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B.K. BORISON



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GOOD
SPIRITS



Chapter One

Harriet

On the first day of December, the universe gave to me—

A busted knee, a twisted string of garland, and a cat with an attitude problem.

I don't need any of these things, but I have all three, warring for my attention as I roll to a stop at the bottom of my porch steps after tripping over a rogue cat. She meows and scampers after me, offering a sandpaper lick on the back of my hand—like she's not the reason I'm stretched out across the sidewalk in front of my little house like a *CSI: Annapolis* cold open, sparkly garland twisted around my ankle.

Oliver lets out a plaintive meow as I haul myself into a seated position, inspecting my knee. My tights are ripped and I'll have a hell of a bruise, but it's not bleeding . . . much. I suppose it could be worse.

Then I see that the feline responsible for my early-morning acrobatics is holding a piece of heavyweight cardstock with gold foil between her tiny, pointed teeth and my positivity plummets.

"It could have waited until later, Oliver," I grumble, giving her a pet while she deposits the invitation in my lap.

Frankly, it could have waited until *never*.

She meows again, butting her forehead into my arm before bounding off. A silent *Buck up, buttercup*. She disappears around the corner with a swish of her orange tail, off to do whatever it is she does during the day.

I look at the envelope in my lap. Twenty-five years and my mom hasn't changed the design once. When I was a little girl, I would hide in the entryway of her office and watch her slowly write each name. I used to think her care and attention to detail meant she wanted it to be special. Now I know she just likes the performance.

I trace over my name: *Harriet York*.

Not a lick of personalization or a single indication that the woman who addressed this card is the same woman who raised me. It's the same invitation my father's accountant gets, as well as the rest of the guest list for the annual York Family Christmas Gala. The envelope arrives every year on December 1 like clockwork, my mother's commitment to tradition and etiquette unmatched.

I place it in my bag, taking care not to bend the cardstock. As much as I wish it didn't, it matters to me that I received an invitation. It means I'm still considered part of the family, despite how strained our relationship has become.

I haul myself off the sidewalk, untwist the wayward garland from my leg, and collect the bags that landed in the bush next to my railing. I always have my decorations up by the time my mother's invitation arrives. My own little tradition for my favorite time of the year. I spent the weekend digging everything out of my attic and arranging it in appropriate piles, not that it matters now. The garland artfully looped around my banister is hanging limp. The giant poinsettia I spent twenty-six minutes adjusting *just so* is missing a petal.

I fix the edge of the oversize flower so the brand new bare spot is hidden.

"There," I say. "Good as new."

My aunt Matilda used to tell me there are few things that can't be

solved with a shift in perspective and some shiny new trinkets. I've applied that to my own life by buying obnoxiously oversize Christmas decorations. I try to find the silver lining and when all else fails, there's always a blueberry Danish from the tiny bakery down the street to chase the bad mood away.

I don't like focusing on the bad. I never have.

So, I don't.

"Okay there, Harry?" A shadow falls over the short wooden fence that circles my property. Darryl, the postman assigned to our block, is doing his best to peer over the top of the boxes stacked in his arms.

"All good, Darryl." I limp over and meet him at the fence, taking the top package off his massive stack. He grins in relief, his thick mustache hiding most of his mouth, but not the deep smile lines by his eyes.

"How'd you know that was about to fall?"

"Probably because you can't see around it." The tower in his hands wobbles precariously, the bag over his shoulder bulging. I frown at it. "Holiday rush? So soon?"

"Nah. I'm just correcting some misdirected mail." He turns to look over his shoulder. "I don't know how I keep getting mixed up."

He's been getting *mixed up* for the duration of his career, delivering the wrong packages to the wrong people for well over twenty years. I don't know why a man with no sense of direction decided to become a postman. I spare a quick look at the package in my hands, then turn him toward the green sign on the corner. "You're on the wrong street. This label says it needs to get to Morris Street. You're on Murray."

He squints at the letters on the paper, an astonished *bub* caught in the back of his throat. "Can't believe I didn't notice that."

Neither can I, considering he made the same mistake last week. Most of us spend our Sundays sorting out who got what and where it's supposed to be. Last week there were so many mismatched packages, we decided to have a potluck, too.

“How about”—I wedge the wayward package under my arm—“I take this and drop it off on my way into work. That way you can finish up this street without backtracking.”

