

*'The Deadly Daylight* is an intriguing mystery that explores lots of interesting ideas'. **R. A. Spratt, author of the Friday Barnes series**

*'The Deadly Daylight* is a perfect-for-kids murder mystery. I loved spending time with Alice England, who cheerfully chooses coffins for everyone she meets, and Violet Devenish, who might finally have found a true friend. This is a fresh and curiously upbeat read with memorable characters, clever plot and satisfying ending. Prepare for secrets and friendships, life and death, quirks and cosy mystery.' **Cristy Burne, author of the Wednesday Weeks series**

*More Reviews:*

'I loved how the story kept me on the edge of my seat throughout the entire book. This book is great for people who love a bit of murder as well as a bit of mystery.' **Ashlee, 11 years old**

'Wow! This book was amazing. It had me hooked right from the start and it introduced me to the murder mystery genre. I can't wait to read the next book in the series. 5 stars.' **Josh, 10 years old**

'A very suspenseful book. I knew that I would like it just from the title. I really liked how they explained what the title meant quickly and got straight into the action. 5 stars.' **Stella, age 10**

‘If you liked reading *Agatha Oddly* and *Friday Barnes* you will love *The Deadly Daylight*. I really liked that Alice had to remember all the little details on the bodies at her Dad’s funeral home, it was very unique setting for a novel. It hooked me right from the start.’ **Ivy, 9 years**

‘This is a wonderful book, full of plot-twisting events along with everyday drama too. The story hooks you right from the start by using a funeral home for the setting and including the unusual element of sunlight allergies. I really liked how the friendship between Alice, Violet and Cal helped solve the mystery.’ **Ruby, 11 years**

# THE DEADLY DAYLIGHT

*An Alice England Mystery*

ASH HARRIER



**PANTERA**  
PRESS



## CHAPTER 1

# The Resonance of Trinkets

Alice smoothed down the dead woman's collar. Her dad often missed that detail. He prepared and dressed the bodies but didn't always notice things like misbuttoned blouses or crooked spectacles.

There were two items for Alice to arrange. They were inside an envelope with the name *Edna Mackintosh* handwritten on the front. Alice slipped out a pair of square-cut diamond earrings set in silver, and a photograph of a man dressed in clothing from the 1970s – flared trousers and a shirt with a wide collar – held in a black frame.

She removed a gold stud from Edna's left ear and replaced it with one of the ugly diamonds. But when she came to the right earlobe, there was no earring to replace. She made a note about it on the envelope, managing the pen awkwardly in her latex gloves. Her dad would need to mention it to Edna's next of kin, as grieving families sometimes made wild accusations when jewellery was misplaced.

Alice tried to insert the diamond earring, but it wouldn't go in. Edna's earring must have been missing for a while, and the pierced skin had grown over before she

died. Alice considered her options. She could cut off the earring's stem and use costume glue to stick the diamond to Edna's ear. But that was risky. Occasionally, the glue failed. All it would take was a grieving guest to stroke Edna's hair and the earring might fall off. A mishap like that could ruin the funeral.

And what if the relatives changed their minds and asked for the earrings to be returned? Alice didn't want to be responsible for any damage if someone noticed dear Granny's earrings were real diamonds and wanted them back.

Her only option was to re-pierce Edna's earlobe. Piercing an ear was new to Alice but she didn't want to fetch her dad to do it. He had already spent long hours embalming Edna, then bending her arm into a suitable position to hold the photo frame. It would be silly to call him for such a simple task.

'This shouldn't hurt at all,' Alice assured Edna, because you couldn't be too careful.

The earring stem went easily through Edna's earlobe, like pushing a toothpick into an olive. Alice surveyed her work. Not bad. It was slightly off-centre compared with the left one, but no one would notice.

Now for the photo. Sometimes, dead people's possessions shared stories with Alice. Not always, but every so often an object put a little story into her head. Alice called these items *resonant* – an excellent word she had discovered when she was about nine, meaning anything that gave an ongoing hum. That was what it felt like to Alice: like the item was humming and vibrating with meaning and significance. Sometimes it was just a little sliver of a story; and sometimes it was a full history of the person's life.

This photograph was resonant.

