

Chapter One

Funeral

Amanda retreated inside her stone to rest while her brother and mother huddled in the master bedroom. She hoped her father would kill that bastard, but doubt assailed her mind. Wouldn't her father go to prison for killing him? Wouldn't that leave her mother and brother in deep trouble?

Could she kill him instead?

That thought consumed her as she sat down in her little cottage. Her bare bottom smacked the cold wood of the chair, surprising her a little. She guessed she was mortal-like in this world of hers. It would be nice if she could find some cloth or something to cover herself, but there wasn't even a drapery or rug to be found anywhere.

Why is this place without clothes, or cloth of any sort, if it can make furniture and whole buildings? she wondered in frustration.

She realized she'd pulled herself far away from her original goal and roughly brought her tired mind back to the matter at hand. She already knew the answer. Her weary and exhausted spirit had nothing left to give tonight, and she knew it.

As the realization sank in she peered through a window and saw the police talking to her mother and brother. She could listen in, but she is so tired! She needed rest!

This doesn't make any sense, I'm dead. How can I be tired?

There was an answer here, but she couldn't see it. Besides, it was pleasantly dark and seemed like night. The crystals on the walls, that had been shining brilliantly when she left, now barely glimmered, like veiled stars in the night sky.

The last thing she remembered seeing, before sleep claimed her, was the sight of her mother filling the sky as she cradled Mark and laid him to rest on the bed before lying down next to him.

It took weeks before she was ready to try again. She'd kept an eye on outside developments, often climbing or floating up to the top of the crystals to sit on one and listen to the conversations. Sometimes she felt almost as if she were her brother, or seeing through his eyes. To say the feeling was bizarre was an understatement.

Outside her sanctuary she was treated with the unusual experience of watching the aftermath of her own murder. Her room became a crime scene, blocked with tape. Mark peeked in one day and saw many of her things missing, including her notebooks, pens and papers, the tickets she'd purchased just for them...even samples of her dirty laundry.

When she saw them bagging her socks and panties she first thought, *those sick bastards!*, faded as she realized they'd taken her clothes for dogs to try and find her.

But how would they even know where to start looking? She knew his dump site had been carefully selected for its remoteness. It wasn't likely that they would find it by chance, unless they could force him to talk. To her surprise, he did, and her parents were duly informed that she'd been found. She never forgot the look on their faces when they returned from the town morgue after identifying her.

Alas, if only that had been the worst of it all! Mark took to being despondent and uncommunicative. He cried himself to sleep at night, starting the evening between his parents and ending outside her door. Her parents would have to collect him and bring him back to sleep. Her father slept with a gun next to the bed at night.

Every time he did so she wished she could leave the stone and go to him, but every time she tried, either climbing the crystals or floating upwards, she got so tired before she could reach the ceiling that she couldn't do anything more but drop back in defeat.

Then came the day she dreaded most, the day her body was going to be buried.

It started off all right. Mark got up, washed and dressed in a suit laid out by their mother. He breakfasted with their parents, his hand straying to the necklace. Each time his fingers brushed the stone, Amanda felt a jolt of energy, like drinking a cup of coffee.

The white-washed Elmwood God's Service Church had stood on Grave Hill since time immemorial. Its huge stain glassed windows, filled with holy scenes from the bible except the big one above the Rosary showing the founding of the town, gave the interior a cheerful cast. Rising from the ground the bell tower jutted out like a huge bone stuck in the earth, a glint from the top hinting at the great bronze bell.

Inside the warm interior of the church Amanda could see her plain white coffin laid in state at the pulpit. Its lid was tightly shut but she could see a blue aura inside just like when she was buried.

So this is what it looks like. It's so weird to be here for my own service. Kinda like that episode of Castle where that guy faked his death and went to his own funeral.

Her parents put Mark into the front pew. As they talked to the preacher, who stood in plain clothes by the side of the church, Mark scrunched his knees against his chest as he stared dully at the coffin in front of him. Tears flowed from his cheeks and dripped onto the stone.

Every tear made the crystals glow brighter and brighter. Amanda stared. She felt incredibly sad. Anguished. Energized! She felt plugged into a reactor, as energy flooded into every cell of her being.

She rose into the air, passing her best attempts in seconds. The cavern skin shimmered, and she found herself standing outside.

"Wha-?" she gasped.

Her wild gaze settled on Mark sitting next to her unmoved. He didn't see her! He was staring at the coffin.

"Mark!" she gasped. Quickly she bent over him. His eyes did not see her this time and she realized she was still invisible.

"Mark, it's me, Amanda." she said, taking his hand in hers.

Mark jumped a little, staring curiously at his hand.

"C-cold." he shivered.

Amanda bit her lip. How could she do anything? She wanted to comfort him, but appearing in the church probably would start a panic. She needed to wait, but she wouldn't abandon him. Sitting beside him, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and just held him close.

"Oh, short stuff." she said quietly. "I didn't want to leave. I never wanted this. I just wanted true love. I thought I had it, but I was wrong. I already did. I shouldn't have left you guys."

Her eyes strayed to the seven-foot white pine box that had become her body's final bed.

"I'm dead." she said, tears in her eyes. "I'm gone now. I can't feel the sun on my skin, or hold you up in my arms and play with you. I can't find true love."

Resting her head on his shoulder, she tried to shake off her melancholy.

"But you're alive. If there's something good out of this, it's that you are still here. And I guess in a way I will be too."

One finger brushed the smooth stone of his necklace.

"Right here, with you always. Don't worry brother, I will protect you."

