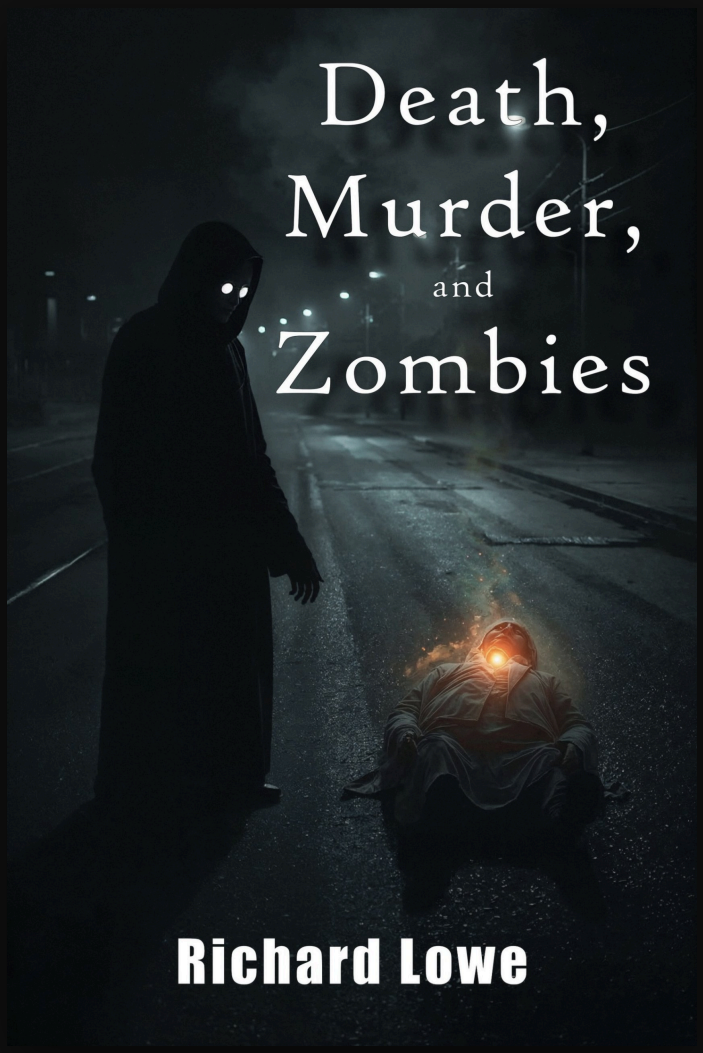
A FREE COMPANION TO DEATH, MURDER AND ZOMBIES

# Her Own Bed

Death has collected every soul that ever lived. This one wants to go home first.




RICHARD LOWE

# Her Own Bed

The ambulance took the corner at Elm too fast, and the paramedic riding in back put out a hand to keep Alma Wilson's oxygen mask from sliding off her face. I sat on the bench across from him. He had no idea I was there, which is how I prefer my rides.

She was eighty-nine years old and her blood sugar had gone through the floor. Her daughter had found her sitting on the kitchen linoleum with her back against the dishwasher, talking to a man who had been dead for eleven years. The daughter had called 911 and then her own husband, in that order, and now she was following in her car with the hazards on.

I had come because the pull said to come. It was faint, the kind of tug that means maybe, the kind I get forty thousand times a night. Most of them turn out to be nothing, and I go and sit anyway, because the one time you don't is the one time somebody dies alone in a room with the television on.

The paramedic pushed a syringe of dextrose into the line in her arm. He watched her face. I watched it too, though for different reasons.

Her eyes came open. They went to the paramedic first, then to the ceiling of the rig, then to me.

People do not look at me. I want that understood from the start. In all the time there has been, a handful have, and most of them were children or dying or both.

Alma Wilson looked at me the way you look at a stranger who has sat down too close on a bus. Then she pulled the mask off her mouth with two fingers.

"You're not Walt," she said.

The paramedic leaned over her. "Ma'am, I need you to leave that on."

"I'm talking to him." She tipped her head toward my bench. "He's sitting right there in my husband's coat."

I was wearing nothing at all, strictly speaking. I am darkness with an opinion. But the mind does what it does, and hers had put Walt's brown corduroy on me because that was the coat she had last seen a man sit in that way.

The paramedic glanced at the empty bench and put the mask back on her. "We're almost there," he said. "You're doing fine."

She was not doing fine, but she was not dying either. The dextrose was already in her blood, the numbers were already climbing, and the pull in my chest went slack the way a fishing line goes slack. Tonight was not her night.