Alice held it, absorbing the story. Edna had been a married woman, and the man in the photo was her husband, Frank. He'd been quite a stern man, although considerate of Edna. He was a soldier in a war somewhere in Asia and had died of a feverish illness in a canvas field hospital many decades before. He'd tried to write a final letter to Edna before he died but was too weak even to hold the pencil. Edna had loved this photo of Frank, looking relaxed on his porch, and always kept it on the shelf in the home where she took her last breath just a week earlier.

'How are you getting along?'

When he was in the funeral section of their home, Alice's father Thaddeus always moved quietly. It was fitting, as an undertaker, he'd told her once. However, Alice was never startled by his sudden arrivals.

'Nearly finished,' she replied.

Thaddeus stood by Edna's polished dark-blue shoes. He was tall and slightly hunched at the shoulders. Alice had heard people describe her dad as a haunting figure, and she found that unfair. Yes, his face had a pale, mournful appearance, but couldn't anyone see the twinkle of humour in his eyes? And yes, he did have long, thin fingers, but you needed to have strong hands if you worked with dead bodies – there was a lot of massaging of stiff limbs required. And perhaps he did have a low voice like a ship's distant horn, but that was just right for someone who spoke to bereaved families every day.

Alice manoeuvred the photo frame into Edna's hand, sliding it under the woman's wrist. She slotted it into the fingers her father had curled into a gentle gripping position and tilted the frame at a more poignant angle. *Poignant* was

another of those wonderful words she had discovered in more recent times: it meant something that was so sad it almost made you a tiny bit happy. People often used it to describe Alice's arrangement of trinkets with the corpses, which made her proud.

She did a final check of the cuffs, makeup, hair, and position of the wedding band. Then she stepped back and nodded at her father. 'All done.'

'Lovely.' Her father pulled a dustsheet across the coffin to protect Edna from bugs and dirt. 'Dinner's on the stove. Do you have any homework?'



Alice brushed her burnt-orange hair until it was smooth and then attempted to put it up into a perfect ponytail. There was always at least one bump, which annoyed her. Some of the girls at school – like Jasmine Pang and Kimberly Larsson – wore perfect, sleek, bump-free ponytails. It wasn't that Alice had to look perfect – it was just that she liked things to be orderly and symmetrical. She suspected Kimberly and Jasmine's mothers helped them, which made Alice feel a little better that hers had bumps. She had to do it by herself, after all, since she had only one parent, and he was a busy man running a funeral home.

She washed her face and looked at her small ears in the mirror, wondering for a few moments what it would be like to get her ears pierced, like Edna Macintosh. She didn't like pain, but she had seen a girl at school wearing tiny silver dinosaur earrings and thought they were marvellous. Alice was extremely fond of dinosaurs and

her most treasured possession was a ten-centimetre piece of Dromaeosaur bone from the cretaceous period. She'd saved up and bought it from the fossil and gem store at the Quay, and kept it on her bedroom desk where she could look at it every day. Seeing that girl's dinosaur earrings had made her seriously consider piercings for the first time.

Alice picked her way through the organised clutter of her bedroom and collected her school satchel. She had science for a double period today, which made it her favourite day of the week. Her science teacher was a chaotic but interesting person who taught them all kinds of astonishing facts about the natural world, both ancient and modern. Alice couldn't understand why the other kids were so unpleasant about Ms Littlejohn, calling her 'Professor Sprout' and 'hedge witch.'

She joined her father downstairs. Thaddeus was the only bit of colour in the dark kitchen. Most of the rooms in their house were dark, from the mahogany furniture to the aged forest-green wallpaper and stone floors. This was because it was a funeral home built in Victorian times, and everyone knew funeral homes needed to be sombre. Alice's bedroom was the exception. Her dad had painted it a sunny yellow when she was a little girl, which she'd liked until very recently. She'd only just started to think she'd prefer a clean, soft grey, the colour of the rainy sky over Damocles Cove.

