



DEAD GIRL

**DEAD GIRL
IN LOVE**

Linda Joy Singleton



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I pounded on the silk-lined lid over my head, pushing and breathing hard, trying not to panic. But, geez! Who wouldn't panic in my situation? I'd fallen asleep in my own house, own bedroom, own body. Then in the flash of a promise, I found myself lying flat on my back in some kind of box, entombed in blinding darkness. Not only was I stuck in my best friend's body, but it seemed I was in her coffin, too.

Did that mean ... that Alyce was dead?

Or was I?

"Ouch!" I cried as I pinched myself. Still very much alive.

But what was I doing inside a coffin? My thoughts reeled with confusion as I tried to get a grip on this new reality. Taking over someone else's life was hardcore confusing. It always took a while to adjust to a different body—like breaking in new shoes, only worse because I wasn't walking on soles, I was switching souls. And while I now looked like my best friend Alyce, I had no idea what I was doing *here*—except for a shivering sense of fear.

Keep calm, I told myself. Alyce (unlike me) was levelheaded and avoided risky behavior. She researched her teachers before each semester to learn lesson plans; if a guy asked her out, she prequalified him by checking blogs (which was why she never dated); and she wouldn't drive anywhere without Googling directions. My practical, sensible, slightly neurotic friend never left anything to chance and would never have climbed inside a coffin without a good reason.

The two most logical "good reasons" were:

1. Someone locked her in this coffin.
2. She was hiding from someone.

Both choices involved a dangerous "Someone" that I had no interest in meeting. Panic rose to crisis level. Move arms, legs, body. Get out! Now!

Reaching up, I pressed my hands firmly against the silky lid and, fueled with a surge of adrenaline, pushed up with all my energy.

To my utter and total shock—the lid lifted!

When light streamed onto my face, I wanted to shout with joy. But that would just be stupid. I mean, who knew who might be listening?

Grabbing the edge of the coffin, I jumped onto a polished hardwood floor—then stared, open-mouthed. I was surrounded by rows and rows and rows of gleaming copper, wood, and stainless-steel coffins. Obviously this was a mortuary showroom, where luxurious death beds came with two-for-one bargains, warranties, and price tags. But why was Alyce in this place? It would make sense if this was an old cemetery, since Alyce often snapped pictures of creepy gravestones. But this modern mortuary was too cheerful, with its murals of angels, clouds, and daisies floating across sunny yellow walls.

Most of the coffins (or is the formal term "casket"?) were hinged open for display. A printed tag attached to a shiny silver coffin read:

Custom "Praying Hands"

Blue-stitched embroidery, squared corners, adjustable bed and mattress, fully insured product warranty.

All for a discounted cost of \$3,999.99.

Wow! I'd heard that the cost of living was expensive, but the cost of dying was even worse. Why did a corpse need an adjustable bed anyway?

The plain wooden coffin I'd been hiding in was the drabest in the room, without plush cushioning or embroidery stitching. I was about to check its price tag when I heard footsteps and murmured voices.

Coming toward this room!

Closer, closer ...

Reluctant to climb back into the coffin, I jerked my head from side to side, searching for a better hiding place. No closets, tables, or drapes. The murmurs increased. At least one man and one woman were heading this way. When the door knob jiggled, I slapped my hand over my mouth to stifle my shriek.

Quick! Hide now! Sprinting over to the largest coffin in the room, I scrambled behind it and squeezed into the narrow space between wall and coffin.

"This way, please," a woman said as the door creaked open.

Huddling flat against the wall, I watched two sets of shoes enter the room: men's black loafers shuffled after a pair of girly, blue-heeled pumps.

"We're very proud of our showroom," the woman said in a professional tone. "We have the largest selection of caskets in the state."

"I-I don't think I can do this," an elderly man's voice quavered. "She was all I had ... it's just too soon."

"That's understandable," the saleswoman replied automatically, as if reciting from a script. "Is there someone else in your family who could make these arrangements?"

"No. Only me," he added with a sniffle.

His sorrow reminded me of how I'd felt a year ago, when I found out Grammy Greta had died. Whenever Mom used to give me grief over stupid stuff, Grammy had always been there to support me. Losing her was like having all the lights turned off in the world. But I'd discovered recently, when Grammy and I were reunited on the other side, that "dead" didn't mean she was gone. Grammy even had an important job overseeing the Temp Life program—which was how I had now ended up in my best friend's body.

