

S C O T T B A R O N



L I V I N G
T H E
G O O D
D E A T H

Living the Good Death

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CHAPTER 1

Traffic flew by in a blur, a speeding deathtrap of rubber and metal buzzing at speeds well above the posted limit. A casual observer might think the deadly machines were almost anxious to turn anyone made of less-sturdy stuff and foolish enough to stumble into their path into grisly roadkill. They may have been inanimate, but they were dangerous as hell nonetheless.

That didn't concern the pale young woman in black one bit as she stood casually on the median of the busy street. No, her gaze and attention were entirely focused upon a doorway across the road as she ignored the buzzing vehicles.

Donny's Happy Hour Bar & Pool Hall really wasn't much to look at. Dingy and run-down, with that ass-end-of-town look that made you wonder just how lighthearted and joyful any happy hour there could really be. Of course, with the sun high in the sky, it wasn't anywhere near happy hour. In fact, by all but the most serious alcoholic's standards, at just past noon, it was still quite early.

Only *serious* day-drinkers would be partaking at this hour.

As if on cue, the disheveled shape of Andy Meade came into view as he was birthed to the sidewalk through the faded red door. He blinked rapidly, wincing as his eyes tried to adjust to the bright afternoon light.

Though a mere fifty-three years of age, Andy, with his thinning hair and ashy complexion, looked closer to a well-worn seventy, the result of a life of hard drinking, chain-smoking, and a diet of questionable nutritional content. He had long ago given up on getting ahead in the world, and that world-weariness bled through into his every movement.

He stood in the doorway a moment longer, squinting until his eyes finally acclimated to the sunlight as the cool breeze lapped uncomfortably at his skin. Andy popped his collar up against the unexpected chill, then turned and staggered slowly toward the parking lot adjacent the bar.

It's only a couple of drinks, he rationalized as he swerved down the sidewalk on wobbly legs. *I'm perfectly fine to drive. Just need to sit down a minute is all.*

The young woman in black followed his progress, her piercing gray eyes watching him as a cat watches a mouse, seemingly disinterested, yet paying close attention nonetheless. Then, as if heeding an invisible call, she abruptly stepped off

the median and into traffic, striding purposefully across the street, her long black coat swishing behind her in time with her rapid steps.

She didn't bother to look at the cars hurtling her way. She didn't even spare them so much as a glance, yet somehow, she avoided them all without mussing a single hair or missing a step. In fact, it was as if the drivers didn't see her at all.

The young woman in black's boots crunched to a stop as she reached the curb, eyes narrowing ever so slightly as she focused on her quarry. A slight furrow creased her brow as she slowly raised her left hand, stretching it out toward Andy just as he reached his silver sedan.

Her outstretched fingers gently flexed at him from across the parking lot, as if plucking invisible strings in the ether. The action somehow caused his body to shudder, his grip faltering as the keys slipped from his hand.

Drunk as he was, Andy was startled. Alarmed even. Even through the high-proof haze that clouded his mind, he sensed something was distinctly not-right.

A faint glow became visible from his chest, tugging his very core as his life force seeped from his body, slowly pulling through the very fabric of him, inch by inch. Wide-eyed, he glanced around in shock and disbelief, but no one passing by took notice.

Andy quickly slid into a panic as he clutched at his chest. He sensed that he wasn't just suffering from having too much to drink. No, viscerally, somewhere in the depths of his primitive mind, he *knew* that wasn't the case.

This was something different.

Something horribly wrong.

In a moment of unusual clarity he realized, much to his surprise, and with absolutely no warning, that he was dying.

The young woman in black lowered her hand, casually watching as her victim's life force slowly ebbed out of its meat case.

She just stood there. Calm. Expressionless.

One might say she looked almost bored even, because, hello? For Death, Reaper of Souls, this was just another day at the office.

A beam of light flashed across her eyes, and for just a second her attention faltered. On the sidewalk, a man had stopped and opened his unusually ornate blue enamel antique pocket watch, the sun's reflective blaze playing across its face in a dance of light. Such an out-of-place object caught her attention.

Who still carries a pocket watch nowadays? she found herself wondering.

The man turned to continue his walk, shutting the watch case with a quick flip of

his wrist. With the distraction gone, the young woman refocused her attention fully back onto her quarry, but as she did, her expression turned to one of shock.

