



## Waking the Dead

“Charlotte... charlotte...” I could hear someone calling my name, but I wasn’t sure if it was real or just in my head. I couldn’t recognize the voice, but my eyesight was starting to fade. I could just barely make out the flag with the big 13 on it, waving in the wind above me. “Charlotte! Charlotte!” Was it Brittany or Freddie? Betta? No. I don’t know who it was. 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 totally black. I think things stayed that way for a while, but I can’t really be sure how long. I also remember something about a brightness and a mess of colors and sounds that I couldn’t place. I heard voices again, but I still didn’t recognize them. There was a conversation going on in my head and I finally heard 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.

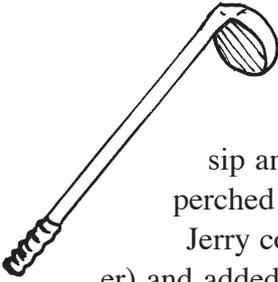
Suddenly, things went black again, but it was different this time. I’m not sure how, but somehow I knew things. I could hear my own breath, I could feel my chest heaving; I could sense that I was conscious again. I opened my eyes but everything was still

dark. *Why?* I could smell, feel, and hear; still taste the blood on my tongue. So why couldn't I see anything? And why wasn't my heart beating? I was on my back, laying 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 in this situation. The long and short of it was that I just wanted was to get out. So I punched the lid and my fist broke through the wood as easily as if it had been cardboard. A cascade of dirt covered my body but I ignored it. I just kept breaking and digging and tunneling and climbing until I saw a light high above me.

I could feel the night air enter my nostrils and it felt 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. I never thought I had it in me! 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 Bathory... Beloved... blah blah... 1991-2007... Slain 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 turned myself around again and was surprised (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 drunk 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. “We ran over you *burp*... remember?”

“About that...” Jerry tactlessly interjected. “We’re real sorry. 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. “Nobody even found out it was us... 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 made me miserable on the happiest night of my life! As if it wasn’t bad enough that they ran over me! As if it wasn’t bad enough that I was in a coma 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 suddenly felt those romantic memories of that magical night. It was so beautiful until I got my face shoved into the thirteenth green. I smiled slyly and 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!" It seemed that 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 said, why don't we play a game?"

Rick suddenly 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 considering they both fainted at the sight of my wrath. That's right. Upon witnessing my terrible might, with my 9-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, sexier... more alive than I had ever remembered. 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 where, 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 there, received communion there; 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. "Who could that be, hanging around in a graveyard at night? Rick? Jerry?" But when I investigated I saw that they were still passed out near my plot. "Hello?" I ventured further 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 began to remember. 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 paused. The figure was moving toward me and it was then that I began to realize that it was definitely not Betta, nor was it one of her stupid jocks or lady servants. Whoever it was, looking at them was scaring the bejeebers out of me and my only impulse was to run. As I bolted I could hear the

sound of the crunching leaves match my pace behind me, and I just started to run faster. I was getting lost in the maze of memorials and fountains and statues and was desperately looking for a way out. I turned and the figure was right behind me, like a demonic shadow that wanted 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. There was no sign of my mysterious pursuer. But I didn't want to take any chances. The way he was following me, it was evident that he was trying to catch me. Who knew where he 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 that. 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 under-

stand in full... my instincts suck.

I wrenched myself back into hiding, hoping that it 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. I heard the heavy, lurching footsteps on the carpet and saw the shadow stretch 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, gripping the edge of the pew so tightly it hurt. 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 pale but nice-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 boy 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 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’d 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 coat and unrolled it. “I’ve got records to keep and according to my work forms you, Charlotte Elizabeth Bathory, died on Saturday, October 31st 2007 at 8:53 PM.”

“... So?” I didn’t know what else to say.

“Sooooooooo... what are you doing *here*?”

“I have no idea! I only just woke up ten 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 suit jacket and pulled out an ancient-looking book that was about a foot thick. I couldn’t understand how he could’ve hidden something that big inside 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 of decaying pages, acting as if I were no longer there. “Here you are... Charlotte Elizabeth Bathory, born May 8th 1991... 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 2007 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?”

“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.”

I felt my stomach rumbling. “... 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 four. You have until midnight on Halloween, the Eve of All Saints, to prove to yourself that you're really dead and that 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 said, "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 that was not the case.

"What if I find a reason to stay?"

"Trust me, you won't."

"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.