

Guardian

By James Mascia

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Okay. So I'm dead. It's not so bad. Is it?

Letting your girlfriend, who only has her learner's permit, drive your car is never a good idea. But when Brittany looked at me with those "puppy-dog" eyes of hers, I couldn't resist.

The next thing I knew I was surrounded by cop cars and staring down at my own bruised and broken body laying on the double yellow lines of Route 41. I tried desperately to get someone's attention, hoping someone could tell me what happened. All the cops, the EMS volunteers and even the firemen ignored me.

"Sir," I said, to one of the passing officers, a tubby man, nursing a half drunk cup of Starbucks. "Can you tell me what happened? Where's Brittany?"

He walked right past, without a glance in my direction. Frustrated, I reached out to grab his shoulder, "Answer me, will you! Tell me where Brittany is."

My hand went right through his uniform and stuck into his back. The officer kept walking, but I didn't miss his shuddered, "Chilly tonight." He took another sip of his coffee.

What in the world was going on?

It took only a couple minutes to figure out my predicament. No matter whom I approached, who I spoke to, they all looked past me. Even when I flailed my arms or jabbed my face in theirs. I couldn't get hold any of them. Every time I tried, my arm swiped right through them, sending a feeling of fire shooting up through my arm. I was definitely dead – no doubt about it.

I followed the cop with the Starbucks cup and stood three feet away as he bent over my prone body beside the still-warm car. I saw the flash of his nametag—Mallory—as he reached into my jeans and pulled my wallet out. Opening it, he said in a very robotic tone, "Barnes, Robert.. Age 17."

"Bobby," I corrected, then mentally slapped myself. Here I was,

decomposing on the ground, and all I cared about was the officer calling me by my proper name. How sick is that?

Another officer, whose badge read “Franklin,” stood next to me scribbling down information as Mallory read it from my license.

“See if we can contact his parents. They aren’t going to be too happy,” Mallory ordered the other man.

The way he said it, so detached, as if he saw something like this everyday, made me want to hit him. My mother would be more than unhappy. She would be crushed. I pictured her collapsing to the ground at our front door, balling her eyes out, while my father tried to hold back the tears he desperately needed to shed.

Franklin looked up from his report pad. “What about the girl?”

“Brittany Hamilton, 16. Critical condition. Contact parents and have them meet us at County Hospital.”

For a second, I was relieved. Brittany was alive. Suddenly, my body felt cold. The two officers, standing over my body, both shivered. Steam rose from their open mouths.

I shouldn’t have been relieved Brittany wasn’t dead. She’d been the one who’d killed me. If she hadn’t been driving...

She needed to pay for that. I would make her pay. My hands clenched as I imagined myself wringing her neck. Quickly, my mind reminded me that I couldn’t grasp anything. The thought calmed me, only for a moment.

Mallory shook the folds from a white sheet, bent and covered my body with it. Then the two cops walked away.

“I hate nights like these,” Mallory announced, draining the last of his coffee. “Now we’re going to have to deal with the parents. And they’re gonna look at us like it’s all our fault.”

I followed them to their car for the ride to the hospital.

They climbed into the vehicle. I reached for the handle to open the rear door, and cursed as my fingers went through.

I realized I could simply slip through the door into the car, so I climbed into the rear, desperately hoping I wouldn’t fly out the back when they pulled away. They were laughing at something as they sat in the front seats. I couldn’t believe it. They were laughing and having

a good time while my dead body was growing cold on the pavement not fifty feet away.

Unable to control my anger, I punched right through the back of Mallory's head. It wouldn't do anything, but at least it made me feel better.

"Why's it so cold in here?" He rubbed his hands over his arms.

"I don't know," Franklin responded. "Maybe the AC's up too high." He wound the dial on the dashboard.

As the car pulled away, I braced myself against the seat. I didn't fly through the back. Instead, I moved with the car as if I was a perfectly living human being. Breathing a sigh of relief, I sat back and went along for the ride.

I pretty much ignored the officers as they chatted about their plans for the weekend. Every word they spoke only made me angrier. They showed no compassion for someone who'd just died. I wondered if they even cared.

It didn't take long before the large brick hospital building loomed ahead. I'd only been there once before, when I broke my ankle playing basketball in eighth grade. It looked much the same as it had then. The two cops even pulled up to the same entrance I'd been wheeled through.

No wheelchair tonight. Not for me anyway.

