

DANSE MACABRE

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE REAPER

EDITED BY

NANCY KILPATRICK

EDGE

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—TOTENTANZ—

By Nancy Holder & Erin Underwood

A kiss for luck. The merest peck, a whisper against Drea's mouth, when Paul should have given it his all.

Cologne's bitter winter wind set her teeth to chattering as she read the directions to *Firme Köln* for the tenth time, but she still couldn't find *Endlose Gasse*. She needed this job beyond just needing employment. It felt like a last chance.

That's not true, she thought. *You're just having pre-wedding jitters.*

Complicating matters, Cologne's carnival season was in full swing as it neared the final Crazy Days and the residents of Altstadt — Old Town — were enjoying the celebration. Navigating the streets was an exercise in patience to avoid being swept away by festive packs of wildly dressed Carnival goers. In her severe black suit, hair pulled back, she kept stumbling on her new black heels. Her dancing shoes, actually, but they went well with her suit.

Paul's family had this weird tradition that the bride and groom had to dance a special waltz at their wedding reception. The music was played on a brass disc inside a music box that had been in the family for generations. Paul's mother would bring the box and the disc with her from Berlin. For now, they practiced to a digital recording of it. It seemed tuneless, with no cues to help a non-dancer remember the intricate steps.

Paul was astonished by her awkwardness. But she'd *told* him the night they'd met that she didn't dance. He'd been too busy sweeping her off her feet to listen.

"Triller, triller!" a young man sang on the street in heavily accented English. He was dressed like a dead Michael Jackson, white face, his nose painted to look like a triangle of bone.

His moonwalk was spectacular; Drea felt in her coat pocket for a coin for the little black cardboard coffin beside him, the lid open to reveal a scattering of change and a few bills. She tossed in two euro coins. Dead Michael Jackson saw them and cried, "Woo!"

A high-pitched scream followed on the end of his triumphant shout. Drea spun around just in time to see a little blonde-haired girl running backwards away from him, directly into the rush of oncoming traffic. The girl's right foot left the curb, and she began to tumble.

Without thinking, Drea dove after her, grabbing the hem of the girl's coat and yanking it hard with one hand and reaching up to cradle her head like a football with the other as they fell hard to the sidewalk.

A woman tore the terrified child from Drea's arms and shouted at the boy. Then the mother and daughter disappeared into the oblivious crowd, leaving Drea sprawled on the cement.

"You're welcome," Drea muttered, then smiled weakly as Michael Jackson held out his hand and hefted her to her feet.

"American," he said, and kissed her hard on the mouth, bowed, and moonwalked back to his little coffin. Then he danced past the coffin, gesturing for her to join in — no, to follow him — down the street. Feeling a little goofy, she did it anyway — people were always saying she was too nice — and he stopped beside a small brass plaque at the mouth of a nearby alley. He did a hip thrust and pointed at it.

Endlose Gasse. Endless Alley.

"How...?" she began.

He handed her the crumpled printout of her directions, which she must have dropped when she'd saved the little girl, and swept an elegant bow.

"Danke," she said, taking the paper while fishing in her pocket for more change.

He waved her off, blew her a kiss, and danced away.

Dashing beneath the inconspicuous Roman arch, Drea hurried down the narrow alley that opened into a generous courtyard surrounded by some of the oldest buildings she had seen since arriving in Cologne. *Firme Köln* was the third door to her right,

the building large, Gothic style, with ornate decorations that drew her eye up to a tapered black spire inlaid with alabaster designs.

The building looked every bit the “old money” accounting company that the headhunter had described. Of all the structures around the courtyard, *Firme Köln* was the grimmest, with its shadowed windows and a clinging sense of silence.

With five minutes to spare, Drea entered the lobby. A stale scent stirred in the air. The reception room was small and lit with dim incandescent sconces that cast dirty yellow light on the walls. The ceiling towered above, decorated with delicate plaster designs and a large renaissance-style mural of angels reaching down from Heaven.

The receptionist, a gray-haired woman who appeared to have been stuck in the Victorian era — chignon, high neck, no makeup — told her to sit down. Fifteen minutes later, Drea felt herself nodding off. After another half-hour, she wondered if she had gotten the time wrong.