She had only lost focus for a moment, but despite the immense power at her command, Andy's life force inexplicably, and quite suddenly, snapped back into his body.

"That's not supposed to—" she almost managed let out an utterance of surprise, but she didn't have a chance. Her vision swirled and faded to black as she tumbled to the ground, unconscious.

Waking up on the floor of a grimy, low-end hotel room, dazed and disoriented with a mouthful of sick, really isn't the ideal way to start your day. Most would prefer a simple cup of coffee, but some aren't so lucky.

The young woman in black lay there, facedown on the floor, carpet fibers tickling her lips as she slowly breathed. A thick mental fog weighed her down like a damp blanket, dulling her senses as she tried to free herself from its embrace. That annoying pulsing in her head and chest only made things worse.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

What the hell is that sound? Why can't I see anything? Wait, am I on the floor?

Try as she might, she found it surprisingly difficult to tune out the noise filling her head so she could focus.

Okay, there is something seriously wrong here. She struggled to clear her head. Slow down, focus. Get your bearings. First things first, see where you are.

Unfortunately, her eyes weren't giving her any information.

Open your eyes and look around. This isn't rocket science.

Her body had other ideas, at least for the moment, and her vision stubbornly remained at zero as she gingerly tried to open her lids. Try as she might, they remained glued shut in a most uncomfortable manner. It took a moment, but finally, she realized what the problem was.

Eye crud? How can I have eye crud?

Several frustrating seconds passed as she gritted her teeth, ignoring the pain of her lashes pulling out one by one as she strained to open her eyes. Finally, the sticky layer of crud and grime began to loosen, releasing her eyelids with a wet pop and a sting.

What is this place? She looked around with somewhat blurred vision.

Something is really not right, she realized. And what's that taste?

Propping herself up on one elbow, she pondered the lingering foulness in her

mouth. Spitting out the remnants of Lord knows what and wiping the straggling bits of carpet lint from her lips, she surveyed the scene as best she could from her less-than-ideal vantage point on the floor.

Okay, that's a little better. She could feel her senses slowly sharpening as she shook the cobwebs from her brain.

As her vision cleared, she discovered the room was actually worse than she had thought at first glance, if that was even possible.

The carpet may have been lush and beautiful once, but that was many, many years ago, and all that remained now was a distant memory of its former regality, encrusted with countless years of filth and grime rubbed deep into its fibers.

My face was on that, she thought with a shudder.

The walls were no better. Peeling paint and ancient smoke-stained wallpaper from the 1970s graced them, the sounds of a slow drip echoing from what she imagined must be an equally horrible bathroom. A musty smell permeated the tiny space with a pervasive dampness. The television was the most modern thing in the room by far, and even that marvel of technology was outdated by decades.

I don't understand. I'm in a seedy flophouse hotel, and a low-end one at that, but why? For that matter, how?

The unexpected groan coming from the bed took her by surprise. A sudden, heavy pounding filled her chest as a flush rose quickly to her cheeks. A tingle rushed through her body as a wave of adrenaline surged into her veins. She froze, straining her senses, and listened. The person the noise had originated from didn't seem to be aware of her presence.

At least not yet.

She quietly pushed herself up to her knees and peered over the edge of the bed, shocked that she had failed to even notice there was someone else in the room with her.

Get up. You're not doing yourself any good on the floor.

Unsteady, she cautiously found her way to her feet, wobbling ever so slightly, clutching a rickety chair as she slowly regained her balance. Peering through much less blurry eyes, she discerned that the sound had come from an old man lying on his side on the threadbare comforter, breathing deeply.

He appeared to be sound asleep and totally unaware of her presence.

Propped up against the wall, she noticed an unusual and ornate walking stick, the bird's head pommel well worn, from years of use. The twisting length of the wood rippled with curved lines. For a moment she thought perhaps it might be

necessary to use it until her balance evened out, but as she released her white-knuckled grip on the chair, she was pleased to find her equilibrium had returned.

Okay, starting to feel better.

Scoping out the dimly lit room, she noted an old picture of the man and a woman she assumed was his wife on the chipped and faded wooden nightstand next to the bed. It was obviously taken at least a decade ago if not more, the pair of them smiling like a postcard-perfect happy couple.

The room lacked a feminine touch.

