

FROM THE BOOK
PAGAN ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT FICTION: 13 PRIZE WINNING TALES

DEBORAH BLAKE



Dead and
(Mostly) Gone

Copyright © Deborah Blake 2008

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Dead and (Mostly) Gone

Deborah Blake

It was the end of another long shift, and Donata's stomach roiled with a combination of too much bad coffee, and too many frustrations. Her room in the basement of the police building was damp and cold, and smelled vaguely of sweat, stale air and despair. By the end of the day, she no longer noticed it. She figured it came with the territory, so to speak. Nobody wanted her upstairs with the rest of the gang, and that suited her just fine. The sign on the door said "Witness Retrieval Specialist"—it sounded so much more official than "Witch".

She sighed, and looked at her watch again. The chief had called down an hour ago, pleading with her to stay past shift-end to deal with an important case. A crisis, he'd called it. Time-critical. Yeah, right. Then why was she still sitting here? Half past seven on a Friday night, there were lots of places she'd rather be. Well, all right, not lots—let's face it, cops weren't all that popular except with other cops, and Witch-cops weren't all that popular even with them. Oh, the Pagan community tried to be supportive of all its members (a bit like cops, if you thought about it), but it was an old habit for witches to be leery of the law, and old habits died hard.

Donata had been at this job for fifteen years, which she figured was about twelve years too many. When she'd started in March of 2018, badge shiny, eyes bright with the fervor of the righteous, she'd had visions of days spent in glorious success—the triumph of law over lawlessness. After fifteen years, she knew better. They didn't just relegate her to the basement because she was an embarrassment in the eyes of the public (and most of her colleagues). The miasma of anguish, gloom and regrets that emanated from her area of the building could drive even the most hardened cop to drink at the end of the day. She knew she'd been doing the job too long when she'd realized that she longer noticed that either.

When witchcraft had finally come out of the broom closet, as Pagans liked to say, there was a period of adjustment for everyone involved. Then the Catholic Church settled most of the lawsuits for religious persecution out of court, admitting to centuries of lying to the public for the greater glory of God and his coffers. It hadn't hurt that the latest Pope's mother turned out to be the last in a long line of Stregas, traditional Italian Witches. The scientific community had sheepishly conceded that they had concrete proof that the human brain was capable of such unscientific feats as clairvoyance and

other psychic powers. Pagan pride days became as commonplace as Gay marches, and life resumed its normal course. More or less.

So now Witches were an accepted part of the community, just another once-oppressed group, struggling to find their place in a society that had reluctantly admitted them to the status of equals without ever becoming quite comfortable with their presence. For most, it made surprisingly little difference in their lives. Other than the fact that they could post ritual times in the paper, and practice their nature-based religion openly, without fear of losing their jobs or their children, life went on much as it had before.

That is, except for a gifted few, for whom society had a use. Dowzers, for instance, to save the trouble of drilling exploratory holes for water or oil wells. Now there was a nice job. Reasonable hours, good pay, true appreciation for your work. Donata often thought she should have become a dowser. She sighed again. She was willing to bet that dowzers were all home on Friday nights, or out doing whatever dowzers did for fun. And to think that she had once thought her job was glamorous. Of course, she was much younger then.

When they first came up with the position of Witness Retrieval Specialist, it had seemed like the perfect solution to one of the most frustrating situations in police work. Someone is murdered, but there are no witnesses. If there were no major clues at the scene of the crime, and nothing to tie any particular suspect to the murder, the police hit a dead end. Literally.

Then, after the dust of the changes had settled, some bright young cop had come up with an unconventional idea at the end of a frustrating week of fishing for clues and banging his head against a wall of alibis. He'd convinced his superiors to bring in a Witch to call in the one witness to the crime that no one had been able to talk to—the victim himself.

And so it had begun. The Witch, a fairly obscure psychic (who went on to write a book about the case, and spent a few years on the talk-show circuit, before the phenomenon became too commonplace to catch the public's interest) called forth the spirit of the dead man, who promptly pointed the finger at his best friend, whose alibi quickly recanted in the face of such an incontrovertible witness.