It was nearly a full hour before the receptionist ushered her down a hall and into a room so dark she could barely see the elderly gentleman seated behind an enormous ebony desk. His skin was stretched tightly over his sharply-angled face. His hair was as white as the teenager’s stage makeup, with matching eyebrows. Long, thin fingers were splayed over what appeared to be a black ledger book. He didn’t shake her hand, as was German custom. Didn’t introduce himself either — and she felt at a tremendous disadvantage, for she hadn’t been able to find out his name.

He opened the ledger book with a flourish and ran his finger down a list of handwritten names on the yellowed page. Each name had a check mark beside it — except for hers, which was the last one on the page.

“*Fräulein Armstrong*,” he said, gesturing for her to sit.

He wrote something in the ledger. “As you know, we are looking for someone who can update our office systems, someone with a background in technology. The world is running ahead of us, I fear.” His smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. He seemed ... depressed.

“Well, maybe I can help you catch up,” she ventured.

“Hmm, *ja*.” He tapped her name. “I am concerned about your work experience since you have just graduated from university. But my secretary thinks I should talk to you, and I have long since learned to trust her instincts.”

He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. It was her cue. Her time to shine.

But her frustrations from the last couple of months came to a head, colliding with her hopes for getting employment in Cologne — hope that was slipping away again. It was obvious to her that he'd already decided she was wrong for the job. Why prolong the agony? "Um," she began, and she wanted to kick herself. To her horror, tears welled. Her friends always said she was too soft, too sweet. They said Paul had bulldozed her into moving to Germany. That she needed to work in an American firm for two years so she could take her CPA exam. But he'd wanted to be home. It had sounded so romantic.

Now, Paul was mad at her because she couldn't get a job; and she couldn't learn to dance his stupid family waltz; and she was blowing her interview.

"Well," he said, about to end it, and she reached down deep inside herself and took a breath.

"I'm an accountant," she reminded him. "Like you. There are credits and debits. They have to balance. That's the same in IT, as well. Everything can be reduced to binary. On, off. And we can integrate everything so that you can keep up with all the changes."

"Balance." He sighed. "It is yes, it is no. But now there is all the gray in the world. So many variables."

"But in the end, credits and debits," she said.

He blinked and looked at her. "That's ... true." He was quiet a moment. He seemed to be considering something. "But how do I know you're not a, how does one say in English ... a slacker? You've come to Germany for an adventure, and then you'll meet someone and off you'll go—"

"Oh, no," she replied. "I live here. We're getting m-married." She heard herself stumbling over the word.

"Ah, true love." His smile was wistful. "I have not had that good fortune."

Neither have I, she thought; to her horror, she also almost burst into tears again.

"So, first step taken," he said, and then he snapped the ledger book shut.



"*Das ist Scheisse*," Paul said, practically spitting the words at her. "Shit."

"Trial periods at new jobs are normal," she said. She was standing in their apartment holding a bottle of champagne and her cell phone. He was still at work.

"Not for *free*. Did you even bargain when he told you he wouldn't pay you a goddamned euro?"

No, she thought, and although she'd braced herself for this reaction, and practiced what she would say in response, everything was melting away in a sea of uncertainty. It *was* a little weird not to get at least something for showing up to work.

"I thought we could go out, to celebrate," she said instead. "It's carnival."

"We say *Karneval*," he corrected her with asperity. "I'll be late. *Someone* has to pay for this wedding."

He hung up. On her.

She stared at the phone as if it were a foreign object and sank down onto the couch. He was right; no, he was wrong; he was wrong to be so mean. She was desperate; no one was hiring, and at least she would have some precious job experience if it didn't work out, wouldn't she?

When Paul came home three hours later, a little drunk, he handed her some wilted flowers and took her in his arms. He told her how sorry he was, and explained that his office had gone out drinking together to team-build, that it was too late to take her to *Karneval* tonight; it was time for champagne and waltzes at home.

"Kiss me first," she said; and he laughed at her and brushed her mouth again the way he had that morning, just going through the motions. Then he held his arm out to the side and draped his other one very loosely across her upper back. She laid her hand in his and wrapped her arm around his waist.

Blearily, he hummed the godforsaken non-melody, and she shut her eyes in resignation. He dragged her around the living room like a marionette with broken strings, humming in her ear, too loudly. It all felt so random and weird.

