyone thought midnight was the perfect time for raising the dead. All that was required was darkness. Some people did put a great deal of stock in certain phases of the moon, but I had never found it necessary. "No, how about nine o'clock?"

"Nine?"

"If that will be all right. I have two other appointments tonight, and nine was left open."

She smiled. "That will be fine." Her hand shook as she signed the check for half the fee, the other half to be delivered after the raising.

We shook hands, and she said, "Call me Carla."

"I'm Anita."

"I'll see you at nine tonight at Wellington Cemetery."

I continued for her, "Between two large trees and across from the only hill."

"Yes, thank you." She flashed a watery smile and was gone. I buzzed our receptionist area. "Mary, I'm booked up for this week and won't be seeing any more clients, until at least next Tuesday."

"I'll see to it, Anita."

I leaned back in my chair and soaked up the silence. Three animations a night was my limit. Tonight they were all routine, or almost. I was bringing back my first research scientist. His three colleagues couldn't figure out his notes, and their deadline, or rather grant, was running close. So dear Dr. Richard Norris was coming back from the dead to help them out. They were scheduled for midnight.

At three this next morning I would meet the widowed Mrs. Stener. She wanted her husband to clear up some nasty details with his will.

Being an animator meant very little nightlife, no pun intended. Afternoons were spent interviewing clients and evenings raising the dead. Though we few were very popular at a certain kind of party—the sort where the host likes to brag about how many celebrities he knows, or worse yet, the kind who simply want to stare. I don't like being on display and refuse to go to parties unless forced. Our boss likes to keep us in the public eye to dispel rumors that we are witches or hobgoblins.

It's pretty pitiful at parties. All the animators huddled, talking shop like a bunch of doctors. But doctors don't get called *witch*, *monster*, *zombie queen*. Very few people remember to call us animators. For most, we are a dark joke. "This is Anita. She makes zombies, and I don't mean the drink." Then there would be laughter all around, and I would smile politely and know I'd be going home early.

Tonight there was no party to worry over, just work. Work was power, magic, a strange dark impulse to raise more than what you were paid for. Tonight would be cloudless, moonlit, and starred; I could feel it. We were different, drawn to the night, unafraid of death and its many forms, because we had a sympathy for it. Tonight I would raise the dead.

Wellington Cemetery was new. All the tombstones were nearly the same size, square or rectangle, and set off into the night in near-perfect rows. Young trees and perfectly clipped evergreen shrubs lined the gravel driveway. The moon rode strong and high, bathing the scene clearly, if mysteriously, in silver and black. A handful of huge trees dotted the grounds. They looked out of place among all this newness. As Carla had said, only two of them grew close together.

The drive spilled into the open and encircled the hill. The mound of grass-covered earth was obviously man-made, so round, short, and domed. Three other drives centered on it. A short way down the west drive stood two large trees. As my car crunched over gravel, I could see someone dressed in white. A flare of orange was a match, and the reddish pinpoint of a cigarette sprang to life.

I stopped the car, blocking the drive, but few people on honest business visit cemeteries at night. Carla had beaten me here, very unusual. Most clients want to spend as little time as possible near the grave after dark. I walked over to her before unloading equipment.

There was a litter of burned-out cigarettes like stubby white bugs about her feet. She must have been here in the dark for hours waiting to raise a zombie. She either was punishing herself or enjoyed the idea. There was no way of knowing which.

Her dress, shoes, even hose, were white. Earrings of silver flashed in the moonlight as she turned to me. She was leaning against one of the trees, and its black trunk

emphasized her whiteness. She only turned her head as I came up to her.

Her eyes looked silver-gray in the light. I couldn't decipher the look on her face.

It wasn't grief.

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it?"

I agreed that it was.

"Carla, are you all right?" She stared at me terribly calm. "I'm feeling much better than I did this afternoon."

"I'm very glad to hear that. Did you remember to bring his clothes and a mento?"

She motioned to a dark bundle by the tree.

"Good. I'll unload the car." She didn't offer to help, which was not unusual. Most of the time it was fear that prevented it. I realized my Omega was the only car in sight.

I called softly, but sound carries on summer nights. "How did you get here? I don't see a car."

"I hired a cab, it's waiting at the gate."

A cab. I would love to have seen the driver's face when he dropped her off at the cemetery gates. The three black chickens clucked from their cage in the backseat. They didn't have to be black, but it was the only color I could get for tonight. I was beginning to think our poultry supplier had a sense of humor.

Arthur Fiske was only recently dead, so from the box in the trunk I took only a jar of homemade ointment and a machete. The ointment was pale off-white with flecks of greenish light in it. The glowing flecks were graveyard mold. You wouldn't find it in this cemetery. It only grew in graveyards that had stood for at least a hundred years. The ointment also contained the obligatory spider webs and other noisome things, plus herbs and spices to hide the smell and aid the magic. If it was magic.

I smeared the tombstone with it and called Carla over. "It's your turn now, Carla." She stubbed out her cigarette and came to stand before me. I smeared her face and hands and told her, "You stand just behind the tombstone throughout the raising."

