

**JIM BUTCHER**

**GHOST  
STORY**

**A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES**



**A ROC BOOK**



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## **ALSO BY JIM BUTCHER**

### THE DRESDEN FILES

STORM FRONT  
FOOL MOON  
GRAVE PERIL  
SUMMER KNIGHT  
DEATH MASKS  
BLOOD RITES  
DEAD BEAT  
PROVEN GUILTY  
WHITE NIGHT  
SMALL FAVOR  
TURN COAT  
CHANGES  
SIDE JOBS (ANTHOLOGY)

### THE CODEX ALERA

FURIES OF CALDERON  
ACADEM'S FURY  
CURSOR'S FURY  
CAPTAIN'S FURY  
PRINCEPS' FURY  
FIRST LORD'S FURY

ROC

Published by New American Library, a division of  
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 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, Auckland 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

First published by Roc, an imprint of New American Library, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Printing, August 2011

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REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

Library of Congress Cataloging-In-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN : 978-1-101-47617-8

Set in Janson Text

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To Air, for introducing me to Mab by onion-colored light

## Acknowledgments

As always, there are too many people to thank and only a little bit of space to thank them in. This time around, I must especially thank my editor, Anne, for putting up with my delays in writing. I'm sure I gave her, along with several of the folks trying to schedule things at Penguin, headaches. My agent, Jenn, was invaluable in getting everything straightened out, as well as in helping me through the bumpy bits, and I owe her my thanks, as well. I would apologize to you all abjectly if I were sure it would never happen again. Seems sort of insincere to do it otherwise, all things considered, so I'll just thank you for your patience and understanding.

To the inhabitants of the Beta Asylum, many more thanks than usual are owed, especially for everyone who sacrificed so much of their time and focus in the last few weeks before the revised deadline. Your feedback, support, and advice were particularly invaluable.

To my dear patrons, the readers, I can only thank you for your patience, after leaving the last novel the way I did, then making everyone wait another three months past the usual delay while I made sure this book was ready to go. Enjoy! (And, technically, guys, *Changes* did NOT end in a cliff-hanger. Seriously.)

And to Shannon, who had to live with me during this more-frantic-than-usual period of insanity: I'm almost certain I'll be sane again at some point in the reasonably near future. I'll try to make it up to you.

# Chapter One

Life is hard.

Dying's easy.

So many things must align in order to create life. It has to happen in a place that supports life, something approximately as rare as hen's teeth, from the perspective of the universe. Parents, in whatever form, have to come together for it to begin. From conception to birth, any number of hazards can end a life. And that's to say nothing of all the attention and energy required to care for a new life until it is old enough to look after itself.

Life is full of toil, sacrifice, and pain, and from the time we stop growing, we know that we've begun dying. We watch helplessly as year by year, our bodies age and fail, while our survival instincts compel us to keep on going—which means living with the terrifying knowledge that ultimately death is inescapable. It takes enormous effort to create and maintain a life, and the process is full of pitfalls and unexpected complications.

*Ending* a life, by comparison, is simple. Easy, even. It can be done with a relatively minor effort, a single microbe, a sharp edge, a heavy weight . . . or a few ounces of lead.

So difficult to bring about. So easy to destroy.

You'd think we would hold life in greater value than we do.

I died in the water.

I don't know if I bled to death from the gunshot wound or drowned. For being the ultimate terror of the human experience, once it's over, the details of your death are unimportant. It isn't scary anymore. You know that tunnel with the light at the end of it that people report in near-death experiences? Been there, done that.

Granted, I never heard of anyone rushing toward the light and suddenly hearing the howling blare of a train's horn.

I became dimly aware that I could feel my feet beneath me, standing on what seemed to be a set of tracks. I knew because I could feel the approaching train making them shake and buzz against the bottoms of my feet. My heart sped up, too.

For crying out loud, did I just say that death isn't scary anymore? Tell that to my glands.

I put my hands on my hips and just glared at the oncoming train in disgust. I'd had a long, long day, battling the forces of evil, utterly destroying the Red Court, rescuing my daughter, and murdering her mother—oh, and getting shot to death. That kind of thing.

