



Waking The Dead

“Charlotte... Charlotte...” Someone was calling my name, but I wasn’t sure if it was real or just in my head. I couldn’t recognize the voice but there were bright lights in front of me now. “Charlotte! Charlotte!” Was it Brittany or Freddie? Betta? No. I didn’t know who it was, and I didn’t really care. I was just in too much pain. I tasted blood in my mouth.

“Charlotte...” It was fainter now. I couldn’t keep my eyes open. Before long, things went black again. I think things stayed that way for a while, but I can’t really be sure how long.

At some point there was brightness and a mess of colors and sounds that I couldn’t place. People were talking again, but I still couldn’t recognize them. There was a

conversation going on in my head and I finally picked out Brittany's voice. Was I at the hospital? I couldn't see anything, at least not with my eyes. I couldn't hear anything, at least not with my ears. I was getting all these sensations but I had the notion that they were all pure, unfiltered by my body, like they were going straight into my mind without wasting a second.

Suddenly, things went black again, but it was different this time. I'm not sure how, but somehow I knew things. I could hear my own breath, I could feel my chest heaving; I could sense that I was conscious again. I opened my eyes but everything was still dark. *Why?* I could smell, feel, and hear; still taste the blood on my tongue. So why couldn't I see anything?

I was on my back, lying against something soft. I put my hands forward and felt a silky cloth against something hard like wood. A lid. I was never particularly claustrophobic; however, I always imagined I would panic if I ever found myself trapped, like it seemed I was now. But in reality? Not so much panic. The long and short of it was that I just wanted to get out. So I punched the lid and my fist broke through the wood as easily as if it were cardboard. A cascade of dirt fell onto my body but I ignored it. I just kept breaking and digging and tunneling and climbing until I saw a light high above me.

The night air trickled into my nostrils, and oh man did it feel good. It urged me onward, higher and higher until I was gripping the moist grass between my fingers. Then

with one final effort, I pulled myself upward, shoving aside a mass of earth and some wilting flowers. My arms were tired from working them, but I was most impressed by their capabilities. Exhausted and still a little dizzy, I threw my head back, feeling a jolt of pain as it struck against stone. “Oww!”

I turned around to see what I hit. “*Charlotte Belmore... Beloved... blah blah... 1993-2008... Lost in a tragic accident on Halloween Night?* Oh, crap! They thought I was dead?” I closed my eyes, grabbed the cross still hanging around my neck, and was ready to chant, *There’s no place like home*, when I heard a clang. I spun around again and gasped in surprise (as if suddenly waking up buried alive *wasn’t* surprising).

Rick and Jerry were sitting there, completely tanked, staring at me like idiots. “Charlotte?” Rick asked in a beer-soaked voice. “Is that really you?” He took another sip and nearly fell off the tombstone where he was perched like a drunken vulture.

Jerry couldn’t hold back a belch (that made me shiver) and added, “You’re lookin’ pretty hot. Right, man?” He shoved Rick who grunted in agreement.

“But aren’t you supposed to be dead?” Rick asked. “You fell in the pool *burp*... remember?”

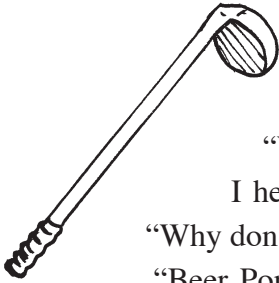
“About that...” Jerry tactlessly interjected. “We’re real sorry we hit you. The gear was stuck... plus we were really drunk, right man?” He shoved Rick again who, again, grunted in agreement, this time collapsing to the

ground, laughing. “We were just trying to spook you. It was Betta’s idea... but we feel real bad about it...” They smelled like a brewery and there were cans littered all around them. “But now you’re okay again! That’s pretty cool, right? *Burp!*”

As if it wasn’t bad enough that they’d made me miserable on the happiest night of my life! As if it wasn’t bad enough that they’d hit me with a golf cart! As if it wasn’t bad enough that I was in a coma because of their perverse little joke and my family buried me... now they were making a mess of my grave! I backed up against my tombstone and felt something cold and slender resting on top of it. Something metal.

Well whadaya know? It was my club—the nine-iron from the golf course. As I wrapped my hand around the rubber purple grip, it felt just like old times again. I thought of Freddie and sighed at those romantic memories of that magical night. It had been so beautiful until I took that swan dive into the abyss. Smiling slyly, I sat myself on the top of the headstone, crossing my legs playfully and rocking back and forth. “You know, boys,” I said in the sweetest, least evil voice I could muster, “being that I’m back and all I thought maybe we could celebrate with a little game!”