His face brightens. “You’d do that for me?”

I’ve done more complicated things for less appreciation. I smile at him. “I love playing Santa,” I tell him with a pat on the shoulder. “See you later?”

He gives me a quick wink over his shoulder, already moving down the sidewalk. “Not if I can help it.”



On the first day of December, the universe gave to me—

Two more misdelivered packages to be corrected, a side trip to get Band-Aids, and no blueberry Danish in sight.

“I’m so sorry, baby, but we’re all out.” Paula frowns at me from the other side of the counter, the lines on either side of her mouth deepening in concern. I’ve been coming to Paula’s bakery since I was six years old, my face pressed up against the display with blueberries staining my cheeks. “You want a cranberry apple one instead?”

No. I want a blueberry Danish. The promise of that sweet, sugary delight is the only thing that’s gotten me through this hellscape of a morning. I’ve dangled it in front of my nose like a carrot on a stick. But it’s not Paula’s fault she ran out, so I force a smile and nod, willing to accept literal crumbs from this woman. “Cranberry sounds great, thank you.”

She reaches into the long glass case while I inspect my knee. The hole in my tights has expanded, a slash across my upper thigh. I look like some sort of holiday grunge-rock princess with my tweed skirt and knee-high boots. The unicorn Band-Aid adds a little color, at least. That’s nice.

“Uh-oh.”

I look up. Paula is bent in half, searching her pastry display.

“What’s *uh-oh*?” I ask. I hate *uh-oh*. I don’t know how many more *uh-ohs* I can handle today.

“I think we’re out of Danish.”

“All of the Danish? Even the cranberry? It’s gone?”

Her face softens at the utter devastation that seeps into my voice. I *always* get a Danish on December first. *Always*.

“You’re here much later than usual,” she says, casting a critical eye over the counter. She nods at my busted knee. “Did you get in an alley fight? What happened to you?”

“Life happened to me,” I mutter. I’m here later than usual because I was trying to do a good thing, but I guess no good deed goes unpunished.

Mindful of the line starting to form at my back, I scan the selection. All she has left are some butter croissants and a couple of powdered doughnuts.

“I’ll take a doughnut.” I glance over my shoulder. “Sorry to keep everyone waiting.”

“Don’t worry about that.” She scoops up a doughnut with her metal tongs and places it in a to-go bag. “Why don’t you grab a coffee on your way out? We’ve got that peppermint mocha you like. Tell Imani at the register I said it’s on the house.”

I force a smile. “Thanks, Paula.”

I eat my pity doughnut while sipping at my pity coffee on the way to the Crow’s Nest, the antiques shop I inherited from my aunt Matilda a handful of years ago. Powdered sugar decorates the front of my sweater as I turn down one of the many crooked avenues that twist around downtown Annapolis, following the cobblestone path along the harbor that leads to the Crow’s Nest. Nestled at the very end of the street, it waits for me—my home away from home—framed on either side by glittering water.

Cedar shingles. Green trim. A sign in arching gold letters above the door. When I get closer I’ll be able to see the faded pencil marks

on the inside of the doorframe from where my sister and I used to measure ourselves every summer.

While my parents kept our physical reports in a tidy manilla envelope in their shared office, my aunt Matilda carved our childhood into her walls. I've always been able to find a home among the forgotten things that clutter and crowd the shelves. They've given me hope. Kept me company. More than once, I've picked up a lost little bobble and seen the beauty in its imperfections. I've wondered if I worked hard enough at my bruised and broken bits, if I could be shiny again, too. I've wondered if anyone might ever see me as something precious.

I step over the sidewalk and onto the small wooden bridge just in front of the entrance, the heels of my boots nearly clicking. *Walking the plank*, Aunt Matilda used to say with a wink. I do a little hop skip over the last board and greet the two massive Douglas firs waiting patiently by the door, a delivery from a Christmas tree farm a couple of towns over. I plan to decorate the shop while Bing Crosby croons on the ancient record player in the back and shovel enough peppermint bark into my face to make this morning nothing more than a bad memory.