I was supposed to be at peace, or merging with the holy light, or in line for my next turn on the roller coaster, or maybe burning in an oven equipped with a stereo that played nothing but Manilow. That's what happens when you die, right? You meet your reward. You get to find out the answer to the Big Questions of life.

"You do not get run over by trains," I said crossly. I folded my arms, planted my feet, and thrust out my jaw belligerently as the train came thundering my way.

“What’s wrong with you?” bellowed a man’s voice, and then a heavy, strong hand wrapped around my right biceps and hauled me off the track by main force. “Don’t you see the damned train?”

Said train roared by like a living thing, a furious beast that howled and wailed in disappointment as I was taken from its path. The wind of its passage raked at me with sharp, hot fingers, actually pulling my body a couple of inches toward the edge of the platform.

After a subjective eternity, it passed, and I lay on flat ground for a moment, panting, my heart beating along lickety-split. When it finally began to slow down, I took stock of my surroundings.

I was sprawled on a platform of clean but worn concrete, and suddenly found myself under fluorescent lights, as at many train stations in the Chicago area. I looked around the platform, but though it felt familiar, I couldn’t exactly place it. There were no other commuters. No flyers or other advertisements. Just an empty, clean, featureless building.

And a pair of polished wing tip shoes.

I looked up a rather modest length of cheap trousers and cheap suit and found a man of maybe thirty years looking back at me. He was built like a fireplug and managed to give the impression that if you backed a car into him, he’d dent your fender. His eyes were dark and glittered very brightly, hinting at a lively intellect, his hairline had withdrawn considerably from where it must have been at one point, and while he wasn’t exactly good-looking, it was the kind of face you could trust.

“Southbound trains are running pretty quick lately,” he said, looking down at me. “I figured you probably didn’t want to hook up with that one, mister man.”

I just stared up at him. I mentally added twenty years and forty pounds to the man standing in front of me, subtracted more hair, and realized that I knew him.

“C—” I stammered. “C-c-c—”

“Say it with me,” he said, and enunciated: “Carmichael.”

“But you’re . . . you know,” I said. “Dead.”

He snorted. “Whoa, buddy. We got us a real, gen-yoo-wine detective with us now. We got us the awesome wizardly intellect of mister man himself.” He offered me his hand, grinning, and said, “Look who’s talking, Dresden.”

I reached up, dazed, and took the hand of Sergeant Ron Carmichael, formerly of the Chicago Police Department’s Special Investigations division. He’d been Murphy’s partner. And he’d given his life to save her from a rampaging loup-garou. That had been . . . Hell’s bells, more than ten *years* ago. I saw him die.

Once I was standing, I stared down at him for a moment, shaking my head. I was a lot taller than he was. “You . . .” I said. “You look great.”

“Funny what being dead can do for you,” he said, widening his eyes dramatically. “And I tried Weight Watchers and everything.” He checked his watch. “This is fun and all, but we’d better get moving.”

“Uh,” I said warily, “get moving where, exactly?”

Carmichael stuck a toothpick in his mouth and drawled, “The office. Come on.”

I followed him out of the station, where an old, gold-colored Mustang was waiting. He went around to the driver’s side and got in. It was dark. It was raining. The city lights were on, but the place looked deserted except for the two of us. I still couldn’t

tell exactly where in Chicago we were, which was damned odd; I know my town. I hesitated for a moment, looking around, trying to place myself by spotting the usual landmarks.

Carmichael pushed open the door. “Don’t bother, kid. Out there’re all the buildings that coulda been, as well as the ones that are. You’ll give yourself a headache if you keep thinking at it.”

I looked around once more and got into the old Mustang. I shut the door. Carmichael pulled sedately into the empty streets.

“This isn’t Chicago,” I said.

“Genius,” he said amiably.

“Then . . . where are we?”

“Between.”

“Between what?” I asked.

“Between what?” he said. “Between who. Between where. Between when.”

I frowned at him. “You left out *why*.”

He shook his head and grinned. “Naw, kid. We’re real fond of *why* around here. We’re big fans of *why*.”

