

An Ethereal Embrace by Tanya Sissipus

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CHAPTER ONE

Fighting a hangover, I sat at the kitchen table, a coffee in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other. The words on the paper seemed to be swimming before me, but anything was preferable to looking around the room. The walls were a bright yellow, with fluorescent orange trim, and the cupboards had been done in a bright pink, painfully visible since they had no doors. At night, the effect was almost overpowering, but with the noontime sun shining through the window above the sink, it was almost psychedelic.

I'd really meant to repaint the place, just like I'd intended to buy some curtains for that traitorous window. Unfortunately, whenever it looked like I might have the time, something always came up. I'd been living in the place for a year now, and still hadn't gotten around to doing anything more than complain about it.

Raising the steaming mug to my mouth, I had to close my eyes to protect my poor brain from being bombarded by the darts of color and light reflecting off the liquid. Finding some peace in the near-darkness, I forced myself to finish the coffee before my stomach could rebel. It's no wonder I rarely go drinking with the guys.

With my second cup, the world finally began to return to normal. Picking up the paper, I scowled at the front page. "Hmph. Buck-fifty for the weekend edition, and the biggest story they can find is an old geezer out raking leaves." Shaking my head, I muttered "Must be a slow news day." Thumbing past the local news, with fingers that just barely did as I asked, I laid the paper open to the Sports section and cursed loudly.

BUFFALO RALLIES TO WIN OT THRILLER L.A. FALLS TO SEVENTH PLACE

Beneath the bold headline was a picture of the Los Angeles goalie, sprawled awkwardly in front of the net, as the winning goal sailed past his outstretched glove. "Damn it! Another twenty bucks down the drain." I'd been taking a beating in the office hockey pool lately, and had hoped to

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redeem myself with last night's game. Obviously, that wasn't going to happen this week. Hoping I could at least count on a couple points for my dream-team, I scanned the box score, only to be disappointed again.

Turning the page in disgust, I saw that there was another strike on the horizon. Not caring whose greed had peaked now, I wiped the section off the table and onto the floor. Suddenly, a wave of dizziness swept over me, nearly sending me down to join the damned newspaper. Gripping the edge of the table, I closed my eyes and concentrated on keeping the contents of my stomach where they were.

Satisfied that I wasn't going to be sick, I opened my eyes and grabbed the Classifieds. Not finding anything of interest in the way of a job, I turned the page and smiled. Spread out over a page and a half - dwarfing the help wanted ads - was a virtual flood of bizarre personal ads, escort services, and 900 numbers. Chuckling softly, I pushed the section aside and reached down for another. As I did, something on the back of the Classifieds caught my eye.

"What the hell was that?" Dropping the comics, I picked up the last section and tried to spot whatever it was that had caught my eye. Scanning past the births and into the deaths, I suddenly stopped short, staring in disbelief at two separate paragraphs in the bottom right-hand corner.

TRACY: Tanya Melissa It is with great sorrow that the family of our beloved Tanya announce her passing in this, her 23rd year. We all mourn...

RANDALL: Michael III Our darling Mike left us this week, gone to rejoin Alan, his youngest brother and best friend. The family also wishes to extend...

I had to read each piece twice before I could accept what I was seeing. I desperately wanted pictures, just to be sure, but the facts were all there before me. I had known both Tanya and Michael in college - the former not nearly as well as I would have liked and the latter far too well. However, despite what I knew in my head, I simply couldn't accept in my heart that they both were dead.

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I had known Mike since high school, and we had become good friends during our time at college. We had started out by trading notes for classes we had missed and had come to realize we had a lot more than schedules in common. His death made no sense at all, hell, it had been his idea to head out to the bar last night.

As for Tanya, she had been the one big crush of my life. For two years of high school and nearly three years of college she had been the only woman for me. Unfortunately, she never knew it. Nope, the coward that I was, I had remained in the shadows, worshipping her from afar, afraid to approach. Oh, I'd come up with plenty of reasons for not telling her how I felt, but they were just excuses.

