

SIXTEEN SOULS



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THE HAUNTING OF CHARLIE FRITH

It's the recently deceased that trouble me the most. Older ghosts aren't so bad. They're always dressed in jerkin and hose or corsets and wide skirts, so they're easily avoided; eyes down, earbuds in, and they've no idea I can see them. But the newly dead look just like everybody else, and that's what makes them so dangerous.

I don't go rambling about the old part of York more than I have to, and never on my own. Today, Heather walks beside me as I move carefully down the Shambles, her stethoscope tangling in the yellow lanyard that holds her hospital ID. In the six years since her death, she's not changed: same messy plait; pretty, plump face; gray high-waisted slacks; and a wrinkled shirt, her sleeves rolled up no matter the weather. She's nattering away in that honeyed voice of hers, and I'm not really listening but I let her words wash over me as I keep walking, trying to disguise the slight limp that's been nagging me since the bus.

My prostheses have started to rub. I should have double socked, but then my sockets get too tight and I'm sore and

aching by the end of the day. There's nothing I can do about it now. I never take my lower legs off in public, especially since the twins got at them with Mum's glittery nail polishes. Now I've got pink-and-purple sparkles all over the covers.

We move along the cobblestones. The old timber-framed buildings overhang, as if competing for daylight. It feels like each side of the row is leaning into the other, the jewelry shop longing to whisper a secret to the fudge makers across the street. Nothing is level here, not the walls or jambs to the squat doors, not the panes of glass in their quaint Victorian shop-front windows. Some have metal signs shaped like pies or shields hanging above them, with ornate metal brackets to fix them to walls of brick, cob, and wood—walls that haven't really been clean for hundreds of years.

History hangs in the air like a stink I can't escape. Guy Fawkes was born here, they hanged Dick Turpin here, and Saint Margaret Clitherow was pressed to death beneath her own front door. So, it's no surprise that the ghosts are almost as numerous as the tourists.

I'm often told I'm an old soul for a lad of sixteen, but they've got it wrong. I'm no Old Soul. Actually I do my best to avoid them.

I have to sidestep a ghost in a fur-trimmed cloak by feigning sudden interest in a window display of baby fleeces and pajamas. Next, I twist back like I heard someone calling my name, all so a woman in a ruff doesn't bump into me. Unlike

the other living people on the street, I'd be as solid to her as she is to me.

That's the price of seeing the dead. They can vanish through walls or pass right through regular people, but me, I'm flesh and bone to them. They can touch me. They can hurt me. The dead can be very demanding, not to mention dangerous if they get too keen and I can't get away before they draw blood.

Sod that.

I'd have preferred to get the bus out to Monk's Cross retail park, where the floors are smoother and the ghosts fewer, but there is a shop here Heather insists we visit.

"What do you think about themed bookends?" She follows half a step behind me, acting like she's a confused ghost desperately trying to communicate with the living. The dead haunt people as often as places. I mean, there's nothing much for them to do except hang around and complain, even if no one but me can hear them.

I don't answer Heather's question; talking to a ghost on a street this haunted would be foolish. She goes on some more, reeling off a list of gift ideas, and I go on pretending I've no idea she's there until she cuts off midsentence. I can't help following her line of sight to a boy propped against the doorframe of a nearby shop. He's a child of the slums—frostbitten fingers, no shoes, stinking rags draped over a flickering, skeletal body.

There is no sixth sense, no gentle tapping on the inside of my skull or uncanny sensation that something otherworldly

lurks nearby. Feelings like that are for books and movies. The child looks as real to me as anyone living, but then boots and sneakers march through him and he half fades from view.

A wash of cold fear weighs on me. Heather blocks my sight of the kid and talks me down until I can't hear my heartbeat anymore.

Of the three kinds of ghosts—free, tethered, and looped—the looped ones are the worst. Trapped in the memory of their death, they're unaware that they've died, existing beyond our time and place in a bubble of their own. But sometimes their personal reality bleeds into our world, and that's very bad news for me.

I turn away, guilt tightening my chest.

I have to preserve my sense of what's real.

My foot catches the edge of the pavement and I trip. Heather lunges and grabs my arm, supporting me in an impossible stumble down into the cobbled gully. I scan the narrow thoroughfare, hoping no one saw me cheat gravity. When there's no sudden onslaught of eager dead, I release my breath.

"All right?" Heather asks. I nod, as subtly as I can. She lets go of me, but her lips are pressed thin with worry.

We need to be more careful.

Adjusting my weight, I catch my reflection in the darkened window of a gift shop closed for redecoration. Heather is beside me but I'm standing alone. The dead don't have reflections. I look like the kind of lad that might cause trouble—square face,

snub nose, and a broad frame with muscle on big bones, like my dad.

We set off slowly. I know the shop as soon as I see the book-and-quill sign above the door. Despite my unease, I crack a grin.

Inside, the green walls and cabinets are stuffed with everything from board games and fancy stationery to collectable replicas of the One Ring and Harley Quinn's baseball bat. It's full and cramped, but Heather knows how to move in a crowd without being walked through. We take our time browsing, but half my attention is always on remembering not to give myself away. It's all too easy to forget no one else can see or hear her.

"Charlie, do *not* turn around." The voice is female, but it's not Heather's. The accent is so clipped, it sounds deliberately posh, almost fake. "You've picked up a tail."

I pivot slowly, proud of my self-control, to face the blond woman in her midthirties standing among the robed mannequins in the center of the shop. From the string of natural pearls at her throat to the cut of her skirt suit and neatly pinned curls, Audrey Nightingale is straight out of a 1940s photograph. Picture-perfect.

Her lips tighten. "I said *don't* turn."

