Ghostgirl: Homecoming

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Chapter 1

The Slender Thread

Answered prayers cause more tears than those that remain unanswered.

–Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada

If you expect nothing, you can never be disappointed.

Apart from a few starry-eyed poets or monks living on a mountaintop somewhere, however, we all have expectations. We not only have them, we need them. They fuel our dreams, our hopes, and our lives like some super-caffeinated energy drink. Charlotte was done living, but she wasn't done dreaming—although she definitely felt like her dreams had been put on eterna-hold.

ying of boredom wasn't an option. Charlotte Usher was already dead. She drummed her spindly fingers impassively on her desk, then slid the three-wheeled office chair she was sitting on to one side of her cubicle and then the other, craning her neck in hopes of getting a slightly better view down the hallway.

"I have no life," Charlotte grumbled, just loud enough for Pam and Prue, seated in cubicles nearby, to hear.

"Right. None of us do," Prue crowed. "Now shut it, I'm on the phone."

"Like *you* should be," Pam chimed in, using her hand instead of the mute button to silence the receiver and keep her "client" from hearing her talk.

As Pam and Prue chatted busily away, Charlotte stared down resentfully at her own phone. Each phone, like the

cubicles, was identical. They were bloodred, with a single flashing light in the center. No dial pad, no way to call out. They just received.

In fact, she didn't know it was a flashing light from firsthand experience because, so far, it had never rung. It's not even as if she were down the hall and missed a call or something. It had never rung. Not once since she'd been here, which felt like a long time.

"Maybe something is wrong with the connection," Charlotte moaned, pretty much summing up not just her lack of phone time but her lack of enthusiasm as well. She spread her arms out on the desk and lay her head in them, like a pale, fragile egg in a curly nest.

"Watched nails never dry," CoCo whispered sympathetically, seeing Charlotte staring at her phone as she gamboled by her cubicle.

Sitting there day after day incommunicado was terribly frustrating and more than a little embarrassing for Charlotte. Everyone else's phone was ringing off the hook! After all, wasn't *she* the reason why all her classmates, now fellow interns, were there in the first place? Heck, even the new girl, Matilda Miner, who sat directly opposite Charlotte at work, was clucking away, fielding hundreds more calls than she was.

"I know, it sucks, right?" Maddy said, peeking her frizzy head over the divider separating them. "It sucks that no one is calling you."

Charlotte nodded halfheartedly and just as she began to spill her guts, Maddy's phone rang. Again.

"Oh, sorry," Maddy interrupted, stating what was all-too-obvious to Charlotte. "I can't talk now. I've got to get that. We can talk later, okay?"

"Sure," Charlotte said resignedly, leaning her head back down, this time twisting her eyes upward at the video camera pointed directly at her. Monitoring her? Mocking her was probably more like it.

Nevertheless, she tried to keep a stiff upper lip, like some put-upon British teenage royal in a welcoming line. If there was one thing she'd learned, it was that her conduct mattered — especially if someone was watching. She looked back down, squinting from the glare of the white walls and the incandescent office ceiling lights above and greeted her solitude with the grace and dignity befitting an intern of her pedigree. She straightened up, crossed her legs at the ankle, folded her bony fingers on her lap, pursed her lips into a tight little smile, and continued to . . . wait.

Charlotte started reflecting — something she'd been doing a lot of lately.

Choking on that gummy bear and dying in class had changed everything, but it wasn't all bad. She'd experienced a lot more personal growth in death than she ever had in her life. She learned the value of teamwork, selflessness and sacrifice through her Dead Ed classmates and of course their supportive and sympathic teacher Mr. Brain. She'd even gotten to go to Fall Ball with Damen, the guy of her dreams. Kind of, at least. Most importantly, she'd found a best friend and soul mate, Scarlet Kensington, a connection that she'd been craving her whole life. She crossed over satisfied, filled with hope

and expectation. But now, her future, which had been looking so bright there for a minute, felt more and more like a dead end. Life on the Other Side definitely wasn't what Charlotte hoped for. Instead of paradise, it was more like the day after Christmas. Every day. She started to go down a list of what was "supposed" to happen but hadn't. No pearly gates. No harps. Just more work to do.

When they'd first arrived here, she recalled, the Dead Ed kids were kept in an empty monochrome holding room, kind of like a jail cell without the bars. It was imposing and had none of the questionable charm of even the intake office at Hawthorne High. One by one, her classmates were called and led through a nondescript steel doorway. As in life, Charlotte was dead last.

"Usher," Mr. Markov, a man wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a sensible suit, had finally called. "Usher, Charlotte."

"Present!" she replied, happy that someone finally called her name, and had bothered to get it right.

"Oh, goodie," he snapped curtly, tamping down Charlotte's momentary good mood considerably. "We've been having some technical difficulty with the lines and we wanted to make sure everything was in working order so that you could start right away."

"Start? Start what?"

Charlotte was done with starts, she was ready to stop. Stop learning, working, wanting. All of that. The man didn't answer her as he led Charlotte into the other space: a room filled with uniform rectangular cubicles and phones. She stood staring for a second, at what, exactly, she had yet to determine. It

was as if the place and everyone in it was at the tail end of something that used to be alive, but was now stagnant and stuffed, almost museum-like. There was so little to notice. It was all so . . . dull.