I frowned at that for a moment. Then I said, “Why am I here?”

“You never even heard of foreplay, didja?” Carmichael said. “Cut straight to the big stuff.”

“Why am I here as opposed to—you know—wherever it is I’m supposed to be?”

“Maybe you’re having a near-death experience,” Carmichael said. “Maybe you’re drowning, and this is the illusion your mind is creating for you, to hide you from the truth of death.”

“Being here? With you? I’ve met my subconscious, and he’s not that sick.”

Carmichael laughed. It was a warm, genuine sound. “But that *could* be what is happening here. And that’s the point.”

“I don’t understand. At all.”

“And that’s the point, too,” he said.

I glowered.

He kept on smiling and said, “Kid, you’re allowed to see as much as you can handle. Right now, we’re someplace that looks a lot like Chicago, driving along in the rain in my old Mustang, because that’s what your limits are. Any more would”—he paused, considering his words—“would obviate certain options, and we ain’t big on that around here.”

I thought about that for a moment. Then I said, “You just used *obviate* and *ain’t* in the same sentence.”

“I got me one of them word-a-day calendars,” he said. “Don’t be obstreperous.”

“You kidding?” I said, settling back in the seat. “I live to be obstreperous.”

Carmichael snorted, and his eyes narrowed. “Yeah, well. We’ll see.”

## Chapter Two

Carmichael stopped the Mustang in front of a building that reminded me of old episodes of *Dragnet*. He parked on the empty street and we walked toward the entrance.

“So, where are we going?”

“Told you. The office.”

I frowned. “Don’t suppose you could be more specific?”

He looked around, his eyes narrowed. “Not here. We aren’t in safe territory. Ears everywhere.”

I stopped on the completely empty sidewalk and looked up and down the motionless, vacant street, and saw nothing but lonely streetlamps, traffic signals, and windows unmarred by light or curtains, staring more blankly than the empty eyes of a corpse.

“Yeah,” I said. “Real hotbed of intrigue around here.”

Carmichael stopped at the door and looked over his shoulder. He didn’t say anything for a few seconds. Then he spoke quietly, without a trace of affectation in his voice. “There are Things out here, Dresden. And some Things are worse than death. It’s best if you get inside.”

I rolled my eyes at him. But . . .

Something about the emptiness around me was suddenly extremely nerve-racking.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and tried to saunter inside. The effect may have been slightly sabotaged by my desire to get some solid building between that emptiness and me. Carmichael used a key to open the door and let me in before coming in behind me, his face directed back toward the street until he had shut the door and locked it.

He nodded to a guard, a beat cop in dress uniform, who stood just to one side of an elevator, his back in an entirely rigid position of at-ease, his hands clasped behind him. The guard’s uniform was literally perfect. Perfectly clean, the creases perfectly sharp, his gloves perfectly white. He wore a silver-plated, engraved service revolver in a gleaming black holster at his hip. His features went with the uniform—utterly symmetrical, strong, steady.

I stopped for a second, frowning at the guard, and then reached for my Sight.

Professional wizards like me have access to all kinds of wild things. One of the wildest is the Sight, which has been described in various times and cultures as the second sight, the third eye, the evil eye, and a host of other things. It allows a wizard to look at the true nature of things around him, to see the unseen world of energy and power flowing around him. It’s dangerous. Once you see something with your Sight, you never forget it, and it never fades with time. Take a look at the wrong thing and you can kiss your sanity good-bye.

But this entire scene was so Rod Serling, I had to find *something* about it that I could pin down, something familiar, something that wasn’t being spoon-fed to me by a person who looked like a younger, thinner Carmichael. I decided to try to identify the

single object that was most likely to tell me something about the people around me—a source of power.

I focused on the guard's gun.

For a second, absolutely nothing happened. And then the black and silver of the gleaming weapon changed, shifted. The holster elongated, trailing down the length of the guard's leg, and the pearl-handled revolver changed as well, the grip straightening. The silver of the barrel and chamber became the pommel, handle, and hilt of a cruciform sword. Light gleamed from the weapon, not reflected from the illumination in the entry hall of the building, but generated by the weapon itself.