"Final arrangements are never easy," the saleswoman was telling the man. "They're a necessary part of the healing process. Still, we can wait if you'd rather do this later."

Yes! I thought desperately. Wait till later! Turn around and leave now so I

can get out of here.

But the man wasn't leaving. He murmured something indiscernible, then I watched his black loafers follow the clicking heels farther into the room—toward my hiding spot. I scrunched into the smallest ball possible, which was seriously uncomfortable because Alyce's legs were long and bony with knobby knees. I held my breath, afraid that even the slightest sound would boom like a fired cannonball.

The woman's heels tapped closer.

Two caskets away from me!

I struggled for invisibility, afraid to move or breathe. Only I couldn't hold my breath forever, and when I finally let it out, I was sure I was going to be caught.

But the saleswoman only heard her own voice as she launched into a sales pitch. "Green Briar caskets are velvet lined and trimmed in lace with matching pillows. The lids are foam-filled with decorative buttons. And our caskets are rot- and insect-resistant," she boasted. "They're guaranteed to last a lifetime."

Whose lifetime? I wondered, smiling at the irony. It wasn't like a corpse could jump out of the grave to complain about bugs and mildew.

But my smile died fast when the saleswoman suddenly gasped.

"Dear God!" she exclaimed. "What is that doing there?"

Electric fear shot through me. I braced myself for discovery, but instead of the footsteps coming closer, they click-clicked away.

"Who left this here?" the saleswoman exclaimed angrily.

"Is that a dead animal?" the man asked.

"Of course not. It's only a tacky kid's backpack and it definitely doesn't belong in our sales room." She seemed to recover and added, "I'll get rid of it."

Curious, I shifted toward a crack between caskets, pushing Alyce's dark hair out of my eyes to get a better view. A large-boned woman with upswept burgundy hair and a gaudy abundance of necklaces and bracelets was looking down at the floor. Her jewelry jangled as she swooped down to pick up a leather backpack with a ratty rope dangling from its bottom.

Not a rope, I realized with horror, but a curly, furry tail.

This wasn't a random backpack—it was Monkey Bag!

Alyce had nicknamed her beloved backpack “Monkey Bag” and carried it with her everywhere. She must have dropped it when she climbed into the coffin. The backpack was Alyce’s most prized possession (a gift from the father who took off when she was four) and contained her digital camera, art supplies, cell phone, wallet, and notebooks. Since I was supposed to be Alyce (at least temporarily) I needed to retrieve Monkey Bag. Yet if I stayed here, I would for sure get caught.

I considered my odds of crawling around the caskets and sneaking out the door. With the saleswoman distracted, I might make it—except I couldn’t abandon Monkey Bag. How could I escape *and* get the backpack?

Think of something, Amber! I told myself. Coming up with creative solutions was one of my strongest skills, and would someday help me achieve my dream job as an entertainment agent. A self-help book I’d read called *There’s Always a Plan B* advised thinking out of the box to create inventive ideas. But crouched in the shadow of a casket, I had zero ideas.

Plan C: Wing it.

When the saleswoman (tightly grasping Monkey Bag) led the man out of the room, I jumped up and took off after them.

Luckily, Alyce wore soft-soled sneakers. My quick footsteps were so silent even I couldn’t hear them. Staying far behind, I pressed against walls and peered around corners before moving forward. I tiptoed down a long corridor lined with pictures of boring-looking people in suits, then past a door marked *Restrooms*, which gave me an uncomfortable urge to use that room.

But there was no time for comfort. Monkey Bag was on the move.

The man said something softly to the saleswoman, his voice choking with a sob. The saleswoman murmured sympathetically, guiding him left at a hall intersection. As they turned, I glimpsed the man’s wrinkled, tear-stained face and my heart ached for him. The poor guy must have lost his wife. I wished I could tell him she would be all right. If she’d gone to the other side where Grammy Greta hung out, his wife was safe and happy.

They stopped at a door marked *Office: Green Briar Mortuary Director*. The saleswoman led the man inside, swinging Monkey Bag by its leather straps. The door shut with a sharp bang.