"Oh, my God," he said in English, "you really can't dance."

Fuck you, she thought, and blanched, because she didn't talk like that and she certainly didn't think like that, not where Paul was concerned. But what she said was, "I know."



She couldn't dance, but she could streamline, coordinate, integrate. The next day on the job, she dazzled her boss, who

was simply called Herr T. He sat beside her in her frigid dimly-lit office with its heavy antique furniture that cast long shadows about the room, and watched as she showed him what she had planned for *Firme Köln*. There was something different about him today. He seemed ... fuller, somehow. She'd thought his hair was all white, but there were streaks of blond in it.

She was very aware of him sitting so close, and she tried very hard to hide it. He was a million years old, for heaven's sake, and she was engaged.

"You see, we make records for each client," she told him, tapping on her laptop keyboard. She had brought it with her to work. "Then the accountant inputs the variables for each tax situation, and with these prompts, the computer accesses the appropriate programs, which you would lease."

"Tax situation," he said, smiling a little. "Paying what one owes."

"Yes," she said, a little confused.

"What one owes," he said again. He walked to the window and pulled aside heavy red velvet curtains, stirring the shadows and revealing the brightly lit streets crowded with revelers. She stood and followed him.

"Will you go out tonight?" she asked and he glanced at her, startled.

Then he pursed his lips in amusement and looked back at the window. She had the distinct impression that at first he'd thought she was inviting him out, then realized his mistake.

"Saturday night is the *Geisterzug*," Herr T. said. A faraway look clouded his face. "It is a sight to be seen."

"The *Ghost Parade*. I'll be sure to see it." She moved from the window. "Good night, Herr T."

"*Gute Nacht, Fräulein Armstrong*," he said, his bone white fingers still gripping the curtain.



As she left *Firme Köln*, Paul called her and said he would take the streetcar and meet her, to make up for the night before.

They would celebrate Shrove Thursday together. Tonight was the Parody Parade, playing off the coming *Rosenmontag* — Rose Monday — parade. Instead of big fancy floats, tonight's festivities consisted of dancers and marching bands interspersed with deliberately cheesy, mock *floats* that consisted of carts pushed

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and dragged through the partying crowds that spilled out from the pubs, filling the streets. The Crazy Days were here.

She and Paul drank hot wine, and applauded as the Parody Prince dressed in rags and a silver crown encrusted with plastic jewels rode by on a cart pulled by a pair of button-eyed clowns with fiery red wigs, blue Lederhosen, and candy cane striped socks. Dancing behind him in perfect formation was his troupe of *Prinzengarde*. They wore colonial-looking uniforms, women in dresses, men in pants, all of them wearing *Dreispietz* — tricorne hats. Then came more floats, with the riders tossing candy and trinkets into the crowd.

Paul was getting drunk, yelling and nearly knocked over a little boy to grab a shiny necklace of silver beads. Drea was very cold, and tired, and she found herself thinking about her first day at the job, and how well she had done, but Paul had only asked a question or two about it, and moved on.

A float trundled past with an *oom-papa* band. Dancing the polka on the slow-moving cart was a man in a skeleton bodysuit and two men wearing Renaissance outfits—one a priest with his red robes, the other a noble in his red and gold doublet. Paul grabbed her and started dancing maniacally in little drunken circles.

“Polka, Drea!” he shouted.

He whirled her in a wild circle with a series of hops. She stumbled on the slippery sidewalk, flailing and sliding, crashing into people, most of whom just laughed.

“Paul, please stop!” she said, as she tried to extricate herself from his tight bear hug.

“She can’t dance!” he cried. “She can’t make money! But she sure can fuck!”

“Paul!” she cried, humiliated. “Stop!”

“Oh, you fuck so great.” He mashed his lips against hers, darting the tip of his tongue like a snake against her teeth. “Let’s go home now. I want to fuck my American.”

“Oh, my God,” she said, turning her head and ignoring the chill that crept down her spine. “You’re drunk.”

But she knew he was speaking from his heart. She remembered the first time they’d slept together. It had been a long time for her, and they hadn’t done much sleeping. He was dashing and funny and he obviously liked her a lot. The sex had been great because she’d been so happy. She’d felt special in his arms. He hadn’t noticed that it hadn’t been all that great for a while now.