But my carefully laid plans stay tucked beneath the trees. I never even get to put them in their stands. As soon as I flip the CLOSED sign to OPEN, we're inundated with a steady stream of customers. I should be grateful for the foot traffic, but they're the sort of customers who ask a lot of questions and buy exactly nothing, testing the positivity I'm holding on to by sheer force of will. Usually I don't mind the conversation, but one woman spends fifteen minutes on her speaker phone, another tries to sell me on some sort of hair mask she's been using religiously for ten years, and a middle-aged man in New Balances huffs and puffs his way around the furniture section.

"You don't have any unassembled nightstands?" he calls, hands on his hips and one off-white sneaker kicked to the side.

This isn't an IKEA, I want to snap. But I bury it down in the same place I keep my grief for the blueberry Danish and fix a smile on my face.

Silver living, I tell myself. *Silver lining, silver lining, silver lining.*

"No, we don't sell unassembled antiques." I'm proud of myself when my tone stays even. "But we do have some really lovely pieces."

By the time the sun is melting through the back windows, I'm tired, my knee hurts, and not a single decoration is up in the shop besides a half-hearted sprig of mistletoe over the back storage closet. I flip the sign on the door and pat one of the trees, dragging my fingers along the prickly branches.

"Don't worry, pal. Tomorrow is a new day."

Hopefully a better one. Hopefully one where I can string lights on my trees.

Wind whistles off the water as I lock the door to the shop behind me, the ornate brass key heavy in the palm of my hand. Another one of Aunt Matilda's whimsies that I haven't had the heart to update. I press the key into my pocket and turn up the street, the lanterns that line each side of the road slowly flickering to life in the settling dusk.

There are no wayward cats on my walk home. No misdelivered packages or oversize Christmas decorations crumpled in a heap against the porch. It's just my quiet craftsman house on a side street of Annapolis and a door I need to kick on the bottom right corner to open.

The glow of my tree welcomes me as I drop my things in a heap by the door, shimmying out of my tights. I tug on my favorite pajamas—a matching red and white flannel set with dancing reindeer—and toss my curls into a ponytail. Tonight, I'll soothe the day's disappointments with *White Christmas* and peppermint tea. Tomorrow I'll try again.

Christmas has always been my favorite time of year. It's the only time of year when it feels like magic might be real, hovering somewhere close to the surface. Like you can reach out and touch it. Cup

it between frostbitten fingertips like sugarplum kisses and popcorn strung on ribbon. Crackling fires beneath the hearth and gingerbread cookies fresh from the oven. Christmas has always felt right. Christmas has always felt true.

I sink into the comfort of my couch and watch my movie, unwrapping a candy cane while Betty and Judy sing about sisters. Something thick and heavy settles at the back of my throat. *Sisters*.

Growing up, my sister and I used to lie on the floor with our heads tucked together and watch this scene over and over. We'd promise each other that we'd be the same way, laughing and smiling and dancing—together, always. We watched our mother and our aunt tear into each other until their relationship was a pile of ash. We knew we wanted something different. Something better.

But the last time I talked to my sister, cherry blossoms were on the trees and tears were on her cheeks. Somehow, despite our best intentions, we managed to become exactly like them.

I took one path. Samantha took another.

I force the thought away. Today is December 1. It's not a day for painful memories. It's a day for Danny Kaye and peppermint candies and my coziest socks.

Tradition. Hope. Kindness.

I'm so busy trying to suck down tea and convince myself that I'm fine that I don't notice the important things. Namely, the strange man in my living room. It's the scuff of his boots against the floor that finally catches my attention, his shadow large and looming in the glow of my Christmas tree. He clears his throat, my head snaps in his direction, and I—

I scream. I scream at the top of my lungs and hurl the closest projectile I have. The TV remote sails over his shoulder, landing next to an ornament of a lighthouse.

He doesn't so much as flinch, gazing at me steadily from the shadows.

"Hello, Harriet," he says easily.

His voice is rough. A faint accent I can't pinpoint or recognize. I don't *recognize* a single thing about him, most of him hidden in the shadows. All I can make out is a strong jaw and broad body, his hands held loose at his sides.

I press myself farther into my couch. My breath goes shallow. Every murder mystery podcast I have ever listened to has started exactly like this.

The stranger raises his hands, palms facing out. "Don't be alarmed."

Don't be alarmed. Okay. Says the man who is standing—uninvited—in the middle of my living room. He moves closer and light dances over his angular face. His jaw is brushed with scruff, heavier over his top lip. An implication of a mustache, if he were to grow it out fully. He drags one of his hands through his messy, windswept hair.