Now what could I do? I couldn't exactly knock on the door and ask for my backpack. The fact that Alyce had been hiding inside a coffin was a big clue she wasn't supposed to be here.

I need help, I thought, mentally broadcasting an SOS into the universe. When I'd accepted this Temp Lifer mission, I thought it would be easy. Not crazy confusing like the first two times I'd swapped bodies. I hadn't known zip about those new identities, but I knew practically everything about Alyce. I expected to breeze through this assignment in a few days. After Alyce's soul had a chance to rest (I visualized an out-of-body beach resort), she'd return to being my wonderful best friend again. We'd have a sleepover and once I explained everything, we'd laugh about my adventures in body-swapping.

But so far, all I'd had was trouble. And when the saleswoman opened Monkey Bag, she'd find Alyce's wallet with her driver's license and Halsey High School ID card. Then the monkey crap would really hit the fan.

I needed a diversion that would (a) lure the saleswoman and her customer out of the office, and (b) give me enough time to sneak inside to rescue Monkey Bag.

While I was thinking hard, my gaze drifted up to a plastic sphere fixed to the ceiling. The smoke detector's tiny light shone green, as if encouraging me to go wild with my ideas. But while I was creating a rather brilliant plan that involved a ladder and a lit match, the office door swung open.

"Someone's been in my office!" the saleswoman exclaimed, looking up and down the halls suspiciously. "I have to report this to security. It won't take long; please come with me."

The grieving man nodded, following obediently.

A break-in? Hmmm ... what was that about? Well, not my problem. In fact, this could work out well for me. When the saleswoman left the office, her hands were empty, which meant she'd left Monkey Bag inside. This was my chance! So I went for it—running like I was on fire, ducking behind a wall, my heart pounding and my palms sweating.

The door was unlocked, and there were papers strewn on the floor and two large drawers of a file cabinet hanging open. And there on the floor was Alyce's bedraggled, ratty Monkey Bag. I slipped it over my shoulders, a position so

familiar that the straps fit as naturally as skin. Then I hurried out of the room, the door banging behind me.

“Hey, you!” a voice bellowed. “What were you doing in my office?”

I froze in the hallway, caught in the saleswoman’s suspicious gaze. For a moment, I couldn’t remember how to make this body work. My legs, arms, and racing heart felt foreign. Not my own. But the fear was one hundred percent mine. With a spur of energized panic, I took off running.

“Drop that backpack!” the saleswoman commanded. “What else did you take from my office?”

Ignoring her, I ran faster.

“Stop, thief! Someone catch her!”

Skidding around a corner, Alyce’s sneakers squeaked like they were screaming in protest. Up ahead was an exit. I sprinted for the double glass doors, slamming them open, blinking at natural brightness. I was outside!

The sun was disappearing behind the western hills—which surprised me, since I’d assumed it was morning. How long had I been in that coffin anyway? Fortunately, Green Briar Mortuary had more artificial lighting than a shopping mall at Christmas, so I could see just fine. With a quick glance, I took in the lush mowed lawn stretching out to a gated cemetery, the near-empty parking lot, and the startled look of a tattooed gardener as I jumped over the corner of the rose bed he was pruning. He swore, yelling for me to stop.

But I kept running.

Behind me, voices rose in anger. I caught the word “police,” which spurred me to run like escaping arrest was an Olympic event and I was sprinting for a medal. I hadn’t done anything wrong ... but what about Alyce? If she’d broken laws, she must have had a good reason. Without knowing that reason, all I could do was make sure my best friend didn’t get caught.

Racing around a corner of the building, I headed for the parking lot. I hoped to find Alyce’s car—but I didn’t see it. How had she gotten here? No time to wonder, I realized, glancing over my shoulder. The saleswoman had given up the pursuit, but the tattooed gardener—who was younger and faster—was gaining on me.

Up ahead, a fence spread around the cemetery. I’d once tried to climb a

cemetery fence with disastrous results. Not going through that again. I veered away, down the sidewalk of a street so desolate I didn't see a single car driving by. My breath rasped and my legs ached like they were about to fall off, but I kept running, too scared to give up.

