



# Give Me a Leg Up

A Broken Heart Story

By Michele Bardsley

LIBBY MONROE GENESSA stood in her front yard and stared at the object sticking up from the snow. She blinked a couple of times. Backed away. Scooted closer. Closed one eye and waved her hands.

Nope. It was still there.

“Ralph!”

Her husband, already on the porch hanging up a Thanksgiving wreath, waved at her to wait a second. She hadn’t quite gotten over hanging up a Turkey Day wreath. Christmas wreaths, she could understand. But Thanksgiving? What was appropriate for one of those? Heaps of stuffing dotted with cranberries with turkey legs hanging off? Alas, her husband’s version of a Thanksgiving wreath was merely a circle of twined limbs with fall leaves on it. And in the middle hung a little wooden sign saying “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Still. *Turkey legs*. Nom, nom, baby. The dragon inside her snorted with approval. She had been a vegan for a very, very long time. Then she got ... um, gifted with a dragon soul, *and* she married a vampire. Her views on consumption of meat had changed drastically. She suffered tremendous guilt when giving in her to her carnivorous cravings ... she did. But, her daughter, who was certainly all dragon, had to eat meat. And so Libby had slowly introduced meat into her own diet while pregnant and in no time at all became a bacon whore.

Since she’d grown up on the road, raised by parents who were seriously devoted paranormal investigators, she hadn’t experienced the insanity of holiday celebrations. They hadn’t really celebrated anything, unless it was a successful investigation. Then her dad would pop

for a trip to IHOP.

"That's a leg," said Ralph, who'd finally joined her. He slid his arm around her and placed a kiss on her temple. She still got giddy when he did stuff like that. She loved him deeply, and it was a good thing, too, since they were pretty much married for the next five-hundred years. Vampires who did the wild thing were hitched for a century, but dragons were committed for a half a millennium. She hugged Ralph, and then together, they stared at the leg. It was clothed in black pants, and a shiny black shoe.

"Dig under the snow drift and see if it's attached to anything," she said. Only in Broken Heart could two people find a freaking leg in their front yard and think it was normal.

"Zombies," muttered Ralph as he crouched down and used his vampire speed to dust away the snow. "They're always dropping their parts everywhere. And they smell like garbage dumps."

"I still like Jessica's idea that all zombies should be issued cans of Axe Body Spray," said Libby.

"Then they'll smell worse." He paused. "It's attached to a body."

Libby squatted next to him, and looked down at the man they'd uncovered. "It's Larry."

"Nah," said Ralph. "The last time we saw Zombie Larry, his eyeball was glued to his forehead."

Libby examined the guy's brow. "I see Superglue residue." She studied him intently, frowning. His eyes were open, staring sightlessly ahead. "I swear it's Larry. Only he's looking a little less dead."

"Other than that blue tinge, I think you're right," said Ralph. "No more flaking skin, no more slack mouth, and his hair had definitely grown back. What's that in his hand?"

Libby plucked out the orange gem. "It's a big faceted crystal." She looked at it. "Probably fake."

Larry blinked, and then he moaned. Not a zombie moan. A human one. Translation: OUCH!

"Holy crap," said Libby. "He's alive. Let's get him inside."

"I'M COMPLETELY FREAKED out," said Libby as she helped her husband arrange a comatose, but *breathing* Larry in the backseat of the Honda. "Seriously. Freaked. Out."

"I think we should belt him in," said Ralph as he studied the not-so-dead zombie stretched in the back seat. He was too tall to fit, so he was really scrunched in there.

"Hel-lo," said Libby from the other side of the car. "Your wife needs reassurance."

Ralph stopped contemplating the Larry transportation issue and rounded the car to hug his wife. "This is Broken Heart," he said. "When was the last time something weird didn't happen here?"

"True." She sighed. "I guess we should get him buckled in."

Ralph kissed her. She melted into his embrace, and for a second, the kiss went nuclear, and she forgot all about the zombie.

"If there wasn't an almost dead guy in it the backseat, I would take you to our bedroom right now," said Ralph.

"Yay for night school!" said Libby. The boys were in third grade now, and their daughter had started kindergarten. "Boo for zombies."

"Let's go," said Ralph. "Now."

Libby felt a little guilty for shoving the zombie around and being all in a hurry so they could return home for some nookie.

Then again ... Larry would understand.

"What about the gem?" asked Libby.

"Let's hand it over to Patsy and Gabriel. It might have something to do with Larry's new lease on life."

"Okay dokay." She threw her husband a smoky look. "Let's roll. 'Cause time is a'wasting."

Ralph dove in the car and had the engine turned over before Libby had buckled her own seatbelt.

He took off like a shot, and Larry, not so comfortably arranged behind his own seatbelt, groaned.

