



CHARLIE

Chicago was made of ghost stories.

And I could see every one of them.

I stood on the back porch of Marco's apartment in Pilsen, looking out to the alley and the other old brownstones. I'd known this city my whole life, and now it featured an extra layer of memory placed on top like an animation cell. The dead, faint little clouds, faces and limbs, shuttered in and out. Reflections.

I shouldn't have come here tonight.

The last time I saw Marco was back in April. We had been trying this whole rigmarole of finding peace in each other. It was fucking pointless.

Sam had already been dead a whole month at that point. Dad and Marco had already exploded at each other. But Mom hadn't left yet, and I still had the slightest sliver of hope that my best friend would be there for me.

"Something weird happened in the hospital that night," I had finally told him, sitting in that diner. "I was waiting for a room out in the hall of the ICU. The doctor pulled Dad into a private room to tell him about Sam. And he screamed. I could hear it in the hall."

"I heard it from the waiting room," Marco'd said, his curly black hair hiding his boyish face. Even though he was in his mid-twenties, his soft brown cheeks and big puppy dog eyes always made him look young and sweet. I felt safe to keep going, because there was no distance between us. We grew up together. He'd loved my sister, so much that he was going to marry her. He'd sat shiva with the family as one of us. He wanted to talk about her. He wanted us to say her name. He was a survivor in this hellscape with me. "I remember," he had said, as if he was here for the good, and the bad.

Well, what a fucking lie that turned out to be.

"Okay, so I'm sitting on the gurney, Dad's screaming, and I close my eyes," I'd said. "And I don't know what the hell I did, but I just begged whoever could hear me to let me see her one more time. Maybe it came out as a prayer or a spell or maybe I'm just fucking crazy but . . . Marco, I opened my eyes and saw this . . . ghost."

Marco had just stared at me. That softness was frozen. I got nervous.

"Well," I continued, "not just *a* ghost. A lot of ghosts. Everywhere. All around."

"What?" is all he'd offered me.

A very dead woman sat in the booth behind him, fuzzy and without the

lower half of her body, like a frayed projection. She wore an old hat over finger-curling hair.

"You know how when music plays," I started, "you know it's all around you? You can't touch it, but you can feel it. You know?"

"Okay," Marco tried slowly. "And did you see Sam?"

"No," I said. "But I've spent the last month trying to find her. I looked around the house, the hospital, the mall—"

"Charlie," Marco interrupted. Like he was saying "stop." His hand came up, his palm in a weak plea. "Charlie, you need to tell your doctor about this."

"This isn't the concussion, Marco."

Marco's hand went limp. And he looked out the window. His eyes were welling. "Charlie, you don't fuck around with head injuries."

"You don't believe me."

He had said nothing.

Rage. I threw down my change on the table and scraped out of the booth. "You know, I really thought that if I could trust one person it would be you."

"Charlie—"

"Sam would have believed me."

I hurt him with those words. But he hurt me with his. And Dad had gutted him, and Mom gutted me. And Sam left us all with bloody gashes across our hearts. When death happens, people get hurt. And sometimes, there's no knowing how to stop it.

So now why the *fuck*, nearly six months later, was I back here at Marco's like it was gonna help *anything*?

Tonight, I stood on Marco Ramirez's back porch, the new apartment of an old friend Sam and I had known better than we'd known ourselves. Marco always threw a Halloween party, and I had never missed a single one. Neither had Sam. So I thought she might be here. She wasn't.

Everyone else stayed inside and warm, dressed up as Ashton Kutcher or Paris Hilton or George Bush. I saw at least four Spider-Men . . . I guess 2005 was the year of Spider-Men.

Marco was dressed as Bob Dylan. I cobbled together a low-effort Daria. Bob Dylan and Daria kept glancing at each other over a crowded room of spider-people and Playboy Bunnies, before I decided it was too much and headed for the porch.

The idea of enjoying a costume party seemed so normal.

But Marco and I weren't normal anymore.

We loved a dead girl. Just because she was dead didn't make us love her any less. It just meant it hurt more.

So here I was, at a party, alone on the porch, empty-handed because Sam was in fact not there. "I know you wanted me to go as Phoebe," I said to her,

wherever she was. She would have gone as a pirate, for the fourteen-hundredth time. “But I found your music, and you better show up.”