There would be no more excuses now. Tanya was dead and she would never know how I had felt. The fact that I hadn't seen or thought about her for well over a year did nothing to dull the aching pain that I felt.

Spreading out the paper before me, I gasped aloud, staring down at the front page. "How the hell did you miss that, stupid?" I asked myself. Underneath the headline 'Three dead in early morning crash' was a picture of Mike's prized Jeep, upside down next to a car so badly damaged I couldn't begin to guess the make.

According to the story, Mike had run a red light and smashed into the other vehicle. Witnesses clocked him at over eighty miles an hour, and the police suspected alcohol to be a contributing factor, Ha!. He had died on impact, unlike the passengers of the other car, Tanya and another girl I didn't know. They had lingered for a few hours. As if they hadn't suffered enough.

"You stupid bastard!" I cursed, throwing the paper against the wall. Ignoring the throbbing in my head, I groaned "We agreed to leave the cars and take a taxi home. You said, 'one more drink' and I believed you." Slamming my fist down on the table, I cringed and growled "I even called the fucking cab!"

Apparently, Mike had had different ideas. Leaving the coffee on the table, I stormed out of the kitchen in disgust, not sure where I was going. All I knew was I had to take out my frustrations on something or explode.

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"Goodbye, Mrs. Randall. Remember, if you need anything, just call me. Okay?"

Sniffing, my friend's middle-aged mother nodded but clearly couldn't bring herself to speak. Nevertheless, she did force a half-smile, showing that she appreciated the thought. In the brief time Mike and I had been friends, his mom had seemed to take a liking to me, and I to her. As I left her at the door of the funeral parlor, I tried to decide whether I hated him more for what he had done to his family, or for what he had done to Tanya and hers. Watching Mrs. Randall shuffle back into the awkward silence of the packed room, I realized it didn't matter.

Loosening my tie, I sighed in relief. Damn, it felt good just to be out in the open air, where I didn't have to watch my every word. Claustrophobic, I loathed crowds, and things had never come easy to me in matters of emotion.

Wandering aimlessly, I was surprised to find myself heading in the direction of Tanya's funeral. As attracted to her as I had been, I really didn't know her. Sure, we had talked on occasion-usually about assignments - but I'd never been able to just sit down next to her and start a conversation.

"Do you really want to do this to yourself?" I asked in a whisper, "You've never met her parents and her friends weren't exactly in your social circle. You'll stick out like a sore thumb." Regardless, I felt strangely compelled to pay my last respects. For some reason, I just had to be there to say goodbye. It might be a matter of too little, too late, but I had to admit my feelings for her, even if nobody else could know, or understand.

Climbing the steps to the funeral parlor, I readjusted my tie and took a deep breath. "Please let there be somebody here I know," I hoped. At least then maybe I can look like I belong.

Nodding to the ushers, I stepped quietly into the viewing room. Whereas Mike's funeral had taken place in cold, almost clinical surroundings, Tanya's family had chosen a much more pleasant

environment.

The room was carpeted in a plush gold with walls that sported oak paneling and several large pieces of art. There were couches along both sides of the room, and three crystal chandeliers provided soft, comforting illumination. The only thing that spoiled the warm, inviting nature of the room was the people. Looking as uncomfortable as I felt, they were talking in hushed tones, shaking their heads and doing their best not to look at Heather's grieving parents.

Looking into the open casket, I felt a few tears gather in the corners of my eyes - and didn't care one bit. The young woman lying there looked like Sleeping Beauty, but I knew my kiss wouldn't wake her from this sleep. Her skin was like ivory - paler in death than it had ever been in life, and her long, red hair had been arranged neatly over her shoulders. Someone, probably her mother, had delicately made-up her face, and her eyelids had been mercifully closed, sparing us the pain of her once bright, emerald green eyes.

Turning to her parents, I tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, I shook her father's hand, patted her mother's arm tenderly and ail-but bolted out of the room. I had intended to stay for the duration, but...

Hands in my pockets, I turned back for one last look before leaving. "I love you, Tanya, I always did."

"Okay, that will be twenty dollars and seven cents. Would you prefer to pay by credit card or by personal check?"

