

FAREWELL GHOST

by

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Sinister Rouge

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BADLANDS

Clay Harper saw the devil once. She was creeping down a long, dim corridor. And when her lithe animal figure halted at his locked door, when she smiled her vicious smile in through the peephole, Clay fell into a crouch and shut his eyes. It *was* the devil—he knew this well enough to never speak of it—but it wasn’t until he moved to Los Angeles that Clay met the devil in person.

It started with buying the house of a dearly departed rock star.

The realtor said the odds were against them. The house was so coveted, and harboring such terrible infamy, that there was always some millionaire buzzing the front gate. But Clay was an optimist, hopelessly so, and when they drove to the top of Via Montana Road, high in the hills over Burbank, his heart hammered. Just the fact that the property was on the market at the same time they were looking...

88 Via Montana wasn’t the last house on the left or right, it was the last house *period*, built atop a steadily rising foothill where rocky ravines and resident hawks and coyotes took the land back from the human sprawl below. The road turned abruptly and terminated at a cul-de-sac—and wrought-iron gates that Clay knew from so many front-page stories. Gritty news photos come to life. Clay’s father, Peter, took one look at the high adobe walls, the security cameras, the castle-like turret rising over the trees, and groaned. “Looks a bit out of our price range, Vanessa.” They had spent the better part of the day touring affluent L.A. enclaves—Encino, Silver Lake, Hancock Park—while Peter grew increasingly agitated with the price tags (“Isn’t all this going into the ocean with the next earthquake, Vanessa?”). And now this... the Boyle House... where thousands of people would have killed to live.

“It is steep,” Vanessa agreed. “Literally, figuratively. But since you’ll be working in Burbank, I’d kick myself for not showing one of its best properties.” There wasn’t much conviction in her voice; all day, she’d clacked around on uncomfortable heels, listening to Peter—a former law partner turned head of legal at a movie studio—bitch and complain, and now it seemed she was only humoring herself.

“Let’s take a look,” Clay said. “What’s it hurt, Dad?”

Vanessa made a noise in her throat and entered an access code on the key panel. A moment later, the yawning gargoyle face on the gate split in two and they were rolling up a shaded drive, past rows of sago palms to the main house where Rocco Boyle, frontman for the best band of his generation—or any other, in Clay’s opinion—had once lived.

Of course Clay wasn’t going to let on that he was a Rocket Throne fan. He played it cool as Vanessa showed off the Spanish Revival exterior with its dark-wood shutters and red roof tiles and dried-up fountain out front. Ditto, as she guided them through the five-bedroom interior, through arching doorways and under vaulted ceilings with crisscrossing beams, and all the while he was thinking, *This was the room where Boyle kept his guitar collection* (it was a little girl’s bedroom now); *This was the hallway that Rocco’s modern-art friends painted* (there was no evidence of it now, only several coats of mundane beige). And then they were upstairs, in the master suite, where Clay withdrew his phone and casually aimed it at the floor.

Vanessa saw what he was doing and warned that the owners had a strict no-picture policy. And Clay looked at her like she had rats in her hair, like he’d only meant to make a call and had no idea that they were standing over the spot where Boyle’s girlfriend had drawn her last breath.

Not until Vanessa had walked them past the summer kitchen on the back deck, the heated pool with its sun-blasted Neptune statue, and a small grove of fruit-bearing trees in the large yard

beyond—features Clay could have recited himself, having read all the articles and books and conspiracy theories—did they arrive at the two-story, gable-roofed guesthouse in the back corner of the property.

“What’s in there?” Peter, a musical ignoramus, asked.

“Storage,” Vanessa replied, and Clay cursed the current residents without a sound. *Blasphemy!* “Although you could use it as an office, a gym, even another residence.” No mention that this had been Boyle’s home studio. That Rocket Throne had recorded *The Disharmonic* in there. Or that Boyle had sung all of the vocals in the loft upstairs.

The studio was called “the Generator,” and history had been made inside.

Tragedy too.

But Vanessa didn’t invite them in, didn’t offer even a Peeping Tom peek through the dark window. So Peter shifted his weight from one foot to the other and dared to ask the question. “Three million five,” came Vanessa’s reply, and Clay cringed. Except, for the first time all afternoon, his father didn’t feign a heart attack. His expression didn’t even change.

“There must be an acre and a half of L.A. property here, Vanessa. There’s a pool and a citrus orchard. A view of the entire San-Whatever Valley. So... what’s the catch?”

Vanessa’s freckled face was an open book; for a realtor she had surprisingly little guile.

“Have you ever heard the name *Rocco Boyle*, Mr. Harper?”