She's gone, she thought. Many animals mate for life. Occasionally humans follow suit, though not so much in this era.

She glanced at the other items on the table, and noticed that next to the picture sat a small bottle of pills and a bottle of vodka, both quite empty. The man shifted slightly in his bed, and the smell of something acidic and foul wafted to her nostrils.

What is that stench? she wondered. Then she saw it.

The thick stream of the man's sour vomit, consisting mostly of vodka and undigested pills, along with what she guessed to be the remnants of his dinner, had trickled down the side of the comforter. It must have been drying for a while since the pool on the floor had slowly begun caking into yet one more mystery stain in the ancient carpet.

As for the smell, let's just say calling it unpleasant would be an understatement.

The old man's chest continued to rise and fall in a slow but regular rhythm. Apparently, the pills and vodka didn't quite do the trick.

I see, she thought, studying the lines of his face. A failed suicide.

She rolled her shoulders and neck, loosening her limbs as she stood upright. Her body stretched and cracked as she rose to her full height, vertebrae swinging into alignment as her back returned to a more familiar and comfortable posture.

Having finally gotten her bearings, though still rather confused by them, she happened to catch a glimpse of herself in the filthy, chipped mirror above the dresser. Her raven hair may have been a bit askew, and her eyes seemed a bit puffy, but she still looked like the same twenty-something girl she'd always been. Pale and lean, clad entirely in black, wearing her ever-present long black coat. Her wardrobe fit just right, and seemed to almost be a part of her.

It's okay. I'm okay, she thought, pleased that at least she still looked like herself. Mostly anyway. Something still seemed off, for lack of a better word, and that worried her. Of course, what constitutes off when you happen to be the girl who thinks she is Death is a whole other question.

Walking slowly on unsteady legs, she made her way down the smoke-stained halls. The ancient lobby was empty. Speckles of dust hung suspended in the stale air, making bright points of reflected light as they lazily floated through the lone ray of sun that somehow discovered a gap in the ancient blinds.

She stumbled out the front door of the seedy hotel, a blast of riotous sound hammering her ears as she found herself overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the street noise.

“What the hell’s going on?” she gasped aloud in shock as she was buffeted by the cacophony of the city.

So noisy today, she marveled. Unusually so.

And to her ears, it was indeed louder, but why the change? Perhaps she’d find the answer if she explored the area further.

The neighborhood itself, though one of the older and more run-down in the city, really wasn’t all that bad. At least not anymore. Apparently, the dive hotel in which she’d awoken was one of the last raggedy holdouts in what appeared to be an otherwise rapidly gentrifying neighborhood.

There was the smell of ART™ in the air, as creative types pursued their dreams of installation-piece recognition and stencil-graffiti glory. Meanwhile the junkies and drunks who had populated the area for decades were being quickly displaced from their weekly rentals and hobo squats as the buildings were snatched up by out-of-town investors and developed into ridiculously high-priced lofts.

With nowhere cheap to go but the few remaining flophouses, which were full to capacity, a good many of the men and women now slept in boxes in alleys and doorways. Every day, girls in yoga pants, artists with trust funds, and professionals who wished they were artists with trust funds, milled about the street, ignoring the down-and-out camped in their own doorways.

Meanwhile, they failed to notice the world around them, stepping over them like so much trash as they texted on their phones, obliviously engrossed in their own world.

Taking it all in as she slowly walked, the girl in black finally began to feel like herself again, sharpening her focus and forcing the myriad noises to the background. An unexpected gust of cold wind hit her like an icy slap from a scorned lover. It cut through her clothes, chilling her to the bone and making her shudder as goose bumps sprang to life beneath her insufficient garb.

What the—? she thought as she brushed her wind-blown hair from her face. She

paused, realizing her hands actually *felt* cold, the tips of her fingers fading to an even paler hue than normal.

How can I feel the cold?

Puzzled, she stared at her hands for a moment, then flexed them into fists a few times, fighting the cold as they began to stiffen from the chill.

Most disconcerting indeed.

With a shudder, she continued down the street, icy hands jammed deep in her pockets against the frigid air. It was only a few blocks until the buildings parted, leaving a gap to the brightening sky, and the girl who thought she was Death felt a sudden flush of glorious warmth flow over her as she stumbled into a sunny patch near the corner of the street.