The cops got out of the car and entered the Emergency Room. I followed closely behind as they walked up to the reception desk. They waited for the nurse frantically moving about behind it. She looked like she was trying to do a million things at once. By the amount of people in the waiting room, I could tell it was a busier than normal evening. Only then did I notice how loud everything was. It sounded like a bomb had gone off in my head, as the talking, the ringing phones, the beeping instruments, and the PA announcements merged into a continuous cacophony of sound.

Finally, after sliding a couple of charts onto a cart, that another nurse wheeled away, she returned to the reception desk. She was young and looked pretty athletic, but even so, when she spoke, she sounded out of breath. "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

“A teenage girl was brought in a few minutes ago,” Mallory said in the robotic, uncaring tone that was really pissing me off. “Brittany Hamilton. Car wreck. Listed as critical.”

“They just wheeled her into ICU.” The nurse barely looking at them as she recited the information. She pointed to the left. “Down and to the right,” she snapped. Then she grabbed another chart and called out, “Pierce, Anthony!”

Following the officers, I trudged up the hallway, growing angrier with each step as I got closer and closer to the girl who’d essentially murdered me. The hall itself was empty. The further we got from the Emergency Room, the quieter and calmer everything got.

Before we rounded the corner to the Intensive Care Unit, I knew Brittany was already here. Her familiar jeans and t-shirt lay in a bloodied heap on the floor outside a room, waiting for someone to come and pick them up and trash them.

She lay there, in a hospital gown, already hooked up to several machines, monitoring her heart and brain activity. A plastic hose stuck out of her nose, feeding oxygen to her system. Cuts and bruises covered pretty much every inch of visible skin. It even looked like some of her lovely blonde hair had been cut or ripped out in the crash. For a moment, I felt sorry for her. Then I remembered that she was the one who’d killed me.

A doctor entered the room, the doors sliding apart with a whoosh. I followed him in, and stood at the end of Brittany’s bed. She looked so weak – so helpless. I was torn between my want to rush to her side and my need to throttle her.

The doctor examined a chart in a slot at the end of Brittany’s bed, then he squinted at the monitors. He shook his head. He didn’t say a word, but scribbled something on the chart and placed it back in the slot. I tried grabbing it, to see what it said. But once again, my phantom hands failed me. I could no more grab that chart than I could strangle lying there so innocently.

The doors whooshed open and shut behind me as the doctor exited. In the hallway, I saw the doctor talking with the two officers. Turning my back on them, I stepped around the side of Brittany’s

bed. I suddenly felt cold as a wave of rage crashed upon me. She shouldn't have been driving. I shouldn't have let her.

Suddenly, I realized I no longer knew who I was angry at – her or me. Sure, she'd driven the car, but I'd been the one to hand her the keys. In a way, the whole mess was my fault too.

She shivered. A wisp of steam rose from her mouth. My anger was making her cold. No longer sure what to do, I stepped through the glass just as the doctor walked away from the officers.

"It's a shame." Franklin peered through the glass separating Brittany from us. "Such a pretty girl. Probably won't survive the night."

My head spun in his direction. "What do you mean she won't last the night?" I shouted. "She's still alive. Don't give up on her yet!"

At this point, I knew better than to expect a response. "I'm going to food court. Need some coffee," Franklin looked through me at Mallory. "Want anything?"

Mallory shook his head. "I'll wait for her parents."

Franklin left. I stood next to Mallory and waited for Brittany's parents to arrive.

What was I going to do? I was dead. There was no going back. I couldn't very well float around without a body forever. Where were the angels they told us about in church, ready to take us up to heaven? Was everything I'd been told wrong? Or had I missed my opportunity somehow? Maybe I wasn't supposed to go to heaven. Maybe my spirit was meant to stay here on Earth forever.

"She's gonna be okay," I muttered. Staring at my near-dead girlfriend, I prayed I was right, though I was no longer sure who I was praying to exactly. All I knew was that more than anything, she needed to live. If not, I would blame myself forever – and it seemed like I would have an eternity to do so.

A few minutes later, Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton arrived, clutching each other. I recognized them immediately, having been to their house many times over the last year. Mrs. Hamilton was already beside herself, tears and mascara ran down her cheeks. Mr. Hamilton held his wife, trying to keep her calm. I could tell by his posture, he was just as worried as her.

He stepped up to the window to Brittany's room. "Officer, what happened?"

Mallory moved close to Mr. Hamilton and smiled. I wanted to hit the officer. Didn't he know that the one thing he shouldn't do in a situation like this was smile?