She kept her eyes on me all the way to the emergency bay. When they rolled her out under the yellow lights, she turned her head on the gurney to keep me in view.

* * *

I should explain the pull, since it is going to matter.

Every life ends. That is the one promise the universe keeps without exception. Before it ends, there is a drawing in, a gathering, the way a tide pulls back off the sand before the wave, and I feel it wherever it happens.

Some pulls are sharp, a car crossing the center line, a man on a ladder, a bad batch on a corner downtown. Those I answer at once. Others come on slow over weeks, and those are the ones I visit and visit again, sitting at the bedside, waiting for the body to finish its argument with itself.

Alma's was the slow kind. I could feel it in her the way you can feel weather in an old knee. The diabetes had been eating at her for thirty years, and the cancer that had started in her breast long ago

had come back quietly and moved into her bones.

The doctors had told her daughter in the hallway, with a chart held against their chests like a shield. Months, they said, maybe less.

Nobody had told Alma, because the daughter thought she couldn't take it.

Alma already knew. People almost always know.

* * *

They admitted her that night and moved her upstairs the next afternoon. I came by on the second night, between a crash on the interstate and a woman in the cardiac unit two floors down who went out holding her grandson's hand.

The room was a double, with a curtain drawn between the beds. The other bed held a woman with a broken hip who slept with her mouth open and her hearing aids on the tray table. On Alma's side, a vase of carnations sat by the window, pink and white, the kind you can buy at any gas station register for nine dollars.

She was awake. The pain medicine had her floating a little, but her eyes were clear enough when they found me in the corner.

“You came back,” she said.

*I come back to everyone.*

She frowned. She had heard me, but not with her ears, and I could see her deciding whether that was the medicine.

“You're not Walt,” she said again.

*No.*

“I know you're not. I'm not senile.” She plucked at the blanket. “But you were wearing his coat in the ambulance and now you're not, so what are you wearing now?”

I considered the question. Nobody had asked me that in four hundred years.

*What do you see?*

“A shadow with a couple of lights in it.” She squinted. “Like the pilot light on the furnace when you take the panel off.”

*That is closer than most get.*

She lay back against the pillow and breathed for a while. The monitor counted her heart in green.

“I know what you are,” she said. “I've known since the kitchen floor, and I'm eighty-nine, and I've buried a husband, two brothers, a sister, every friend I had in high school and a dog I liked better than most of them.”

*Tell me about the dog.*

That got her attention. She turned her head on the pillow and studied me.

“A beagle,” she said. “Biscuit. He went under the porch to die, in August, the year Denise started high school.”

Her mouth opened and then shut. She pressed her lips together, the way people do when they are holding a sob down in their throat, and looked out the window at the parking structure for a long minute.

“Walt crawled under there on his belly in his good pants to get him out, and ruined the knees.” She wiped her eye with the heel of her hand. “I don't know why I'm crying over a dog forty years gone.”

I let that sit. People think I want them to stop crying, and I don't, not ever.

“So that's it,” she said finally. “You're here.”

*I'm here.*

"Now?"

*Not now.*

"When?"

*I don't decide that.*

She snorted. It was a good snort, the kind that comes from a woman who had spent her life sorting out what men told her from what was true. "Then who does?"

*Your body does: your heart, your blood, the sugar in it. I come when they're finished. I never come early, and I'm never late.*

"That sounds like something a man would say about a bus."

I have been called a great many things. Nobody had ever compared me to public transportation, and I liked it.

* * *

She asked me about the carnations on the third night. By then they had moved her to a private room on the third floor, because the woman with the broken hip had started screaming at two in the morning and the nurses needed the bed. Alma's new room had a window that faced east, over the lot, and the carnations had come with her on a cart.

"A boy brought those," she said. "Did you see him?"

*No.*

"Said he lived on my street and was checking on me." She looked at the flowers with her mouth turned down at one corner. "I've lived on that street fifty-one years, and I don't know him from Adam."

*Maybe he's new.*

"He sat with me an hour and let me talk." She pulled the blanket up. "I told him about Walt and the garden, and he listened like a man waiting for a train, looking at the IV bag the whole time."

I would remember that later, at a time when it was far too late to matter. That night I thought it was the ordinary loneliness of the young, who visit the old the way they visit museums, out of duty, glancing at the exit. I didn't give him a second thought.

"The nurses think it's sweet," she said. "The tall one said it does her heart good to see a young person care." She shook her head on the pillow. "I didn't like him. He had cold hands."