"Ah, check please."

"Alright, then I'll just need your mailing address so that I can send you the bill."

Having given her the information, I hung up the phone and stared at the piece of paper before me. I'd spent the past two weeks working on it, and felt it was some of my best work, but nobody would ever know that I was the author. Instead, it would serve as an anonymous tribute, then disappear forever.

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It would be exactly a year next Wednesday that Tanya had passed away. After her funeral I'd tried to forget her and get on with my life and, for the most part, it had worked. I'd even found myself a new girlfriend and we had stayed together for nearly four months. We had been inseparable, but one day decided it simply wasn't working, and that was the end of it. It was the second longest relationship I'd ever been involved in, and it had felt good.

However, as the anniversary of Tanya's death approached, I found myself becoming more and more depressed. I became painfully aware of my loneliness, and I could see that it was affecting my family, friends, and coworkers. They all knew something was wrong but were too polite to ask what it was. Hell, even I had no idea what it was until I checked the calendar.

So, feeling the need to do something, anything, I'd sat down and written a poem in Tanya's honor. I'd never been much of a writer, computer programming languages didn't count, but I'd also never been so motivated or inspired to put my thoughts on paper. The final product was something that I was very proud of, but I was still afraid to announce my feelings to the world. What difference it could have possibly made, I don't know, but I simply couldn't sign my name to it. So, I compromised, and published the poem as an anonymous memorial to Tanya.

It seemed a futile thing to do, but I wanted others to know how much I had loved her, even if they couldn't know who I was.

Leaving the piece of paper there by the phone, I suddenly felt the urge to go out and take a long, long walk.

CHAPTER TWO

"David."

Somewhere, far, far away, there was a voice calling me, but I felt no compulsion to answer it. Rolling over, I pulled the covers up to my chin and allowed myself to sink back into the sleep from which I hadn't really awakened.

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"David. Wake up, David."

The call came again, each word sounding somehow closer, yet no louder than before. Cautiously opening one eye, I saw that the clock read 2:34 a.m. and fell back asleep, confident that nobody would have cause to wake me up in the middle of the night.

"David. Please. It's me, Tanya."

The voice was as soft and as quiet as it had been the first two times, but for some reason it managed to penetrate my sleep-clouded mind. Yawning, I forced myself to sit up in search of the mysterious caller.

It wasn't hard to find her.

She was standing at the far end of the bed, mere steps away from being swallowed by my walk-in closet. Although the room was shrouded in darkness, the only light coming from the digital clock at my bedside, she appeared to carry an illumination of her own. Her red hair was a fiery halo that framed her perfect ivory features, from which a pair of brilliant emerald green eyes shone like headlights. She was dressed in a long, flowing black gown, but even it seemed to glow with an inner illumination.

It was her. It couldn't have been, shouldn't have been, but it was her.

"T-Tanya?" Rubbing the last vestiges of sleep from my eyes, I knew I should have been frightened, but the only emotion I could manage was awe. Confronting the obvious, I asked incredulously "Is that really you?"

She just smiled sweetly and nodded.

"Really? This isn't a dream?"

"Nope."

I was at a complete loss for words. I mean, if I couldn't string together a coherent sentence around her when she was alive, how could I be expected to do so knowing she was dead. This shouldn't have been happening, but somehow it was. "Ah . . . what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to thank you."

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"Huh?" Hardly able to believe that the words were in fact coming from her lips, those succulent, ruby red lips that I had longed to kiss for so long, I choked "For what?"

"For the poem. It. . . was beautiful." A single tear trailing down her cheek in a jagged line, she whispered "I... I never knew you felt that way. About me, I mean."

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"I know." Shaking my head, I confessed "I was a lousy coward. I just couldn't get up the nerve to tell you."

"Don't you ever talk about yourself like that!" In her anger, she

moved a step closer to the bed, carrying the brilliant aura of illumination with her. It was no trick of the light, no freak shaft of moonlight that bathed her in such a glow. It was something else, something deliciously intangible.