While it was true that ghosts could lie, it turned out that most murdered folk would much rather point the finger at whoever it was that actually cut their lives short than waste this once-in-a-death-time opportunity by blaming someone else, no matter how much that that person might have pissed them off during their days among the living. Besides, with a little training and practice, a Witch could almost always tell if one of the dearly departed was lying.

So the Police Academy added a new specialization to their curriculum, albeit one that you had to pass some pretty unusual tests to qualify for as a candidate. And Donata Santori had been a proud member of the first ever graduating class of Witness Retrieval Specialists, more commonly referred to by their less talented peers as "ghost yankers".

At first it really had been all that she'd expected. She'd helped to solve the "unsolvable" crimes, brought hardened criminals to long-delayed justice, aided families in finding closure. For the first few years, she'd gone home at the end of the day with a feeling of satisfaction, and the knowledge that she had helped in a way that few others could. It had seemed as though her "gift" had a real purpose, and the job had given her life meaning and glory.

But the satisfaction she felt slowly started to fade in the face of the grinding realities of the job. It wasn't just the lack of acceptance by other, more conventional cops, although she'd truly expected that to pass after they'd seen how much help she could be. It wasn't the nagging of her friends and family to get a better, "normal" job—one that paid more, and had less irregular hours. It wasn't even the way the job seemed to eat her life, until it was all that was left.

No, the thing that finally wore her down was the job itself. Day after day of talking to the dead, instead of the living. One tragic tale after the other. "My husband killed me because I overcooked the roast one too many times." "My partner killed me because he had embezzled all the money from our business." "Some druggy mugged me in an alley for twenty bucks and my watch. Oh, yes, I know where to find him; I've been haunting him for weeks. Too bad he's too stung out to be able to tell."

After a while, it all started to sound the same. And fifteen years later, Donata had to admit to herself that her friends and family were right; it was time to quit, and find a better job. It didn't matter that she was good at this one, or that there were few people

with the talent and inclination to take her place. The truth was, she just didn't care any more. The dead had gotten along fine without her before, and they could just do it again.

She put her head down on her desk, next to the remains of the pastrami on rye that had been her dinner. She was so tired. Tired of the job, tired of death, and the pettiness that seemed to plague the human condition. Maybe she could get a job as an Avon Lady, peddling beauty instead of wallowing in ugliness.

The rap of a fist on her half-closed door jarred her out of her reverie. She looked up, expecting to see the clerk that usually brought the case files down from the more rarified air upstairs. Instead, she saw the weary, grizzled face of the chief himself. Intrigued in spite of herself, she sat up straighter behind her desk, and pushed the pungent scraps of her sandwich over the corner of her desk into the trash. As far as she could recall, the chief hadn't been down here since her first day at the precinct, over ten years ago. She saw him in the hallway, of course, and at the occasional meetings where he actually felt a need for her presence, but to the best of her knowledge, Captain O'Malley had never actually set foot in the basement since the day he'd personally escorted her down to her new office. This case must be something big.

The captain dragged the only other chair in the office out of a corner, and sat down heavily. A graying man on the verge of retirement, with only a slight gut to show for his years behind a desk eating bad food at odd hours, the chief always looked tired and a little grumpy. It came with the position, she supposed. But tonight the tired was more obvious than the grumpy, and Donata thought that she detected an edge of desperation on top of it all. Well, it didn't take a psychic to figure that out—he wouldn't have come to her if this were some normal case, one that he could solve by normal means. Still, it was a little disconcerting to see the boss man looking so worried.

She cleared her throat before she spoke. "Got something for me, Chief?" As if that wasn't obvious.

O'Malley hitched his chair a little closer to her desk, and lay a folder down carefully in the space vacated by her dinner. One stubby, nicotine stained finger tapped the top of the folder, but he didn't open it right away. Donata saw him glance around, taking in the peeling paint of the walls, the lack of windows, the stacks of paperwork from cases both old and pending. She could feel his long-delayed realization of how

dreary her job really was, and his guilt over his lack of appreciation for her work. All of it overlain by that sense of desperation and fear.