Peter looked to Clay for help, but Clay was a brick wall. The old man didn’t have a clue about his infatuation with Rocket Throne, didn’t know that Clay hung on every note and lyrical turn of phrase, that he’d spent countless hours staring at the album cover for their self-titled debut: Two guys and a girl in leather boots, denim, and tattoos, cool-looking, tough-looking, walking single-file along a random, dark street. Not shot from the side like *Abbey Road*, but angled

over the girl's shoulder so that you might have been next in line with them. That image captured the entire mood of the album, Boyle screaming and crooning and whispering through twelve tracks of audible genius, his voice projecting a sense of having lived a life worth living, having experienced all the joy and sorrow and terror the world could offer and surviving to capture it in song. And it spun Clay's dials up, way up; it made him want to live bigger, fight harder for the things he wanted, and most urgently, to make those wonderful, thundering, melodic sounds with a guitar of his own.

But to his father's wondering look, Clay didn't blink.

It wasn't that Peter was a shitty father, just that he'd devoted himself thoroughly to his eighty-hour work weeks, determined to give his family more than the blue-collar poverty he'd grown up in. And in that, he'd succeeded tremendously—at the relatively small expense of getting to know his son. Clay's mother, Tracy, had been the familial link between them. But Tracy was gone now and that left the two of them to figure each other out.

The old man did know a few things—that Clay played guitar, that he had trouble making friends, that he was reluctant about going to college and spending his life in a hermetically sealed office—but he wouldn't have guessed that Clay's favorite movie was *Eddie and the Cruisers* or that he'd spent the bulk of his eighteenth birthday nosing up cocaine with his part-time girlfriend. Or that when Tracy packed Clay off the following July it wasn't to Europe, but to inner-city rehab. And Peter surely didn't know that Clay's one and only ambition in life was to front his own band and live the Rocco Boyle life (even if it meant suffering the Rocco Boyle fate); only his mother had known and she'd taken his secret—like rehab and so many other things—to her grave.

“I haven't the foggiest,” Peter told the realtor. “Does Rocco pitch for the Angels?”

“No, no,” Vanessa laughed. “He sang and played guitar in a band called Rocket Throne. Go back eight years and they were the biggest rock act in the world. Unfortunately, Boyle had issues with substance abuse. His girlfriend... OD’ed one night in the main house and when Boyle realized what had happened, he... he came back here and... well...”

“Awful,” Peter replied. Though Clay could see his wheels turning, the shrewd investor asserting himself. “There’s room for negotiation then?”

“Just the opposite. You’d be surprised how many freaks want to live where a rock star died. Offers have exceeded four times what it’s going for.”

“Then why’s it on the market at all?”

Vanessa shook her head. “That’s the thing—it’s never *been* on the market. After Boyle passed, he left it to a member of his touring crew. The man and his family have endured the fans and tour buses and occasional flyover, but they have young daughters and would like to raise them in a less popular place. I’m a friend of the family, and they’ve asked me to show the place and maybe field offers from people who fall in love with the property, not its history.”

“Well, that sounds like us—am I right, Clay? I mean, do you listen to any Rocker Bone?”

“I prefer James Taylor,” Clay said, and tried hard not to laugh.

“We’re not interested in the past,” Peter went on. “That’s why we’re in L.A. The price is scary-high, but if your friends were willing to bargain—how ’bout it, son?”

The excitement in his father’s voice threw Clay, as did the word *son*. No doubt Peter had the capital—he worked hard and spent little, and his bank account and investments, not to mention Tracy’s life insurance, were certainly heftier than he’d have admitted—but Clay was nevertheless amazed. There was something different about his father these days. Tracy’s death had shaken him, had shaken them *both*, and maybe the old man was trying to step out of himself

a little, give them something. A house on a hill. A view to look out on while they mended their lives.

“Does this mean you’ll be putting an offer in?” Vanessa looked to Clay, correctly identifying him as the emotional linchpin.

Clay glanced up at the Generator’s high loft window and imagined himself on the other side of that pane, smiling down at them. “Yeah,” he said. “This place is ours now.”

In a game of free association, when prompted with the words *Rocket Throne* and *location*, most fans would have said *Hollywood*, the same way you would say New York for The Ramones or Seattle for Nirvana. Though none of its members were actually from Hollywood (who the hell was?), Rocket Throne had been spawned in the prolific currents of the Sunset Strip, like Guns N’ Roses and The Doors and a hundred acts before them. So when tourists went looking for the infamous Boyle House, their time was often wasted wandering the Hollywood Hills. Boyle had taken up residence elsewhere for just this reason. He had wanted to escape the clubs and parties, the groupies and hangers-on, and the drugs, most of all. And for a while, in the foothills of sleepy, suburban Burbank, Boyle had succeeded. The demons had let him be.

In the end, though, Rocco Boyle wrote his own cautionary chapter of rock history, right there in his home studio, and that was why Vanessa the realtor cautioned them about their chances of getting the house. Still, the funny thing about one-in-a-million odds—there was always that “one.” Gamblers swore by it. Lottery dreamers too. Clay had never thought of himself as a gambler, or particularly lucky, but somehow he knew, even before the call came in.