I pulled out some loose papers of sheet music and held them to my chest. I’d tried so many different trinkets of hers, like bait on the end of a fishing line. Old notes, birthday cards, her car keys with a silver Elphaba hat charm dangling from them. I’d tried so many places, all around the city, but she wasn’t there.

But I’d found this last week, in a box I didn’t like to open. This sheet music felt the most like her, a small remnant that had frayed off before the murder. Untouched by what had happened. Still Sam.

An unfinished song.

I felt someone watching me. “Sam?” I snapped around.

Nope. Just the ghost of a pale man, standing in the corner of the porch. He was *in* the corner, half of his face obscured by the brick. Like his house had been torn down and this brownstone built just a bit off-center. He looked like a glitch in the Matrix.

He just stared at me, politely. *Dobry wieczór*, he said in my head.

I turned my back. I closed my eyes. I breathed in and out. “Not today,” I hissed at him. “Please get out of here.”

Sam would have been kinder to him. But I wasn’t Sam.

The porch door smacked open. I jumped a little. Marco stepped out, and I felt both relief and dread.

“Hey,” he said. His voice sounded hoarse. Lower. Slower. But it was still him. And I wanted to hug him and say, “We’ll figure this out.” But I didn’t. I just nodded.

Marco leaned on the railing next to me, nursing a beer. I saw him as the little boy who had grown up next door, then my roommate along with Sam, and now between us, we held a future we would never see.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” Marco said.

“I came,” was all I could manage. If I tried to tell him about the ghosts again, he’d get that face. Like he was scared for me. Or *of* me. Like he couldn’t take me losing my mind.

I clenched the sheet music in my fingers. He saw it.

“Ah,” he said. I knew he wanted to look at it, but I didn’t hand it over. I had a death grip. The awkward moment passed between us. “You know, for a musician, Sammy really hates to write shit down.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m glad I found this much. It’s uh . . . from the Rapunzel musical she’d just started.”

“Do you still have her recordings?”

I shook my head. “They got lost in the move. Along with the desktop.” We had lost her all over again. Dad was crushed. He smashed a bunch of his own vinyls when we found out. I knew he blamed himself even more than he blamed me.

But I didn't want to mention Dad in front of Marco.

"Nice new apartment," I said, weakly.

"Yeah," he said, and then, like I'd finally given him an open door, he added, "Did you guys find a place? Did the house sell okay? Do you need any money? I can—"

"We're fine," I said. "We made enough to live on for a little while by selling the house and other stuff."

Like her piano. Where did you put a piano when you didn't have a home? After Sammy died, Mom said she needed to start over, and Dad didn't want to stay there all alone. The house had become a crypt anyway. So, Mom left, Dad checked out, and I was ghost-hunting when I wasn't taking care of him. Everything changed in so little time.

"You eating?"

"Yup," I lied.

"Okay. Hey, uh . . . just a heads up." He shifted his weight to his arms, resting on the wooden railing. "Some TV people contacted me about an interview, *which I didn't do*, but . . . there's probably gonna be coverage again. It's not the anniversary yet, I don't know why—"

"Yeah." The word was a shield, a barrier, a "stop now."

He didn't stop. "Do they still call Pops?"

"We changed his number and the apartment is under my name," I said. "I blocked who I could."

When someone dies, it's pain. But when strangers find fascination in your tragedy, it's uncanny and vulnerable as the world replays your grief and gives it a name and infographics. The only thing to do is keep the television off and the phone unanswered. I didn't feel like seeing it happen again. And again. With the catchy title underneath. I hated it. I didn't want it to be some official thing. Like if I refused to give it a name, it couldn't constantly haunt me.

It was a fluke, people liked to say. *These things don't happen every day. That's why it hurts so much.*

No, it hurt because my sister was fucking dead.

These things don't happen, but the century kicked off with the towers falling, Baghdad was bombed on live TV, and now New Orleans was underwater. Maybe this was just how the world was now. Every time you and your sister left your house, only one of you was coming home alive.

I felt sick. I turned away from him.

Marco looked at his bottle, and then he gave a small snort of a laugh. "You know," he said, "I tried talking to Pops a few weeks after. I asked him what we were gonna do. You know what he said?" I knew, but I didn't say anything. He took another sip, scowling. "*There is no we.*"

"I'm sorry, Dad's not been—" I started.

