



## **HOTEL CALIFORNIA**

by

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Lonnie Maitland was less than an hour away from Vegas and he was getting tired – dangerously tired. He had opted to drive to the convention all the way from Sacramento because he absolutely hated to fly – the very thought of it made him queasy.

He yawned and switched on the radio. He got static at first, but then The Eagles blared forth with their classic hit, “Hotel California.” He turned the volume down and hit the scan button.

Another station was playing the same song.

Lonnie hit the scan button again. He could only pick up three stations in that area of the desert and “Hotel California” was on all of them.

“Hmm. Funny.”

He switched off the radio, thinking he should find a place to spend the night. Vegas would be there in the morning, but he wouldn’t be if he fell asleep at the wheel. Besides, the computer software convention didn’t start until noon.

Another five miles raced by and then Lonnie noticed a blinking neon sign on the right side of the highway. It said, “HOTEL CALIFORNIA – Next Exit.” Strange coincidence, but still, it sounded like an interesting place – even though it was in the middle of nowhere.

Lonnie exited I-15 and followed the signs. He maneuvered his Taurus into the hotel's deserted gravel lot and pulled up next to the entrance. It wasn't what he'd expected. The rustic building was three stories tall and had a front porch that ran its entire length. The structure looked like it belonged in Dodge City, circa 1888.

He hoped it had a restaurant.

Lonnie entered the old-fashioned lobby and heard a TV on low volume, broadcasting a game show.

The place had a musty, rosewater smell. He walked up to the front desk, where he could just see the top of someone's head on the other side.

"Excuse me. I need a room, please, just for one night."

The old man got up slowly and turned around. He was dressed like a saloonkeeper. Without hesitating, he took a key out of a cubbyhole and handed it to Lonnie.

"Room 312. Pay in advance."

Lonnie settled the bill.

"Is the restaurant still open?"

The old man shook his head and sat down again. "Vending machines are out back."

Lonnie sighed. "Thanks."

At least the place had an elevator that worked.

The interior décor was Victorian – including all the furniture. Lonnie's four-poster was almost too short for his long frame. He collapsed on it with an armful of junk food and switched on the little black and white TV across from his bed.

There was only one station and it was broadcasting an episode of "The Twilight Zone." Lonnie tried to watch the show, but he became too restless and uneasy. He decided to grab a soda to wash down a salty bag of pretzels.

Once downstairs, Lonnie nabbed a 7-Up out of the only vending machine that worked and reluctantly returned to the elevator.

Something didn't feel right, and he hesitated a moment before stepping inside. When he pressed the third floor button, the contraption took off with a jolt.

The elevator reached the third floor – and continued climbing. Its speed increased.

“Whoa. What the hell?”

The elevator whined, reaching Floor 50, Floor 80, Floor 100. It finally stopped on the 200<sup>th</sup> level with an abruptness that sent Lonnie sprawling.

He got to his feet, his 7-Up wasted, just as the elevator doors opened.

Lonnie let out a girlish giggle. It was a dream, that’s all. He’d fallen asleep watching “The Twilight Zone” and now here he was in La La Land.

He stepped out of the elevator into a circular, dimly lit room that was half the size of a football field. It looked like a garish lounge bar.

A waiter in a white coat appeared in front of him. He bore an extraordinary resemblance to Rod Serling.

*No worries*, Lonnie thought, *I’ll go along for the ride*. He felt carefree, as light as a feather.

“Right this way, sir,” the waiter said. “Your party is waiting.”

Lonnie noticed there were other people there, and grinned. He recognized them all.

Elvis sat in a pink Cadillac, next to Miss Monroe. Abe Lincoln was engrossed in a philosophical discussion with Jim Morrison. Liberace tickled the ivories on a raised platform.

Lonnie followed the waiter over to a large, round table. It was set with crystal and fine china.

“Have a seat, Mr. Maitland.” The waiter rang a silver bell. “Attention, everyone, our guest of honor has arrived.”

“What’s the occasion?” Lonnie asked, as the dead celebrities gathered round.

The waiter smiled. “Your 40th birthday, your latest promotion, your recent divorce – the occasion is whatever you wish it to be.”

That made sense – it was his dream – although he couldn’t figure out why Liberace had been included.

“I only invited the people you miss and admire most, sir.”

So Rod Serling could read minds? He still wasn’t perfect.

Lonnie smiled apologetically. “But I don’t like Liberace.”

“Rod” snapped his fingers and the flamboyant pianist was instantly replaced with Frank Sinatra, who began belting out the lyrics to “My Way.”

“Later, Frank,” Elvis yelled, grabbing a seat next to Marilyn. “It’s time to eat.”

The party of six was treated to a sumptuous feast – all of Lonnie’s favorite dishes. The waiter was quick to clear the table and refill their champagne glasses.

Lincoln solemnly proposed a toast in Lonnie’s honor.

“I’m not sure this soirée was such a good idea,” Marilyn cooed.

“Take a valium, sweetheart,” Frank scolded, lighting a cigarette.

Jimbo slid underneath the table.

The waiter brought out a towering hot fudge sundae and presented it to Lonnie with a flourish.

Everyone watched as he shoved a hefty spoonful of ice cream into his mouth.

“Aren’t you guys having dessert?” he asked, licking his lips.

The celebrities laughed hysterically, as if they were all in on a private joke.

Lonnie was finally allowed to see their true, grotesque forms. The lounge bar became a Mother Ship.

He was trapped in a nightmare.

“This is no nightmare, sir.”

As the waiter’s green tentacles snaked around his waist, Lonnie suddenly remembered why he was afraid to fly.

THE END