The guard's blue eyes shifted to me at once. He lifted a hand and said in a gentle voice, "No."

And as suddenly as a door slamming into my face, my Sight vanished, and the weapon was just a gun again.

The guard nodded at me. "My apologies for being abrupt. You might have harmed yourself."

I looked. His name tag read AMITIEL.

"Uh, sure," I said quietly, lifting empty hands. "No problem, man. I've got no problem with you."

Carmichael nodded respectfully to the guard and jammed a thumb down on the button to summon the elevator. It opened at once. "Come on, mister man. Time's a-wasting."

Officer Amitiel seemed to find the statement humorous. He smiled as he touched two fingers to the brim of his cap in a casual salute to Carmichael. Then he went back to his relaxed stance as a guardian, calmly facing the emptiness that had unnerved me.

The elevator doors closed, and the car rattled a little before it started moving. "So," I said, "now that we've got at least one guardian angel between us and whatever it is you were nervous about, can you tell me where we're going?"

Carmichael's eyes crinkled at the corners. He grunted. "I'm pretty much a tour guide at the moment, Dresden. You need to talk to the captain."

Carmichael took me through a precinct room, the kind with a lot of unenclosed desks as opposed to cubicles, where cops worked. It looked a lot like the Special Investigations headquarters in Chicago. There were several men and women at the desks, reading through files, talking on phones, and otherwise looking like cops at work. All of them were about Carmichael's apparent age—right at the line where youthful energy and wisdom-creating life experience were reaching a state of balance. I didn't recognize any of them, though Carmichael gave and received nods from a couple. He marched over to the only other door in the room, leading to a private office, and knocked.

"In," said a clear, quiet baritone.

Carmichael opened the door and led me into the room. It was a small, well-used office. There were old filing cabinets, an old wooden desk, some battered wooden chairs. The desk had an in-box, an out-box, and a message spike, along with a rotary telephone. There was no computer. Instead, on a table next to the desk sat an old electric typewriter.

The man behind the desk was also more or less Carmichael's age, and he looked like a professional boxer. There was scar tissue here and there around his eyes, and his nose had been frequently broken. He had hung his suit jacket over the back of his chair, and his shoulders and biceps strained the fabric of his white shirtsleeves. He had them rolled up to the elbows, revealing forearms that were approximately as thick as wooden telephone poles, and looked every bit as strong. His hair was blond, his eyes blue, and his jawline was heavy enough to make me think of a bulldog. He looked familiar somehow.

"Jack," Carmichael said. "This is Dresden."

Jack looked me up and down, but he didn't get up. He didn't say anything, either.

"He's always this way before he's had his cup of coffee," Carmichael told me.

"Don't take it personal."

"Hey, coffee," I said into the silence that followed. "That sounds good."

Jack eyed me for a moment. Then he said, in that same mellifluous voice, "Dresden, are you hungry?"

"No."

"Thirsty?"

I thought about it. "No."

"That's because you're dead," Jack said. His smile was brief and not particularly reassuring. "You don't need to drink. You don't need to eat. There's no coffee."

I eyed Carmichael.

"I stand by my statement," said Carmichael. He looked at Jack and hooked a thumb at the door. "I should get back to that rakshasa thing."

Jack said, "Go."

Carmichael slapped my arm and said, "Good luck, kid. Have fun." And he strode out, moving like a man on a mission. That left me sharing an awkward silence with Jack.

"This isn't what I expected out of the afterlife," I said.

"That's because it isn't," he said.

I frowned. "Well, you said I was dead. Ergo, afterlife."

"You're dead," Jack said. "This is between."

I frowned. "What, like . . . purgatory?"

Jack shrugged. "If that works for you, call it that. But you aren't here because you need to cleanse yourself. You're here because there was an irregularity with your death."

"I got shot. Or drowned. Ain't exactly rare."

Jack lifted a big, square hand and waggled it back and forth. "It isn't about the physical. It's about the spiritual."

I frowned. "Spiritual?"

"The opposition," Jack said. "You died because they cheated."