But they weren’t paying attention. Either that or they had actually consumed so much alcohol they had gotten swimmer’s ear. They were babbling to each other about some promiscuous girl at school.



I raised my voice. “I said, why don’t we play a game?”

Rick snapped to attention.

“What?”

I heaved a sigh and repeated myself.

“Why don’t we...”

“Beer Pong,” Jerry shouted. Then they did some kind of *secret football handshake* or something and started laughing again.

“No,” I began again in a soft tone, bordering on sultry. (That excited me, by the way. I had never *bordered on sultry* before.) I crept closer to them and bent down a little, with the club folded in my bare arms. I pursed my lips and smiled. “I was kind of in the mood for golf.”

They fell silent, looked up at me and burst into laughter again. “We don’t know how to play golf,” Rick said.

“Oh, that’s okay. Neither do I!” I lifted the club over my shoulder just like Arnold Palmer... or was it just like Mark McGuire? Oh well! It really didn’t matter because, as I was preparing to let the two of them taste chrome, they both fainted at the sight of my wrath. That’s right. Upon witnessing my terrible might, with my nine-iron gleaming in the moonlight, the two fearless football stars suddenly withered and collapsed on the spot. They were lucky because in that moment I was beginning to wonder if I wouldn’t actually have used it to knock some sense into them. After all, I was feeling very different all of a sudden.

I felt good. I felt stronger and more alive than I ever remembered feeling. Suddenly, I wanted to shout and dance and run and yell. Then it hit me. “Uh oh. My parents are gonna want to know I’m back!” I ran off through the cemetery, gleefully kicking a beer can at Rick as I went. “See ya later, boys!”

I hopped over tombstones and flipped over graves, when before I had always been afraid to even step foot in a graveyard. I looked around. I was in *Our Lady of the Resurrection’s* churchyard. I was christened here, received communion here. Guess I never thought about being buried there. “I wonder how long I was asleep. I assume they must’ve buried me right away. I must have been in a pretty deep coma!”

Yes, I was denying the obvious. I was very good at that. But the alternative would mean that either I was crazy or I was in a whole mess of trouble. Correct answer: *B) A whole mess of trouble.* Allow me to explain.

Here I was running through a cemetery in the middle of the night, still wearing my Halloween dress (which by this point was ripped and covered with dirt), heading home, not knowing what to expect when I got there. I heard rustling sounds, more like crunching leaves. Footsteps.

I halted my own steps. “Who could



that be, hanging around in a graveyard at night? Rick? Jerry?" But when I looked over my shoulder I saw that they were still passed out near my plot.

"Hello?" I ventured farther amongst the headstones, not really frightened, but getting there. I saw a shape move. "Who's there?" I thought I recognized it from long ago... another life, perhaps. It was a familiar silhouette, but I couldn't understand *why* it was familiar, as it didn't seem to match the appearance of anybody I'd ever known before.

It moved closer, and at last I remembered. I had seen this person on the golf course the night of the accident. It must've been a fourth member of Betta's hit squad that night... no. It was probably Betta herself. I slowed, frowning, squinting to see better. The figure was moving toward me and it was then that I knew it was definitely not Betta, nor was it one of her stupid jocks or lady servants. Whoever it was, they were scaring the bejeebers out of me and my only impulse was to run.

As I bolted, the crunch of those footsteps on the leaves matched my pace behind me, and I just started to run faster. I was getting lost in the maze of memorials and fountains and statues. Where was the way out? With the nine-iron still gripped tightly in my hand, I turned and the figure was right behind me, like a demonic shadow eagerly trying to become attached to me forever.

Spying the surrounding fence of the graveyard, I took off at full speed and leapt over the bars like a fleeing

convict, just grazing my stomach against the iron spearheads at the top. As I came down on the other side, I nearly fell, placing my hand against the stinging wound and rose slowly. I didn't have time to rest. It was right... right... uh... where *was* it? I looked through the bars into the silent churchyard beyond, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. But I didn't want to take any chances. The way that shadow was following me, it was evident that it was trying to catch me. Who knew where it could've been hiding.

I turned away and aimed for Brittany's house. *Oh, I never should've left my grave!* But as I looked down the street, I saw that living shadow standing in the distance. *How'd it get over there? Oh God!* I turned toward the closest building and took off like a flash. Before I knew where I was headed, I was already pulling on the heavy church doors and dashing inside.