"But I just meant like . . . I meant how were we gonna bring her back." He

shook his head, like he was disgusted with his childishness. “Like in Pops’ song about that guy who walks down into hell and grabs his wife right out of the river Styx . . . Hercules?”

“Orpheus,” I said. The name of Dad’s song was “Orpheus.” “But it didn’t work out for him.”

Bringing someone back from the dead, that was impossible.

But finding their ghost? I could do that. I *would* do that.

Marco nodded. “Right, duh.” And then he added, “Yeah, I miss you.” He squinted at me, like he was seeing me from a million miles away. “You always know a lot, and you always know what I’m talking about.”

I missed him, too.

I wanted nothing more than to be back in our apartment with him and Sam, the Three Musketeers, clueless assholes in our mid-twenties trying to find our way. Getting ready for a wedding. Putting in job applications while I subbed at a middle school off the Red Line and Marco worked as a clerk and Sam wrote music. Once upon a time, we were family.

“I wonder if Orpheus would fall in love with her . . . if he knew how it was going to end . . .” Marco muttered, and then he raised his beer. “I would.” And he finished the bottle.

Oh, he was drunk.

Then silence. Because what the fuck are the survivors supposed to talk about? She wasn’t here. And in that way, neither were we.

Something pulled at my stomach. I looked down to the alley, where there were lines of factory workers from the 1800s, still walking back and forth from the assembly lines and slaughterhouses. The Polish ghost was now trying to light the memory of a cigarette, his fuzzy cloud of an outline leaning on a fire escape.

Something hissed from the alley.

It was going to happen again.

Usually, ghosts went about their business. But sometimes, the smoke would come.

And eat them.

Consume them.

Boil them down, until they became part of this mass of static.

The ghosts never reemerged.

I didn’t know what to call it, the static cloud of smoke. But I did not like it.

“Okay, and how are you—?” Marco began.

“I should get going,” I said quickly, before I could see the Polish man be eaten.

“Charlie,” Marco said as I pulled away. “Please, just look at me—”

But Daria left Bob Dylan on the porch. Alone.

I shouldn't have gone to Marco's. It was a fool's errand that led to nothing. I knew that I'd just feel like shit if I saw him, but she could have been there. She *should* have been there.

I gripped the edges of my coat, sitting frozen on the bus as it rocked and jolted down the street. Marco, she'd loved Marco . . . fine, leave me, but I couldn't believe she had abandoned Marco.

So either you're a selfish prick in the afterlife, I muttered to her in my head, or you're in that static.

No. That's not how this ended.

It rained the whole time I was on the bus.

The 21 bus was full of Chicago, both alive and dead, existing on top of one another. Like I'd forgotten to wind my camera before taking the next picture and all of a sudden it was photograph on top of photograph.

The living held shopping bags, wore scarves covering thinning hair, and wrapped big thick Carhartt coats around bodies that smelled like cigarettes. An older man unwrapped a CVS bag, revealing some sort of gooey leftovers he scooped up with his hands and gulped down with an underbite.

The dead looked like memories flickering through projectors. Floaters in my eye, there but not there. Although they were only parts of a memory, I could see the story of the city splayed out on their clothes: pioneer shirts, flapper dresses, Victorian skirts, Edwardian hats, T-shirts bemoaning elections thirty years ago. Honestly, when I started seeing ghosts, I only had about a week of sheer panic before I weirdly grew accustomed to it. Ghosts were, for the most part, not scary; they were just people.

It was like everyone was listening to their own soundtrack. Some of the ghosts looped, doing one action over and over again, like a gouged CD, always restarting a song twenty seconds in. I called them Loopers.

Some of them diligently watched over someone alive on the bus, their mist curling on the person's shoulder. I called them Clingers.

Others looked out the window, still trying to grasp onto life. Maybe pretending it was still a nice rainy day in 1926, and they were heading home for dinner. I just called them sad.

What if Sam was stuck somewhere?

I clutched the music sheet tighter in my sweaty palms.

You asshole, I whispered to her. I am still here. I'm waiting for you. Come back. Come home. Find me.

One of the ghosts must have heard me. An old white woman. I could barely make out her mist, but I saw her hair poofed like my mom's in her graduation photos. I couldn't see her legs, and barely saw her arms.

She started to come over—no, started to *float* over. It could have been a horror movie, but I knew she was just a person and not a monster.

Not like the static in the alleys.

Hello, she said. *You can see me.*

I nodded.