"A bad one," he finally said. "We've got nothing, and we're running out of time. For a while there we thought we had a lead, but it turned out to be a case of mistaken identity." He scratched the end-of-the-day stubble on his chin absently, reminding her of the sounds the mice made, scrabbling through the wall behind her desk. "You're all we've got, I'm afraid." He shifted uncomfortably on the hard wood chair, clearly not happy about being there, with her.

Donata finally snapped. Hell, it was late, she was tired, and she was going to quit the damned job anyway. She wasn't going to sit there and play games with someone who clearly didn't like her, or the job she did.

"For the Gods" sake, spit it out, Chief," she said, slumping back into her seat. "You keep telling me how serious this is, and how little time we have. It is way past quitting time" why don't you just tell me what is so damned important that it would bring you all the way down here to my little slice of heaven, so we can both go home."

O'Malley glared at her, but didn't respond with the lecture on respect that she'd expected. Instead, he flipped open the file, and turned it toward her. On top was a picture of a tow-headed little girl, maybe four or five years old. She was wearing a pink tutu and flashing a set of dimples at the photographer as she posed in mid-twirl. She looked happy and alive, in a way that only small children can. Donata felt the acids in her stomach churning in response.

She looked at the chief with dismay. She never got used to the children. "This is the victim?" she asked.

The captain hung his head. "That's my granddaughter, Lacey. She was five last week." Donata thought she saw the glint of tears in his eyes.

"She's dead?" she asked quietly. It seemed as though she could feel something after all. All the more reason to quit this damned job. She hated to see this tough man brought down like everyone else. Death, the great equalizer. Damn.

Unexpectedly, O'Malley shook his head. "No, not yet. At least we don't think so." He pushed the picture of the little girl aside, to reveal the one that lay underneath.

This photo contained none of the joy of the previous one. It featured a scruffy man, clearly unhappy. Dead, in fact. The hole in the middle of his forehead made that

clear. Strangely, he didn't seem to look any worse than he must have before the unsightly hole was added to the various scars and prison tattoos already decorating what could only have been a homely face to begin with. A face only a mother could love, although in this case, Donata thought even that was unlikely.

She picked up the photo. "So who is he? Or who was he, I should say."

The chief grimaced. "Michael Franco. Rap sheet as long as your arm: robbery, extortion, beating up little old ladies in alleys. You name it, if there was money in it, and it didn't require actual work, Franco did it. Spent a couple of short stretches in prison, didn't seem to teach him anything. Got out a week ago on parole. Good behavior. Huh." They looked at each other for a minute, their differences temporarily negated by their common disgust with the system. O'Malley shrugged, and turned back to the photos.

"He kidnapped my granddaughter this morning, on her way to the park. Knocked down her mother, picked her up and ran. Jumped on a bus and was gone before anyone could do a thing. Two blocks from her house. We got the call an hour later."

Donata looked at her boss intently. "He called you, or her mother?"

The captain looked, if possible, wearier than he had when he'd entered her office. "Me. He knew who I was, who she was. We figure it was personal, although we haven't figured out why yet. If he was still alive, that might matter. But he's dead, so it doesn't."

"What happened?" She asked.

He sighed. "The usual screw-ups. Tip-off by a neighbor, over-eager young beat cop new to the job. The guy got cornered; then he got shot. No big loss to society. Under normal circumstances, we'd be happy to save the expense of a trial."

Donata knew it couldn't be that simple, or O'Malley wouldn't be sitting in her dismal little office, playing show and tell. "Your granddaughter wasn't with him when they found him?"

"No," the captain said heavily, "she wasn't." He squeezed his fists together so hard the knuckles showed white. "When the bastard called, he told us that he'd buried her someplace where we'd never find her, and that her air would run out by midnight. Our only hope was to capture him alive, and force him to tell us where he'd hidden her." He looked grim. "Now he's dead, and our only hope is you."

Donata didn't feel any better about that than the man seated across the desk from her did. She pushed her hair back from her face, and tried to gather up the scattered remains of her energy.

"You know, Chief, the reason that my job works is that most of the time the dead folks I talk to are eager to give me the information on who killed them. Your guy, on the other hand, isn't likely to be all that enthusiastic about sharing. He doesn't strike me as the type who would be overwhelmed by remorse just because he's crossed over to the other side."