Thaddeus was reading the newspaper, dressed in his rainbow sweater. He wore vivid colours whenever he wasn't working, since he was obliged to wear dull colours the rest of the time. Alice poured herself some cornflakes and milk, then surreptitiously drizzled honey over the top. She wasn't overly keen on honey, but it was better than

nothing. Her dad wouldn't have sugar in the house. 'More people die from illnesses related to the consumption of sugar than anything else,' he often remarked. He was even strict with the amount of honey she used, and she usually had to wait until he was distracted by the newspaper to get the taste of her cereal just right.

Thaddeus sipped his green tea. He drank it with every meal, claiming it was proven to boost digestion and longevity. Alice understood that a man who worked with the dead might value a long life, but she didn't like the taste.

'Could you pass me the *Chronicle*, Dad?'

Thaddeus pulled the *Coastal Chronicle* out from under the *Port Cormorant Mail* he was reading and gave it to Alice. They had two daily newspapers delivered, and he and Alice read them each morning. Her father liked to check the funeral notices, clicking his tongue when he found a mistake in the spelling or details. But he also read the news, and Alice had picked up the habit.

Thaddeus had a mobile phone, but he only used it for work calls. He'd read that the radiation from phones caused damage to brain cells so he used it as little as possible and wouldn't hear of Alice having one. Alice mentioned this in health class once when they were discussing cyber safety.

Kimberly Larsson had stared. 'He won't let you have a phone? How do you survive?'

Alice wasn't sure why she needed a phone to survive but tried to answer. 'I don't go anywhere dangerous. I'm usually at home, or on a walk, or at school.'

'But how do you know what's happening?' Kimberly asked.

'I can get my news from the papers.'

‘Ew, newspapers,’ Jasmine Pang said. ‘That black stuff gets on your fingers!’

‘Ink?’ Alice nodded thoughtfully. ‘That’s true. It washes off easily, though.’

‘But how do you talk to your friends after school?’ Jasmine pressed her.

‘What friends?’ Kimberly muttered, and a bunch of other kids sniggered.

Alice wasn’t bothered. She didn’t need friends like other kids seemed to. She was perfectly happy on her own at lunchtime, birdwatching on her favourite bench, sitting in the library, or visiting the school laboratories where Ms Littlejohn let her fossick through trays of natural objects or clip slides into the microscope to study the organisms.

Alice munched her cereal and read the news. There was a story about a burglary of several bags of sugar from a convenience store and another about an illegal iguana that had been seized from a pet shop.

She closed the newspaper. ‘Is it just Edna Macintosh’s funeral we’ve got today?’

‘Yes.’ Her father speared a piece of avocado with his fork – a superfood, he told Alice regularly. ‘And Miss Laura Timms tomorrow.’

She nodded. ‘Let me know if there’s anything that needs to go in with Miss Timms’ body after school.’ She checked the clock. It was 8.15. Alice went to brush her teeth and came back to the kitchen to wish her father goodbye.

Thaddeus got that twinkle in his eyes that meant he was about to make a pun. Puns were his favourite type of joke and he was always on the hunt for a new one.

Thaddeus waved his forkful of avocado. ‘You avo good day, Alice.’

She smiled, but it was not a particularly original pun, so she didn't give him any additional congratulations. Alice stepped out the side door of Tranquillity Funerals at 8.19. She didn't technically need to start the walk to school until 8.22, but she liked to give herself a couple of minutes to work on her long-term project of befriending next door's cat.

She crouched near the fence to check underneath a camellia bush. There it was – small, smooth and brindled black and orange. It was sitting completely still, its dark pupils almost filling each amber iris.

'Shh,' Alice whispered, extending a hand. 'It's all right. You're perfectly safe.' The cat flicked its tail.

She waited, squinting at the cat's nametag, but it was impossible to read in the darkness of the shrubbery and the cat refused to budge. Alice sighed and withdrew. The cat was proving resistant to her efforts. If she ever got within arm's length, it backed out of the bush and dashed through the fence into its own yard. Alice hadn't met their neighbours, who had only come to live there a few months ago. They never seemed to be at home.

Her weak leg tended to ache when she crouched down like that. Alice pulled her skirt to the side and rubbed the muscle. It had a mottled colour and two dark veins that crossed the surface haphazardly, like rivers on a map. Kimberly Larsson had remarked that Alice's leg was evidence that she was possessed and hadn't seem interested in Alice's explanation of why her leg was like that.