Cringing only a little, after all, this was a ghost that had chosen to confront me, I scowled "Why not? It's true." Self-pity momentarily eclipsing the sense of awe I felt in her presence, I leaned back against the headboard and told her "I would waste entire evenings making excuses for not asking you out. Once, just once, I actually got as far as picking up the phone, but you weren't home." I felt awful taking out my frustrations on her but found that I was powerless to stop. "If that's not cowardice, what is it?"

"If that's true," she cried, "Then we're both guilty."

"Huh?"

"It's true. I did the exact same thing." In a voice almost too soft for me to hear, she added "Only I never stopped." Now the tears were flowing freely. "Even after we graduated, I still kept hoping we'd meet up at the mall or on the street or something. All I had to do was pick up the phone, but I never even got that far!" Her eyes clenched tightly shut, she lowered her head and sobbed "At least you made the attempt."

Her every word was a double-edged dagger that pierced my heart and imbedded itself there for all eternity. On the one hand, I was ecstatic, knowing she felt the same way I did. On the other hand, that knowledge brought only pain, because there was nothing we could do about it. Those years were lost and would never come again. However, as sick as I felt, I could see that she felt worse. Awkward and uncomfortable, I resorted to humor, not knowing how else to comfort her. "Yeah, 'dem 'dere telephone contraptions is confusing, ain't 'dey?"

I can't explain how relieved I was to see a tentative smile return to her face.

"So, ah..." Now that our feelings were out in the open, I felt more awkward than ever. "Why did you, well, come back?" To my amazement, I had accepted her ghostly presence without question. How she had come back from the dead was immaterial to me. All I needed to know was:

why?

Wiping the tears away, she shrugged "Because I had to see you. I ... I had to know you felt the same way." Pausing, she finished "It was important to me."

"But why? I mean, what good can it do either of us now?" I didn't mean for it to sound angry or confrontational, but how else could such a question sound?

"You're right," she sobbed, tears beginning anew. "It was selfish of me, I'll go."

"No! Please! Don't go." Leaping out of bed, I exclaimed "I didn't mean it that way." Gently grabbing her arm, not caring that it should have been impossible, I turned her to face me and confessed "I'm not very good at this kind of stuff. Hell, if I had been, I'd have asked you out years ago."

At first, when she gasped, I thought I had done something wrong. I feared my living flesh had burned her, since she felt ice-cold to me. However, when she smiled and threw her arms around me, I knew I had done something right. I didn't know what it was, but I was glad. Of course, now I was worrying about whether or not I could do it again.

Holding her head against my shoulder, I could feel the wetness of her tears against my bare chest. Were they tears of joy or of sorrow? Did it matter? "Tanya, what's wrong? What's the matter?"

Pulling away, she took my hands in hers and smiled. "There's nothing the matter. It's just that you, David, are truly one-of-a-kind."

"Tell me something I don't know," I joked. Then, more seriously, I asked "What do you mean?" Certain that there was something more to her presence than unrequited love, I prodded "That wasn't just an idle compliment, was it?"

"No." The pain of remembering written all over her face, she told me "I'm a ghost, in case you'd forgotten. For the past year I've tried to talk to, to touch, to embrace, to just get the attention of someone, anyone, but nobody knows I'm there. Not my family, not my friends, *nobody*."

"What makes me different?" Whatever it was, I wouldn't have

traded it for the world.

"I don't know. I really don't." Shrugging, she suggested "All I can figure is that we were meant to be together. I've never really believed in fate, but it's a romantic notion, don't you think?"

For a moment, I didn't say anything. Then, with a smile, I shrugged "Works for me." Thrilled to see her smile again, I added "Regardless, I wouldn't change a thing."

Shaking, Tanya looked up and asked me "Can ... can I ask you a favor?"

"You don't have to ask."

"Yes, I do. Can I... that is... would you...?"

Concerned, afraid that I was losing her, I pleaded "Tanya, what is it?"

"Just hold me!" As she collapsed into my arms, I wrapped myself around her, determined to protect her from anything, even the cold embrace of death. For the first time in my life, I felt like I really belonged, as if I finally had a purpose. Loving that elusive sense of comfort, I didn't intend to let it go for a moment.