*Most people do, at the end of a hospital hallway.*

"Not like that." She had the look of a woman trying to name a smell. "Like he was taking measurements."

* * *

She told me about the garden on the fourth night, and the fifth. There was not much else to talk about, and she had a lot to say about it.

The house was a small brick two-bedroom two blocks off Elm, and the backyard ran sixty feet to a chain link fence and a row of overgrown privet. Walt had turned the whole thing over with a spade the spring they moved in. It took him three weekends, and he did it with a cigarette in his mouth and a transistor radio hanging from the fence playing ball games.

"Tomatoes along the fence," she said. "Beans on poles, and zucchini, which nobody needs more than one plant of, and he put in six. We gave it away in grocery bags until the neighbors hid when they saw us coming."

Her voice went on, and I listened, and between her sentences I went out and did my work. The woman two floors down had been the beginning of a bad week in the cardiac unit. A boy hit a tree on his motorcycle out by the airport, and I held his hand while he asked me if his mother knew yet.

When I came back, Alma was talking about roses.

"After Walt passed I couldn't do the vegetables anymore," she said. "Too much bending, so I let the back go to grass and kept the roses along the side of the house, where I could get at them from the walk. And tulips, every fall."

*Every fall?*

"Every single fall for eleven years." She was looking at the ceiling. "The squirrels dig half of them up and I don't care, because you put in a hundred, you get fifty, and you'd be surprised what fifty tulips in April does for a person."

The pull was stronger that night. I could feel it in the room like a draft under a door.

"I didn't get them in this year," she said. "Denise bought me the bag, red and yellow, the good Dutch ones from the hardware store, and they're sitting on the back step in the mesh sack. I was going to do it the week I fell."

She turned to look at me.

"Ground's not froze yet," she said. "Is it?"

*No.*

"There's still time." She said it to the ceiling. It was not a question, and I didn't answer it.

* * *

Her daughter came on the sixth day, which was a Tuesday, the way she always did. Denise was fifty-four, a dental hygienist with a sore back and two boys in college. She brought a canvas bag of clean nightgowns and a stack of crossword books and a face she had arranged in the car.

They talked about the boys, and the weather, and a cousin in Ohio who had remarried for the third time. I stood by the window and kept out of it. Families have a way of talking around the only thing in the room, like water going around a stone.

Then Denise sat forward in the vinyl chair and put her hand on the bed rail.

"Mom, the social worker came by to see me this morning."

"I know. She came by to see me too. She has a lot of pamphlets."

"There's a place in Greenfield, and it's nice. It's got a courtyard and a chapel, and the nurses are there all night, and I went and looked at it."

Alma looked at her daughter while the monitor counted.

"I want to go home," she said.

"Mom."

"I want to go home, Denise. I'm not dying in a place with a courtyard."

"Nobody's saying dying." Denise's voice cracked on the second word, and she stopped and started again. "Hospice can come to the house, they have a program, but somebody has to be there at night and I can't be there every night, not with work and the boys home at Christmas, and I can't leave you alone in that house with the stairs and the insulin and you falling down in the kitchen, I can't."

"I didn't ask you to."

"You don't have to ask. I'm your daughter."

Alma reached over and took Denise's hand off the rail and held it. Her own hand was spotted and thin, the skin loose over the knuckles. Denise's hand was square and strong and she let her mother hold

it.

"Fifty-one years," Alma said. "Your father carried me over that doorstep, and you were born in the front bedroom because the car wouldn't start. I'm going home."

Denise bent her head over their two hands. Her shoulders shook twice and stopped.

"Okay," she said into the blanket. "Okay. I'll talk to them."

After she left, Alma lay looking at the door.

"That was mean of me," she said. "The car and the bedroom. She can't argue with that."

*No.*

"I'd do it again."

*I know.*

* * *

I should tell you about the night of the parking lot, because it was the only time in those two weeks I was afraid, and I am not often afraid.

It was evening, during visiting hours, the busy part of the day when families come up from the lot with balloons and takeout and the hallways smell like French fries. Alma was asleep. I was standing at her window, about to go, because there was a pull on the other side of the city, a man in a bathtub who had made up his mind.

Then the wrongness came.

I have felt it before. It comes once in a long while, the sense that the order of things is about to tear somewhere, the sour note under the whole orchestra.

I had felt it some weeks earlier, in a condemned building downtown, collecting a girl named Tina, seventeen, on a bare mattress on the third floor. That night it was everywhere and nowhere, and I put it down to the city.

That night at Alma's window, it was close.

