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B.K. BORISON

GRIM TIDINGS



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



Chapter One

Darcy

I died on a sunny Tuesday in March at the age of twenty-seven.

I could hear the bumble bees buzzing beneath my window, dancing through the sprigs of lavender planted in small, clay pots. I remember thinking it was especially cruel, how I could hear life creeping forward, even when mine was coming to a close.

Scratchy sheets. Sore throat. An ache wedged beneath my rib cage that radiated out until I knew nothing but pain. Most of my life was spent in hospital beds, but I could feel the difference this time. So I tipped my face into the single beam of sun that managed to filter through the hospital-issued canvas curtains and I rattled out my last breath.

I thought death would mean an end to my suffering.

Not so much.



“Can I touch it?”

“No.”

Behind me, Brad makes a noise that settles somewhere between

Some spirits think they're anchored to this place because of unfinished business, while others believe it's the final test before they move on to whatever is next.

I think that if no one can bother to change a water filter regularly, there isn't much hope for some grand plan. We're being used as cheap labor. Indentured servitude, our immortal souls tied to this bureaucratic afterlife as glorified pencil pushers. I don't know what I expected would happen when I died, but it certainly wasn't this. An office with too-bright fluorescents, incompetent coworkers, and a stack of overdue paperwork on the edge of the desk I'm never at.

"This place is hard enough, don't you think?" The expression on Brad's face shifts. A flash of petulance beneath all that good boy charm. "There's nothing wrong with wanting some company."

Hesitation pinches between my shoulder blades. I remember what it was like when I first arrived. I had spent months and months confined to a bed with sheets that smelled like disinfectant. Pain sharp as knives and then . . . nothing. A woman with a kind smile hovering over me, her hands holding on to mine.

"Are you ready to leave now, my darling?" she asked.

"Yes," I whispered. "Please."

And then we were here. Standing in an empty hallway lined with doors. Her with her black cloak draped around her shoulders and me still in my hospital gown.

Those first few weeks in the afterlife had been exhilarating. I thought it was a second chance. Another life, without pain.

But it wasn't a life at all. It was a trick. An illusion.

The loneliness set in hard and fast, a hollow ache carved into my chest. I know what it's like to crave something more.

"I'm sorry," I tell Brad. "You're right. It is lonely. I'm just—I think I've been working too much."

His smile returns, encouraged. "Maybe you should take a break. Have some fun."

I try to keep my face neutral. "Maybe."

Where does one find fun? Not in this office, that's for sure. They say that those who become Reapers are the souls with the greatest potential for darkness. It doesn't matter that I had no say in my designation. I'm treated like the second coming of the bubonic plague everywhere I go. I've never once gone to one of the interoffice pot-lucks. Never received an invitation to the Malevolent Spirits' book club.

"Maybe"—Brad shifts closer, drawing out the word, trying to be coy but only managing a faint approximation of constipated—"we could have fun together."

I tip my chin up, careful to keep space between us. "Our office has a no-fraternization policy."

"Does it?"

I don't know. But if we don't, I'm going to drop a note in the suggestion box. I might be lonely, but I don't intend to seek solace in the arms of candy-colored Brad. My standards didn't disappear when I died.

"I should get going," I hedge, avoiding the question. "I'm late for assignment selection."

Brad's eyes flare in interest. "That's today?"

He looks far too eager for what is essentially the end of another person's life. I manage a tight smile and start to edge around him and toward the door. "Yep."

"Can I come?"

"Only Reapers are allowed in front of the tree."

"I won't tell." He makes a cross over his heart, staying close. "Swear it."

"It doesn't matter. The tree would know."

There are strict rules. To receive my assignment, I must appear in front of the massive yew tree that sits at the very center of the department. It's private, and . . . discerning. Only one spirit may enter the room at a time. Only then will the tree grant a soul to collect.

"I can be quiet," Brad insists.

"No."

"I can—"

"No," I say again, sharper. I never should have indulged him. Now he's trailing after me like a lovesick puppy, playing twenty dumb questions.

Next time, I'll replace the water filter myself.

The door to the break room swings open, and a small blond head appears. I almost weep in gratitude. Aelia's eyes shift between me and Brad, a knowing smile edging up one side of her mouth. She tries to push up her sleeves, but they fall again almost immediately. She's swimming in her dark black robes, her hood up, her young face cast in shadow.

"Everything good in here?"