She smoothed her skirt back down, hitched her satchel onto her shoulder, and commenced the walk to school.



Damocles Cove High School was set on a hill overlooking the water and had been battered by the ocean winds for over seventy years. The two-storey buildings had lost all their paint and looked somehow bare, as if they'd been stripped of their skin and now only their yellowing bones showed. The roof was orange with rust and the windows were smeared with a fine layer of sea salt. When Alice was sitting in class, the wind howled and banged at the glass as if it wanted to get in and rush around to tear up books and knock over chairs. The classrooms were always cold, no matter how the sun shone outside.

Alice couldn't help being a little proud to go there, though. Her father had gone to the same school, and his father before him. There were other, newer schools around, but Alice wouldn't hear of going to those. She had a tradition to uphold.

And anyway, Alice had secured, in her opinion, the best spot to sit and eat lunch in the whole school. It was a bench in the courtyard that looked straight into the principal's office window. It was always empty, despite its sheltered position near a flowering shrub favoured by native bees and nectar-loving birds. Every day she was surprised by her good luck in finding it vacant. Perhaps everyone knew it was Alice's bench.

At morning recess, she was eating her seaweed rice crackers and watching a brown honeyeater flit from blossom to blossom in the shrub, when the principal strode through the courtyard towards the office door. His name was Mr Prince, which Alice's father loved to make puns with ('Mr Prince is your *pal*.'). There were a lot of Princes in Damocles Cove – she'd heard Thaddeus refer to them as a founding family. Mr Prince was a burly man with

vast shoulders. His muscles bulged so much that he looked like he'd been squeezed from a tube into his lemon polo shirt. Mr Prince had been a footballer and then a phys-ed teacher before he came to reign over Damocles Cove High School.

One of Alice's favourite things to do was imagining the perfect coffin for people she saw. For Mr Prince, she pictured an extra-wide jarrah casket with pale-yellow velvet lining. The handles would be pale gold, gleaming and embellished like sporting trophies. The flowers on top would be blue and yellow to match his favourite football team.

Mr Prince had Kimberly Larsson at his side and an unhappy looking Jasmine Pang trailing behind. '—highly irresponsible,' Mr Prince was saying in his across-the-oval voice. 'Reckless and dangerous actions—'

'It's all a mistake, sir,' Kimberly interrupted smoothly. She had so much self-assurance. Alice always thought of her as a smaller, meaner adult. 'Violet's got it all wrong. It was an accident.'

'And I wasn't even there,' Jasmine chimed in miserably.

'I'll be calling your parents,' Mr Prince boomed. 'There's no place for bullying in Damocles Cove High ...' His voice receded as they rounded a corner, the girls exchanging a vexed look behind his back.

Next came Miss Goodwill, her arm around Violet Devenish as she ushered her towards the nurse's office. Miss Goodwill was the Pastoral Care Coordinator. She had bright blue eyes and tortoiseshell glasses that sat on top of her head, holding back a mass of blonde curls. Alice thought she was a nice enough woman but sometimes she interfered too much in the students' personal affairs. For

instance, she was continually urging Alice to sit with other kids during breaks.

Alice only knew Violet from a distance. The fair-skinned girl always wore long sleeved tops and pants, gloves and long socks, a hat with a kind of shade-cloth veil covering her face and neck. Alice, who was curious by nature, had been especially curious about why all this was required, but hadn't managed to overhear the reason so far. She assumed it was an allergy – perhaps to bees? It looked like a beekeeper's veil. Violet's nickname was 'Violet the Vampire', and she was as friendless as Alice. Violet did have a friend for the first few weeks of high school, but that girl left suddenly and no one knew where she'd gone. Alice had heard kids say that Violet's family of vampires had murdered the friend and drunk her blood. She was sure that wasn't true, but she would have liked to know the facts.

'I really think it must have been a misunderstanding,' Miss Goodwill was saying.

'She did it on purpose.' Violet sounded angry. 'She pulled my hat off, pushed me out of the shade and said, "Let's see if you turn to dust in daylight, vampire."' "

'Perhaps you misheard her.' Miss Goodwill looked even more upset than Violet.