I looked down at the parking lot. Rows of cars under the sodium lights, a minivan backing out, a man in scrubs smoking on the barrier by the ambulance bay. Two hundred windshields, and behind half of them people sitting in the dark, getting ready to go in and see someone they loved, or getting ready to drive home after.

I looked at every one of them. I could not find it.

The wrongness sat out there like heat off a stove. It did not move toward the building, and it did not move away.

It sat there for two hours, while visiting hours ended and the families went home and the lot thinned out to the night staff and the stragglers.

Alma woke up once and saw me at the window.

"What is it?" she said. "You look like Walt when he heard a noise downstairs."

*I don't know.*

"You don't know?" She found that funny. "I thought you knew everything."

*About the souls I take, I do. Not about the ones still walking around.*

She looked out at the dark past my shoulder. Then she pulled the blanket up to her chin and turned on her side, toward the window, so she could see me.

"Well, stay there," she said. "If it's coming up here, I want you between me and it."

I stayed. A little after eight the wrongness thinned and went, the way a smell goes when somebody finally opens a window.

Somewhere a car started. I didn't see which one.

The man in the bathtub had waited for me. They always do.

* * *

The hospital discharged her on Monday, eleven days after the ambulance. A nurse wheeled her down to the curb in a chair while Denise brought the car around. Alma had her purse in her lap, and the carnations, which had gone brown at the edges, and she made the nurse stop so she could throw them in the trash can by the door.

"You keep the vase," she told the nurse. "Somebody'll want it."

I rode home with them. Denise drove like a woman with a full cup of coffee on the dashboard, both hands on the wheel, stopping a full car length behind every stop line. Alma looked out the window at everything, at the bank and the Dairy Queen and the dry cleaner and the new houses where the soybean field used to be.

"They put a light in at Elm," she said.

"That was two years ago, Mom."

"Well, I don't drive anymore."

The house was cold. Denise turned the thermostat up and went around opening blinds while Alma stood in the front hall with her hand flat on the wall, the way you put your hand on the flank of a horse you know.

The hospice nurse would come Thursday to set up the bed and the oxygen. Until then it was the two of them and me and a refrigerator full of casseroles from the women at church.

Denise wanted her to sleep in the recliner downstairs. Alma wanted the bed upstairs. They compromised on the bed upstairs, with Denise behind her on the steps with both hands out, and it took twenty minutes to climb fourteen stairs.

At the top, Alma stopped and breathed with her forehead against the wall.

"This is stupid," Denise said.

"It's my stupid."

I waited at the top of the stairs. The pull in her had gone deep and steady, like a low note on an organ that you feel in the floor more than hear.

It was not tonight. It was close.

* * *

Denise stayed Monday night in her old bedroom, the one with the twin bed and the swimming ribbons still pinned to the corkboard. On Tuesday she went to work, came back at six, fixed supper and watched her mother not eat it.

"You have to eat something," Denise said. "You took your shot."

"I'll eat."

"You'll eat now."

Alma ate four bites of the church lady's chicken and rice and set the fork down. Denise checked her sugar with the meter and wrote the number in the notebook on the nightstand, and the number was all right, and she sat on the edge of the bed with the notebook in her lap and looked at it for a while.

"I can't stay tomorrow," she said. "Rick has the thing with his knee and I have to drive him. I'll come Thursday when the hospice lady comes, and I'll be here by eight."

"I'll be fine."

"You'll call me."

“I'll call you.”

“You'll eat.”

“Denise.” Alma put her hand on her daughter's arm. “Go home, kiss your husband, drive him to his knee. I've lived in this house fifty-one years without anybody watching me eat.”

Denise laughed and then stopped laughing and put her face down on her mother's shoulder. They stayed like that for a while. I went to the window.

The roses along the side of the house had been cut back for the winter, short brown canes with a few red hips left on them. The back step had the mesh sack on it, the way Alma had said. Red and yellow tulip bulbs, a hundred of them, gone a little soft in the cold.

* * *

On Wednesday Alma was alone in the house for the first time in two weeks. She spent most of the morning sleeping and the afternoon in the chair by the bedroom window, wrapped in a blanket, watching the back yard.

A squirrel came along the fence. It went down to the step and worked at the mesh sack for a while, looking for a way in. It didn't find one and went off along the top of the privet.

“Ha,” Alma said to it. “Not this year.”

I sat on the end of the bed. I had been other places all day, a nursing home on the east side, a car on the bypass, a baby in the neonatal unit who had lived four hours and whose mother had held her for every one of them. I came back between, the way you check a pot.

She was talking to me before I had properly arrived. People near the end do that. The line between the rooms gets thin.