We spent the remainder of the night just holding each other. Well, that and talking. Strangely enough, it was the most amazing night of my life. I shared things with her, secrets, dreams, desires, that I'd never thought I could put into words, and she understood. In return, she opened up to me and not only did I understand, I found myself really caring about what she had to say. Unfortunately, as the first glimmer of sunlight began streaming in through the bedroom window, Tanya decided it was time to leave.

"No, please. Stay." Shocked to find myself on the verge of tears, I climbed out of bed after. "Please," I whispered "I can't bear to lose you again."

"I'll be back, I promise." Granting me a single kiss, she told me "Go to work, and try to put me out of your mind."

"Not likely." I grinned.

"Try anyway," she smiled. "I'll be back Thursday night."

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Without thinking, my eyes darted towards the swimsuit calendar above my bed. "Thursday?" I complained, "That's three nights away."

"True, but since you have three days off, we can spend the whole weekend together."

"How did you know that?" With the weird schedule I worked, even I got confused from time to time.

"I've been watching," was her enigmatic reply. Then, before I could ask what she meant, she blew me a kiss, turned, and walked through the bedroom door.

Shocked, I reached up to rub my cheek, which suddenly felt as if it had been hit by a snowball. When I realized that it was her kiss I was feeling, I jumped up and threw open the door, eager to share my discovery.

There was no one there.

The next few days were absolute murder. No matter how hard I tried, I saw Tanya everywhere I looked. Every time someone spoke to me, I wanted it to be her. Entire lines of code were ruined by the unconscious insertion of her name. However, despite my distraction, and frustration, I was deliriously happy. And I wasn't the only one who noticed.

To my surprise, my boss even poked her head into the office Thursday afternoon and told me "Nice to see you're feeling better, Dave. You've seemed kind of depressed lately."

"Thanks. That's all over, I promise."

"Good. That said, don't do it again. Brings down morale, know what I mean?" She said it in her sternest voice, but the wink and the smile told me she was kidding. Returning the smile, I switched off my computer and headed home, hardly able to contain my excitement. Tanya was coming tonight.

"David. . . it's gorgeous!" Spinning in delight, Tanya threw her arms out and smiled. "In all the years I've lived in this city, I can't believe I've never been here."

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Returning her smile, with interest, I leapt forward and swept her into my arms, catching her in mid-twirl. Thrilling at the now-familiar chill of her body, I replied "Glad you like it."

We were standing at the edge of a small, lagoon-shaped section of beach, far away from sunbathers, swimmers, and fishermen. As secluded and private as any place within the city could be, the small stretch of rocky shore was surrounded by trees that were several hundred years old. Everywhere you looked, the world was green and gold and red and naturally beautiful.

Pointing upwards to the thin, trickling waterfall behind us, I boasted proudly "I've traced the source to a small crevice, almost two-thirds of the way up the steepest embankment for miles." With a shrug I added "I don't know if its run-off from the rain, or what, but its clean and its cold."

Wrapping her arms around my neck, Tanya sighed in contentment. "You'd never know that we're only a mile or two away from skyscrapers and apartment buildings and downtown traffic. It's a little slice of paradise, isn't it?"

"I always thought so," I returned, "But it always seemed to be lacking something. You."

Her only response was to giggle and snuggle closer to the warmth of my body. "It's so romantic," she sighed a while later, her voice barely a whisper. "Have you ... I mean, does anybody else know..."

Loving the feel of her arms around my neck; her cool, sweet breath on my cheek; and the delicate balance of her body in my arms, I was glad I had never shared my discovery with anyone before. This was exactly the kind of scene I had envisioned for my secret little hideaway, and I was glad I had waited. Kissing her softly, I replied "No, you're the first."

As the afternoon wore on and the shadows slowly enveloped us, we kissed, we talked, and then we made love. Not giving any thought to the circumstances, we simply allowed ourselves to be swallowed up by the moment, seeing the afternoon as the natural progression of almost six years of silent longing, and an endless week of romance. Although we

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started out timid and uncertain, it wasn't long before we became attuned to each other's needs, somehow anticipating the other's thoughts, while at the same time retaining a measure of pleasant spontaneity.