'I didn't,' said Violet. 'Kimberly's been doing this sort of thing since I started here.'

Alice was intrigued. She also thought Violet was probably correct about Kimberly, who had turned harassing Violet into a personal hobby. Kimberly, with her excessive makeup, blonde-pink ombre hair and group of terrified friends, loved giving people unpleasant nicknames. She had been calling Alice 'Alice in Zombieland' since fifth grade, presumably because she lived in a funeral parlour.

THE DEADLY DAYLIGHT

Miss Goodwill caught sight of Alice and pointed her out to Violet. 'Look! Alice could use some company. Why don't you two girls sit together at lunch today?'

Both girls were silent, but Alice saw Violet give a slight roll of her eyes. Miss Goodwill turned and fixed Alice with a pleading stare. 'You'd like a lunch companion, wouldn't you, Alice?'

Alice shook her head. 'No, I'm quite all right on my own, thank you.'

But Miss Goodwill was nodding at Alice like one of those figurines that sat on people's dashboards. 'Yes, you would. Just for a change, hm? Give it a try.' She squeezed Violet's arm. 'What about you, Violet? Come and sit with Alice during lunch today, keep her company.' She lowered her voice. 'If there's any bullying going on, it certainly won't happen *here*.' She gestured towards the principal's window.

Violet looked annoyed, but her shoulders dropped in a kind of silent sigh.

'Fine,' she said. 'I'll eat lunch with Alice.'



## CHAPTER 2

# The Question of Tact

At lunch, Violet arrived still looking cross. She sat beside Alice on the bench.

‘Hello, Violet.’

‘Hi.’ Violet dug in her backpack, pulling out a cling-wrapped chicken roll.

Violet held her veil away from her face so she could bring her food to her mouth. At close range, Alice could see she had blonde hair and light-blue eyes under the veil – although they could have been green. She was a round, soft-looking girl whose skin had a powdered appearance, almost hairless and with little natural oil. For Violet, Alice would select a pale casket – possibly ash wood – lined with lilac silk to offset the bluish-white of the girl’s skin. Silver embellishments. And a floral arrangement featuring white irises.

Alice got out her own lunch. She always brought sandwiches left over from the previous day’s funeral but was careful not to take the ones that had been offered around the room. Too often she had seen people pick up a sandwich, poke its middle, and return it to the tray. Today’s lunch consisted of one triangle of curried egg, two of cucumber and one of smoked salmon.

They sat in silence for fifteen minutes, eating their lunch and then staring at the concrete path. There were shouts from other parts of the school yard but kids hardly ever passed through this courtyard so they were undisturbed. The sun was shining today, but the cold sea breeze whistled above them and rattled at the tin roof.

Perhaps Violet would like to have a conversation. Alice tried to think of something they could talk about – something they had in common. There was a band sticker on Violet's bag, but Alice wasn't into pop music. She couldn't see any sign that Violet liked dinosaurs. The girl's earrings were tiny amethysts. The only thing they seemed to have in common was being the targets of Kimberly Larsson's insults.

'I'm sorry you had to deal with Kimberly and Jasmine's shenanigans before,' she said.

'Their what?'

'Shenanigans. Trickery.' Violet still looked blank, so Alice explained. 'Their mean prank.'

Violet shrugged. 'It was nothing new.'

'What were they trying to do, specifically?' Alice asked.

'Trying to trigger my allergy, of course.'

Alice paused with her sandwich partway to her mouth. 'What allergy is that?'

'Duh. Sunlight.'

Alice was startled. 'I've never heard of such a thing.'

Violet looked bored. 'Solar urticaria. I was born with it. My dad, his brother and my brother – we've all got it. My grandma had it, too.'

Alice was sympathetic but pleased. This explained so much. 'So that's why they call you vampire,' she said. 'Because vampires can't go out in the sun. How much sunlight does it take to trigger the allergy?'

Violet eyed her. ‘Why do you want to know that? Did Kimberly put you up to this?’

‘Kimberly doesn’t speak to me, except to call me Alice in Zombieland or imply that my weak leg is possessed by evil spirits.’