"Wait. What opposition?"

"The angel standing guard at the elevator is what we cops think of as a clue. You need me to draw you some pictures?"

"Um. Hell, you mean? Like . . . actual Fallen angels?"

"Not exactly. But if you want to think of it that way, it works. Sort of. What you need to know is that they're the bad guys."

“That’s why I’m here,” I said. “Because they . . . broke some sort of cosmic rule?”

“You were getting in their way. They wanted you gone. They broke the law to make it happen. That makes you my problem.”

I frowned at him and looked down at myself. I noticed idly that I was wearing jeans, a plain black T-shirt, and my black leather duster—which had been torn to shreds and consigned to the waters of the lake an hour or three before I got shot. I mean, my duster had died.

But I was wearing it, whole and good as new.

Which was when it really, really hit me.

I was dead.

I was *dead*.

Chicago, the White Council, my enemies, my friends, my daughter . . . They were all gone. Obsolete. And I had no idea whatsoever what was going to happen to me next. The room felt like it started spinning. My legs started shaking. I sat down on a chair opposite Jack’s seat.

I felt his steady regard on me, and after a moment he said quietly, “Son, it happens to all of us. It’s hard to face, but you gotta relax and focus, or there’s nothing I can do for you.”

I took some deep breaths with my eyes closed—and noticed for the first time how absolutely incredible I felt physically. I felt like I had when I was a kid, when I was full of energy and the need to expend it doing something enjoyable. My limbs felt stronger, quicker, lighter.

I looked at my left hand and saw that it was no longer covered in scar tissue from the burns I’d received years ago. It was whole, as if it had never been harmed.

I expanded the logic and realized that I didn’t actually feel all that incredible—I was simply missing an entire catalog of injuries and trauma. The faded, years-old scar I’d given myself on my right forearm, when my knife had slipped while cleaning the fish my grandfather and I had caught, was missing also.

The constant, slowly growing level of aches and pains of the body was simply gone. Which made sense enough, since my body was gone, too.

The pain had stopped.

I mopped at my face with my hand and said, “Sorry. It’s just a lot to take in.”

The smile appeared again. “Heh. Just wait.”

I felt irritated at his tone. It was something to hang on to, and I planted my metaphoric heels and dragged the spinning room to a stop.

“So, who are you?” I asked. “And how can you help me?”

“You want to call me something, call me Captain. Or Jack.”

“Or Sparrow?” I asked.

Jack looked at me with a cop face that showed nothing but the vague hint of disapproval. He reached across the desk and slid a file folder to the blotter in front of him. He opened it and scanned the contents. “Look, kid, you’re stuck here. You aren’t going anywhere until we get this discrepancy sorted out.”

“Why not?”

“Because what comes after isn’t for people who are rubbernecking over their shoulders or bitching about how unfair they had it,” Jack said, his expression frank.

“So, we sort out how you got screwed over. Then you get to move on to what’s next.”

I thought of being trapped in the hollow shell of the city outside and shuddered.  
“Okay. How do we fix it?”

“You go back,” Jack said. “And you catch the scum who did you.”

“Back?” I said. “Back to . . .”

“Earth, yeah,” Jack said. “Chicago.” He closed the folder and dropped it into his out-box. “You gotta find out who killed you.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “You’re kidding.”

He stared at me, his expression as jovial as a mountain crag.

I rolled my eyes. “You want me to solve *my own* murder?”

He shrugged. “You want a job here instead, I can set you up.”

“Augh,” I said, shuddering again. “No.”

“Okay,” he said. “Any questions?”

“Uh,” I said. “What do you mean when you say you’re sending me back? I mean . . . back to my body or . . . ?”

“Nah,” he said. “Isn’t available. Isn’t how it works. You go back as you are.”

I frowned at him and then down at myself. “As a spirit,” I said.

He spread his hands, as if I had just comprehended some vast and weighty truth.  
“Don’t hang around for sunrise. Watch out for thresholds. You know the drill.”

“Yeah,” I said, disturbed. “But without my body . . .”

“Won’t have much magic. Most people can’t see you, hear you. Won’t be able to touch things.”