Her gaze was drawn upward to the statue of Christ looking down upon her from the cross. She couldn't tell if his eyes condemned her or not. Compelled, she spoke to it.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't go. But my family means more to me than anything in my life, or afterlife I guess. I don't know what it is anymore, or what I'm to do here on Earth except keep him safe. But I beg you, please Lord, please let me keep them safe."

She got up from Mark's side, came to her coffin, and knelt.

"I swear," she said, her eyes still locked on the statue. "I swear over my dead body and my soul, that I will protect my brother from all danger, and will not falter no matter what comes. Please grant me the strength to fulfill my vow."

She bowed her head. For a moment, just an instant, she felt a soft touch on the back of her neck. Just a brush, as of fingers caressing the hairs on her nape, leaving a tingle there that spread through her entire body and vanished.

She looked up quickly, but saw nothing. Unless...

She frowned, shook her head, and looked again. For just an instant, she could have sworn she saw a pleased smile on the statue of Christ. But it had come and gone so quickly that she wasn't sure she had imagined it.

Sitting down next to Mark, she held him again as more and more griever came through the doors. The priest vanished into a side alcove and her parents came to sit beside Mark.

Amanda shifted off the pew and instead sat at Mark's feet, it being the only spot open to her without going back into the neck. She held his hand, which turned a tinge of blue by the end of the service, four hours later. She listened as her high school friends, workmates, family and college friends all came to stand at the pulpit and tell about her life. She blushed at some of the stories that she knew to be exaggerated, making her into quite a hero. She'd never done any of that. Well, she had, but not to that level. It was embarrassing the way they spoke. Then her brother stood and walked to the pulpit with their father. Amanda walked with them, her heart hammering in her chest. What would he say? Could he even talk?

Mark took the microphone and in a broken voice told the church how much he missed his sister. Overcome with grief, their father comforted him while the congregation sobbed. Amanda hugged them both, weeping herself. For just a heartbeat, the passing flight of fancy or daydream, there seemed to the rest of the church a shimmer onstage with them.

They came down together and Amanda took her place again to be close to her brother. After the ceremony the pallbearers came and carried her coffin out the doors with Mark standing solemnly. As her father was one of them, she could now stand next to him freely, and she held him as close as her mother as they passed by.

She stood with him by her grave, as the first shovelfuls fell over the lid. She stayed in the car ride home and hovered over him as he negotiated the "wake" at their house. She saw so many friends there! But Mark quickly made his way to his room where he threw himself onto his bed and sobbed.

"Oh, Short Stuff," she said, "I didn't want to hurt you. I never wanted that."

"Amanda!"

He snapped upright in an instant, looking around for her. Amanda started to try and appear, but a glimmer of light from the necklace distracted her. What was that? Mark noticed it too. Forgetting himself, he curiously grabbed it. The moment he did so his expression relaxed and he slumped back into bed.

"Mark!"

Panicking, Amanda pried his fingers from the stone. He opened his eyes and looked right at her.

"Amandaaaa, I'm so glad you're home." He slurred. "Everyone thought you were dead...but they never opened the box. Knew it was empty...you were here the whole time weren't you? Knew you'd never leave me alone."

"Shush, short stuff." Amanda said tenderly, relieved that he was okay. She placed her head on his and shivered. But when she went to pull away he grabbed her and held her close.

"It's okay. They weren't lying to you, little brother." Her voice cracked. "I wish it was a prank. God, I wish it was. I'd give anything to be back with you and mom and dad, but I'm not. I...I'm dead."

Her grip tightened on him as he clutched her closer.

"You can't be dead. You'll leave me alone!" Mark sobbed, holding her as tight as he could, ignoring the freezing cold that stabbed his skin.

"I am, little brother. But I'm not leaving you alone. NEVER. I'm going to be with you every step of the way, making sure no one EVER hurts you. I'll always protect you. Always."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"That's good." Mark yawned. "Excuse me. I feel so...tired...all of a...sudden."

Amanda tenderly straightened him on his bed and placed his head on his pillow. She bent and kissed him on his forehead.

"Sleep little brother. I'll be with you, though you may not see me. I'll always be close."

He fell asleep.

Amanda sighed in relief, looking at his angelic face. That had been close! She glared at the stone that was her home. Did it have something to do with Mark's weakness? She could have sworn it had drained him somehow. As he'd gotten weaker, she'd gotten stronger. Strong enough to appear.

If only she had an idea of what was going on! Was the stone even safe for Mark to wear? Could she be the biggest danger Mark faced? She was meant to protect him, dammit! Not be the one putting him in danger!

Confused and scared, she paced back and forth at the side of his bed, invisible. She hardly noticed when, two hours later, her mother came in to check on Mark. He woke up when she kissed his brow.

"Oh!" she said, surprised when he opened his eyes. "Sorry baby, I thought you were asleep. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Momma! I saw her! I saw Amanda!" he said excitedly. "She was right here in this room. She said she really is dead." He hung his head. "But she promised never to leave me! She's going to stay!"

Amanda felt a surge of happiness at his excitement.

His mother stared at him, tears brimming over in her eyes. She was crying.

"Mom?" Mark asked.

"Oh, honey. That...that's wonderful. And so like your sister. You two were so close! I'm...glad that you...er...talked to her. I'm sure she is watching over you right now."

You know it, mom, Amanda thought as her mother hugged him tight.

"Now go to sleep. Remember, Amanda's watching you now and will tell me if you don't."

"Yes momma."

As she closed the door she heard her mutter, "Just a dream. But it would be so nice if it were true."

"It is true, Mom." Amanda said to her just as it clicked shut. "I promise."