Violet seemed to relax slightly. ‘What’s wrong with your leg? Did you hurt it?’

‘No, I’ve had it all my life.’ Alice pulled up her school skirt to show Violet the thin, blotchy limb with its surface veins. ‘My umbilical cord was wrapped around it in the womb. The circulation to my leg got cut off and it never developed properly. I’ve had physiotherapy, but it’s still weak. The doctor calls it muscular atrophy.’

Violet blinked a couple of times. ‘That was pretty unlucky.’

‘Well, yes, but my twin was even unluckier.’

‘You have a twin?’ Violet glanced around as though she expected Alice’s twin to pop out from behind a shrub.

‘Yes.’ Alice showed her the pendant on a chain around her neck. ‘This is Saint Cosmas. Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian are the patron saints of twins. The Saint Damian one was supposed to be for my sister, but she died. Our umbilical cords were tangled around us both – my leg and Victoria’s neck.’

Violet’s eyes grew round and horrified. ‘That’s terrible. It must have been so sad for your parents.’

‘Well, my mother left when I was an infant,’ Alice said. ‘So I don’t know how she feels about it. My father has raised me on his own.’

They sat in silence for several minutes. Violet bit a nail through her veil and Alice watched the process with

interest. There were a number of tiny holes in the veil where Violet had clearly done the same thing before.

‘Kimberly pulled my hat off and tried to push me out into the sunlight,’ Violet blurted at last.

Alice was aghast. ‘That was very, very wrong of her. You could have died!’

Violet gave another of those casual shrugs, although she looked a little pleased to hear Alice’s outrage. ‘Luckily Miss Goodwill couldn’t get hold of my mum, or she would have marched down here and demanded Kimberly get expelled, or something. Not that that would be such a big loss.’ She paused. ‘Do you actually live at a funeral place, like everyone says?’

‘Yes,’ said Alice. ‘Not in the funeral rooms, of course. Our house is in the rear section.’

‘Still. Dead bodies.’ Violet grimaced.

Alice wasn’t quite sure what Violet was getting at, so she nodded politely.

‘Have you always lived there?’ Violet asked. ‘My dad said it used to have a different name.’

It was a lovely surprise to find Violet interested in her family business. ‘Yes, that’s true. Tranquillity Funerals is Damocles Cove’s oldest funeral home. The England family has owned the place for around one hundred and fifty years. Established as England’s Funeral Parlour in 1876, it was renamed Tranquillity Funerals in the 1990s by Julius England. It is currently owned and run by my father Thaddeus England, Julius’ nephew, member of the National Embalmer’s Association.’

‘You sound like a tour guide,’ Violet told her.

‘I wrote the About Us page of our website,’ said Alice. ‘My father didn’t agree with Uncle Julius changing the

name, but Tranquillity Funerals has brand equity now and we're better off not to change it back.'

'What's brand equity?'

'I think it means that local people know Tranquillity Funerals is a cheap funeral service, so we should run with it.'

'Oh, right.'

'Uncle Julius lost interest after he renamed it, anyway,' Alice added. 'He went to live in Germany and left my father in charge. Dad was only twenty-five but he worked hard and did his best to keep the place running. I'm extremely proud of him. One day, I'll own and run the business.'

Violet seemed astonished. 'You *want* to run it?'

'Oh, yes. Very much.'

Violet took a breath, shook her head and adjusted her glove. She glanced over her shoulder at the principal's office.

'So, my question about your allergy,' said Alice.

'Oh, yeah, what was it?'

'How much sunlight does it take to start your allergic reaction?'

Violet assumed her bored look again. 'I can't have any sun exposure at all. It triggers my allergy immediately and it won't stop by itself, even when I get out of the light.'

'And there's no way to treat it?' Alice asked.

'Well, my Uncle George has found this new thing where the doctor exposes your skin to a tiny bit of light every day to build up your resistance. He's thinking about trying it – says my brother and I should, too. My mum's totally against it, though. Too dangerous. Even the tiniest bit of sunlight makes me flare up.'

‘I see. Is it very painful?’

Violet nodded. ‘But the main problem is Anna Phylaxis.’  
‘Anna who?’