He grabbed her head and kissed her again. She jerked away, almost tumbling to her knees, and hurried the seven blocks to the streetcar stop. She covered her mouth with her hand to keep from crying or screaming or both as the brilliantly illuminated city roared past.

She passed a hotel, and thought about checking in. She thought about going to the airport and flying back to Boston.

But if she left, she left in defeat. And maybe it was just nerves for Paul, too. Maybe he was as afraid as she was. That they were, in essence, dancing the same dance.



Paul came home even drunker, and passed out in the middle of apologizing. Drea slept on the couch but she didn't think he knew, because he was still asleep when she left. Smiling grimly, she let him oversleep. He might have the only paying job between them, but by light of day, she had somewhere else to go.

At work, she began to write up a technical document for Herr T. Paul called, apologized, promised he would never treat her so crudely again. To reward him, when lunchtime rolled around, she put on the horrible black pumps — her dancing shoes — and queued her iPod to play the quirky waltz. She would conquer it, by God, and everyone would applaud at the reception, and it would all be good.

Closing her eyes, she imagined Paul in her arms, and her feet were less clumsy, her movements more fluid than when he whirled her around like a puppet.

When she opened her eyes, she found Herr T. standing in a dark corner, watching. He looked even younger, and when he saw that she had spotted him, he smiled faintly.

"I was just practicing," she said, blushing.

"No one should dance alone." Herr T. moved closer, holding his hand out to her. "If I may?"

Drea stepped into his arms.

"When you move, move from your heart. That is where the dance begins," he said. He hummed the notes of a different waltz, something very strange, and together they glided, and she was almost graceful. His hand was cold without warming from her touch as they spun about the room, their shadows following them across the floor.

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Herr T. seemed even more youthful while they danced, tall and strong, actually, and painfully cold. She reached up to touch his face and he stopped humming, and the dance ended on his breath.

This is what I thought it would be like, she thought.

Her fingers laced through his hair, pulling his head down to hers until their lips met. The air in her lungs froze; she struggled for breath, desperate for oxygen but not wanting the moment to end, not ever. Even as she clung to him, Herr T. pushed her away with such force that she crashed into the wall.

"What am I doing?" Drea cried. But he remained silent, withdrawing into the shadows as if he'd disappeared into thin air.

Drea grabbed her things and ran.



"I can't believe you lost a job that wasn't even paying you. How do you do that?" Paul said. He stomped through the crowd of people who marched along with the *Geisterzug*.

It was a spectacle. Dancers were dressed in black gowns and white face paint with hollowed out eyes. Others wore rags and glow-in-the-dark makeup. Mixed in were people in gauze shrouds; others held sticks that dangled skeletons from gossamer thin string; and others who carried drums and struck the solemn beat of the death march.

A bone-white full moon shone above, casting light upon the dancing shadows. Drea looked around, half expecting Dead Michael Jackson to moonwalk out of the crowd.

"Are you listening?" Paul said. He grabbed her wrist and spun her around to face him. He was a handsome man, but a grim and ugly look distorted his face.

She didn't tell him that she hadn't lost the job. She hadn't even quit it. She had simply decided not to go back. No one from *Firme Köln* had called, not even Herr T. And why should he?

But she'd thought he might. She'd hoped he would.

"Paul, it was for the best," she said. "I promise I'll find a paying job."

Paul snorted. "For the best? How are you going to find a job that pays when you can't even keep one that doesn't?" He smirked. "You think you'll live for free after we get married, is that it?"

And suddenly she thought, *I won't live at all. I'll die if I marry you. I'll be buried alive.*

She stepped away from Paul, finding herself in the flow of the Ghost Parade, surrounded by tall bony figures in black that looked strangely familiar. They were graceful and silent — except for the sound of their beating drums and the clicking bones of the skeletons that dangled from their sticks.

Goosebumps prickled Drea's skin, and she moved her feet in an unthinking succession of steps as she danced through the *Geisterzug* in a perfect waltz. Figures capered after her for a few seconds, as if she were the leader of the parade; their silhouettes were thrown against brick, plaster, and steel, and she stopped inches away from Paul, who watched her in shock.

"Drea," he said touching her face. "You *can* dance as well as you fuck."

She knocked his hand away, and then turned, stalking off toward the streetcar.