"THE ZOMBIE'S HERE," said Patsy. The queen of vampires and werewolves was sitting on the front porch with her husband sharing a bowl of chocolate ice cream. Offering him some had been a big-assed mistake because he'd eaten half the freakin' the bowl. But then he suggested what they could do with rest of the ice cream, and she'd darned near called Ralph and Libby to hold off on the delivery of the strangely alive Larry.

"I hate being the boss," she grouched as they watched the Honda zip up the very long driveway. "Is it just me, or does Ralph think he's a Nascar driver?"

"He does seem to be in a hurry," said Gabriel. He leaned down and kissed his wife's neck, which made her shiver. "I promise we will have time later to explore our dessert options."

Patsy grinned at him.

Ralph barely had the car in park before he jumped out, and swung open the door to the Honda's back seat.

"Here you go," said Libby, as she popped out of the car, and helped her husband haul out the zombie.

Patsy left the bowl of ice cream on the porch, and walked with Gabriel to take over their new charge. "You found him a snow bank?"

"Yep," said Ralph. He practically threw the zombie at Gabriel, who managed to catch the poor man and swing him up into his powerful arms.

"He had this on him," said Libby. She lobbed an object at Patsy, who caught it easily. "It's a gem. Don't know much else about it."

Libby was already in the car, belting herself in.

"That's it?" asked Patsy incredulously.

"Pretty much," said Ralph. "Good luck."

He scrambled into the car, and within two seconds, the Honda was zipping back down the driveway.

Patsy looked at her husband, feeling even more grumpy. "They are so going home to

have sex."

"Yeah," said Gabriel. "I think the werewolves in Siberia could smell those pheromones."

"Lucky bastards," said Patsy. She sighed. "All right. Let's get him into a room and get Stan over here. Unless he's having sex, too. Why does everyone get sex, but me?"

Gabriel laughed, as they both turned toward the house. "I promise, my love, that I will accommodate your needs as soon as possible."

Patsy brightened. "Sweet." Her gaze went to the zombie who seemed to sleeping peacefully in the werewolf's arms. "I wonder what his story is."

"We will know soon enough," said Gabriel.

They walked into the house.

A few minutes later, with Larry securely tucked into a comfortable bed, Gabriel returned to the porch. He picked up the bowl of melted ice cream, and grinned.

"HE'S NOT BAD-LOOKING," said Linda Beauchamp Michaels. "For a zombie."

Her husband, Dr. Stan Michaels, looked down at the unconscious man splayed on the bed. Patsy and Gabriel had placed him in one of many available guest bedrooms. The man who'd spent months shuffling around Broken Heart with an eyeball Superglued to his forehead, was looking more alive with every passing minute.

"I don't think he's a zombie anymore," said Stan. "He's got a heartbeat. And his lungs are working."

"And he's got skin," added Linda. "Not to mention all of his hair."

Stan rubbed a hand over his bald head and slanted a glance at his wife. She grinned and kissed him soundly. "I love you, Cueball."

"Well, I'd believe you if you weren't drooling all over the dead guy."

"He's not dead," she said. "Besides, you're the only guy, dead or otherwise, for me."

Mollified, Stan moved away from the bed. He scooped the orange gem from the nightstand. "He must've made a wish," he mused.

"But how did he get it?"

Stan shook his head. "I don't know."

"It's mine," said a craggy voice.

Linda and Stan were both startled and turned to look at Larry. "I lost it fifty years ago."

"You've been dead for fifty years?" Linda sounded horrified. "How did you get back into your body? How did you get ... alive again?"

Larry had blue eyes, and blond hair. He was tall, and as he got more and more ... well, alive, he was also getting muscled. Larry the former zombie really was a looker.

"He appears to be returning to the same form he had before he died," murmured Stan. He was staring at the man with clinical precision, no doubt noting details no one else would think important.

"Before I was murdered," said Larry. His eyes fluttered closed.

"Shit," said Linda. "Murdered?"

Larry had obviously passed back out. She glanced at her husband, who shrugged.

"We'll let the queen know, but I hardly think solving a fifty-year-old murder is relevant

now." Stan returned the orange gem to the nightstand. "We should let him rest. I've taken all the samples I need." He picked up the case where he'd stored the blood and skin he'd taken from Larry.

"Poor soul," said Linda as she took her husband's free hand. "I hope he's okay."

"We'll know more after I finish the tests," said Stan. "C'mon, sweetheart."

He led her out of the bedroom, and she turned and shut the door behind them.