So, a little more than a month after their first visit, Clay and his father were straining up the steep grade of Via Montana in a Pack Up! moving truck.

Much to their realtor's chagrin, Peter had lowballed the asking price. A week went by without word before Dave Ganek—former Throne roadie turned family man—responded with a counter of three-million-three, his “final price,” take it or leave it, brother. No one was more thunderstruck than Vanessa, who had explained, with the patience of a teacher to pupils both deaf and dumb, that the original price was a steal to begin with! But after six years in residence, it seemed the Ganeks were good and ready to leave, and they weren't interested in drawing the process out. Peter had simply been in the right place at the right time with the right story.

The Harpers drove the van across the country from Philadelphia, slept in truck stops, and hefted their furniture and boxes into the large house themselves. As Clay joked, you had to cut costs somewhere.

That first afternoon, they dove, sweaty clothes and all, into the deep end of their new, amoeba-shaped swimming pool, while “Under the Bridge” and “Ode to L.A.” played from Clay's iPhone. At dusk, they sat up on the balcony outside Peter's bedroom suite, guzzling lemonade and witnessing the electricity wink on across the shimmering expanse of the San Fernando Valley. “Is that a vision?” Peter said, and what could Clay do but nod at the endless miles of lights? “We're going to do well here, Clay.”

A desperate hope clung to Peter's statement, a vulnerability Clay could relate to. There was an excitement between them, a sense that, in this new west-coast life, they were building toward... something. “We are,” Clay said, grinning honestly.

His first night in the house, Clay heard the guitar. The footsteps would come later, but the guitar was there from the beginning. He'd fallen asleep in bed and woke when the book he'd been

reading—the Sex Pistols’ *12 Days on the Road*—slid off his chest and slapped the floor. He was reaching for the lamp on the nightstand when the strings found his ears.

The Ganeks had warned them that Throne fans kept frequent vigil outside the gates. The house may have been difficult to find for the casual tourist, but there were countless web sites devoted to Boyle’s last earthly address, complete with Google satellite pics. As a result, Dave Ganek had installed a security system with sensors mounted along the perimeter walls and signs warning trespassers of prosecution by law. “Most times they only want to take pictures and talk about how they saw Throne at South-by or wherever,” Dave said. “A few try to climb the hill for a glimpse of the Generator. As long as they don’t trigger the alarm or wake my kids, I’ve always let them be.”

In other words, visitors came with the territory. You couldn’t live in Graceland without Elvis impersonators showing up. But as Clay lay there in the dark, listening to the phantom guitar through the open window, his threshold proved lower than anticipated. The player was only screwing around, striking the same three notes again and again, and Clay thought that was pretty ignorant. *If you’re going to hang out at Rocco Boyle’s house, the least you can do is learn to fucking play!*

He crawled from bed and felt his way through the cavernous unfamiliar house, down to the wide, open-concept kitchen. He was halfway through his Cherry 7UP when he realized his mistake. The guitar wasn’t coming from the street. It sounded louder here, at the back of the house. Whoever was playing wasn’t on the far side of the wall either.

They were on the property. In the yard.

A glance at the alarm panel made his pulse jump. Peter had gone to sleep without arming any of the zones. Meaning someone could have scaled the wall undetected.

Aware of the number of curtain-less windows looking in at him, Clay struck the lights off, one by one. He and his father had marveled at how easily the house had swallowed their worldly possessions; they would have to buy more stuff just to get the echo out of the rooms. Now that echo worked against Clay, amplifying even the smallest shuffle.

Nothing moved outside though. The motion lights sat dark.

And the cool night enveloped Clay's skin as he slipped onto the back deck. Vanessa had warned them that L.A. wasn't the Florida of the West; it wasn't a tropical climate, but a desert one—dry heat during the day, significant temperature drops at night—and Clay folded his arms, feeling a shiver run through his frame. Feeling watched.

The three-note performance continued in the dark to his right. As Clay crossed the deck and stepped barefoot in the damp grass, the player suddenly slowed, as if sensing his presence.

The shadow of the unlit Generator came into view and Clay froze. *In there.*

Someone had scaled the wall and picked the lock and now they were inside there, paying homage to their dead hero.

Then the guitar ceased, and Clay heard a voice, whispering from Boyle's old studio. Speaking directly to him.

But the surrounding canyon must have bounced sound around in odd ways, because a moment later Clay realized, again, he was mistaken. Now there were two or three low voices and they were actually on the far side of the wall.

Clay followed their laughter, the crackling of their feet in the hillside chaparral. The motion sensors worked against him as he set off one lamp after another. If the lights worried his visitors, though, they didn't let on, perhaps thinking they were the ones setting them off.