"Fine," I mutter, using the opportunity to yank myself away from Brad. I readjust my scythe and my bag, making sure everything is in order. "Are you heading to the assignment room?"

She nods, then blows a hot pink bubble with her gum. It obscures most of her face before she snaps it back in her mouth with a grin. Aelia came to the department when she was eight years old and is one of the few spirits who was permitted to skip the mandatory Ferryman training. Her scythe is bigger than she is, strapped across her back with a thick leather belt.

She is small, adorable, and wholly terrifying.

"I have the slot after you," she says. "And you're late."

I grab on to the lifeline with both hands. "Yes," I agree. "Yes, I am."

"Well, don't make *me* late." She tilts her head toward the hallway. "I won't be penalized because you're being chummy in the break room."

"Yes, of course." I slip out of the room and quickly link my arm with hers.

Brad calls a goodbye, but I wave him off, lengthening my strides. Aelia snickers under her breath as she meets my adjustment in pace.

"I can't believe that guy was placed with the Reapers." She snorts. "What an idiot."

"I know," I murmur. "I thought it was a mistake when he showed up."

She pushes back her hood, shooting me a look from the corner of her eye. Her hair is braided into two neat pigtails, pale pink scrunchies at the end of each. She looks like she should be heading to the playground, not collecting souls for the afterlife.

"You're allowed to let those inside thoughts out, you know." She reaches up and raps her knuckles against the side of my head. "Gideon isn't lurking around the corner, ready to clock you for insubordination."

"Gideon would have to actually *be* around the corner for that to happen." The managing head of the Reapers prefers a more hands-off approach. He hasn't been seen in the office for more than two hundred years.

Aelia smirks. "You're also allowed to wear some color."

I stare down at my sleek black robes. At five foot eight, my robes fit a lot better than hers. "This is the uniform. We're wearing the same thing."

She stops abruptly in the middle of the hall, offended. "We are *not* wearing the same thing." She whips open the front of her robes with a flourish. "I am not afraid of a little pizazz."

I stare at her pizazz. Underneath her uniform, she's wearing a hot pink sweater with a sparkly rainbow emblazoned across the front of it. It's tucked into a bright baby-blue tutu, more sparkles on the edges.



Whoever she claims next is in for a treat.

She closes her robe with a snap, and continues walking down the hall.

"Let me guess," she calls over her shoulder, "you're wearing a black skirt, black tights, and a black turtleneck."

I glance at the top of my robe just to make sure it's not open. "It's a boatneck sweater, and it's slate. Not black."

"Slate," she mutters under her breath, shaking her head. She turns down a hall, and then another. The assignment room is hidden in the center of a labyrinth. Every door we pass is unmarked, each one painted the same corporate white. I'm convinced the design was intentional.

"What did Brian want?" she asks while I'm busy counting steps, trying to remember where I am.

"His name is Brad," I answer, distracted.

"Whatever." Her lips press together. "Was he trying to touch your scythe again?"

I clutch it tighter to my body. "He does seem preoccupied with the specifics of becoming a Reaper. He said he wanted to come to the assignment room."

Aelia stops; I almost mow her tiny body down. "He asked you that?"

"Yeah."

Her eyes narrow in suspicion. "I don't trust him."

"I know. That's why I don't go to the break room."

Before us, the door to the assignment room looms at the end of the hall. My chest tightens. *I don't want to do this*, I think wearily, the blade across my shoulder feeling like a thousand pounds. *I'm so tired of death.*

"How long has he been a Ferryman? A month?" Aelia scoffs. "A month. And he thinks he can get in front of the tree."

"You were in front of the tree on your first day."

"Yes, well." She examines her nails. They're painted a pastel pink. She has flower decals on every other finger. "I'm special."

I snort a laugh. "That you are."

We come to a stop in front of the last unmarked door. Two ornate sconces anchor either side, matching flames that never extinguish. The handle is a burnished brass, curved in the shape of a scythe. I stare at it, knowing I should already be inside.

But I hesitate.

Aelia tilts her head up and gives me a curious look. "What's going on with you?"

I debate lying, but Aelia has always been able to see right through me. "I don't know."

I don't know how to describe this itchy, uncomfortable feeling that crawls through my bloodstream. A tug, right at the base of my skull. It's as if I've misplaced something. Like there's something I'm supposed to remember.

"Do you ever—" I pause, trying to untangle my thoughts.