A couple minutes later, the closet door popped open and thirteen-year-old Jenny Matthews O'Halloran stepped out. Larry had been the town zombie because of her. She'd found him when she was nine years old – on Halloween night. He was her zombie, and she had to take responsibility for him. She rolled her eyes. She couldn't believe she'd even thought that. Mom was all about responsibility *this* and responsibility *that*. What-ev-er. At least rescuing a zombie was more fun than scrubbing toilets. Bathroom duty totally sucked. And they were rich, so they could pay someone to clean the whole house, too, except her parents were too down-to-earth to employ a maid service.

Quietly, Jenny crept to the bed and shook her zombie awake. "Larry?"

He blinked awake. "Princess?"

"Yeah," she tugged on him. "C'mon. I'm getting you outta here."

He smiled. "You rescuing me?"

"Like you rescued me, Larry." Jenny didn't like thinking about that night in the cemetery. If Larry hadn't seen her fall into the pit ... she shuddered just remembering how it felt to have the earth give way under her feet.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe," she promised.

"I need clothes."

"Thought of that!" Jenny ran to the closet and grabbed an armful of clothing from the floor. "I brought some of my dad's sweats."

She piled the pants and shirt onto the bed. "There's another way out of this room," she said. "In the closet. There's a little hallway that goes down to a door into the garden. Soon as you're dressed, I'll meet you there."

"Okay, princess."

Jenny scurried into the secret passage, her heart pounding. Her plan had only been to get Larry away from the adults who would only poke and prod him like he was a lab rat. She didn't know what she would do after she got him to her secret place in the woods, but as her mother said, one damned problem at a time.

**LARRY STOTTEN STARED** stood underneath the oak tree and watched Jenny scabble up the wood slats that had been nailed into it, forming a ladder up to the tree house above.

"Daddy built it for us," said Jenny. She paused. "Not Patrick. My real dad. He died."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm lucky I got two good daddies. Some kids don't even get one."

Larry's newly beating heart stuttered. He'd once believed himself to be a good daddy, too. After his wife died, he'd moved the girls to Broken Heart. He'd thought, much to his everlasting regret, living in a small town would be safer. He hadn't counted on his wife's gem

bringing trouble to their door. On her death bed, Lila made him promise to never give it to her step-brother. Ean wasn't a nice man, she'd said. A big understatement. He was a kidnapper. And a murderer. But at least he'd never gotten the gem.

There were so many things he hadn't known about Lila or her family. It hadn't been her fault that her mother's second marriage had been to a man without moral character. It was Lila's mother who stole the gem and gave her to her daughter for safekeeping. Larry hadn't known his wife's secret, not until she gave him the stone and told him to protect it, and their girls.

He hadn't known the gem's powers. He hadn't known Ean was an honest-to-God mage. He hadn't known there was no way to ever keep his daughters safe.

"Larry?"

Jenny's voice filtered down from the tree house. He shook off the memories, and began the climb. His thick fingers and sneakered feet didn't do well on the thin strips of wood. He slipped a few times, but finally, he managed to get to the square hole cut in the bottom of the tree house. It was at least a decade old, and the floor creaked ominously as he crawled onto it.

Jenny was prepared. She had two battery-powered lanterns, a stockpile of energy bars, chocolate, and bottled water. She even had pillows and a sleeping bag. "I figure you can hang out here until ... well, we figure out what to do next."

"Thank you, Jenny. You're a good friend."

She beamed at him.

He remembered that his daughters used to smile at him like that, especially if he'd said yes to candy or to an extra bedtime story. Fifty years.

"Why are you ... you know, alive?" Jenny was studying him, her smile giving way to a frown.

"This." He pulled the gem out of his pocket. "It's a wishing stone."

"Wishing stone?" She looked skeptical, which made him laugh. The child lived in a town with vampires, dragons, werewolves, and zombies, but the idea of a gem that granted wishes seemed unbelievable to her. He tucked it back into his pocket.

"A long time ago a mage named Merlin made it. It's dangerous, Jenny. A lot of people would like to get their hands on it. People who aren't very nice."

"Why don't you wish it away?"

"I can't. There are rules. Especially for the guardian." *One wish per person.* He'd never made a wish on it. He hadn't known what it was until after Lila died. She'd transferred guardianship to him the day before she passed away, and told him what it did mere minutes before she breathed her last. He would never know why she didn't wish away her disease. Had she already made a wish? Or did she want so badly to be free of the gem, she preferred to die? He wanted to believe enough in her love, in her loyalty, to think she would've never left him and their daughters alone unless she felt as though she had no choice. Lila had been a stubborn woman.

The day his girls disappeared, he'd intended on going to the stone's hiding place and wishing for their return, but Ean had found him first. And killed him.

After he died, he had no idea where he'd gone. He didn't remember. Not heaven, not hell. Not even limbo.

One night, he'd woken up one day in his desiccated body fighting in a battle right out of Orson Wells screenplay. It turned out that Queen Patsy had called forth the dead in the Bro-

ken Heart cemetery to fight demons and vampires trying to destroy the town.