Hearing a shout behind me, I realized the gardener was getting even closer. I pushed myself faster but knew I couldn't keep it up much longer, especially with the pounding in my chest and the heavy backpack slamming against my shoulders.

Attacking footsteps thudded louder, terrifyingly close now. I looked around frantically, searching for a building or yard to hide in. But the paved road, bordered by chain-link fencing and rural fields, stretched on endlessly.

Then I heard a honk and roaring engine.

Startled, I glanced back at a familiar blue Toyota zooming toward me. The passenger window was down. A girl with curly brown hair waved at me from behind the wheel.

"Amber!" she called in a voice I knew as well as my own.

When the car slowed beside me, I stared in shock.

At my own face.

“Hurry! Get in!”

I hesitated, but only for the micro-second it took me to glance back and see the gardener barely a leap away. Grabbing onto the door handle, I swung myself inside the Toyota (my mother’s car) and slammed the door. My rescuer punched the accelerator and we were out of there. The side mirror flashed a glimpse of the gardener as he flipped me off.

Turning slowly, I studied my rescuer. Me ... yet not me. I had a good idea who was temporarily residing in my body—but still, it was a shock to come face-to-face with myself and realize that she wasn’t me. Like being trapped in a crazy dream where shards of reality swirled into kaleidoscope fragments.

First thought: *No way! I can’t be both the passenger and the driver of this car.*

Second thought: *Why is my body wearing a dress and (horrors!) nylons?*

Third thought: *Is that a zit growing on my chin?*

Insanity squared by Impossibility = Belief.

The last time I'd seen my real body had been a lifetime ago. Well ... actually only yesterday, but it felt longer. After living other lives for a few weeks, I'd finally, happily reunited with my own less-than-perfect-but-100-percent-wonderful body. Being myself—Amber Borden—was seriously heaven. I'd hugged my parents, played with my little triplet sisters, and cuddled my cat Snowy. It was like a Hallmark Channel homecoming, complete with tears, kisses, and laughter—except that an important person was missing from the happy reunion equation.

My BFF, Alyce.

She'd refused to even speak to me—which I deserved. While I had been body-switching my way through solving problems for other people, my best friend was going through a crisis. She wouldn't say what was wrong, only that she needed to talk. She'd begged me to come over but I'd let her down. So when Grammy Greta asked me to become my best friend (literally), how could I refuse? It was my chance to fix things with Alyce. Besides, if someone had to temporarily live my best friend's life, who better for the job than me?

So Alyce was off taking a soul vacation, and I was residing in her body.

This left my real body minus one resident.

Guess who'd stepped up for the job?

“Grammy?” I asked uncertainly as I clicked the seat belt into place.

She nodded. “Surprise, sweetie.”

My voice. My face. My grandmother.

“Yes,” she said cheerfully. “It really is me.”

“Oh. My. God.”

“My sentiments exactly. We have a lot to be thankful for,” Grammy Greta said with a reverent glance upward. “This is an amazing opportunity for both of us.”

“Amazing. Definitely,” I said, feeling dizzy as I stared at myself. I should have expected this, especially since I'd agreed to the plan, but up close and in person it blew my mind. I could hardly believe it was happening. “You really are in my body.”

“I promise to take good care of it until you return. Our assignments shouldn't last for more than a few days, so relax and make the best of this experience.”

“I don’t even know how to start my assignment.”

“You’ve already started.”

“I have? How?” I shook my head, even more confused. “By being chased out of a mortuary? I don’t know what’s going on with Alyce. Is there any way of contacting her? Where exactly is she?”

“You know better than to ask those sorts of questions.” Grammy’s clipped tone slammed the door on my curiosity. “There isn’t much time. I need to get you home.”

“Home would be great! I can’t wait to see everybody.” My relief was huge—mostly because I’d been dreading facing Alyce’s disagreeable mother. Mrs. Perfetti had this way of looking at me like I was a puddle of pee the cat left on her floor.

“Sorry, sweetie, but you misunderstood.”

“Can’t I go back home with you?”

Grammy shook her curly head (well, *my* curly head actually, but if I started getting picky about pronouns I’d go crazy). “Don’t you remember the Nine Divine Rules for Temp Lifers?” she asked.

I bit my lip, nodding.