I grip my candy cane. It's not sharp enough to stab him with, but I've got enough adrenaline coursing through my system to probably cause a little damage.

"What do you want?" I breathe.

"I want to help you." He moves closer. "It's not too late, Harriet. You can mend your ways."

I blink. "Is this, like, a door-to-door thing? I'm not interested in joining your cult, thank you." His face remains blank. My eyes dart to the door and back again. "How did you get into my house?"

"I—"

"More importantly, when can you leave?"

"I don't—"

"I don't have anything valuable." I drag my teeth over my bottom lip. "Actually, that's a lie. That gingerbread house by your feet is hand-painted. You could probably get something for it on the black market."

He studies the gingerbread house in question, eyebrows raised. "Black market," he repeats slowly.

"You can have it," I whisper. "Please leave now."

He shakes his head, dragging his attention back to me on the couch. His eyes linger a beat too long on the patterned material of my pajama bottoms. He drags his hand over his jaw. "I have no interest in your gingerbread house."

"What do you have interest in, then? Murder?"

Good job, Harriet, my brain chirps. Very subtle.

"I have no interest in murder either." The light shifts over his face. He is all angles and sharp, knowing eyes. His jaw firms and he tilts his chin up. "I'm interested in your soul," he says ominously, and my stomach lurches up to my throat.

I pause, waiting for him to continue. He doesn't. "See, that sounds a little bit like murder."

"It's not murder."

"It *really*, really sounds like murder."

"It's not," he insists. "I'm not—"

"It's just, if you're not a murderer, you should really work on your presentation because—"

"I'm here for your reckoning." He cuts me off quickly, raising his voice. He sounds frustrated, like none of this is going to plan. Good. That makes two of us. His lips flatten into a line and he gives me a look, something flickering behind his eyes. A flame. Or a candle, almost. "I'm a Ghost of Christmas Past, Harriet. Your reclamation awaits."

My jaw hinges open. My candy cane falls to the floor.

On the first day of December, the universe gave to me—

A string of bad luck and a . . . ghost, apparently.



Chapter Two

Nolan

She watches me in silent, frozen astonishment from her place on the couch, her brown eyes blown wide, her blanket clutched tight to her chest. After a passionate initial response, it seems she's decided to pretend she's invisible.

That's perfectly fine. I'm a patient man.

I'm still recovering from the shock of the television remote nearly clipping my ear. While violent reactions to my appearance are not out of the ordinary, I can't say I was expecting it from this tiny woman in ridiculous pajamas.

I turn halfway and reach into the tree behind me, extracting the slim device while she processes. I set it neatly on her coffee table.

She makes a garbled, sputtering sound.

Lovely.

"You don't—" She swallows, sucks in a sharp breath, then exhales again. "You don't look like a ghost," she finally says.

"Well . . ." The word falls out of my mouth and hovers there, uncertain. I'm not used to people doubting my existence as I stand in front of them.

“Well?” she repeats, staring at me in bewilderment. There’s a mug in the shape of a Christmas tree at her elbow and enough candy canes hanging from various light fixtures to probably be a fire hazard. Clutter occupies every inch of available space. This house is a disaster, but . . . festive, I suppose. A festive disaster.

I try to summon all my ghostly bravado. “I am one.”

“A ghost?”

“Yes.” I nod. “I am a ghost. Or a spirit. Whichever you prefer.”

She gives me one slow blink in response. Her hair is a mess of wild, blond curls, tied back in a haphazard ponytail on the very top of her head. Two strands break free, brushing along her high cheekbones. She digs her fist into her eye, seemingly trying to clear her vision, then drops it again, blinking blearily at me.

“Of course. That makes sense.” A slightly hysterical laugh bubbles out of her, her eyes rolling to the ceiling. “You’re a ghost,” she says under her breath. “He’s a ghost.”

I nod. “Yes. I am a ghost.”

The smile drops from her face in increments. “You’re a ghost,” she repeats, sarcasm fading into disbelief.

“A Ghost of Christmas Past, yes.”

“Sent to haunt me?” She digs a finger into the middle of her chest. “Me?”

I hum in the affirmative.

“I’m being haunted? Right now?” She squints, her nose wrinkling. “This is—I’m having trouble believing it.”