The captain nodded. "Yeah, I know. More likely to gloat than anything else. But the department psychic who usually handles finding missing persons is out of town, on some kind of damned retreat, and we haven't been able to find anyone who is able to make a connection with Lacey." He swallowed hard. "They think that she is probably unconscious. You're all we've got, Donata."

To her surprise, the older man reached out and took her hand, an unspoken plea written clearly across his face.

"I know it's a long shot, Donata," the chief said, "and it's late, and you're tired, and you don't like me much. But I'm asking you to try. Please."

What was she going to say, "No, go home, forget about your granddaughter"? Donata pushed her chair away from her desk, and picked up the small box of magical supplies she always kept handy, along with the two pictures. The chief followed her down the hallway to the room reserved for official magical workings, where she spent much of her daily grind immersed in the simple rituals required to communicate with the recently dead. Somehow she didn't think that this one was going to be simple.

She glanced up in surprise as O'Malley followed her through the doorway. She wasn't used to an audience.

"Are you sure you want to be here for this?" She asked.

O'Malley nodded solemnly, suddenly respectful. "If it won't interfere in anything."

Donata shrugged. "Don't see why it should. Just keep back out of the way, and don't say anything, okay? It's important not to interrupt me."

"Got it." The chief settled his considerable bulk against a back wall, and watched her set up the quarter candles at north, south, east and west, and the small altar table in

the middle. Donata used incense, salt and water to cleanse the space, then cast the circle and called the protective spirits of the elements to their quarters. First Air to the east, then Fire to the south, Water to the west and finally Earth to the north. With their powers to protect her, along with her own focus and will, it was safe to call the spirit of the dead man back into the land of the living. As long as she stood within that circle, there was nothing the dead could do to harm her. That didn't make them fun to deal with, though.

She focused on the picture of the now-deceased Michael Franco, and invoked the aid of the gods in drawing him back to the earthly plane one more time. She spoke the words of the spell she used for these rituals, with a few minor alterations to fit the circumstances, and called the name of the dead man three times. For a few moments there was only silence, and the feeling of the air growing heavier in the space around her. She could sense the chief shifting restlessly behind her, and held up a hand without looking to remind him not to move.

The incense seemed to swirl and eddy in a non-existent breeze, and then slowly solidified into the image of a man. Transparent and wavery, it was nonetheless clearly recognizable as Falco, down to the sneer on his unhandsome face.

Unlike many of the recently dead, Falco showed no signs of confusion or fear. He clearly knew who and where he was. All his focus was on Donata; in his place outside the circle, the chief might as well have been invisible.

His voice came like a distant whisper, clear and quiet. "What do you want, Witch?"

"The child," replied Donata evenly. "Tell me where the child is, before it is too late."

"Or what," the shade mocked, "you're going to kill me? A little late for that, don't you think?"

Donata smiled at him. It wasn't a nice smile. She thought it was probably just as well for the chief's piece of mind that he couldn't see it from where he stood.

"Oh, no, Michael," she said. "I don't have to do that. All I have to do is make sure you can never be reborn."

The dead man looked at her, uncertainty a glimmer in his shadow eyes. "What are you talking about, Witch? I'm dead. That's it. If my old sainted mother was right, then

I'm going to hell. If she was wrong, then I'm just plain dead. Either way, there's nothin' you can do to me. As far as I'm concerned, that little girl can rot where she lies."

Donata pulled in all the power that came with her gift; much more than she used in her day-to-day work, more than most other people ever saw. Drawing on her connection to the gods she believed in beyond doubt, she let the dead man see her assurance as she ripped away his.

"Well, Michael, that's where you're wrong," she whispered. "There is no heaven, no hell. There is only the cycle of birth, growth, death and rebirth. Into each lifetime we come with the ability to learn from our previous mistakes, and make ourselves anew—better, wiser, happier. Even you have that chance." She ignored the slight sounds coming from behind her, and focused all her energy on the dead man, seeing him mesmerized by her words.