"Officer Mallory." He extended his hand.

"What happened?" Mr. Hamilton repeated.

Mallory grew serious finally. He turned his head and looked at Brittany, lying motionless in the bed. "They were coming around a corner on Route 41. A drunk driver swerved across the highway and hit them head on."

"Oh, my God!" Mrs. Hamilton gasped and clamped a hand over her mouth.

A drunk driver?

Then it hit me. Images flashed through my head. We were on our way back from the football game. She begged me to drive, and I let her. I talked about our plans for the weekend. But she was so nervous driving, trying so hard to concentrate on the road that she hardly paid attention. We came down the road – the sharp curve near Baily Hill. All I saw were the headlights.

"Oh, my God!" I repeated. It hadn't been my fault either. Some careless, drunken fool had done this.

"Fortunately, the driver's side airbag deployed," Mallory continued. "She's lucky to be alive."

"But what about..." Mrs. Hamilton began, but cut herself off, turning to her husband. "Brittany was driving? Weren't they in Bobby's car?"

He looked at his wife, as if to tell her she already knew the answer to the unasked question.

She collapsed on the spotless tile floor.

"I'm sorry," Mallory explained. "Robert Barnes was thrown through the windshield and died on impact."

I closed my eyes and looked away. Hearing about my own death made me sick to my non-existent stomach. Having my girlfriend's parents told in front of me, and watching them grieve, made it even

worse. I wasn't their son, but I'd been a part of their family.

I definitely didn't want to be around when my mother was informed of my demise.

Suddenly, alarms blared in Brittany's room. I leaped through the wall, landing beside her bed. Her heart monitor showed a steady line instead of the usual zigzag beating of her heart. Her body still lay motionless, but her chest wasn't even rising and falling anymore to the rhythm of her breathing.

The doctor and a couple of nurses rushed into the room. Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton tried to push in also, but officer Mallory stepped in their way, blocking their path. "Let the doctor's do their job," he said.

"That's my daughter!" Mr. Hamilton objected.

Then the door whooshed shut, taking their words too.

Would Brittany be joining me in a few minutes? Or would her eyes suddenly flutter open? I didn't know, but one way or the other, I would be there for her – whether she knew it or not.

The doctor removed the tube from her nose as a nurse administered air to her. The other nurse grabbed the defibrillator from its perch on the wall and began charging it. Meanwhile, the doctor lowered Brittany's gown, baring her chest to the onlookers.

"Clear!" the nurse shouted, then applied to the two paddles to Brittany's skin. A loud bang issued. Brittany's body convulsed. The heart monitor spiked momentarily, but returned to the flat line sliding across the screen.

She couldn't die. She couldn't. I wouldn't let her.

"Come on Brittany." I went to stand directly over her. One of the nurses stuck her arms through me in an attempt to reach Brittany. She shuddered at the sudden cold. "You need to make it. You need to pull through. You don't want to be here with me. You want to live."

The nurse stuck her arm through my head as she applied the defibrillator to Brittany's chest again. "Clear!" she shouted.

Again, the heart monitor jumped momentarily, but settled back into the flat line.

“Don’t give up!” I looked into Brittany’s eyes, and grasped for her hand. Every time I did, my fingers went right through. I wanted to grab her, and smack her – anything to make her respond. I felt helpless.

The doctor desperately fed the oxygen to her. The nurses shocked her with the defibrillator several more times. All I could do was watch as her life slowly slipped from her body. I would have cried, but I had no tear ducts.

Eventually, the doctor and nurses gave up. Again her body was covered with the sheet.

“Mark time of death,” the doctor said. “11:27pm.”

“NOOOO!” Mrs. Hamilton screamed from the other side of the glass.

I wanted desperately to echo the word, but no sound escaped my ghostly lips.

I stayed with Brittany as the doctor stepped out of the room to talk with her parents. The nurses put the equipment away. Then, they too left.

Needing to do something, I went over to Brittany. It’s funny, I never thought I would be able to feel a dead body, but as I stood over her, it was like death radiated off her. Death felt cold, and yet, tiny pin pricks of warmth shot from her.

She’s not dead.

At least, she wasn’t fully dead. I wondered if there was still a chance to bring her back. Since I couldn’t get anyone’s attention, and didn’t seem capable of interacting with anything physical, the challenge was to figure out how.

