

## HEREAFTER

By Terri Bruce

The boy appeared to be dumbstruck. His eyes were wide and his mouth was hanging open.

“So...that was kinda crazy,” he said finally.

“I didn’t see you doing anything to help,” she said angrily. “Now start talking. What is going on?”

He shifted uneasily. “Look, I gotta go...”

“Oh no you don’t!” She grabbed him by the arm. “In here!” She dragged him across the hall and thrust him into the living room.

“Hey! Hey!” The boy flailed his stick-thin arms in protest. “This is accosting a minor! You can’t do that.”

Irene let him go, suppressing a smile as she did so. “I’m pretty sure there’s no such crime as accosting a minor. Now talk. Who are you?”

The boy pushed his hair out of his eyes and peered around the room. “Jonah, Jonah Johnson. I live a few blocks from here.” He turned in place, studying everything his eyes could take in. “I like your couch.”

“So why do you keep saying that I’m dead?”

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised. “You’re glowing and no one can see or hear you. That sounds like a ghost to me.”

“A ghost?” She didn’t like the sound of that, but he seemed sincere. She looked him up and down again, almost ready to believe him. “Wait a minute...you don’t glow. Are you a ghost?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “No.”

“Then how come you can see me?”

“Er...well, that’s kinda complicated...”

“Ha! That’s what I thought,” she said triumphantly. “Nice try, kid. You’re obviously some kind of delinquent—I don’t know if this is just for kicks or what, but I’m calling the police.” She headed for the kitchen.

“Hey!” he cried, trailing after her. “I’m an honor student!”

“That doesn’t mean you’re not a delinquent.”

“Huh,” she heard him say. “I wonder if they have police in the land of the dead.” His voice deepened in an imitation of a television announcer: “Cops Undead: Miami.” Then it rose back to his normal pitch. “That would be cool!”

She crossed into the kitchen and picked up the phone. “We’ll see how much of a smart ass you are when they’re threatening to throw you in juvie hall.”

“For what? I didn’t do anything!”

“Then start talking.”

“I told you...”

Irene paused in the act of dialing the phone, waiting for him to finish the sentence. The silence began to stretch out. She turned around and then stopped in surprise. The hall was empty. The boy was gone.

“Jonah?” Irene moved back down the hall peering into the other rooms and calling his name. “Jonah? This isn’t funny.” It only took a minute to realize that he was nowhere to be found. She was alone.