I have a daughter. She pointed to another old white woman sitting half-asleep in her bus seat. *Can you please let her know . . .* And she stopped. . . . *How long has it been? She's older . . . how long . . .*

Sam would have helped her. And Charlie Before All This would have never hesitated to be kind.

But I just said, *I'll let her know*, with my dull face and my dull eyes reflecting back to me in the window behind her. I was a stranger to myself.

How long had this ghost been following that woman, trying to talk to the living? And Sam couldn't even be bothered.

The bus stopped. I stood up, pressed my skirt down, put my hood up, and leaned over to the woman stirring in her seat. Her eyes fluttered open, and I said, "Your mom had some cool hair. She wants me to let you know she's with you."

Before the woman or the dead mom could say anything else, I stepped off the bus and back into the world.

Little puddles reflected the city on the ground, the lights and Chinatown archway in a mirrored universe I wished I could just sink into. I kept the sheet music close to my heart under my hoodie.

I should have been making sure Dad ate dinner. I tried to imagine him in our apartment, staying up for me. Cooking some pasta, texting me, u ok kid? But it's harder to conjure imaginary ghosts when you know real ones exist.

If I could find Sammy, maybe I could find Dad. And Mom. And Marco would stop talking about Orpheus, and we could all cobble ourselves back together into a life.

"If you don't come back for me," I muttered to her, "come back for them."

I stepped under a store's awning to get out of the drizzle. I took out the music. I ran my fingers over her notes. Touching a dead person's handwriting. Every little swoop she made, every quarter note she filled in—she'd been here. An echo of her life, still pulsing in this world that she'd broken away from. She was not here, but her notes were.

I touched the opening words: *adagio*.

"Patient," she had told me when she wrote it down. "It means be patient."

Sam was good at patience. She was quiet, thoughtful, and the only time she wasn't calmly sitting somewhere, she was running like lightning, training for whatever marathon. Either *adagio*—slow—or *vivace*—bright and full of life. Me, I was never *adagio*. I was *presto* (extremely lively), *fortissimo* (the loudest), with a *crescendo* (getting louder) for good measure. Or that's what she always said.

Not so true anymore.

Sam, I squeezed the music, closing my eyes. *I don't know who I am and I need them, and I need you. Please, Sam. Please just show yourself.*

A rain-soaked prayer to the once-living; a useless plea to someone who had only been human and now was probably just dust. Something so powerful going out into the ether, only aimed at a hope of a ghost.

But then I heard a rushing.

A percussion.

I took a sharp breath. I opened my eyes . . .

And the Red Line rushed above the street into the Chinatown station. I was gonna miss the train.

Just the train.

I felt tears hot on my flushed, burning face.

I trudged forward, slipping the sheets back under my hoodie, carefully cradling them. I kept moving, my hair wet. My cheeks red.

The streets full of people, the air full of ghosts. I walked through the dead like Marco's Disney version of Hercules swimming after Megara in the river Styx. I felt their feelings, just waves and washes like passing fish in the ocean. They disappeared, moved out of the way, screamed in my ear.

Dead people all around us, all the time. Filling up the air like ash.

God, let them drown me.

I walked faster, trying to outpace my thoughts. Then I ran. Fuck adagio.

But I couldn't outrun the memory of my sister. The constant empty spot where she should be. Grief never fucking leaves. People leave, cars and houses are sold, clothes and shoes given away, music is lost, plans destroyed . . . but grief, never. Grief was steadfast and merciless.

I tripped. I fell. The music sheets flew all over the place.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I screamed.

I watched, helplessly, as the sheets fluttered like will-o'-the-wisps in the air, swinging in the cool rainy wind. As they scattered, landing in puddles, flying across the street, shooting under passing car tires.

I stared in utter disbelief.

Then I burst into tears. *I can't remember that song forever, Sam, I'm going to forget it . . .*

Why did I trip?

Why did we split up in the mall?

Why had we been there at all? A thousand little notations that had to happen in the perfect order to kill my sister.

The train clacked its last car above. The rails sparked and screeched. Now only ghosts remained on the platform, looking down at the tracks. Dead people who had jumped.

In a city like Chicago, sometimes the only way to scream out and be sure anyone could hear you was to fuck up the evening commute.

But even then, Dad still wouldn't notice.

I could do it. I could climb up there and jump.