“Then you know the first rule: *Follow through on your Host Body’s obligations and plans*. You’re Alyce now, not Amber. While you’re in Alyce’s body, her house *is* your home.”

“But what if her house sucks? She doesn’t stay there much and would rather hang at my place. Bending the rules won’t hurt anything. We could tell everyone I’m ... I mean, Alyce ... is sleeping over with Amber.”

“Did she make plans to sleep over tonight?”

“Um ... no.”

“Well, then. You know what you have to do—the sooner the better.” Grammy glanced in the rearview mirror, furrowing her brow. “Delay could be dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” I asked uneasily, still a little out of breath from all that running.

“There are always risks.”

“You mean ... Dark Lifers?” I shivered, remembering my recent encounters

with dark souls who refused to stay dead and hijacked living bodies. Except for a glowing grayness around their hands, they appeared like ordinary humans ... until they reached out with predatory fingers and stole your energy.

“I have no evidence for concern.” Grammy glanced over her shoulder. “Still, we must remain cautious.”

“But you’re in charge of the Temp Lifer program—you should know everything.”

“Not for this assignment. I can’t tell you much,” she added with a shrug, momentarily lifting her hands from the wheel—which spun wildly and sent the car careening toward a telephone pole.

“Grammy!” I cried, clutching my seat. “Hands on the wheel!”

“Relax. I have it completely under control.”

She grabbed the wheel and jerked back into the right lane, giving me a determined smile. I had this flashback of myself showing similar confidence when I’d gotten lost driving, exaggerating how I had everything “under control” when inside my fears flapped like birds spinning blindly in a wind tunnel.

Was Grammy nervous, too, and hiding it?

“As I was saying ... ” With only one hand on the wheel, she turned back to me. “Someone else is handling my job while I’m Earthbound, so I don’t have any upside information.”

“Then how did you know I was in trouble?”

“I received a short message with a map and a voice relay.”

“What’s a voice relay?”

“Unexplainable in Earth terms, but what matters is that I’ve been warned to hurry because of possible danger.”

My heart jumped. “Danger?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing more than a routine cautionary message.” She glanced in the rearview mirror then back at me. “I haven’t seen anything unusual although I’ve had this prickly feeling, like I’m being watched. But my perceptions are clouded while I’m in a physical form. Until our assignments end, I’m human just like you.”

Her words seemed like a bad pun considering that she was speaking through my voice. She wasn’t “just like me,” she *was* me. And I doubted I’d ever get

used to the weirdness of body-swapping.

We'd gone far enough now that Green Briar Mortuary was rapidly fading to a bad memory. We passed under a Spanish stucco archway into a subdivision where all the homes were mission-styled: stucco siding, square and rectangular, a few even rising up to bell towers. My grandmother made a sudden left, turning so sharply I banged my elbow on the door. After "ouch" and "sorry," we didn't say anything for blocks. I was lost in thoughts about my assignment, trying to guess why Alyce had broken into the mortuary. Was she looking for something? Hiding from someone? Checking sale prices on caskets?

"You all right, sweetie?" Grammy patted my arm.

"Define 'all right.'" I stared at her. "I still can't get used to you ... I mean, me."

"Isn't it a kick?" She chuckled. "It's *déjà vu*, since I used to look a lot like you when I was a teen. Although it's hard adjusting to the restrictions of a physical body—not being able to levitate or pass through solid objects. I got scratched trying to get inside this car without opening the door." She pointed to a reddish scrape on her arm.

"Grammy, be careful with my body. It may not be perfect, but it's all I've got."

"No worries. I'll get accustomed to gravity and solid matter soon. Look how fast I've adapted to driving."

"Speaking of which," I said, frowning, "why are you driving?"

"It's faster than walking."

"I'm serious, Grammy. You don't have a license and never learned to drive."

"What's to learn?" She hit the gas pedal too sharply, jerking me forward. "I put the key in and twist. I figured out that the little *D* means drive. And the *R* means right."

"No! *R* is reverse!"

"That explains a lot." The car jerked back, then forward. "What's this red button?"

"Don't touch! That's for hazard lights!" I pulled at her arm. "Grammy, be careful. Mom will go ballistic if you dent her car."