She took her place without a word while I placed ointment on myself. The pine scent of rosemary for memory, cinnamon and cloves for preservation, sage for wisdom, and lemon thyme to bind it all together seemed to soak through the skin itself.

I picked the largest chicken and tucked it under my arm. Carla stood where I had left her, staring down at the grave. There was an art to beheading a chicken with only two hands.

I stood at the foot of the grave to kill the chicken. Its first artery blood splashed onto the grave. It splattered over the fading chrysanthemums, roses, and carnations. A spire of white gladioli turned dark. I walked a circle sprinkling blood as I went, tracing a circle of steel with a bloody machete. Carla shut her eyes as the blood rained upon her.

I smeared blood on myself and placed the still-twitching body upon the flower

mound. Then I stood once again at the foot of the grave. We were cut off now inside the blood circle, alone with the night, and our thoughts. Carla's eyes flashed white at me as I began the chant.

"Hear me, Arthur Fiske. I call you from the grave. By blood, magic, and steel, I call you. Arise, Arthur, come to us, come to me, Arthur Fiske." Carla joined me as she was supposed to. "Come to us, Arthur, come to us, Arthur. Arthur, arise." We called his name in ever-rising voices.

The flowers shuddered. The mound heaved upward, and the chicken slid to the side. A hand clawed free, ghostly pale. A second hand and Carla's voice failed her. She began moving round the gravestone to kneel to the left of the heaving mound. There was such wonder, even awe, in her face, as I called Arthur Fiske from the grave.

The arms were free. The top of a dark-haired head was in sight, but the top was almost all there was. The mortician had done his best, but Arthur's had been a closed-casket funeral.

The right side of his face was gone, blasted away. Clean white bone shone at jaw and skull, and silver bits of wire where the bone had been strung together. It still wasn't a face. The nose was empty holes, bare and white. The skin was shredded and snipped short to look neater. The left eye rolled wildly in the bare socket. I could see the tongue moving between the broken teeth. Arthur Fiske struggled from the grave.

I tried to remain calm. It could be a mistake. "Is that Arthur?"

Her hoarse whisper came to me. "Yes."

"That is not a heart attack."

"No." Her voice was calm now, incredibly normal. "No, I shot him at close range."

"You killed him, and had me bring him back."

Arthur was having some trouble freeing his legs, and I ran to Carla. I tried to help her to her feet but she wouldn't move.

"Get up, get up, damn it, he'll kill you!"

Her next words were very quiet. "If that's what he wants."

"God help me, a suicide."

I forced her to look at me instead of the thing in the grave. "Carla, a murdered zombie always kills his murderer first, always. No forgiveness, that is a rule. I can't control him until after he has killed you. You have to run, now."

She saw me, understood, I think, but said, "This is the only way to be free of guilt. If he forgives me, I'll be free."

"You'll be dead!"

Arthur freed himself and was sitting on the crushed, earth-strewn flowers. It would take him a little while to organize, but not too long.

"Carla, he will kill you. There will be no forgiveness." Her eyes had wandered back to the zombie, and I slapped her twice, very hard. "Carla, you will die out here, and for what? Arthur is dead, really dead. You don't want to die."

Arthur slid off the flowers and stood uncertainly. His eye rolling around in its

socket finally spotted us. Though he didn't have much to show expression with, I could see joy on his shattered face. There was a twitch of a smile as he shambled toward us, and I began dragging her away. She didn't fight me, but she was a dead, awkward weight. It is very hard to drag someone away if they don't want to go.

I let her sink back to the ground. I looked at the clumsy but determined zombie and decided to try. I stood in front of him, blocking him from Carla. I called upon whatever power I possessed and talked to him. "Arthur Fiske, hear me, listen only to me."

He stopped moving and stared down at me. It was working, against all the rules, it was working.

It was Carla who spoiled it. Her voice saying, "Arthur, Arthur, forgive me."

He was distracted and tried to move toward her voice. I stopped him with a hand on his chest. "Arthur, I command you, do not move. I who raised you command you."

She called one more time. That was all he needed. He flung me away absent-mindedly. My head hit the tombstone. It wasn't much of a blow, no blood like on television, but it took everything out of me for a minute. I lay in the flowers, and it seemed very important to hear myself breathe.

Arthur reached down for her, slowly. His face twitched, and his tongue made small sounds that might have been "Carla."

The clumsy hands stroked her hair. He half-fell, half-knelt by her. She drew back at that, afraid.

I started crawling over the flowers toward them. She was not going to commit suicide with my help.

The hands stroked her face, and she backed away, just a few inches. The thing crawled after her. She backpedaled faster, but he came on surprisingly quick. He pinned her under his body, and she started screaming.

I half-crawled, half-fell across the zombie's back.

The hands crept up her body, touching her shoulders.

Her eyes rolled back to me. "Help me!"

I tried. I tugged at him, trying to pull him off her. Zombies do not have supernatural strength, no matter what the media would like you to think, but Arthur had been a large, muscular man. If he could have felt pain, I might have pulled him off, but there was no real way to distract him.

"Anita, please!"