They glared at each other from either side of the aisle of the streetcar. The lights flickered as the streetcar snaked through the city, casting Paul in ghoulish light. He looked devilish.

"It just seems strange that you can dance all of a sudden," he said after a while. "*Denkst du, das ist lustig?* Are you having a joke at my expense?"

"No." Drea stood and walked toward the far end of the streetcar. Paul followed after her. She tripped, stumbling, barely grabbing onto one of the metal poles in time to break her fall.

"There's the Drea I know. Two left feet. No balance at all," he said, laughing. The lights flickered again casting the train in darkness. "Let's dance, baby."

He pulled her against him as the lights flickered back on, and they spun in a circle with Paul humming the weird little waltz. She couldn't do it. Wouldn't.

He looked at her bleary-eyed. "You don't want to dance? Maybe you want other things?"

He grabbed her ass and pressed against her. The lights flickered on, off, and as she stared past him, she saw a white face looking in at them through the window. Dead Michael Jackson's face! That was impossible!

At the same time, the streetcar lurched, throwing Drea and Paul to the floor. A whine shrieked high-pitched and wild, like the little girl who had nearly fallen off the curb. The terrible

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sound of metal scraping and crumpling pierced the night as the streetcar tilted to the left, sending passengers flying, tumbling into the aisle, onto each other. Sparks filled the darkness, creating grotesque orange shadows throughout the car as it buckled and rolled to a stop.

People all around Drea were crying and screaming, begging for help. Dazed, she lay on something soft, comfortable in spite of the pain that lanced her side.

The dim emergency lights flickered on, giving her just enough light to see that the car was on its side. Passengers were covered with blood, some sobbing and scrambling over other people, others lay very still.

Drea struggled to sit up and something — no, *someone* — beneath her groaned.

“Paul!” she cried, rolling off him.

His legs were bent, and half of a metal handrail pierced his abdomen, pinning him to the door. There was blood everywhere. She scooped up his neck, cradling it, forcing down sheer panic.

“I’ll get help,” she said.

“*Fräulein Armstrong,*” said a voice, as a gentle — but cold — hand gripped her shoulder. Everything around them froze; all the screaming stilled.

It was Herr T. And his blond hair curled around a face that was vibrant and young.

Dead Michael Jackson stood slightly behind him and peered over his shoulder.

“Herr T! Are you hurt?” she asked.

“Only by your absence,” he said, “but in a terrible coincidence, I can no longer stay away from you.” He gazed at her, and despite her terror, she saw the longing there, the sadness. “I had an account to balance tonight,” he said, nodding toward Paul, who stared up at him in horror.

Beside Herr T., Dead Michael Jackson held up the two euros she had put in his coffin that first morning. “To pay the ferryman.”

“*Nein. Nein, bitte!*” Paul said, groaning. His head lolled. “Help me, Drea. Help!” He coughed; blood spurted from his lips over Drea’s fingers as he struggled for breath.

Then, as the German teenager moonwalked *through* the frozen figures of the other passengers, Herr T’s face vanished into the hooded cloak he now wore that hid his features in shadow. The

cloak enveloped him, and in his hand he held a scythe. The skin on his hand melted, and skeletal fingers gripped the wood.

Drea couldn't speak. She told herself she was going into shock. She wasn't seeing the things that she was seeing.

"Just as you did not see what a lecherous bully your *fiancé* is," Herr T said. He swept a courtly bow. "I am *Tod*. Death to you. And it is very unfortunate that you have danced with me." He smiled sadly at her. "And that I, after all these millennia, have fallen in love with someone so ... temporary."

She just kept staring, even as he knelt down next to her and Paul. He rested a finger on Paul's forehead. Her *fiancé* was suddenly cold to the touch, almost icy.

Herr T got to his feet. He held the scythe like a staff, looking down at the two of them like an executioner taking their measure.

"No," she pleaded. "Let us live."

"Your account is not being debited," he said. "You saw me check my ledger when you came into my office. That little girl was due to be hit by a Mercedes Benz, but you saved her. I thought to take you then, at the interview, to balance things out. But I found I could not." She sensed that in the darkness beneath the hood, his eyes gazed at her, and he held out his free hand, made of bone. "I was drawn to you even then."

And I to you, she thought, holding Paul's head as he panted and writhed.