"Your mother always did overreact. Luckily I'll be around for a while to help

her get organized and give her advice on raising the triplets.”

“Heaven help her,” I murmured, remembering how I used to cover my ears with my hands whenever Mom and Grammy had one of their “rows,” as Grammy called it.

“What did you say?” Grammy Greta asked.

“That I think it would help if I drove.”

“No time for that. I have to get back before Theresa—I mean, *Mom*—misses the car.”

“Please tell me you didn’t take Mom’s car without asking permission.”

“How else was I going to find you quickly?”

I groaned, visualizing being grounded for the rest of the school year and probably all summer, too.

A traffic light blinked from green to yellow and Grammy punched the brakes. This time I was prepared, grabbing tightly to the hand rest. I glanced with relief at the empty crosswalk, glad there weren’t any pedestrians for Grammy to run over.

“I’m getting the hang of this driving gig,” she said with a smile that radiated her own quirky personality. “I always meant to learn to drive. I may still.”

“Why bother? You’re already dead.”

“Dead is such a misunderstood word.”

“I was at your funeral.”

“Do I look dead to you?”

“No, you look like me and I look like Alyce, but we both know that’s not real.”

“Being a Temp Lifer is a real and a solemn responsibility,” my grandmother said. “It’s not a game.”

“I know, I know.” I rubbed my forehead. “I’m hearing my voice and watching my lips speak to me. It’s all so freaky.”

Grammy laughed. “Like that movie *Freaky Friday*.”

“Worse. That was a comedy and what we’re going through is serious drama.”

“You’re right—our assignments are serious. We must use paramount caution.”

“Paramount caution?” I repeated, rolling my eyes. “Grammy, you *cannot* talk like that when you’re me.”

“Talk like what? I’m not clear on your meaning; could you elaborate?”

“No one elaborates at my age. Grammy, do you even hear yourself? You lecture me on how to behave, yet you’re not making any changes yourself. I mean, look at how you dressed. I didn’t even know I had a pair of nylons.”

“I found these in your mother’s room.”

“You snooped in Mom’s room?” I asked, horrified.

“How else could I find something decent to wear? This dress was in the back of your closet. It’s a little tight but I think it looks nice.”

“Nice as in boring and hideous,” I groaned. “There was a reason it was hidden in the back of my closet—it was a birthday gift from Aunt Suzanne.”

“My Suzy always did have excellent fashion sense. But I thought you two didn’t get along.”

“We don’t. I should have burned that dress.” I stuck out my tongue. “While you’re in my body, no more dresses and never, ever nylons. Wear jeans and T-shirts.”

She blinked like this was a startling idea. “Well ... I suppose you’re right.”

“Yes, Gram, I am. Trust me on that.”

“But outward appearance is a trivial preoccupation with no redeeming value.”

“Grammy, you’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

I sighed. What was I thinking when I agreed to let Grammy take over my life? She hadn’t been young since the last millennium. This assignment was going to be a disaster. I never should have accepted it—yet I couldn’t abandon Alyce to an unknown Temp Lifer any more than I could leave ratty Monkey Bag in a mortuary.

We had reached a familiar neighborhood with an eclectic blend of old homes. My high school was just two blocks to the left and if we kept going straight we’d run into Molly Brown Lane, where a right turn would take us to my house and a left to Alyce’s house.

“Almost there.” I pressed my lips tight so I wouldn’t beg Grammy to turn

around. But Grammy had always been strict when it came to rules—at least for other people. Her double standard made Mom crazy.

She slowed to a jerky yield, then hit the gas (too hard) and turned on Alyce's street. Just a few more blocks and we'd reach the Perfetti house.

"Trust your instincts and you'll sail through this assignment," Grammy said, squeezing my hand. "You might even have fun."

I thought of my "fun" at the mortuary and shook my head firmly. "Doubtful."

"When did you become so negative?"

"It's called being realistic. So far this assignment has gone all wrong."

"Can't you find anything positive to say?"

"Well, I'm glad I didn't lose Monkey Bag," I said, gesturing to the backpack now resting on the seat beside me.

"Ah yes, that old ratty backpack." Grammy smiled fondly. "Little Alyce used to carry it everywhere."

"She still does. If she has any important papers or lists, I'll find them in this bag, which will really help me solve her problems."