“You're back,” she said.

*I'm back.*

“Tonight?”

I don't lie. I want that understood too. I have never needed to.

*Yes.*

She looked out at the yard. Her hands were folded on the blanket. They didn't move.

“All right,” she said.

She stayed in the chair until the light went. The yard went gray and then blue and then black, and the streetlight came on at the end of the block. She didn't get up to turn on a lamp, and I didn't suggest it.

* * *

At seven she went to the bathroom and back, holding the dresser and the doorframe and the wall. It took a long time. In the bathroom she took the vial from the little refrigerator Denise had brought up and set on the hamper, and drew her evening dose into the syringe by the light from the hall.

She had done it twice a day for thirty years. Her hands knew the work without her. She pinched the skin of her belly, slid the needle in at an angle, pushed, counted to five, pulled it out, and put the cap back on with one hand.

Downstairs, in the refrigerator, sat the plate Denise had made up for her and covered in plastic wrap: chicken and rice, a dinner roll, applesauce in a dish. Denise had written EAT on a sticky note and put it on top.

Alma did not go downstairs. Fourteen steps down and fourteen back up was more than she had in her, and she knew it, and she did not have the appetite anyway. She got back into bed and pulled the

quilt up.

I could have told her. I want you to know that I knew exactly what was going to happen, the way you know a glass is going to fall when it reaches the edge of the counter. The insulin would go into her blood with nothing to work on, and over the next few hours it would take her sugar down, and down, and her brain would go quiet, and her tired heart would stop in the dark.

I have stood next to a thousand times a thousand of these little moments. The pill taken twice, the stair not seen, the car keys picked up after the fourth drink. I have never said a word, and I never will.

It is not my place to arrange the end of anyone. I only come when it arrives.

* * *

She talked for a while in the dark, with the streetlight coming in pale through the blinds.

"Will Walt be there?"

I had known she would ask. They all ask about someone.

*No.*

She took that in. Her breathing was slow and even, and her hands lay on top of the quilt.

"Where is he, then?"

*He went on. I took him from your kitchen eleven years ago, with the seed catalog open on the table and his reading glasses on his head, circling the tomatoes. He went into the pouch with the others, and Fate took him out again and wove him into somebody new.*

"Somebody new."

*A boy. I won't tell you where.*

"A boy." She was quiet. "How old?"

*Ten.*

"Ten." She let out a long breath and laughed into the end of it. "That man never waited for anything in his life, not a bus or a doctor or me at the altar. He came to the church an hour early and paced the parking lot smoking." She turned her face toward me in the dark. "Does he garden?"

I knew the boy. I know all of them.

He lived in a city by the ocean, in a third-floor apartment with a balcony the size of a closet door, and on the balcony he kept three plastic pots of peppers he had started from seed in egg cartons on the kitchen windowsill. His mother thought it was the strangest thing. Nobody in the family had ever grown so much as a houseplant.

*He has peppers on a balcony.*

Alma started to laugh. It was a real laugh, a wheezing, rattling, helpless laugh, and she put her hand over her mouth and laughed into it until her eyes ran. I waited.

"Peppers," she said. "He hated peppers. Gave him heartburn."

*He still doesn't eat them. He gives them to the neighbors.*

That set her off again. She laughed until she coughed, and the cough hurt her, and she lay back and held her side and breathed, still smiling at the ceiling.

"Will I forget him?" she said finally.

*Yes. Mostly. When you go on, you'll go on new.*

"Mostly?"

*Some things stay. Not memories. The shape of them.*

She was quiet so long I thought she had gone to sleep.

"Like peppers," she said.

*Like peppers.*

"All right." She closed her eyes. "That's all right."

* * *

Around ten she started to sweat. It came up on her forehead and her upper lip in fine beads, and her hands went restless on the quilt, smoothing it and smoothing it.

Her heart was going fast. I could hear it from the end of the bed.

"I'm hot," she said. "Is it hot in here?"

*No.*

"Open the window."

I don't open windows. She knew that. She kicked at the quilt until it slid half off the bed and lay there with her nightgown stuck to her and her chest going up and down.

At half past ten she started talking to Walt, the one in her head, the one in the corduroy coat.

She told him the zucchini had gotten away from him again. She told him Denise had called and the boys were fine. She asked him if he had locked the back door, and then she told him to go check, because she wasn't getting up.

I sat with her. That's most of what I do. People think I come with a scythe and a cowl and a speech, but mostly I sit, the way a neighbor sits on the edge of the bed, the way a friend waits in the car.