"What?" she snaps, impatient as always.

"Do you ever get tired of this work?" I ask carefully, pulling at the string that loops around all my most persistent thoughts. "Do you ever wish . . . you were with a different office?"

Aelia blinks at me. Pale blue eyes in a perfect cherub face, with the knowledge of a thousand lives coursing through her tiny body. "Our work is the most important in the department," she says.

"Yeah." Disappointment curls in my gut. I don't know what I was hoping for. "Yeah, of course. I know that."

"We are the most powerful beings in existence," she continues, her young voice ringing with finality. "We represent *death*, Darcy. We cannot take that lightly."

But I *want* to take it lightly. I'm tired of the doom and gloom and

the tears and the bargaining. I don't want to be there at the final moments. I want—I want the middle ones. Lazy mornings in bed and cups of coffee gone cold. Flowers in bloom and lipstick smudged on the edge of a glass. A single candle wedged crooked in buttercream icing. Towels fresh from the dryer and junk mail shoved through a crack in the door.

My entire existence is defined by the end. I want the beginning back.

But a Grim Reaper who's tired of death? That sounds like the punch line of a bad joke.

Aelia straightens, her face brightening. "You know what you need?"

A vacation, probably. One of those sensory-deprivation tanks, maybe. For everyone to stop telling me what I need, definitely. The flames on either side of the door flare then settle, as if they can sense my mood.

I narrow my eyes and try to redirect my thoughts somewhere neutral. Just in case.

"You need to wear some color. Something interesting. Just because we're death incarnate doesn't mean we need to look it. Live a little." She snaps her fingers. "Oh! Let's go to that little boutique by your house. I got the cutest strawberry earrings the last time I visited you."

Departmental employees are allowed to haunt the house of their choosing during off-hours, as long as it's outside the beaten path from mortals. I picked a little cottage on the Maine coastline. Craggy rocks and blue-gray waters. Sunsets that paint the sky all sorts of colors. But sometimes I feel more lonely there than anywhere else. Drifting through the empty rooms in my empty house.

"The last time you visited me was in 1968," I point out.

"And I still have the earrings."

"Yes, well, that shop is a wine bar now."

"No shit?"

I nod. "Went out of business in '92 and sat abandoned for a couple of years before a family bought it. They make pretty good schnitzel."

"What the fuck is schnitzel?"

I'll never get used to the vulgarity that explodes out of her tiny body.

"It's a thin, breaded slice of—"

Her eyes glaze over.

"Never mind." I gesture at the door. "I should get inside."

"Yeah, you should. What are you, twenty minutes late now?" She flicks her wrist and looks at the watch on her arm. It's shaped like a jelly bean with gemstones on the band. "I'd like to get my assignment wrapped this century, thank you very much."

Her small hand presses between my shoulder blades, and she shoves me at the door. I reach for the handle to steady myself but fall through instead. The last thing I see before the door slams shut behind me is Aelia blowing another damn bubble with her gum.

I peel myself from the floor with a groan, trying to scrape together the scraps of my dignity.

"Sorry I'm late," I say to the massive tree in the middle of the room. The leaves above my head rustle in response, and I smile. The assignment room is less of a room and more . . . an enormous glass atrium, golden light filtering in from the windows up above. The tree itself splits up through cracked tile like it bullied its way there, its wide trunk cleaving into three pillars. The branches reach out wide, the gnarled fingers almost touching either end of the room.

The tree is beautiful, if not intimidating. An ancient being, with eternities carved into her skin.

"I've been having some trouble," I confess quietly. I smooth my hand over the front of my robes and reach for the pocket where I keep a well-worn folded-up piece of paper. I hear it crinkle and feel

the phantom pain of a life half-lived. "I don't suppose you have any easy assignments to offer me, do you?"

The tree remains silent.

"Yeah, I get it." Frustrated with myself, I find the part of the tree where a cluster of bright red berries peek out from between the leaves. Each berry is small and round, a hard black seed in the middle. I reach for the one that hangs lowest. I pluck it gently from the branch, then cup it in my palm.

Poisonous to mortals, they're something entirely different for us. Hints of lives about to end. A taste of what's to come.

"I could really use something different," I whisper. "Something good."

I place the berry on my tongue and wince against the flavor. It's sickeningly sweet, with a sharp bite that sticks to the back of my throat. The vision is almost as jarring, floating across my consciousness like the slice of a blade.