Gently lowering ourselves to the ground, Tanya still clinging to my torso, I reluctantly broke away and quickly undressed. Breathing just a little heavier, Tanya followed my lead by closing her eyes and willing the black dress into nothingness. As startling as that was, it paled by comparison with my first sight of Tanya's naked flesh. From head to toe, she was one solid hue of pinkish ivory, unbroken by any blemish or scar. Other than the auburn triangle of bush between her legs and the light brown of her nipples, she looked as if she'd been fashioned out of a solid slab of marble.

"Wow." Grinning from ear to ear, I hastily undressed and joined her on our bed of leaves. By now I was used to the aura of cold she carried with her, and barely even noticed it as I caressed her breasts. As I brushed my fingertips lightly across her hardened nipples, she gasped in delight, reaching out a tentative hand to embrace my swollen member. First looking to me for approval, I could have denied her nothing, Tanya climbed atop me and began kissing and licking my penis. For a few minutes I just laid there, enjoying the feel of her soft, moist lips as they ran up and down my shaft, accompanied by the electric tingle of her agile tongue as it licked up, down and around.

Before long, however, I began to feel selfish. First inhaling the musky aroma of her pussy, I gently spread her cheeks and buried my face in between her other pair of lips. Licking my way up and down the folds of her labia, I paused every once in a while to plunge my tongue into her waiting hole. Each time I did, she sucked a little harder, clamping down upon my erection with her talented mouth. Sensing she hadn't enjoyed such attention very often, I wanted to let her orgasm before we turned to intercourse,

Trailing my tongue slowly up her slit, I stopped at her clit and began flicking it with the tip of my tongue. Eventually, I decided I had teased her enough and I wrapped my lips around the tiny nubbin. Then, sucking and licking with an intensity to match her own, I inserted my finger in her pussy to prepare her for later.

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In no time at all, Tanya was panting and squealing in delight, sitting up to force herself against my face. Digging her nails into my chest, she ground her hips downwards, humping my lips and my tongue with almost feverish intensity. Her scream as she came was loud enough to silence the birds, although, luckily, not to attract any unwanted attention.

"Oh, David," she sighed, collapsing against me. Turning herself around, she took my face in her hands and kissed me with a passion I hadn't suspected she possessed. "I was so afraid to do any of this before," she admitted, "My parents had drilled it into my head that it was a sin and that I should wait for marriage." Stroking my cock again, she moaned "Now that I tried it, I never want to stop!"

"Who says you have to?" I asked between kisses. Rolling over, I climbed atop her and asked "Are you ready?"

Grinning, she barked "Yes, oh yes! Fuck me, David, fuck me!" Then, blushing, she added softly "Please," Her contrasting emotions only served to arouse me further, knowing that I was the cause of this remarkable transformation. Placing the tip of my cock against her hole, I looked to her for reassurance and then plunged in to the hilt.

A brief grimace was the only indication of pain from her broken hymen. Once that passed, she quickly warmed to the experience, moaning and groaning and panting in ecstasy. Growing bolder as the afternoon wore on, she began calling out, vocally urging me by telling me exactly how she wanted to be fucked. I was only too happy to obey.

Raising my head to catch my breath, I suddenly froze. In the water beyond the beach I could see the reflection of our love, and I have to admit to being a little frightened. It looked as if I was suspended in air, performing some strange, unnatural, and increasingly impossible acrobatic maneuvers. Tanya's ghostly form was completely invisible. Shocked, I had to look back down to make sure she was still there.

"Ohh, David, what's wrong?" she asked, thrusting her hips upwards to make up for my momentary pause. "Please, honey, don't stop."

Shaking my head, I just laughed and looked away from the reflection. Roughly pressing my lips to hers, I lied "Nothing's wrong. I just needed a tiny rest."

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"Plenty of time for that later," she giggled. "For now, just fuck me!"