By the time they reached the cul-de-sac, Clay had installed himself in the shadows behind the front gate. A secret witness to the figures who appeared in the amber streetlight. Musicians, Clay thought. Obviously musicians.

The first one was tall and lean, with a full beard, hair that fell below his shoulders, and black jeans that looked like they cut off the circulation in his legs. His friend was shorter, but broader, with spiked hair, twelve-hole Docs, and a retro bowling shirt scissored at the shoulders to show his tattoos off.

The girl was last to step into the light, but Clay's heart clenched when he saw her. This was nothing new—Clay habitually fell for pretty faces and shapely bodies (even regular faces and okay bodies)—but what he felt at that moment was stronger. Pure magnetic pull. The girl had long, very dark hair, some of it braided, some hanging loose. Her jeans and T-shirt described aesthetically pleasing curves, and she moved with a stride that spoke of natural, impeccable rhythm. In a word, she was sublime; in two, drop-dead sublime.

Clay shifted behind the gate to watch her, bracelets clacking, heading for the black punch-drunk van that had delivered her here. They were walking single-file, and the likeness between them and Rocket Throne's iconic album art wasn't lost on their voyeur: Two guys and a girl, their clothing, attitude, the shadows reaching out toward the Hopperian darkness beyond the pool of streetlight. Were they doing it on purpose? Would he ever see them again to find out?

"Hey!" Clay called, before he knew what he was doing.

And the spike-haired one jumped a foot off the ground.

The guy with the beard caught sight of Clay's shadow at the gate and flinched. "Shit!"

The girl barely moved. Just pivoted toward Clay's voice. Her eyes found and locked on his. "Hey yourself," she called back.

For a second, Clay had the urge to pull a Boo Radley and bolt. He gripped the wrought iron, willing himself to stay. “I just moved in,” he managed.

The girl’s boots clomped the blacktop as she closed in. Her companions trailed behind, naturally conceding to her leadership. She was about Clay’s age, which was to say a few years out of high school, but still young enough to be mistaken for a college student at places that offered student discounts. “We knew Dave Ganek,” she told him.

“He came by our shop a lot,” Beard added. “He was friendly about everything ’cept giving us a tour of the property.” His sly eyes ran from the girl back to Clay. “How about you?”

“Oh, um...” Smitten as he was, Clay wasn’t letting strangers in in the dead of night. “I don’t have the remote for the gate right now.”

“Got it,” Beard shot back. “You want to, but you just can’t.” He started to leave, but the girl collared him.

“Don’t be a dick. He doesn’t know us and we’re creeping around his property.” She offered Clay a smile that turned his legs to jelly. “You’re new to the 818, huh?”

“I grew up in Philly. I’m Clay. Um, Harper.”

“I’m Savy.” She stuck her hand through the gate.

Clay squeezed the soft flesh, warm at the palm, cool along the back of her hand. “You are?” “Short for Savannah. The tatted-up cat over here goes by Spider and this rude, bearded mother answers to Joe Belasco. ‘Fiasco’ Joe Belasco to his very few friends.”

“Don’t ask us if we’re a band,” Fiasco said. “We’re not.”

“For the record, though, we totally are,” Spider said.

“Cool. What do you call yourselves?”

Fiasco Joe offered Clay a shadowy sneer. “The Quiet Desperations of Calcut—”

“Currently between names,” Savy said. “Do you play?”

“A little guitar...” Clay replied, and thankfully stopped himself before, Six hours, minimum, every single day. But not before he could babble: “...and some vocals. But nothing professional. Just, you know, shower performances.”

At this point, Clay realized he was still shaking Savy’s hand and released her. Her stare kept on him. What she saw—close-set eyes, ski-jump nose, skinny arms, hair too thick and cowlicked to ever be shaped into something cool—couldn’t have inspired her. “We should jam some time.”

Clay nodded emphatically. And he knew what she was doing, buttering him up, shining him on so he’d give them a tour of the house, but who cared? What few friends he had in this life now lived a continent away. There was no one in his immediate orbit except his father, and his father was starting a new job in the morning and would be gone more times than not. So Clay pressed his face a little closer to the gate, a little closer to Savy, the new love of his life, and he felt bold. “Where do I find you?”

“Come down to the shop,” Fiasco Joe told him. “We’re always around.”

Spider pointed out one of the hundred stickers pasted to the back of their doomed-looking vehicle. “Dooley’s Den of Music. Down, down, down on Glenoaks.”

Accepting that there would be no tour tonight, the trio withdrew. Savy turned once before she disappeared into the side of the van. “Be seeing you, Clay.”

And Clay lingered at the gate, waving when Spider tooted the horn and swung around. It was only after they’d vanished that Clay realized none of them had been carrying a guitar....