After the fighting was over, and they had won, he could only think about staying out of the grave. He knew there was something he was supposed to do, but not what. And he hadn't known his name, or even what he was. There was only that insistent, driving urge to remain upright and moving.

Then he'd found the gem in Stan and Linda's backyard.

The moment he touched it, everything instantly came back, and he'd made the wish to live again. He'd felt the heat and the power of the magic—and then ... well, he'd woken up in a snowdrift, then in Ralph's Honda, and finally in the bed at Queen Patsy's house.

"I have to find my daughters."

"No problem," said Jenny. "I'd already been Googling all the over the place." She pulled out a netbook.

Larry understood that technology had made many leaps since his demise. He'd seen enough computers on his ramblings to know what they were—even if he wasn't sure how they worked. Curious, he watched Jenny flip open the netbook and start tapping on the keys.

"Their names are Beatrice Alice and Catherine Laverna, right?"

"Yes," said Larry. "How'd you know?"

"Tamara and I looked up their school records." *Tap, tap, tap.* "You filed a missing persons report a couple hours before *you* disappeared."

"Did they ... were they ... " He swallowed the knot his in throat. "Found?"

"You mean dead?" She looked at him, sympathy in her gaze. "Not here. But..." She turned the netbook around and showed him the screen. "Adoption records for Beatrice Alice and Catherine Laverna, both with the last name of Stotten. They grew up in Tulsa, and still live there. They got married, had kids, and grandkids."

"Adopted?" Bea had been six, and Cathy eight. Now his own children were older than he was ... he'd been returned to the age he'd died, which made him thirty-two.

Jenny shrugged. "There's nothing about them being found in town. Or how they ended up getting adopted."

Had Lila's brother kidnapped them, and then somehow grown a conscience, allowing them to return to Tulsa to be adopted? His stomach squeezed. *Had Ean adopted them?*

"Who raised my girls?"

"Leticia and Ernest Mortimer," said Jenny.

Larry frowned. He'd never heard of them.

"Is it really important to know how they got there?" asked Jenny. "You wanted to know what happened to 'em, and now you do. Bea's an accountant and Cathy's a doctor."

Larry looked away, his eyes hot with tears. He wiped them away. His daughters were alive, and apparently doing well. And what could he do? Show up and say, "Hey, I'm your dead father?"

"I'd like to see them," he said. He just needed to make sure they were okay. "Can you find out about Ean Whittaker?"

Jenny nodded. While she worked, he ate one of the energy bars. It wasn't too bad, but the chocolate bar was much better. He'd forgotten how great food could taste.

"Dead."

Larry blinked. "What?"

Once again, she turned the netbook around and handed it to Larry. On the screen was

an article from the *Tulsa Tribune*. It was dated the same day he'd died. Three men and two little girls had been in a car accident. Apparently the car had stalled on a train track and been broadsided. Only the girls had escaped unscathed.

"My daughters lived," said Larry as he returned the netbook. "And Ean and his goons died."

Maybe Lila had made a wish, after all. Larry decided to believe that she'd wished for the safety and happiness of their girls. Still. The driving force behind his re-animation, and his own wish to live again, seemed to be moot.

"What now?" asked Jenny.

"I don't know." He unwrapped another chocolate bar. "I'll go to Tulsa and see the girls, and then ... well, I guess I could live in Broken Heart."

"Your house is kinda falling down," said Jenny. She chewed on her bottom lip. "They're gonna want to test you and stuff."

"Who?"

"Doctor Stan."

Larry shrugged. "That's okay. I don't have anywhere else to go."

"I won't let them hurt you."

He reached over and chucked her under the chin. "You're a good kid, Jenny."

"What-ev-er." She rolled her eyes, but he could see that she was pleased by his compliment. He returned her netbook.

"I guess we don't have to hide out then," said Jenny. "I can take you home. Mom and Dad will help you."

"Okay," said Larry. He was still the guardian of the gem's power even though he couldn't wield it. He'd used his wish. But maybe it could be used to help Broken Heart and the people who lived here.

"C'mon," said Jenny. She shut the netbook and shoved it into a backpack. Then she grabbed one of the lanterns. "If I'm not back for breakfast, Mom'll flip her sh—er, stuff."

"Flip her stuff?"

"Yeah," she said, blushing. "It's one of the crazy things us teens say."

"Uh-huh."

She scurried to the hole and made her way down the trunk. Then Larry followed, a little more sure-footed this time.

Jenny waited for him, and then turned to make her way through the woods toward her house on Sanderson Street. Larry paused and looked up into the night sky. In his pocket, the wishing stone pulsed warmly, just like a heartbeat.

Just like a second chance.

The End