The hands settled on her neck and squeezed.

I found the machete where it had dropped to the ground. It was sharp, and did damage, but he couldn't feel it. I chopped at his head and back. He ignored me. Even decapitated, he would keep coming. His hands were the problem. I knelt and sighed at his lower arm. I didn't dare try it any closer to her face. The blade flashed silver. I brought it down with all the strength in my back and arms, but it took five blows to break the bone.

The separated hand kept squeezing as if it were still attached. I threw the machete down and began prying one finger at a time from her neck. It was time consuming.

Carla stopped struggling. I screamed my rage and helplessness at him and kept prying up the fingers. The strong hands squeezed until there was a cracking sound. Not a sharp pencil-break like a leg or an arm, but a cracking as the bones crushed together. Arthur seemed satisfied. He stood up from the body. All expression left him. He was empty, waiting for a command.

I fell back into the flowers, not sure whether to cry, or scream, or just run. I just sat there and shook. But I had to do something about the zombie. I couldn't just leave him to wander around.

I tried to tell him to stay, but my voice wouldn't come. His eye followed me as I stumbled to the car. I came back with a handful of soil. In the other hand I scooped the fresh grave dirt. Arthur watched me without expression. I stood at the outer edge of the circle. "I give you back to the earth from which you came."

I threw the dirt upon him. He turned to face me.

"With salt I bind you to your grave." The salt sounded like sleet on his suit. I made the sign of a cross with the machete. "With steel I give you back."

I realized that I had begun the ceremony without getting another chicken. I bent and retrieved the dead one and slit it open. I drew still-warm and bloody entrails free. They glistened in the moonlight. "With flesh and blood I command you, Arthur, return to your grave and walk no more."

He lay down upon the grave. It was as if he had lain in quicksand. It just swallowed him up. With a last shifting of flowers, the grave was as before, almost.

I threw the gutted chicken to the ground and knelt beside the woman's body. Her neck flopped at an angle just slightly wrong.

I got up and shut the trunk of my car. The sound seemed to echo, too loud. Wind seemed to roar in the tall trees. The leaves rustled and whispered. The trees all looked like flat black shadows, nothing had any depth to it. All noises were too loud. The world had become a one-dimensional cardboard thing. I was in shock. It would keep me numb and safe for a little while. Would I dream about Carla tonight? Would I try to save her again and again? I hoped not.

Somewhere up above, nightbirds flitted. Their cries came thin and eerie, echoing loud. I looked at the body by the grave. The whiteness of it stained now with dirt. So much for the other half of my fee.

I got in the car, smearing blood over the steering wheel and key. There were phone calls to make to my boss, to the police, and to cancel the rest of my appointments. I would be raising no more dead tonight. There was a taxi to send away. I wondered how much the meter had run up.

My thoughts ran in dull, frightened circles. I began to shake, hands trembling. Tears came hot and violent. I sobbed and screamed in the privacy of my car. When I could breathe without choking, and my hand was steady, I put the car in gear. I would definitely be seeing Carla tonight and Arthur. What's one more nightmare?

I left Carla there alone, with Arthur's forgiveness, one leg lost in the flowers of his grave.

## IN BEAUTY, LIKE THE NIGHT

by Norman Partridge

Norman Partridge is the author of the novels *Saguaro Rip tide*, *The Ten Ounce Sister*, *Slippin' into Darkness*, *Widest Dreams*, and *Dark Harvest*, which was named one of the 100 Best Books of 2006 by *Publishers Weekly*. He also wrote a media-tie in novel *The Crow: Wicked Prayer*, which was later adapted into the fourth *Crow* film.

Partridge's short fiction—which has appeared in *Amazing Stories* and *Cemetery Dance* and in a number of anthologies, such as *Dark Voices 6*, *Love in Vein*, and *Retro Pulp Tales*—has been collected in three volumes: *Mr. Fox and Other Feral Tales*, *Bad Intentions*, and *The Man with the Barber-Wire Fists*.

In the introduction to the latter collection, Partridge describes in detail his first experience seeing *Night of the Living Dead* at the local drive-in. "The drive-in in my hometown had not one... not two... but three cemeteries as neighbors," Partridge says. "Realizing that, a nasty little idea began to nibble at the corners of my imagination. I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if the dead folks in those cemeteries clawed their way out of their graves and came shuffling across the road to pay us a little visit."

Which sounds to me like the origin of many zombie tales if not this one in particular.

The beach was deserted.

Somehow, they knew enough to stay out of the sun.

Nathan Grimes rested his elbows on the balcony and peered through his binoculars. As he adjusted the focus knob, the smooth, feminine mounds that bordered the crescent-shaped beach became nets of purslane and morning glory, and the green blur that lay beyond sharpened to a crazy quilt of distinct colors—emerald, charcoal, glimpses of scarlet—a dark panorama of manchineel trees, sea grapes, and coconut palms.

Nathan scanned the shadows until he found the golden-bronze color of her skin. Naked, just out of reach of the sun's rays, she leaned against the gentle curve of a coconut palm, curling a strand of singed blonde hair around the