

Chapter 1

My name is Samantha Gerald. I was born on May 24, 2010 and died on May 19, 2035.

It's now 2040 and damn it! I'm still here.

When I was alive I never thought about an afterlife. I always figured there was one – a place where anything and everything was possible. I never imagined that you died and then spent the rest of eternity wandering. At least in my case, I was wrong.

At first, I assumed it was some kind of mistake. I thought that someone, call him the Grim Reaper or Soul Collector, had accidentally forgotten to pick me up or move me on. I spent the first seven months after my death in the hospital rooms of terminally ill patients. When they expired, my pulse would spike in anticipation, hoping that whoever came to get them would take me too. Nothing happened, no one came, and to make matters worse, the deceased didn't join me either. In fact, my only acquaintances among the living are children under a year old, mental patients who are off their medications, and the occasional drunk. Although my interactions with them are always unique, they aren't high on my priority list for companions.

Things did change for the better the first Christmas Eve after I died. I was sitting in the hospital room of an elderly man when his granddaughter came to visit him. She was a delightful girl, around fourteen, and it was obvious that she loved her grandfather as I could sense the strong emotions she felt for him. I had seen her a dozen times while I waited for him to die. Often she brought a deck of cards, which was quite unusual since most people have played virtual card games for the last fifteen years. If her grandfather was conscious, they played poker. He cheated all the time and she let him. She also sneaked food in for him. The hospital had him on a very strict diet: no salt, no sugar – basically no taste. I didn't really understand. The man was ninety-six years old. Why wouldn't they let him eat whatever he wanted?

That Christmas Eve, she brought a huge container of ribs. Man, did they smell good. It was the first time I realized that I could still smell things if I wanted to. Until then, I had assumed that even though I was part of my old world, I didn't really have access to anything in it. The rib aroma was so enticing, I couldn't help myself. When I reached out to grab one, she moved, and somehow I slid right into her. It's not like I possessed her. I couldn't make her raise her arms or dance a jig, but I could experience those ribs with her. The experience was fabulous and so were the ribs.

At that point, I decided there were a few things I'd like to do before I figured out a way to move on. I left the hospital and sought out all the experiences I had ever dreamed about but hadn't had a chance to do. I climbed into the body of a skydiver and flew, took one of the first shuttles to visit the Moon's luxury resort, surfed some of the highest waves in Australia, swam with an Olympic athlete, went on safari in Africa, and reveled in all of the thrill-seeking experiences the world had to offer.

It's been a wonderful five years, although there have been a few bad moments, too. One night I walked through an apartment and found a father punching the face of his teenage son. Blood ran down the child's face and he screamed for his dad to stop. The strong emotions – anger and fear struck me like lighting bolts. I didn't know what to do. I slid inside the father, hoping that somehow I could get him to stop beating his son. All I felt was the uncontrolled anger and frustration that boiled inside the man. It reminded me of my visit to the center of a raging volcano. I flew out of the man and the apartment and didn't look back, not wanting to remember the burning emotion that fueled the man's fists. For days afterwards, I wandered around like my head was in a fog. I wanted desperately to move on, get away from this world, but nothing changed except I learned how to erect a mental shield to block the strong emotions

that exuded from the people around me. It was an all or nothing experience and even though I enjoyed the feelings of love and happiness, they were overshadowed by fear, anger, and frustration. It was better to feel nothing.

I went to Vegas, my favorite place for that high jolt I required to get out of the funk I was in. I left up my mental shield and chose the experiences I wanted to have by stepping into a high-roller and reveling when he hit his number in craps, singing with the headliners, and dancing with the showgirls. The people, lights, noise, and twenty-four hour a day excitement were just what I needed. Within a few hours, my spirits were flying as high as the roller coaster in front of New York, New York.

Today, I'm in San Francisco. It's a great city and they did a marvelous job rebuilding it after the 2030 earthquake that leveled it. Everyone predicted that when the big one came, California would fall into the ocean – but it didn't and the people who had bought homes in Nevada hoping to have beachfront property someday were sorely disappointed. Since the majority of the destruction and deaths were caused by the earthquake-safe high-rise buildings collapsing, the politicians, in their best hindsight vision, passed an ordinance limiting structure height to four stories. Instead of the picturesque silhouette of old, the city now looks as if it wears a cement helmet. One major improvement was the ban of automobiles from the city. The only vehicles allowed were emergency vehicles, cabs, public transportation, delivery trucks, and private limos. They also rearranged quite a few of the streets. The best restaurants are on Cuisine Street. It used to be called Van Ness but after the quake they changed it and moved all the restaurants there. You could get anything to eat there. It's my favorite street in the city.

Tonight I dined in a vivacious blonde accompanied by an equally gorgeous younger man. I enjoyed lobster, caviar, and a twenty-five-hundred-dollar bottle of champagne. Even better was

the constant arousal as he slid his feet up and down the blonde's leg. I felt wonderful and not the least bit tipsy. It's fun to enjoy the aroma and luscious taste of alcohol without any of the disastrous side effects, especially the massive headache the next day. I slipped out of the blonde as the couple stumbled into a black limousine and were whisked away. If they were both conscious when they got to their destination I knew what was next on their agenda. Sure, I could have stayed and enjoyed the experience, but it felt too much like voyeurism.