"Solving problems isn't your assignment." Grammy wagged a finger at me warningly. "We had this discussion last time. Temp Lifers are merely stand-ins until their Host Body can return, strong enough to face their own problems."

"I did more than stand-in for Leah and Sharayah. I improved their lives."

"Not without complications. You were lucky."

Lucky? Is that what Grammy really thought? Sure, I'd made mistakes (knowingly and unknowingly) during my assignments, but they'd been successful nevertheless. I'd thought Grammy was proud of me ... but maybe I was wrong. Was this assignment Grammy's way of giving me another chance to prove myself?

"Tell me more about my assignment," I asked in my most businesslike tone.

"You'll find everything you need in there." She pointed to the glove box.

"Huh?" I raised my brows.

"Look inside."

I popped the glove box open, expecting to find stuff like a car manual, maps, and Mom's cell phone. Those things were there, but so was something small and

wonderful that made me give a shout-out for joy.

“The GEM! Thank you, Grammy!”

“Not just any GEM.” She smiled. “The same one from your last assignment.”

Almost reverently, I picked up the palm-sized book otherwise known as a Guidance Evaluation Manual. The plain gold book appeared boring, but it was a communicator to the other side with audio, video, and text connections. All I had to do was ask a question and the book would create its own answer.

“Go ahead. Ask it anything,” Grammy told me.

Eagerly, I opened the GEM to the first page. It was blank, but I expected that and knew what to do next.

“Why was Alyce inside a coffin?” I asked the tiny book.

A spot of black ink spread and stretched into words across the page.

Hiding.

Not very informative since I’d guessed that already. While the GEM was helpful, it also had a habit of giving annoying answers that led to more questions.

“Why was she at the mortuary?” I tried again.

Searching.

“Searching for what?”

The lost.

“That doesn’t tell me anything,” I griped.

While I was deciding what to ask next, pages flipped wildly as if caught up in a sudden storm. Then the book snapped shut like a slap in my face. When I tried to pry it open, the pages stubbornly stayed closed.

“Open!” I ordered, shaking it.

“It has a mind of its own,” Grammy said. “You can’t force it.”

“Stupid book is giving me attitude.”

“Don’t take it personally. The GEM is only a tool and not designed to solve

your Host Soul's problems. Personally, I find them annoying and won't use one for my assignment."

"But your assignment is easy." I glared at my traitorous GEM, then banished it inside the front pocket on Monkey Bag. "You already know all about me. And Mom is your daughter, so you know everything about her, too."

"Do you know everything about her?"

I shrugged. "Mom is Mom. What else is there to know?"

"I'm not really sure ... yet," Grammy said, with an odd expression that made me wonder what she was thinking.

Before I could ask, she slammed the brakes and I was jerked forward, then back, like a crash test dummy until we came to a stop on the curb in front of a brown, L-shaped corner house that I knew too well.

But the view through Alyce's eyes distorted the familiar, so that everything I saw seemed different. It was as if I'd entered a foreign country with no knowledge of customs or language. Shadows were deepening with the setting sun, turning the ordinary into the ominous. The sprawling oak I'd climbed countless times to sneak into Alyce's bedroom window stood there, starkly forbidding, its trunk a twisted grimace of pain, its limp leaves drooping like shadowy tears. A chilly breeze shivered its bony branches, which looked like arms waving me away.

Grammy Greta came around to meet me as I stepped out of the passenger door. "Sorry to leave you like this, but I can't stay."

"I know ... although I wish you could." I bit my lip.

"You'll be fine."

"Of course, I'm always fine, but ... " I swallowed hard. "Drive safely ... Amber."

"I will ... Alyce." When she embraced me, I closed my eyes and, for a wonderful moment, I was hugging my silver-haired, soft, comfortable grandmother.

Then she drove away, and I was alone.

The sun was disappearing fast behind distant hills; it was the time most families prepared dinner. But there was no sound of voices from this house, only the soft jingle of a wind chime hanging over the front porch. The front yard was

dark without a porch light, and the darkly draped windows were like eyes closed in sleep.

Resisting the impulse to turn around, I walked up the front porch steps.

Crimson flickered through slits in the drapes.

And I smelled smoke.

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