There's a man. Young, with smile lines by his eyes. His hair is so dark it looks like spilled ink. Wet asphalt. Cracked glasses. Music coming from somewhere far away. A flickering neon sign, orange in the melting light.

OPEN

Blood on my hands. Copper on my tongue.

My eyes snap open. The tree groans. I release my breath and let my magic unfurl.

There's a wisp of dark, a pulling sensation at the small of my back, and then I'm gone.



Chapter Two

Darcy

The bar is in the middle of a crooked, cobblestone street; the slate-shingle roof at an angle, the wood siding faded in some spots and bright with color in others. Flashes of deep crimson bleed through navy blue, like it's been painted over several times in what has obviously been a very long life. Maybe even longer than mine. Evergreen creeps in at the corners, reaching toward a wooden sign that simply reads BAR. There's no other name as far as I can see.

A neon light flickers in the window, flashing orange and then red.

OPEN

My magic tugs me in that direction, and I dutifully follow, tracking the details around me. I compare them to the ones in my vision, looking for discrepancies. There is no autumn storm, no haunting song bleeding from somewhere down the road. The pavement is dry. The street is silent.

The bar is the right place, but nothing else matches up. It's not time for me to reap my assigned soul. Not yet.

Sometimes I'm dropped directly into the moment of my charge's death, and other times, I need to hunt for it. I once spent two weeks in a small mountain village, waiting for the death of a sheep farmer. Another time it was half a year in Brooklyn Heights, trailing after the owner of a bodega like a shadow.

I prefer the waiting. When I'm dropped in the middle of the penultimate moment, it's like being cracked across the back of the skull with someone else's anguish. I struggle beneath the weight of it. But when I need to wait, I can pretend I'm there for another reason. I can almost convince myself that I'm good.

I roll my shoulders and make my way toward the bar, pulling my coat tighter around me. I traded my cloak for a long, black wool jacket, my scythe magically tucked into the bag strapped across my chest. My chestnut-colored hair is twisted back in a sensible braid, and my hands and wrists are bare of any jewelry. To anyone passing by on the street, I'm a completely normal, unassuming twenty-seven-year-old woman.

A man with a fisherman's cap pulled low over his eyes emerges from the bar, one arm caught in the sleeve of his jacket. He jerks as I move closer, his fight or flight activated by my presence. He catches the door, his jacket forgotten, staring at me like—well, like he's seen a ghost.

"In or out?" he asks, his voice faint.

"In," I say, reaching for the handle.

He pulls away before our arms can brush, and I give him a small smile. His reaction chafes, though I know it shouldn't. I can't fault the mortals for their instincts. Death clings to me like a second skin. I am the goose bumps on the back of his neck. The whisper in the back of his mind that warns him of danger. But the feeling will fade, and tomorrow, he won't think of the strange woman standing on the front stoop of his favorite bar. His memory of me will muddle. I exist

at the very edge of his comprehension. It's the only way we're able to continue our work. The mortals would rather live in their own delusion than confront the magic that drifts among them.

I was the same way when I was alive.

The man moves past me without another word, glancing over his shoulder several times as he wanders down the street.

What would it be like, I wonder, to be something people move toward instead of away from? It's been so long since I've been anything other than feared.

Morose thoughts for a morose woman. If Aelia were here, she'd flick me in the forehead and tell me to get something fruity and frozen from the bar.

Unfortunately, this bar doesn't look like it has anything fruity or frozen.

I let the door swing shut behind me, the warmth and the noise drawing me in. A wide oak bar top stretches across one side of the room, stools with cracked green leather tucked close. Round wooden tables fill the rest of the space, mismatched chairs and old paper menus stacked in the middle of each. There's a group of midshipmen at one, some fishermen at another. The ceiling arches in the back, hiding a tiny alcove where a couple sits tucked close, their legs tangled beneath the table. It smells like beer and salt water and cigarette smoke, an ancient jukebox in the back creaking out Pearl Jam.

I immediately love it.

Maybe the tree did hear me. Maybe this time I've been dropped in a place that'll do me some good. Maybe I can even make a little vacation out of it, before the whole business of collecting my marked soul.

There's one stool open at the bar, wedged between a wide window and a man with his sleeves rolled to his elbows. Blond hair, not black. Mid-fifties. No laugh lines. I go through my mental checklist as I slide onto the stool next to him. He gives me a cursory glance and a