Violet smiled. ‘*Anaphylaxis*. It’s a super-severe allergic reaction. My airways swell, heartbeat goes crazy; I get stomach cramps and a rash. It kills you if you don’t have your epi-pen or call an ambulance, or whatever.’

The bell for their next class rang and Violet was on her feet in an instant. She started walking off, then hesitated and looked back at Alice.

‘That was ...’ She paused and thought about it. ‘Okay.’

‘You can join me again sometime, if you need to,’ Alice offered.

Violet nodded and walked quickly away.



‘Violet Devenish sat with me at lunch today,’ Alice told her dad as he finished arranging Mrs Delia Gandour’s hair.

He looked up in surprise. ‘Did she? You’ve made a friend?’

‘No, she just came to sit with me because she was being bullied by Kimberly Larsson again.’ Alice used a cleansing wipe to remove grime from a fairy ornament that was to go in the casket with Mrs Gandour. It was not resonant. ‘Violet has something called solar urticaria. She’s allergic to sunlight.’

‘That’s unusual,’ said Thaddeus. ‘Is it severe?’

‘She could die if the sunlight touches her skin.’ Alice put the ornament to one side and started on a silver photo frame. Also not resonant. ‘I hope she sits with me at lunch again because I have so many questions. I’d like to know

how she goes to the beach, and what she does in houses with skylights, and if she's ever nearly died, and how often she needs to use her epi-pen, and if her family picnic at indoor play centres instead of parks and—'

'One moment, Alice.' Thaddeus had straightened up and was watching her seriously. 'This is one of those times when you must show tact.'

'Oh,' said Alice, disappointed. Tact meant concealing your curiosity. It meant speaking in a hushed voice and quietly assisting when someone at a funeral needed a tissue. It meant not asking the questions she wanted to ask, which meant not getting the answers she wanted to get. Her father was big on tact, especially since Alice had declared she wanted to take over the funeral home one day.

'Imagine if you had a life-threatening allergy,' said Thaddeus. 'You would feel frightened for your life every time you went out the door, wouldn't you? So, Violet must feel a lot of fear. Would you want to talk much about something that made you feel that bad?'

'Violet seemed fine with talking about it,' said Alice. 'She made it seem like it was no big deal at all.'

'Perhaps it is no big deal to her, then – but pretending it's no big deal is also how some people behave when something *is* a big deal to them.'

How inconvenient. Alice was continually frustrated by the way people hid their true thoughts and acted as if they felt one way when they actually felt the opposite. It was exhausting trying to work it out. Why couldn't they all be like Alice and her dad, and just say or act the way they truly felt?

Their assistant Patty came in at that moment, hallooing a greeting and clattering a tray of sandwiches into the

refrigerator in the funeral parlour's kitchenette. Patty was small, round and white-haired with a perpetually cheery face. Her favourite thing in the world was food and she found nothing more rewarding than feeding a group of mourners at one of Tranquillity Funeral's services.

'How's everyone?' she said, sticking her head around the door. 'Sixty sandwiches in the fridge, Mr E, and I've restocked the cookies. You're a bit low on milk – want me to bring a few cartons tomorrow?'

'Yes, please.' Thaddeus smiled. 'Patty, you're a lifesaver. Mrs Gandour's family is expecting a mid-sized service, but you never know.'

Patti nodded eagerly. 'I have to tell you, Mr E. I was just at my niece's wedding on the weekend and they had cupcakes spelling out the first initials of the bride and groom. Fancy that, would you! Cupcakes set out in the shape of a letter. What do you say to doing that at a funeral? I could use cookies or even sandwiches!' She read the name on the envelope of Mrs Gandour's trinkets. 'Delia Gandour. I could spell out DG in curried egg sandwiches!'

To Alice's surprise, Thaddeus appeared to think about it.

'I don't think—' she began, but her dad spoke over her.

'I'll certainly take that under consideration, Patty,' he said. 'I'll let you know.'

Patty withdrew, beaming. Alice frowned at her father.

'Dad, that's a terrible idea.'

'Yes, I know,' Thaddeus replied.

Alice thought about that. 'Is it the case that Patty lacks *tact*, Dad?'

He smiled. 'That's exactly right, Alice.'