The sudden warmth hit me as I ran down the center aisle to the steps of the altar. I had a feeling that whatever was chasing me was not human and wouldn't follow me into a place like this. That being said, *all* of this was foreign to me and I was really just going on instinct. Those instincts were telling me that I would be safe here, so what other choice did I have? I ducked behind one of the pews near the altar and slowly peered back toward the doors.

When they were thrown wide open and the shadowy figure entered, ushering the swirling leaves and cold wind

in with it, I realized one important truth that I have since come to understand in full... my instincts suck.

I wrenched myself back into hiding, hoping that, whatever or whoever it was, they hadn't seen me. I leaned my head against the wooden pew and looked around, trying to distract myself from the terror. I couldn't even tell if my heart was beating at a rate I couldn't count or wasn't beating at all. Heavy, lurching footsteps sounded against the carpet as a stalking shadow stretched slowly beside me, dancing in the light of a hundred or so flickering candles.

I looked up at the crucifix hanging above the altar and grabbed mine, beginning to pray fiercely. My eyes were closed so tightly that I could feel the tears being squeezed out of them, rolling down the sides of my face and under my chin.

After a little while I realized that the sound had stopped and the shadow was gone from the floor. I opened my eyes and scanned the area. Nothing. Once I was sure the immediate vicinity was monster-free, I slowly rose, still grasping the edge of the pew in a death grip. I was alone again. I sighed and sat down, dropping like a sack of flour, then folded my hands and said, "Thank you, God," without realizing I had said it aloud.

"You're welcome, I'm sure," came a sudden response. I turned and jumped back when I saw that my stalker was right next to me, sitting quite comfortably. "After all, why should He turn anybody away just because they're

dead?” As it turned out, he wasn’t a shadow monster but a rather fine-looking young man dressed in a black suit, with straight, dark hair. And yet, something about him still worried me. His eyes were so dark, I felt like I was looking out through them, rather than in. Like there was a whole other world behind them.

He smiled slyly as he looked at me. “You know, Charlotte, I’ve been having a hell of a time trying to find you.”

“I know you. You were the man on the golf course! Just before I fell. What were you doing standing around there that night?”

“Speaking of which,” he said suddenly. “What do you think about golf?” He saw my club lying on the floor and picked it up, inspecting it and getting into a driving stance. “I think it’s a great game.” He made an imaginary swing, held it in midair for a moment and lowered the club, saying, “Huh... little short...”

“Who *are* you?”

He leveled his eyes with mine and handed me the club.

“Look, you’re a really nice girl and I think it’s a real shame the way you kicked the bucket and all, but you really can’t stick around here anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’ve got to come home with me. You really gave us the slip! It took me almost five months before I realized you were even gone and I spent the next five months dimension-hopping, practically going door

to door, looking for you! Sheesh! I looked all through Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, Elysium, Asgard, Elmar, Enderland, checked every planet in the immediate galaxies, the Netherworld, the Underworld, the Overworld... I even checked Waterworld. I imagine you were drifting around the ether for quite some time, but stupid me, I should've known you were going to end up back here sooner or later. Doesn't happen often, though. Usually just for monsters and crazy people..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Rules, Charlotte, I'm talking about rules and regulations." He pulled a scroll out of the sleeve of his jacket and unrolled it. "I've got records to keep and according to my work forms you, Charlotte Elizabeth Belmore, died on Friday, October 31st 2008 at 9:53 PM, exactly... 333 days, 22 minutes and 37 seconds ago."

"... So?" I didn't know what else to say.

"Soooooooo... what are you doing *here*?"

"I have no idea! I only just woke up twenty minutes ago! I had no idea any of this happened! I thought I was buried alive or something!"

"You mean you really don't remember anything that happened after the accident?"

"Nope."

"The little moonlight stroll we took on the green as the paramedics were arriving? Nothing?"

"Moonlight stroll?"

He nodded with a smile that soon turned into a frown.

“Well this is a little confusing,” he said, seemingly to himself. “I’m tellin’ ya... monsters and crazy people... not teenagers...”

“Look, I’m gonna ask you once more... who are you?”