"You're just sayin' that to get me to tell," he retorted in an agonized mumble. "I'm not fallin' for it."

She opened her arms wide, so that the light spilled out into the candle-lit room. "Look," she said to him. "Look deep inside. You will see that your soul knows I speak the truth." She took a deep breath. "You have a chance at a new life. A dozen new lives. Unless I take that chance away from you."

She heard his gasp, remarkable since he could no longer take in air.

"You wouldn't," he said, "You couldn't. Nobody has that kind a power."

Donata gazed serenely through the curls of incense. "I can, actually. We have rules about doing no harm to the living. But you're not living, not anymore. And you're threatening the life of a little girl who never hurt anyone. So, yes, Michael, there is something I can do to you. And I will, unless you tell me how to find that little girl, right now."

The ghost gave a sob, compounded of grief, frustration, anger and hope. "Promise me you'll let me move on," he pleaded, his misshapen face further distorted by fear. "I want another chance! Promise me!"

Donata nodded slowly. "Tell me the truth, and I swear that you will get your chance. Now—tell me!—"

“—The old bus depot, on Fifth Street. It's scheduled for demolition tomorrow. She's in the janitor's closet in the basement. I drugged her, but she's okay, I swear!” She could see the ghost's demeanor change as he gave up his burden.

Donata stepped up to the altar and raised her arms above her head. "You are free to go, dead one. Go, and do better in your next life." Quietly and efficiently, she sent his spirit back to the limbo from which it had come, dismissed the quarters and opened the circle.

Only then did she turn around and face the captain, standing open-mouthed behind her.

"Don't you think you'd better go get your granddaughter?" she said with a smile only a little twisted by tiredness and irony.

O'Malley pushed himself away from the wall, and moved toward the door. Then he turned back to her.

"Thanks, Donata," he said. "For helping with my granddaughter. And for—the education. I'll try and make sure you have things a little easier around here."

"That would be nice, Chief," she replied. "And you're welcome. I'm glad it worked. I wasn't sure it would,"

He turned to leave, then swiveled back to her one more time. She cocked an eyebrow at him, inviting the question she knew was coming.

"Can you really do that," he asked, "keep someone from moving on to their next life?" He tried, almost successfully, to keep the fear out of his voice.

The precinct Witch looked back at him, and laughed. "No way. I'm a witch, not a god. But there's no rule that says you can't lie to a dead guy—at least not in the line of duty."

Deborah Blake Bio

Deborah Blake is the award-winning author of *Circle, Coven and Grove: A Year of Magickal Practice* (Llewellyn 2007), *Everyday Witch A to Z: An Amusing, Inspiring & Informative Guide to the Wonderful World of Witchcraft* (Llewellyn 2008), *The Goddess is in the Details: Wisdom for the Everyday Witch* (Llewellyn 2009), *Everyday Witch A to Z Spellbook* (July 2010) and *Witchcraft on a Shoestring* (September 2010). Her new book, *Everyday Witch Book of Rituals* will be released in October 2012. She has published numerous articles in Llewellyn annuals, as well as other Pagan publications, and her ongoing column, "Magick on a Shoestring" is featured in *Witches & Pagans Magazine*.

Her short story, "Dead and (Mostly) Gone" is included in the *Pagan Anthology of Short Fiction: 13 Prize Winning Tales* (Llewellyn, 2008). Deborah's first novel, *Witch Ever Way You Can*, was the winner or finalist in many RWA (Romance Writers of America) contests and received the EMILY "Best of the Best" Award. Her fiction is primarily Paranormal Romance, although she also writes Fantasy, Mystery and Young Adult. She is represented by agent Elaine Spencer of The Knight Agency.

Deborah had been interviewed on television, radio and podcast, and can be found online at Facebook, Twitter and <http://deborahblake.blogspot.com> as well as The Creativity Cauldron, a loop she founded for writers and aspiring writers.

When not writing, Deborah runs The Artisans' Guild, a cooperative shop she founded with a friend in 1999, and also works as a jewelry maker. She lives in a 100 year old farmhouse in rural upstate New York with five cats who supervise all her activities, both magickal and mundane.