The welcome heat startled her, bringing her to a full stop as she took her hands out of her pockets and held them up to savor the delicious warmth of the sun.

Stopping suddenly on a busy sidewalk isn't typically a good idea.

"Hey! Watch where you're walking!" a man grumbled as he brusquely shouldered his way past her.

The impact startled her, but surprise quickly gave way to anger.

He touched me? He actually touched me? She fixed her gaze on the man as he walked away, a furrow forming on her brow as she raised her hand to channel her energy to suck his life and soul from his body.

Her fingers splayed, and a look of calm passed onto her face.

This is what she does. She is Death, and this man's life is now forfeit. Slowly, she moved her fingers, willing his life from his body.

Nothing happened.

Utterly confused, she watched him fade in the distance.

Why didn't it work?

Scanning the crowd, she picked out a man berating his girlfriend. The woman was in tears, while he just yelled louder at her reaction. Yes, that one would do just fine.

Once again she raised her hand, focusing all her energy on the man.

This time it would work. It had to work.

It didn't.

Oh shit! Oh shit—oh shit!

A full-fledged panic was about to set in, and she was the girl who never panicked. Her cheeks flushed from another unfamiliar burst of adrenaline, as the girl who thought she was Death tried once more to take a life, this time selecting a

woman sitting on a bus bench.

Again, nothing.

A bike messenger.

Nothing.

A man in an expensive, tailored suit walking past.

Nothing.

She ran over the situation in her head.

Something has happened to me. Has my power left me entirely? And I can feel... people can see me. An unpleasant possibility formed in her mind. It can't be— am I mortal? She shuddered at the thought, but all signs pointed to that being a very distinct possibility.

She could feel heat and cold. Then there was the issue of people seeing and even touching her. And the icing on the cake, she was apparently unable to take a life. Something was very wrong indeed.

Standing on the sidewalk, dazed and utterly confused, the girl reluctantly accepted the horrifying realization.

No. This cannot be. I am Death. I am not merely a bag of mortal flesh, but what has changed? A look of concern flashed across her face. If I am unable to do my job, what happens when people are supposed to die?

As if the universe heard her query, the piercing sound of skidding tires cut through the air, followed by the screams of bystanders.

They were playing her song.

She turned toward the commotion. Not a random stranger on the street, but an actual traffic collision.

If I can't cross this one over, then... She shuddered at the thought. Come on, pull yourself together. This is what you do, it's what you are. Go do this.

The accident had taken place a mere half-block away. A thirty-something man, his full attention focused on the Facebook drama with his possibly soon-to-be ex-girlfriend that was unfolding on his cell phone, had quite obliviously stepped off a curb without seeing or hearing the blue sedan rapidly approaching him.

Who liked what post and unfriended which person apparently took priority over situational awareness, which, in this case, proved a bad idea, especially when a two-ton hunk of metal on wheels was barreling down the road right toward him.

No matter how good your anti-lock brakes may be, no one can force their car to stop on a dime when someone steps in front of it at short range.

Unless, of course, that dime is in that someone's pocket.

The girl who thought she was Death pushed her way through the gathering crowd, making a deliberate line toward the epicenter of the accident, her hand raised, her face showing the strain as she tried to focus her powers and reap the victim's soul.

This is someone who should be dead. This time it will work.

Her confidence was building with every step. She was Death, and she was going to take this person's life.

She finally edged her way through the throng of bystanders, who she noted could still touch her—*how annoying*—and spotted the injured man on the ground, locking him in her sights.

To her dismay, as she attempted to pull his essence free, the would-be corpse simply stood up, dusting himself off, a bit scraped up and dirty, but otherwise unharmed.

Not what she had planned.

Not at all.

No, it has to work! She strained her hand outward toward the man, but he just stood there, brushing the gravel and dirt off of his clothes.

A concerned woman ran up to him, shocked by the accident but equally amazed that he appeared unharmed after such an impact.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" she asked, her breath catching as she looked at his torn clothes, expecting the worst.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just a scrape."

"You shouldn't stand up," the woman said. "You might have internal injuries. You should lay back down until an ambulance gets here."

"I feel fine, thanks."

"But... the speed he hit you—how are you not hurt! It's a miracle!"

The driver of the car, who was naturally quite freaked out at the prospect of running a man down on his way to work, hovered close, wringing his hands nervously.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't see you. Are you sure you're all right? Should I call an ambulance?"