“Let me just check my records a minute.” He was completely ignoring me now. He reached into his suit jacket and pulled out an ancient-looking book that was about a foot thick. I couldn’t understand how he could have hidden something so huge in his jacket, but I did get the impression that this guy was obscenely abnormal. Placing some reading glasses onto the bridge of his nose, he began to furiously shuffle through the myriad decaying pages, acting as if I were no longer there. “Here you are... Charlotte Elizabeth Belmore, born May 8th 1993... died... heh. Well there’s the problem! I forgot to write it down! What a feeb! Let me just pencil you in.” He placed his finger against the yellowed page, leaving a trail of blood as it passed over the paper, until a red **2008** was left to fill in the blank space. “There! All taken care of!” He slammed the book shut with a cloud of dust and drew something else out, this time from behind his back. A scythe. A big, gleaming scythe. I was ready to pass out. “Ready to go?” he asked with a smile.

“Go where? Oh my God! You’re... you’re... you’re... Death?”

“Death, the Grim Reaper, the Pallid Angel, the Harvester of Souls. Doesn’t matter what you call me, I’m still

late, so if you don't have anything else to do, would you be so kind as to follow me into the light?"

"There must be some kind of mistake," I shouted, backing up toward the doors. "I'm not dead!"

He paused for a moment, staring into my eyes. Suddenly he burst into a wild fit of laughter. "I'm sorry, it's just that I've been doing this for 12,000 years and I never get tired of that. Do you know how many people actually realize they're dead when I come to get them? Like three or four... ever... in history. Don't worry, what you're feeling is normal."

"I feel confused!"

"That's normal."

"I'm pretty *scared!*"

"Oh, very normal."

"Look, I just want to go home!"

"Normal."

My stomach suddenly rumbled. "... Also, I'm really hungry."

"That's... not really normal, but don't worry we can get that checked out when we get home."

"But this is my home," I said with a stamp of my foot.

"Not anymore! Why would you want to stick around here, anyway? This place is a dump."



“It’s *not* a dump!”

“Sure it is. You get sick; you get old; you get hurt. People take advantage of you. You, of all people, should know what I mean. Was your life here really so great?”

“It was going to be!” I snapped at him with tears welling up in my eyes. Why was I so emotional now, whereas before I would’ve just kept my mouth shut?

“Again, I’m really sorry if I ruined your plans but it’s kind of important that we both stick to the schedule.”

“But if I’m really dead—and I’m not convinced at all, by the way—shouldn’t I have some kind of unfinished business?”

“What unfinished business could you possibly have?”

“Don’t try to short-change me, I know my rights! I’ve seen *Poltergeist!*!”

“Oh, right. Detachment, and all that. Listen, the standard detachment period is one week, but I’ll be willing to cut you some slack and give you a month. You have until midnight on Halloween, the Eve of All Saints, to prove to yourself that you’re really dead and there’s no reason for you to stay in this world anymore. After that... well...” He tapped the handle of his scythe on the floor with a sadistic grin. “And I mean it.”

“Why Halloween?” I asked after a lengthy silence.

He thought a while and shrugged his shoulders. “It’s dramatic.”

“Why midnight? Dramatic?”

“Yeah, but mostly for legal reasons.” I paused and

thought about all of this. For some reason I was still getting the feeling that I could say no; that I could back out of this if I gave enough notice. Looking at him now, I understood that was not the case.

“What if I find a reason to stay?”

“Trust me, you won’t.” He was turning away to leave.

“Well what if I do?”

“*You won’t!*” he shouted now. So loudly that I thought the windows were going to spew stained glass all over the church. His voice was like a clap of thunder and the sliding of a knife-edge against skin, all at once. I whimpered like a dog and jumped back, with my arms wrapped around me. All of a sudden, I saw them: brilliant wings stretching out of his back, higher and farther than I thought could fit in the confines of the church. I was seeing him in a new light now, too. “I’ve been talking to you with a friendly face, Charlotte, because I think you deserve to be treated kindly. But I have another face, one that is not so kind. I’ve been patient with you so far but even I, who’ve been walking between the worlds for thousands of years, can grow tired of playing games!” When he saw that I had gotten the message, he drew his wings back into his coat and restored himself to normal. “Do you understand?” he asked calmly.

Yes, is all I could say. But I was thinking, “Nobody is going to push me around. Not anymore.”

“Oh really?” he responded with his hands at his hips.

Oh wait. That’s funny. I guess I said exactly what I

was thinking. That's never happened before.

“I’m not trying to push you around, Charlotte. I’m just doing my job.” He turned away and added, “That’s all any of us can do, in this world and the next.” With that, he disappeared and I was alone again.