I needed to grab something. I needed to move before her life totally ebbed away. I reached out and snatched at the edge of the sheet. My hand passed through like it was air. I clenched my fist, then tried again.

This time, I concentrated on nothing but my hand – willing it make physical contact with the bleached white material. My fingers slid through again, but my thumbnail caught the edge, flipping the sheet up an inch. It was no great feat, yet I couldn’t have been more

thrilled. It was the first contact I'd had with the physical world since...

Brittany's tiny pinpricks of warmth were vanishing – I didn't have much time.

Extending my arm, I concentrated with all my might on just my hand. The sheet pulled away from her face.

Her lips were already turning blue. She hadn't been breathing for a couple minutes. She needed air – desperately – but I didn't know how to get any to her. More importantly, I needed to get her heart started.

If I concentrated hard enough, I might be able to move the defibrillator back to the bed. If I did, what would I do? I didn't know how to use it.

Her heart needed to start – now! The doctors would be no help, having already declared her dead. Plus, I had no idea how to get their attention. Only I could do this – I couldn't rely on anyone else.

In an act of pure desperation, I shoved my hand inside her chest, my phantom hand slipping in between her flesh and ribcage like air passing through screen. She had the chill of death on her. I found myself shuddering at the sensation. My hand reached her heart, I stopped. Don't ask how I knew it was her heart – I just sensed it.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated again, on the hand buried in Brittany's chest. All the energy I had in my spirit channeled through that hand. A tingling sensation filled my fingers. The chill left and they grew warm.

Concentrating harder, I squeezed my fist gently. Her heart twitched at my touch. I felt my digits shooting sparks directly into her heart as I compressed my fist.

"Come on, Brittany." I repeated the motion, over and over. "You can't die on me."

My hand was on fire and it took all the strength I had not to pull back. Pain shot up my arm, like electric bolts, threatening to throw me back. I stood my ground. As long as I had the will to stand, I would never give up.

Suddenly, she sucked in a gulp of air, startling me and sending me reeling backward – our connection broken. It took me a second

to right myself. When I opened my eyes I found myself back in the hall. Brittany's parents and the doctor all rushed into her room.

I hurried back through the wall, and was greeted by a pleasant sight. Brittany was sitting up in bed, her arm clutched to her chest, breathing heavily. Her eyes were wide open. She seemed a bit dazed.

"Brittany! Thank God," Mrs. Hamilton exclaimed as the doctor began turning back on all of Brittany's monitoring instruments.

"I don't understand," he kept saying. "This is impossible."

"It's a miracle," Mr. Hamilton said. "She must have a guardian angel."

I smiled.

She Brittany didn't speak, but through all the commotion of her parents and the doctor around her, her eyes gazed directly into mine.

"Don't ever scare me like that again!" Mrs. Hamilton said as she hugged her daughter, much to the doctor's objections.

"Wh-what happened?" Brittany asked.

"You've had quite a night, young lady," the doctor explained. "You were in a terrible accident."

"No." She peered through them at me. "Did I wreck your car?"

Everyone followed Brittany's gaze—directly to me. They all appeared confused.

The doctor was the first to recover. "Who are you talking to?"

"Bobby." She pointed at me.

"Honey..." her mother began, but couldn't finish. She bowed her head to hide the sobs in her shirt.

The doctor shone a light in Brittany's eyes, and checked out her head.

"I'm sorry, Brittany," her father said. "Bobby didn't make it."

Brittany's lips crinkled at the edges—one of the things I always found so cute about her. "No. He's right there." Seeing everyone's sorrowful expressions, her mouth crinkled even more. "C-can't you see him?"

"She's taken quite a bump on the head. I think we should let her rest," the doctor said.

As soon as the words escaped his mouth, two nurses walked in. One held a syringe. She injected something into Brittany's IV. I knew it was a sedative.

The doctor eased Brittany back onto the bed. "You need to sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

With that, he and the nurses led Brittany's parents out of the room, both of them protesting the entire time. I, however, remained.

"Is it true?" Brittany groaned me. "You're not real?"

"I'm real, Brittany."

"Are you dead?"

"Yes."

She closed her eyes, and tears streaked down her cheeks. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I'm just glad you're alright."

She opened her eyes, but she couldn't seem to focus on me. Her body tensed and her eyes kept trying to roll back up into her head as she fought the sedative. "Don't...leave me." Her eyes closed and her body relaxed.

I'm not sure if she heard me, but I said, "Never." Then I sat in the chair next to her bed. "I promise."