By eleven she had stopped talking. Her eyes were open but they had stopped going anywhere. She was breathing through her mouth, quick and shallow, and her lips moved now and then on words that never came out.

* * *

Sometime after midnight, the wrongness came back.

It was far off this time. I felt it out past the end of her street, in the dark, moving through the neighborhood on foot.

It came up Elm, slowly, and went past the end of Alma's block without turning. After a while it thinned out and was gone.

I don't know whose it was. I would find out, later, when it was far too late. That night it was one more thing in the city and I let it go by, because I was busy, and because there was an old woman in front of me who needed me more.

Her breathing had changed. It went in long pulls with stops between them, the stops getting longer. The streetlight came through the blinds in bars across the quilt.

I moved up from the end of the bed and sat beside her.

*I'm here.*

Her eyes moved. They had been fixed on the ceiling and now they came around to me, slowly, the way a compass needle swings. For a second she was there behind them, all of her, eighty-nine years of her, looking at me with the lights in my face.

Her lips moved. I leaned close.

"The bulbs," she said.

Then her eyes went back to the ceiling, and they stayed.

* * *

Her heart went the way an old clock goes when nobody winds it. It slowed, and it stumbled, and it caught again. It went on for a while like that, faltering and catching, the way a car with a weak battery turns over and turns over on a cold morning.

At a quarter to three it stopped.

I waited. People think death is a moment, a line you cross, a door that shuts. It takes longer than that.

The brain goes on after the heart, firing in the dark, trying every switch in the house to see if anything still has power. It can go on for several minutes, and I wait for all of them.

The furnace kicked on in the basement and ran and kicked off. A car went by on Elm with its radio going. In the bathroom, the little refrigerator hummed on the hamper.

When the last of it went out of her, when there was nothing left in the house of her but the shell on the bed, I reached into her chest. My hand went through the nightgown and the skin and the bone like reaching into cold water.

There, low, tucked between her liver and her spine, the size of a pearl. It glowed warm in my palm, the color of a coal that has not gone out.

* * *

That is when I know them. Not before. I can feel them coming, I can sit with them and listen, but I know everything only when they are in my hand.

I knew Alma Wilson then.

I knew the farm in Indiana where she was born, and the creek, and the boy who drowned in it the summer she was seven. I knew the day she met Walt at a roller rink the winter she was eighteen and fell on her backside in front of him, and that he laughed, and that she nearly didn't marry him for it. I knew the baby before Denise, the boy who came too early and lived one day, and that she named him Thomas and never told her daughter.

I knew the night after Walt's funeral, when she went out to the garden at two in the morning in her nightgown and pulled up every one of his tomato plants by the roots and threw them over the back fence into the privet. I knew she had never told anyone that either.

I knew that every fall for eleven years, when she put the tulips in, she put the first one in for Walt and the second one in for Thomas. Then she did the rest for herself.

* * *

She stood up out of the bed.

Not the body. The body stayed where it was, under the half kicked off quilt, with its mouth a little open and its hands loose at its sides. But she stood up out of it, and she was not eighty-nine.

She was maybe forty. Her hair was brown and pinned up off her neck, and she had on a pair of men's work pants rolled at the cuff and a plaid shirt with the sleeves pushed up.

There was dirt under her fingernails. There was dirt on her knees.

She looked down at the bed. She looked at herself lying there, and then she looked at her hands.

"Well," she said. "That's better."

*Is there pain?*

She thought about it. She rolled her shoulders and turned her wrists.

"No," she said. "Not a bit." She narrowed her eyes at me. "You look different."

*What do you see?*

"A man in a coat." She came around the bed. "Not Walt's coat, a long black one, and you need a shave." She tilted her head. "You're younger than I thought."

*I am not young.*

"No," she said. "I guess you're not."

She went to the window. She didn't open it; she didn't need to. She stood with her face close to the glass and looked down at the back yard, at the gray rectangle of grass and the dark line of the privet and the short brown canes of the roses along the side of the house.

At the back step, the mesh sack sat where it had sat all week. A hundred bulbs, red and yellow, gone soft.

"I didn't get them in," she said.

*No.*

"Fifty tulips. You don't know what that does for a person in April." She put her palm flat against the glass. "Denise will find them and won't know what to do with them, and she'll throw them out."

I said nothing. I don't know what the living will do. I only know what they have done.

She stood at the window for a long while. I let her stand. There are a hundred and fifty thousand of them every day, and every one of them gets the time they need at the window, and I have never yet run short.

Finally she turned around.

