



THE FERRYMAN
AMY NEFTZGER

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by
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The book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to individuals and cosmic forces, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Prologue

Like most large career moves, this one happened by accident. Karen spent a lot of time planning what she was going to do with her life, but Fate had other plans for her, as she often does for most of us. Karen just happened to rob the wrong grave.

Episode One

The Ferryman Is a Woman

Karen studied the coffin she had just uncovered. The lid, once a shiny lacquered surface, was now partially decayed and fell apart as Karen pried it off. Bits of wood turned to dust in her hands as she worked diligently to make an opening. Her arms were tired from digging and the fatigue made it more difficult to be gentle with the rotting wood. She paused to shake her arms vigorously and relax the tension in her muscles and upper body. As she breathed in the chilly night air, she could smell her own sweat mixed with the fragrance of the rich earth and decaying wood. She took a few more deep breaths and turned back to the task of opening the grave. She worked patiently to handle the lid with care and managed to remove a large chunk that was nearly a third of the entire lid. Through the hole she had made she saw the top half of a well-dressed skeleton.

The grave was on the edge of the cemetery in a neglected corner that looked as if it could be part of the adjoining land. The gravestone had fallen over years ago and weathered so much that it looked like an ordinary limestone rock. A few days earlier when Karen recognized that it was actually a grave, she decided to rob it. She was hoping that no one had gotten to it before her.

This particular plot was an older grave from a time when individuals placed ancient coins over the eye sockets of the corpse, although the coins weren't ancient when they were buried. Most of these graves had already been robbed, but due to the location and lack of distinct marking or some other mystical reason, this one had gone unnoticed by robbers until now. It was almost as if the grave had been hidden until the right person came along. Karen wasn't the typical grave robber, and perhaps the corpse found this attractive. Regardless of how the grave had remained unspoiled for so many years, Karen was the one who finally opened the casket and plucked up the coins. It was at that moment that Fate appeared.

"You have three days to finish the task," someone said as soon as Karen had snatched the coins and a few other small trinkets from the corpse. Karen jumped when she heard the voice. It had a rich, mellow tone and resonated with authority. Karen turned around and briefly thought about running, but she decided to stay put when she saw a woman staring her down. The woman had come out of nowhere and appeared to be alone.

The woman was, if nothing else, fashionable. She was very fit, toned but not bulky in stature, and wore clothes of the finest quality. Her boots were Italian leather and the jacket and pants looked like something from a Chanel boutique.

Karen slowly put the coins into her pocket, along with the gold watch she had taken from the breast pocket of the skeleton's suit, and addressed the woman. Other people might have felt intimidated by the situation, but Karen was ready to fight.

"What task?" Karen demanded. "Who are you?" A pocket of night air brushed past and gave her a chill as she waited for an answer. However, she would not let her discomfort show.

"I am Fate, of course. You took the coins intended for the Ferryman. The work is now yours. You're hired." The woman stood with one hand on her hip as she spoke with confidence.

"To do what?" Karen glanced around to see if anyone else was nearby. Surely Fate was not alone in the graveyard at three in the morning. Karen had chosen the time based on her experience of when graveyards were most empty. She'd learned a lot since she started grave robbing and knew that the time between when the bars close and the coffee shops open are the most vacant hours of the night.

"This gentleman paid for safe passage to the next life. Your job is to get him there," Fate explained. "And you're already late."

The novelty of the situation wasn't lost on Karen. She knew the legend of the Ferryman and about how people would be buried with coins on their eyes or lips to pay for a successful journey into the afterlife. She also knew that there were very few graves left

where the gold coins were still in place. Karen was unlucky enough to find and rob this particular grave when Fate was nearby and looking for someone to do her bidding. Fate probably just liked the look of Karen. There were few women strong or daring enough to rob graves, and that probably worked in Karen's favor. She was also physically strong for a woman her size and had a determined appearance in the way she carried herself as she moved. Whatever it was, something had attracted Fate, and once Fate has her eye on you there's no getting away. Of course, Fate always has a way of putting someone into a situation and then leaving, which is what she did with Karen. Some people would call this poor management. Others call it being smart.

Fate abruptly vanished and Karen saw the ghost that had been standing behind Fate. He was dressed in a black suit with a starched white shirt, a black vest and red tie. His shoes were polished and glowed. He certainly seemed less solid than everything else in the graveyard. Looking at him made Karen's eyes water, as if she was watching heat coming from a flame. Everything about him was wavy and unstable. He took a step forward.

"I'm Jerome Brown," the ghost said politely. "Managing partner of Smith and Brown Trading Goods. I ran the general store in town." When Karen didn't respond after a few moments he continued, "What's your name?"

“Karen Irving.” She looked from the coffin to the ghost and then around the graveyard.

“So you’re the one who’s going to take me?” the ghost asked hopefully.

“I don’t know,” Karen replied. She wiped her forehead with her hand, smearing a small amount of dirt onto her face as she did so. “I don’t know where to take you.” She remembered her son, Claude. She shouldn’t have left him home alone, but he was a sound sleeper and the house was locked. She thought she’d be gone for a couple of hours when she left. Now it looked like it would be a bit longer.

“That lady called you ‘The Ferryman.’”

“I’m not.” Karen carefully pushed the pieces of the coffin lid shut again and climbed out of the grave.

“She looked like she knew what she was talking about.”