Dead Michael Jackson crouched beside Paul, holding up the coins to show to Death, as if waiting to be given the word to perform his task.

"Don't hurt him," she begged Death. "Please."

"My job is not to inflict pain," he replied. "It is to kill." He wrapped both his hands around the scythe. Dead Michael Jackson leaned over Paul and pressed the coins onto his open eyes.

"*Tun Sie das nicht! Lieber Gott, bitte nicht!*" Paul cried, limply batting at the teenager. His hands went through the young man and he grabbed onto Drea. His face was pasty, and his lips were turning blue. "*Nehmen Sie sie, wenn Sie sie möchten*. All you need is *someone*, right?"

"Take me?" she said stunned, repeating Paul's words. Drea looked down at him, her face burning as if slapped. He didn't look at her, keeping his unblinking gaze squarely on Herr T.

"I need to balance my book, yes," Death said. "But I would never take you, Drea. I will set you free."

"Oh, God, no. She's got nothing to live for anyway," Paul babbled.

"You have everything to live for," Death said quietly to Drea. "Soon you will see that. And this soulless creature—" he gestured toward Paul, "—will be a footnote in your very long and happy life."

"What happened to the little girl?" she asked.

From beneath his hood the faint glimmer of teeth shown through as Death smiled at Dead Michael Jackson. "This one balanced the account. He died of a drug overdose shortly after he led me to you. And you see? He is fine."

"*Nein*," Paul begged. "*Nein, bitte*."

Letting go of Paul, she placed both her hands over Death's two bony hands on the scythe. Michael Jackson watched them, then looked back down at Paul.

"I danced with you," she whispered. "I danced *beautifully*."

Death averted his head. "A breach of etiquette. A blunder." He sighed. "There is so much gray now. People on life support, demises avoided for decades." He turned back to her. "And there is you."

The hood bobbed as he lowered his head, almost as if she were the one with the scythe, and not he.

"If he is spared, he will have scars and will not dance again. He will not even be able to walk," he said.

"Oh, God," Paul whispered. "Drea, tell him not to do that."

"Life has its price, but it is not up to me," Herr T said to Drea. "It is up to you."

Though he had heckled and bullied her, Drea found herself pitying Paul. Maybe such a life would make him kinder.

"Yes, his afterlife will be better for it," Death concurred, as if he was reading her mind.

Drea put her hands on either side of the hood and drew it away. Herr T smiled at her, handsome and young. The icy feel of Death's skin warmed against hers.

"What you're saying is that you can take me instead," she said, searching his face. "Paul is right. As long as the books are balanced ... credit, debit."

He tried to look away, and she held his face between her palms. "You need me at the firm."

"I need you." His smile was tentative, then radiant.

"Then ... hire me."

Nancy Holder & Erin Underwood

“Very well,” he said, throwing back his head and laughing, lifting her to her feet.

Grinning, Dead Michael Jackson put his euros in his pocket and stood.

“What about me?” Paul shouted.

Together, Death and Drea walked off the streetcar, leaving the sounds of breaking glass behind them as rescue crews invaded the twisted cars. Through the falling snow, the *Geisterzug* appeared, everyone dancing, swaying in a mummies’ ballet.

A single scream echoed through the night. For a moment she thought the sound resembled the ringing echo of her name. Then Herr T took Drea in his arms, both of them smiling as they waltzed into the shadows of *Köln Karneval*.



Nancy Holder is a New York Times best-selling and multiple Bram Stoker Award-winning author, and a short story, essay, and comic book writer. She is the author of the *Wicked*, *Crusade*, and *Wolf Springs Chronicles* series. *Vanquished*, in the *Crusade* series, is out now; *Hot Blooded*, the second book in the *Wolf Springs Chronicles*, will be out soon. She has written a lot of tie-in material for “universes” such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Smallville*, and many others, and recently won her fifth Bram Stoker Award for the young adult horror, *The Screaming Season*. She lives in San Diego.



Erin Underwood is a writer, columnist, and blogger. She has a degree in creative writing and literature from the Harvard University Extension School and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Maine’s Stonecoast MFA program. For her, the seed from which “Totentanz” grew was rooted in the question: How would Death adjust to modern times? What would that mean for him, for us? Erin lives in Marblehead, Massachusetts with her husband.