"All right," she said. "What happens now?"

I opened the pouch at my belt. It is woven from space itself, and it holds everyone, and there is always room.

Inside, it is warm. I am told it smells like whatever the soul remembers best.

*Now you rest. Then Fate takes you out and makes you new.*

"Will it hurt?"

*No.*

"Will it smell like anything?"

*That's up to you.*

She thought about it. Then she smiled, a crooked, satisfied smile, the one she had given the squirrel.

"Turned dirt," she said. "Spring. After rain."

She stepped toward me, and the light of her drew in and drew in until she was a pearl again in my palm, warm as a coal. I put her in the pouch with the others and closed it.

The furnace kicked on again in the basement. In the bathroom, the little refrigerator hummed.

I went on to the next one.

* * *

Denise found her Thursday morning at a quarter to eight, fifteen minutes before the hospice nurse. She knew from the doorway. She sat on the edge of the bed for a long time with her mother's hand in her lap before she called anyone.

The doctor who came signed what doctors sign: diabetic coma leading to cardiac arrest. She had died in her sleep at home, in her own bed, which everyone agreed was a mercy.

The notice went into the paper on Saturday, four short paragraphs, with a photograph from Denise's wedding.

I didn't go to the funeral. I don't, as a rule. Funerals are for the living, and I had a great deal to do.

But I passed that way again three weeks later, on my way to a woman on Birch Street whose time was getting close, and the pull of him took me down Alma's block. It was a cold gray afternoon with a wind coming out of the north. The house had a realtor's lockbox on the front door.

In the side yard, along the walk, where the roses were cut back for the winter, Denise was on her knees in an old pair of her father's work pants. She had a trowel and a mesh sack and a pair of

gardening gloves too big for her. She was digging holes in the cold ground one after another and dropping a bulb in each and covering it and patting it down with the flat of her glove.

She didn't know which way was up. Half of them she was putting in upside down.

It doesn't matter. They come up anyway. They always find the light.

I stood at the end of the walk and watched her for a while, until she had done thirty or forty and sat back on her heels with her face red from the wind. Then she reached into the sack and took out two more and held them in her palm and looked at them.

She put the first one in. Then the second. Then she bent over and did the rest.

Then I went on to Birch Street.

# The World of Death, Murder and Zombies

## Who's Who

*The people of the novel as you first meet them. Nothing here gives away how anything ends.*

| NAME | WHO THEY ARE |
|---|---|
| **Death** | The collector of souls, at work since before humans existed. A tall shape of darkness deeper than the dark around it, with two points of light for eyes. Walks through walls, speaks straight into the mind, and carries a pouch woven from space itself. Patient, dry, and lately bothered by a wrongness somewhere in the city. |
| **Karl Hendricks** | Twenty years old and three years out of high school. Lives behind closed curtains with three monitors and a stack of pizza boxes. Has logged 1,200 hours in Shamble 4 and ranks in the top 0.1% of players worldwide. |
| **Robert Hendricks** | Karl's father, fifty-two, a construction foreman for twenty years. Six foot two, hands that can fix anything mechanical. He and Karl used to work on his motorcycle together before Karl's mother died. |
| **Linda Hendricks** | Robert's second wife, born Linda Martinez, twenty-two. Moved in with her romance novels, her ceramic roosters and a chihuahua named Princess. Wants Karl in school, at work or out of the house. |
| **Mike Patterson** | Michael James Patterson, Karl's best friend since they were boys. Honor roll, athlete, part-time job at an electronics store, and a Honda Civic that rattles. Knocks three short raps, a pause, then two more. |
| **Dr. Sarah Kessler** | A therapist who specializes in trauma and grief, with an office in a converted Victorian house near the university. |
| **Gwynn** | The driver who has delivered Karl's pizza about fifty times in the past year. Three years on the job, a mother who cleans office buildings at night, and a little brother in high school. |
| **Sam** | Gwynn's manager at the pizza place, a decent man with good instincts about problem customers. |
| **Jennifer** | A woman of about thirty who reads medical texts at the same table in the downtown library every afternoon, trying to understand her own illness. |
| **Mrs. Wilson** | An eighty-nine-year-old widow who lives alone two blocks from the Hendricks house. Diabetic, with cancer in her bones, and a daughter who visits on Tuesdays. |
| **Tina Morrison** | Seventeen years old, on the streets since thirteen. The first soul Death collects in the novel. |

In this story only: Alma, Mrs. Wilson's first name; Walt, her late husband; Denise, her daughter, and Rick, Denise's husband; Thomas, the son who lived one day; Biscuit, the family beagle.