Hey, a scruffy voice sounded behind me. *Are you alright there?*

I wiped my eyes. I shoved it all back in. I stood up, the papers fully scattered and ruined. “Yeah, I . . .” I turned around to face the Good Samaritan.

But the only person there wasn’t a person. It was a dog.

A big black scraggly dog, part giant wolfhound, part poodle, part Muppet. He cocked his head. *You sure you’re okay?* he said.

He spoke like a ghost. The *dog spoke like a ghost*.

I stared at him.

Oh, the Muppet dog said. *You’re alive. Whoops. Uh . . . Woof.* And he kept on down the road like nothing had happened. Except he hummed under his breath. He *spoke*. Now he *hummed*.

It was a small tune, notes settled beside each other in a graceful slide of up and down and quarter note . . . rest . . . a major key sitting so close to a minor key. It sounded like a flower blooming at the end of the world.

It was Sammy’s song.

My heart seized. I ran forward. “Hey! You!”

The dog stopped. He swung his head around to look back at me, a question mark in his raised brows.

“Where did you hear that song?” I demanded. “Do you know Sam?”

The dog’s ears pulled back. And then he ran.

“Wait!” I shot forward into the rain, grabbing out for his fur to stop him, but I missed and stumbled under the bridge . . .

I caught my footing and looked up. The dog was gone.

But something was very wrong.

I wasn’t in Chinatown anymore.

The big dragon mural, the green and red of the buildings and gray cracks in the concrete, they had given way to grass and trees. There should be buildings upon buildings, I should be in the heart of a busy neighborhood. Instead, I was at the end of a long street in a park. And beyond the trees changing colors lay the North Side, old condo buildings standing in lines like the Queen’s guards.

In the dark, I saw the smokestacks of the Lincoln Park Zoo. The Conservatory. And the bridge with the L train had been replaced with the long highway of Lake Shore Drive.

“What the fuck,” I muttered.

Somehow I was on the other side of the city. I had gone under the train’s bridge, but there was no bridge above me now, just the overpass ahead of me.

The Lake Shore Drive overpass greeted me with cars flashing in bright lines through the rain. Sam’s music whispered on the wind and pulled me from the city. A flute. Violins. It sounded like it came from underneath the overpass.

The overpass was brick, covered in vines that climbed up its side. But then the vines shook. They grew. Like Jack and the Beanstalk, they curled around an entrance, softly, matter-of-factly. They made a waterfall of green. And the

vines seemed to sing, hum something . . . no, from *behind* the vines I heard the song . . .

I knew what was on the other side. Lake Michigan.

Sammy and I came here right before I moved for college. She'd dropped out a couple of years earlier. That was a hard night, not knowing what being sisters looked like when you didn't live in the same childhood home anymore. I mean, we had nothing to worry about; the future would bring us together before it tore us apart. But in that moment, we sat together at the edge of the city. The chaos of Chicago stopped in its tracks by the night sky and the black water.

She'd looked at me. "The edge of the world," she'd said in her breathy, steady calmness. Somewhere between a flute and a clarinet. I knew her voice like a favorite song. I knew her music like I knew her heart.

And now that music swelled from behind the ivy. After a few measures, it looped back around and started over. Her last song. Unfinished.

"Sam?" I whispered. I walked into the ivy, under the bridge, and . . .

On the other side of Lake Shore Drive stood a massive building made of light and glass.

It looked like a gigantic greenhouse, or train station, or Crystal Palace at Disney World, King's Cross in London, a Van Gogh painting underwater, a glissando with the damper pedal slammed down. Echoes of sound and life. A massive dome with a flickering lighthouse for a crown.

At its feet I saw a fountain and a sea of ghosts following . . . dogs? I trailed them as they forged ahead through the spraying water. I could see the ghosts now, so much clearer. No longer floaters in my eyes; just folks in black and white, walking and wheeling instead of floating. Actual full bodies. Not wisps of what was.

The current of souls pressed around me like I was stuck in a stream. I closed my eyes. There was so much to see, but I wanted to hear.

Yes, underneath the rushing whistling of the march of souls, under the dogs and the waves of the lake . . . the song played on.

This city kept stories of my sister in all its corners. And here, that story sang.

If I was going crazy, I didn't want to be sane. If I was asleep, I didn't want to wake up. My sister was here, in this dream.

I turned to face the Station. The crowd pulled me forward to the pillars. And I crossed the threshold into the light.