Next, I thought I would go down to Fisherman's Wharf and check out the Crab Shack. It was a delightfully loud, bristling place that was jammed with people twenty-four hours a day. There were many ways to get there - jump in a cab, take a retro cable car, the system has been immensely expanded since the quake, or just amble along and enjoy the city lights, smells, and sounds. It really was a lovely evening; the sky was clear with not a hint of the overcast that usually plagues the city and although it was probably chilly, given the coat-wrapped pedestrians on the street, I didn't feel it so I thought I would walk.

To get there, I needed to go all the way down Market, then turn left and walk along the Embarcadero, like walking two sides of a triangle. I don't remember a lot of the math my teachers tried to cram down my throat during my twelve years of parochial school but I do remember - the closest distance between two points is a straight line, so I decided to cut through the buildings.

After walking through the Chinese restaurant across the street, I emerged on a street lined with buildings. Each had glass double doors on the bottom level that looked like lobbies to businesses. I try to avoid people's homes when I can. It's bizarre to walk through them. They can be doing the strangest things, from making love to beating their kids. I didn't want to see the first

and couldn't stop the other. The first building was a clothing manufacturer, the next lawyers' offices, but the third turned out to be an apartment complex.

I barged right into someone's home. In the center of the room sat a brown leather couch, dark wood coffee table, and two leather chairs. No one was home. Thank God. Quickly, I strolled through it. It wasn't like the person would be able to see or hear me, but it felt too much like stalking to stick around and watch people.

My eyes widened as my stomach lurched when I heard the click of the front door master lock. Into the apartment walked an extremely handsome man. He was tall, well over six feet, with a mass of thick brown hair and severe jaw. Muscles bulged under the tight blue shirt that clung to his broad shoulders and narrow waist. His square face seemed pale and drawn; although it contained lovely emerald eyes with the longest eyelashes I had ever seen on a man. All in all, a nice package, all wrapped in a police uniform. I've always had a thing for a man in a uniform. My pulse raced. It had been a very long time since I had experienced anything that exciting.

I took a deep breath, slowing my heart and the desire that traveled up my spine. I should leave, I thought, but watching him intrigued me. He looked tired, but more than that, he seemed depressed. How could a man that gorgeous be unhappy? Maybe I would stick around for a few minutes. If he started to undress, I definitely would leave.

He unhitched his equipment belt, set it on the coffee table and walked directly to the kitchen, seemingly hungry after a long night of work. I stayed in the living room, leaned against the wall and watched him. His kitchen contained a top-of-the-line stainless steel Auto Chef. Just a push of a button and he could have anything he wanted to eat. It certainly had been my favorite appliance.

Instead he opened the refrigerator. It was practically empty, except for an old box of delivery pizza and a six-pack of Bud Light beer. He stared inside and then closed it without removing anything. From a top cupboard, he took out a tall water glass, and set it on the green granite counter. He must be more thirsty than hungry. Another cabinet opened and a bottle of Jose Cuervo tequila was set next to the glass. Then he filled the entire tumbler with the alcohol. I heard him sigh, then watched as he returned the tequila to the cupboard, walked over to the couch, and sat down. It was hard to read his expression. Was he tired? Sad? Or what? And why?

He set the glass down and brushed his fingers across the back of a silver photo frame lying face down on the coffee table. He took his weapon out of its holster and set it next to the picture. I stepped closer. I had never seen a police issue pulse gun before. The police officers who worked the streets started carrying them ten or so years ago. They were supposed to be safer than guns or the tasers they used to carry. The old tasers sent two electrodes shooting through the air where the pulse guns send a concentrated wave of electrical current. It could do just as much damage as a gun but it was less messy. Set on high, it could still kill you, but you looked better in an open casket. What was with the tequila? Were you supposed to clean the gun with alcohol?

He downed half the glass, leaned his head against the back of the couch, and closed his eyes. I got it now - tequila was on his dinner menu. It was more than that; he clutched the glass as if it were his lifeline. Too much for me. It was time to go.

Before I could turn away, he sat up suddenly and snatched the frame from the table. Who was it? I leaned toward him. The picture was of a smiling woman, tall, blonde, beautiful and blowing a kiss toward the camera.

He sighed deeply, put his brow on the frame, and whispered, "Oh, Cynthia."

Ex-girlfriend? Ex-wife? Either way, his pain was obvious. A deep clawing sorrow curled through my gut. That was the last thing I wanted to feel. It was bad enough that I was dead; I didn't want to add depression to my emotional state. It was definitely time to go.

When I turned toward the door I heard him slam his fist against the table. I glanced back. He swallowed the rest of the tequila in one gulp. Then he picked up the gun with his other hand and leaned his forehead against its muzzle.