## Timeline

*From Death's long past to the first weeks of the novel.*

| WHEN | WHAT HAPPENS |
|---|---|
| Before humans | Death is already collecting souls, alone, one at a time. |
| Childhood | Karl and Mike become best friends. Mike has been making Karl the same turkey sandwich since they were twelve. |
| About three years before | Karl's mother dies of cancer after treatment at the county hospital. The medical bills eat the family's savings. |
| Three years before | Karl finishes high school. College applications are rejected and job interviews go nowhere. |
| Six months after the funeral | Robert meets Linda. They marry at the courthouse eight months later, and she moves in the next week. |
| Six months before | Shamble 4 is released. Karl has put 1,200 hours into it since. |
| The opening night | Death collects Tina Morrison on the third floor of a condemned building downtown and feels the wrongness for the first time. |
| Soon after | Robert gives Karl one month: get a job, enroll in school or find somewhere else to live. |
| Three days later | Mike shows up unannounced with groceries and a bottle of Jack Daniel's. |
| Weeks later | Mrs. Wilson's blood sugar crashes on a Thursday evening and an ambulance takes her to the hospital. *Her Own Bed* takes place here. |

## Places

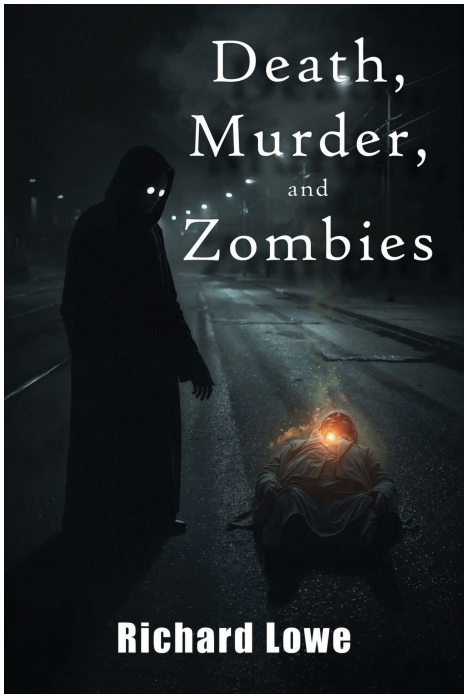
- **The city.** Never named. Condemned buildings downtown, an industrial district at its edge, and plenty of quiet residential streets.
- **The Hendricks house.** Karl's bedroom upstairs with the curtains shut, the living room with the big TV, and the kitchen table where his mother used to help with homework.
- **The crack house.** A three-story building downtown that leans on its neighbor, covered in graffiti in four languages.
- **Elm Street.** In Karl's neighborhood. Mrs. Wilson lives two blocks from the Hendricks house.
- **The downtown public library.** Where Jennifer reads every afternoon, with a loading dock out back.
- **The hospital.** Fluorescent lights, a parking structure, an ambulance bay lit yellow-white, and evening visiting hours from six to eight.
- **Eastgate Mall.** Not real. It is the zombie-filled shopping mall in Shamble 4, where Karl clears the sporting goods store in twelve minutes.

## Glossary

- **Shamble 4.** The newest game in a zombie survival series. Karl has killed 47,000 zombies in it.
- **Marcus.** Karl's character in Shamble 4: Level 89 of 100, maxed-out weapons, every piece of legendary gear.
- **Dying Light.** A parkour zombie game with a day and night cycle, Karl's change of pace.
- **The soul.** A sphere of light no bigger than a pearl, tucked between liver and spine, glowing warm like a coal that hasn't gone out.
- **The pouch.** Death's pouch, woven from space itself, holding any number of souls in comfort.
- **Fate.** The power that weaves each soul from the pouch into a new life, a new body and new chances.
- **Transition.** Death's word for dying. Bodies are temporary vessels; souls go on.
- **The pull.** What draws Death to someone whose life is ending.
- **The wrongness.** Death's sense that the order of things is about to be broken somewhere. Never wrong, always vague.
- **Those who see.** A rare few living people who can see or sense Death.
- **The last impulse.** The brain keeps firing for minutes after the heart stops. Death waits for the last of it before reaching for the soul.

## Read the Novel

Her Own Bed takes place in the same weeks as Death, Murder and Zombies, two blocks from the Hendricks house. The novel follows Karl Hendricks, a twenty-year-old who has killed 47,000 zombies on a screen, from the night he finds out Death is real to the day he decides Death could use some help.




**Death, Murder and Zombies**

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