I stared at him. “How am I supposed to find anything out like that?” I asked.

Jack lifted both hands. “Kid, I don’t make the law. I make sure it gets observed.” He squinted at me. “Besides. I thought you were a detective.”

I clenched my jaw and glared at him. My glare isn’t bad, but he wasn’t impressed. I exhaled slowly and then said, “Solve my own murder.”

He nodded.

Anger rose from my chest and entered my voice. “I guess it isn’t enough that I spent my adult life trying to help and protect people. There’s something else I have to do before going off to meet Saint Peter.”

Jack shrugged. “Don’t be so certain about that. With your record, son, you might just as easily find yourself on a southbound train.”

“Hell,” I spat. “You know what Hell is, Captain Sparrow? Hell is staring at your daughter and knowing that you’ll never get to touch her again. Never get to speak to her. Never get to help her or protect her. Bring on the lake of fire. It wouldn’t come close.”

“In point of fact,” Jack said calmly, “I do know what Hell is. You aren’t the only dead guy with a daughter, Dresden.”

I sank back into my chair, frowning at him, and then turned my head to stare past him to a simple landscape painting on the wall.

“If it makes any difference,” Jack said, “three of the people you love will come to great harm unless you find your murderer.”

“What do you mean, harm?” I asked.

“Maimed. Changed. Broken.”

“Which three people?” I asked.

“Can’t tell you that,” he said.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “I bet you can’t.”

I thought about it. Maybe I was dead, but I was sure as hell not ready to go. I had to make sure the people who’d helped me take on the Red King were taken care of. My apprentice, Molly, had been badly wounded in the battle, but that wasn’t her biggest problem. Now that I was dead, there was nothing standing between her and a summary beheading at the hands of the White Council of Wizards.

And my daughter, little Maggie, was still back there. I’d deprived her of a mother, just as someone else had deprived her of a father. I had to make sure she was taken care of. I needed to tell my grandfather good-bye . . . and Karrin.

God. What had Karrin found when she came back to the boat to pick me up? A giant splatter of blood? My corpse? She was misguided and stubborn enough that I was sure she would blame herself for whatever had happened. She’d tear herself apart. I had to reach her somehow, and I couldn’t do that from this spiritual Siberia.

Could they be the ones the captain was talking about? Or was it someone else?

Dammit.

My self might have felt full of energy and life, but my mind was weary almost beyond measure. Hadn’t I done enough? Hadn’t I helped enough people, rescued enough prisoners, defeated enough monsters? I’d made enemies of some of the deadliest and most evil things on the planet, and fought them time and again. And one of them had killed me for it.

*Rest in peace*, it says on all those tombstones. I’d fought against the rising tide until it had literally killed me. So where the hell was my rest? My peace?

*Three of the people you love will come to great harm unless you find your murderer.*

My imagination conjured scenes filled with the anguish of the people I cared most about. Which pretty much settled things. I couldn’t allow something like that to happen.

Besides, there was one more thing that made me certain that I wanted to go back. At the end of the day . . . some son of a bitch had freaking *killed* me.

That’s not the kind of thing you can just let stand.

And if it would let me get out of this place and let me move on to wherever it was I was supposed to go, that was a nice bonus.

“Okay,” I said quietly. “How does it work?”

He slid a pad and a piece of paper across the desk at me, along with a pencil. “You get to go to an address in Chicago,” he said. “You write it there. Driver will drop you off.”

I took the pad and paper and frowned at it, trying to work out where to go. I mean, it wasn’t like I could show up just anywhere. If I was going in as a pure spirit, it would be futile to contact any of my usual allies. It takes some serious talent to see a spirit that hasn’t manifested itself, the way a ghost can occasionally appear to the physical eye. My friends wouldn’t even know I was there.

“Out of curiosity,” I said, “what happens if I don’t catch the killer?”

His expression turned sober and his voice became quieter. “You’ll be trapped there. Maybe forever. Unable to touch. Unable to speak. Watching things happen in the world, with no ability whatsoever to affect them.”

“Hell,” I said quietly.

“Hell.”