“Who?” Karen asked, unsure if the ghost had seen everything that she had. She began kicking some of the loose dirt onto the grave. She was starting to feel cold and the activity helped warm her up a bit.

“The bossy one. She just left.” The ghost pointed to where Fate had been standing.

“So, she was real,” Karen said more to herself than to the ghost. Of course, the ghost could have also been a dream. Anything was possible.

“Yep.”

“And you’re real?” Karen shoveled a few piles of dark brown earth onto the coffin lid. If she had more work to do before morning, she wouldn’t have time to put things back properly, but she wanted to do something. She hated the thought of leaving the coffin completely exposed. Besides, the feeling of the wooden shovel in her hands was reassuring to her. She was, after all, talking with a ghost. Shoveling seemed to help her feel a bit more normal about the situation.

“As real as you. Maybe mores so, since I’ve been around longer.”

“How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know. You just stole my watch,” he said with a shrug.

“This watch hasn’t worked for at least a century,” Karen replied as she stopped shoveling. She reached into her pocket to pull out the timepiece for a better look. The gold felt soft compared to a modern watch, and she knew it was high quality. She opened and closed it a few times. The hinges were stiff but still moved even

though the hands had stopped. Perhaps it just needed a good winding, but there was no time for that now.

“That explains a lot,” he replied. “I never went anywhere because I thought I had plenty of time.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Karen asked, ignoring his last statement. She threw down the shovel and looked squarely at the ghost. “You put those coins on your eyes. She said it was payment for the Ferryman. What does it mean?” She knew the legend, but she didn’t understand how or why she was supposed to get involved in the process.

“I didn’t put those coins on my eyes. My daughter did that to help me into the next life. You’re supposed to carry me across the river. That’s what a ferryman does. He takes passengers across the river.”

“The river?” Karen asked. It sounded silly to her, but she knew where the river was located. It wasn’t terribly far and the guy didn’t look very heavy. After all, how heavy could a ghost be? It’s mostly air — or some other floaty stuff. If all she had to do was to get him to the other side of the river, she could do that and be back home in an hour before her son woke up.

Getting the ghost into the car was awkward for Karen. After she had placed her shovel and other tools in the trunk, she opened the passenger door and watched him float inside. She

wasn't sure if he was able to manage the door handle, but once he was inside, his translucent fingers began exploring the interior components. At first Karen reached down for the seatbelt to secure the ghost, but then she changed her mind as she realized that it might not work. First of all, he wasn't made up of firm matter and if an accident took place he was likely to pass right through the belt, anyway. More importantly, safety wouldn't be a primary concern for someone who was already dead. She slammed the passenger door and ran back to her seat to start the car. The ghost giggled when the engine roared to life.

Jerome enjoyed the ride in her car, which was a completely new experience since he'd died before cars were invented. He was a real chatterbox, too. He kept talking about how much the town had changed, and he repeatedly asked her to slow down so he could get a better look at things. Karen ignored him and kept driving. Whatever weirdness was going on needed to be done before Claude awoke in the morning.

Karen drove quickly toward the center of town and over the large expansion bridge to the other side of the river. All the while, the ghost asked her questions about everything he had never seen before and what these new things were called. She gruffly responded to his questions, enduring the roughness of the ride in her haste to complete the job and get back to living her life. As soon as

the bridge ended and she reached the other side she turned to look at the ghost.

“Shouldn’t you be gone?”

“I don’t know. Isn’t that your job?” he asked.

“You’re on the other side of the river.” She paused to think about the situation and then added, “Perhaps you need to step out of the car and onto the ground to touch the earth on this side.” So that’s what he did, after struggling with trying to figure out how to open the car door. Once it opened, he marveled at the mechanics of the electric safety locks, listening to the clicking noise it made each time he pressed the button. Karen finally urged him to get moving and out of the car. She looked hopefully at the ghost as he made his way out of the car, but the ghost simply continued to talk about how things on this side of the river had changed just as much as they had on the other side. “This is wrong,” Karen sighed.

“You’re telling me!” the ghost exclaimed. “Electric lights. This black stuff on the roads —”

“Asphalt,” Karen interjected.

“Ass fault. What a funny name!” he said with a smile in his voice. “Ass fault,” he said slowly, listening to the sounds of the words as he pronounced them, “and cars with radios. This is all so fascinating. I don’t think I should have died at all. It seems as if life has become wonderful while I’ve been in the grave.”

“Perhaps you need to walk over the bridge,” Karen suggested. “Maybe the car interfered with the process.”

“Do you think so?” he asked. “Although, I’m not in a hurry now because I really like what I see, and I wouldn’t mind exploring more of the town.”

“I’d love to show you the town, but I have someplace I need to be,” Karen replied. She thought again about Claude.

“You don’t have anywhere else to be,” the ghost replied. “I think you’re supposed to be here. Isn’t this your job?”

“This isn’t my regular job. I work for the cable company.”

“A telegraph operator? You’re a very talented woman, I see.”

Karen dismissed his comments as the ravings of a simple-minded ghost from an earlier time period. She wasn’t enjoying this job, but she didn’t enjoy most of the others she’d had. Few people do. There’s something about a thing being called “work” that makes it automatically unpleasant. Although, some more adventurous types who came across a two-hundred-year-old ghost might think to ask a few questions about what life was like all those years ago. Someone else might be scared or might be curious about what it feels like to be a ghost. Karen, however, was short on sleep and long on worrying about her son, and she was too baffled by the weird situation to enjoy any of it.