“That’s a fairly common reaction.”

“You’re haunting *me*? Me. I’m a good person. I pay my taxes. I feed my neighbor’s cat.” She squints. “Are you sure you’re not just breaking and entering?”

I shake my head, gesturing at the room. “I didn’t break or enter. I appear where I am summoned. It’s an unintended consequence of the general haunting.”

She shifts beneath the blanket, mouth twisted in thought. This happens, too. The slow bleed from shock to confusion to denial. The way people try to make sense of my sudden, unexpected appearance. I *know* I don’t look like a ghost. I look like an ordinary man. Brown boots. A pair of dark jeans. A warm flannel. I’ve never bought into the flash-and-bang routine the way some of my colleagues do. There’s no point in a costume, really, when my appearance out of thin air usually does the trick. I’m not about to start wearing a long white cloak for the drama of it all.

Though perhaps I should. It might speed things along.

A note for next time.

Her eyes slowly crawl back to mine and something about her expression scratches the back of my mind. I tip my head to the side and study her. She feels . . . familiar. Like the edge of a memory I can’t quite grasp. Or an . . . impression, almost. A song I’ve heard before.

“Have we met?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says, voice faint. She shifts on the couch and the light hits her from a different angle. The feeling drifts away. “You tell me. Are you a stalker in addition to a vandal?”

I roll my eyes to the ceiling. “I did not break into your home, Harriet. I used my magic.”

“Magic,” she repeats, skeptical. “You do realize that the method of breaking and entering doesn’t invalidate the actual breaking and entering, right?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Can we please move on from the breaking and entering bit?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I would. Desperately. I’ve barely started this assignment, and I’m irritated. Typically, this feeling settles in around the second or third memory. Spending my holiday season haunting the very worst of humanity hasn’t exactly softened my edges in the afterlife.



Some of my magic escapes my careful control, the lights in the room flaring and then dimming. Her eyes grow wide.

"Do that again," she breathes.

"No."

"Why not?"

Because it wasn't intended, but she doesn't need to know that. "Because you're not in charge."

That seems to ignite a fuse of rebellion within her. She sits up straighter on the couch, the blanket she has wrapped around her shoulders slipping a bit.

"I want proof," she demands.

"Of what?"

"Of your . . . ghostliness. Do you have some sort of documentation?" A slender hand emerges from beneath the blanket, holding a candy cane. The end of it is sharpened to a point. "A . . . badge, perhaps?"

"A ghost badge?"

"I don't know how these things work."

"We don't carry badges. Or any sort of documentation."

Her eyes narrow. "That seems convenient."

I shrug. "Something for me to bring up at our next staff meeting, then."

"Staff meeting? There are more of you?"

I nod. There are hundreds of us. Surely, she doesn't think there's just one Ghost of Christmas Past, haunting the world's worst offenders. It would be an impossible task.

"Okay, fine. That's fine. This is fine," she whispers to herself. Her eyes flutter up and then away. Back and away again. The third time, her attention sticks.

"Do something ghostly," she demands.

Good lord. This woman. "No."

"Prove that you're a ghost," she insists. "Do something only a ghost would do. The light thing again."

I cross my arms over my chest. "It's not a *party trick*."

She grows smug. "That's something a not-ghost would say."

"I just appeared in your living room. I believe that should be sufficient."

"You emerged from behind the tree," she clarifies. "It's possible you came in through the front door."

I turn my head and stare pointedly at the deadlock on her door. The chain is still notched. "I didn't."

"The window, then."

"The window is also locked."

Her eyebrows inch up her forehead, her mind searching for an explanation.

"Maybe I'm having a very elaborate dream," she says, her voice going faint. She pinches the inside of her wrist.

I smirk. "You're not."

She huffs out an irritated breath. "You're a little young to be a ghost."

"Says who?" I shrug. "I died young."

"And your voice. What's going on with that?"

I arch an eyebrow. "My accent?"

She nods.

"I died Irish."

Her brows pinch together. "You're not Irish anymore?"

"No, I'm still Irish."

"Why aren't you haunting a nice gal in Ireland, then?"

"I don't know. This is the location I've been assigned." I scratch at my jaw. "Probably because you Americans need more haunting than most."

She gasps, affronted. "Rude."