"What are you doing here, Nightingale?" Heather asks, crossing her arms.

"Looking out for our boy, of course." Stepping around a young couple taking selfies, Audrey focuses her hawklike gaze

on me again and reaches for the three-headed toy dog I've picked up. I quickly look away. Like all ghosts, her hand goes right through solid objects. Seeing it always gives me the shivers.

Although Audrey hates my rules, she usually follows them, so she must be in a pissy mood today. "Do you want me to leave, or do you want to know who's following you?" My expression must say it all, because she continues, "Outside, with the dark hair and green jacket."

Heather pretends to study a display of replica swords to get a look at our follower. "You sure?"

"Oh, I'm sure. He *thinks* he's being subtle."

Sharp spring light catches the edge of his face through the windowpane. I turn away at the same time he does. My age, maybe a year or so younger, but dressed like he's trying to look older in chinos and a cable-knit sweater under a new waxed jacket.

I don't doubt that he's following me. Audrey rarely makes mistakes. I look back. He risks another glance at the three of us, his gaze lingering on Audrey, then he strides into the shop across the street.

If he can see Heather and Audrey, then he's dead—recently, judging by his clothes. Maybe he wants me to contact his relatives and deliver a message, something I'd *never* do. I'm not an errand boy for the dead.

Experience tells me I'm wrong. First off, he doesn't look

desperately relieved that someone can see him. Secondly, there's something in Audrey's expression that chills me—a tendon standing out in her neck, a taut alertness in her eyes.

She glances at the street. "We need to get you out of here."

There it is again, that flash of fear. She's trying to hide it, but she's afraid and not the type to scare easily. Likely, then, that he's a Hungry One, a spirit who believes a taste of my special ghost-seer flesh and blood will restore him to life.

God. I don't need this.

"He's seen us together." Heather's voice is higher than usual. "We should split up."

"Meet me back at the bus stop, yeah?" I mutter.

With a reluctant nod at me and a firm glower at Audrey, Heather squeezes my hand and slips away. A shop assistant gives me an odd look, which is rich coming from someone dressed up in Dothraki leathers. I move toward the till, grabbing some wrapping paper from a nearby stand on my way, then hurry to pay for the toy dog.

How am I going to get out of here without Waxed Jacket following me?

"We'll go out the back," Audrey whispers, giving me directions to the stockroom. "The code is 4531Y."

"How'd you even know that?"

"Know what?" the bloke at the till asks, assuming I'm talking to him.

"Oh . . ." I can feel the heat in my cheeks. "Nothing."

I stuff the toy in my backpack, and the shop assistant rolls the wrapping paper into a tube for me. I hold it like a sword as I head to the back of the shop and the staff-only door marked NO ADMITTANCE, EXCEPT ON PARTY BUSINESS.

Sweat makes my hands slippery, but I manage to key in the code and open the door without turning to double-check that I'm getting away with it.

Audrey waits for me on the other side.

"Move quickly," she says, "but not *too* quickly. Head up, like you're meant to be here."

Hurrying past simple shelves stacked with products, I catch my breath when a voice carries out of the little kitchenette off to the side. I brace myself for an angry confrontation with an employee demanding to know what I'm doing here, but I reach the fire exit without meeting anyone.

"It's alarmed," says Audrey.

I grimace, place my hands on the bar, and press down hard.

A heartbeat later, I'm hurrying through the food market, ears still ringing. It takes me fifteen minutes to circle around the city center, heading north under the shadow of York Minster because there are too many restless dead around Clifford's Tower. Mad Alice isn't in her alley, so I slip through Lund Court onto Swinegate, narrowly avoiding a collision with a top hat-wearing tour guide and his congregation of eager ghost hunters.

I'm limping by the time I cross the river at the Memorial

Gardens and head along the old city wall toward the train station. When I finally pause for breath, Audrey is gone. I'm alone. No one is following me. I chew on some gum to get the taste of fear off my tongue.

Heather is leaning against the bus stop when I arrive, looking on as I check through the pockets of my puffer coat for my ticket. My left stump is stinging. I'll have to take my prostheses off as soon as I get in. To ease the ache, I sit on the metal bench and settle back against the glass shelter. Heather sits beside me, and because there's no one else around, I allow myself to lean into her a little.

My thoughts go back to the lad dying in the cold over and over again. I wish I could help him, but last time . . .

No. I can't think about last time.

Tucking the roll of paper under my arm, I pull the toy from my bag, suddenly worried that I've not made a proper choice at all.

I turn it for Heather to assess. "Think he'll like it?"

"He'll love it." There's an edge to her voice, something left unspoken, but I've no energy to pry.

Our bus appears, only half full, meaning we can ride home together. Relief lifts me up. We stand. The bus pulls in and, as we step onboard, I flash my ticket at the dull-eyed driver. He barely looks at it, but he brightens when he sees the toy dog.

"Got my lad one of 'em for Christmas. Guardian of the underworld, that."

I nod and smile.

Heather and me sit by the window near the front so I can stretch out. As the bus pulls away, I notice a figure watching from where the old city wall runs opposite the station. Wax Jacket is bold as anything, standing in full sun like he wants me to know he's there. Heather hasn't spotted him. Good, she'll only worry.

A sudden ice-sharp thought sends me sitting upright.

He didn't follow me; Audrey would've marked him. So, he knew where I was going. He got here first and waited.

The jolt I feel has nothing to do with the rumble and whine of the engine as the bus follows Queen Street and turns onto Blossom. No, there's no such thing as sixth sense, but my bones feel heavier, and there is a pulse in my skull like I'm holding out against answers to a question I never wanted asked.

For the first time in a long time, I feel haunted.