"No, really, I'm fine. Don't worry about it."

And the girl in black knew he spoke the truth. He really was okay.

Murmurs of, "He should be dead," and, "How can he be all right?" and even, "It's a miracle!" filtered to the ears of the girl who thought she was Death.

Yes, he should be dead, she thought, grimly. But for some reason my powers have

vanished. This does not bode well.

Distraught, she turned and started off through the bustling crowd, finding herself quickly overwhelmed by the steady flow of people streaming against her as she struggled forward.

Surging humanity was buffeting her like a salmon swimming upstream, and much to her distress and distraction, there was nothing she could do to stop it.

The girl had been walking down the busy sidewalk for a long while with no sense of time. Her distraction continued to grow as the sheer number of people pressing in around her had become downright overwhelming. She felt drained, swaying on her feet from the sensory overload. She managed to push clear of the throng, pressing her back against a store's façade as she took a moment and regained her equilibrium.

This has got to be a mistake. Someone has to know what's going on. There has to be a way back.

She looked up, a boiling frustration building within her, when a neon sign just down the street caught her eye. It was a gaudy thing, flashing pictures of stars, a pyramid, and the all-seeing eye. Her eyes locked on the words "Madame Bavmorda, Psychic" calling to her in bright red.

The bell jingled as the girl entered the dimly lit occult shop. Crystals and tapestries adorned the walls and counters, and new-age music quietly filtered through the incense-tinged air. Watching from a plush chair, decked out in flowing, mystical attire of rich fabric, with what appeared to be very old tarot cards spread in front of her, sat Madame Bavmorda. She gazed casually at her new guest, a hint of a bemused smile on her lips.

To the girl, the psychic appeared to be in her fifties, though with her elaborate outfit and makeup, it was hard to tell for sure in the dim light. For all she knew, the woman could have just as easily been one hundred.

The woman's intense eyes looked at the cards spread on the table then focused again on the girl, studying her.

"You come seeking answers, yes?" The psychic's accent was notably Eastern European.

"You see me?" asked the girl who thought she was Death. "You can actually see me?"

"I see all," the mystic replied. "Come, sit."

She gestured to a cushioned divan across the table from where she reclined. The

young woman hesitated for a moment.

If she can see me... could she help get me home?

She lowered herself onto the cushion.

“You must know, I am not meant to be here. I must cross back.”

Madame Bavmorda furrowed her brow as she sized up the girl now seated across from her. With a flourish, she scooped up her deck and shuffled the cards with well-practiced hands, slowly fanning them out in front of her, pausing as the tarot cards’ images revealed themselves.

“Ah... yes, yes... You are so very far from home.” She watched the girl’s reaction closely.

“Yes!”

The psychic turned over a card.

“But there is a way. A way back!”

“Tell me!” The girl slid to the edge of her seat as she anxiously watched the old psychic.

Another card turned, and Madame Bavmorda paused dramatically, then raised an eyebrow as she fixed her piercing gaze on the young customer seated across from her.

“Hmm, interesting,” she mused. “Very interesting.”

The girl stared at her intently, waiting. “What is it? How do I get back?”

“Madame Bavmorda can help you—for a nominal fee.”

“I am Death, Reaper of Souls, and I must return to my rightful place! People must die! It is my purpose!” the young woman blurted.

The cards that had been slowly turning one by one stopped suddenly as Madame Bavmorda gave her an exasperated look.

“You what, now?” she groaned. “Oh God, not another one. Okay, you know what, you need to get out of here, all right? I don’t do crazy.”

Madame Bavmorda’s accent had disappeared, the girl noted, as she started scooping up her cards.

“But you—”

“I said OUT!”

The woman lurched from her seat with surprising spryness for someone who had just moments before appeared so old and wise, and grabbed the young woman by the arm, hustling her to the exit in a rush.

With a yank, she opened the front door and pushed her strange would-be customer out onto the cold sidewalk, slamming the door behind her, the bell

chiming an unhappy ding as the door shook in its frame from the impact.

The girl thought to go back inside, but heard the lock slide shut as the Open sign flickered out.

Despondent, she slowly turned from the door and started moving, one foot after the other, distraught and alone. Direction wasn't important, she simply felt compelled to walk and think. Two things she'd be doing for many, many hours.