"Does God run a home shopping channel?" she joked nervously.

She then looked around the room and some minor details began to reveal themselves. There was a desk and phone for everyone in her class, with one empty place left over. Everyone from Dead Ed was already seated, and she was glad they had made it there together, wherever "there" was.

Markov began his lecture. It was another orientation speech, but not nearly as open and interactive as Mr. Brain's was when they started Dead Ed. There was more drill sergeant than guru in this guy.

"Everything you've learned," Markov announced, "has gotten you here."

From the tone of his voice, they weren't sure if they should be proud or not.

"But here is not there. Now is not then," he said.

"What's this about?" Charlotte asked Pam quietly.

"Seems we graduated, but now we've got internships," Pam whispered from her cubicle.

"This is where you'll prove yourself, where you'll put your education into practice," Mr. Markov continued.

"This is BS," Prue snipped.

"No, it's a hotline," he said.

"A hotline? To where? For what?" Charlotte asked incredulously.

"It's for troubled teens."

"Can you be a little more specific, sir," Charlotte prodded in her most cadet-friendly tone. "In case you haven't figured it out, all teens are pretty much troubled."

Mr. Markov was an impatient sort who did not easily tolerate sarcasm from his charges, but he could see the confusion on all the interns' faces and felt obliged to elaborate.

"Have you ever had an argument with yourself?" he asked.

"All the time," Suzy Scratcher said as she reflected.

"You mean inside your own head?" Pam answered, grasping the concept ahead of the others.

"Exactly," said Mr. Markov. "You will be the voice inside someone else's head. When they are afraid or confused or lonely or perhaps contemplating something unthinkable, your phone will ring."

"Like a celebrity's sobriety coach or something?" CoCo perked up, her previous addiction to tabloids rearing its ugly head once again.

"It will be your chance to be helpful, to do good and pass along to others what you have learned," Mr. Markov added.

"It will be so cool to talk to living people again!" Charlotte shouted, seeming to miss the point a little.

"You won't actually be *talking* to them in that way, Usher," he corrected her. "You will be more like . . ."

"Their conscience," Charlotte interrupted, showing she understood better than she'd let on at first.

"Yes, that's right," Mr. Markov said.

"Be kind, rewind," Metal Mike piped in with a sample of his childish "inner voice."

Instead of disciplining Mike for his sarcastic sloganeering, Markov used his comment as an opportunity to explain further. He walked over to Mike's phone, picked it up for effect, and continued.

"Everybody needs help at one time or another," Markov said.

"Some more than others," CoCo jibed arrogantly, scanning the room.

"But," Markov continued, showing a surprisingly subtle wit, "helping is not just a *calling,* it's a skill. Something learned."

Charlotte was skeptical. Her own life experience provided plenty of evidence that sympathy, empathy for others, was either something you had or didn't. Most people didn't.

"Someone can have the best intentions," Markov said, "but offering the wrong advice, the wrong help at the wrong time, can be worse than not helping at all."

"So we are here to perfect our craft," Buzzsaw Bud interjected excitedly, the idea of becoming a skilled craftsman appealing to him greatly.

Markov nodded his approval.

"And once we do, we can leave?" Charlotte asked impertinently.

Markov raised his brow as Pam gulped and shot Charlotte a worried look.

"There's nothing keeping you here," Markov said tersely, the disapproval in his voice obvious to the whole class. "It's your choice to stay or go at any time."

It may have been her choice, but then she would also

be making a choice for all those desperate callers who were sure to be reaching out to her. That's what he really meant, she thought. He was questioning her own conscience, her own sense of responsibility. Markov didn't need to say it; his cocked brow said it all. The idea of shouldering such a burden scared her.

Markov had made his point, to Charlotte and the whole class, for that matter. They had a job to do, and it was not to be taken lightly. Not one to belabor an issue, he changed the subject.

"Before we begin, there is a bit of business we need to take care of," Markov continued. "A graduation present."

A door opened and a group of people flooded the room. Charlotte was confused. Everyone's eyes lit up with the joy of recognition. Pam, speechless, got up and ran into the arms of a kind-looking man.

"Pam?" Charlotte called after her.

"This is Mr. Paroda, my second-grade music teacher. He taught me the piccolo!"

Next, Silent Violet, no longer silent, ran screaming toward an elderly lady.

"Grandma!" Violet exclaimed as she embraced the older, silver-haired woman.

"We need to talk," the woman said as she led Violet to a corner, where they huddled close and gabbed away.

After everyone filed into the room, a glorious, elegant figure appeared, only this one had a pink fitted aura.

"Darling," the impeccably dressed woman said.

"Ms. Chanel, this has always been my dream," CoCo muttered, swooning, as she reached out for her idol. "I've always wanted to make something of my life, just like you did."

"How many cares one loses when one decides not to be something but to be someone," Coco Chanel said. "That's one of my favorite quotes."

"It's an awesome, brilliant quote," CoCo said. "Who said it?"

"I did, darling," Chanel replied in all her timeless fabulousness.

Everyone in the room was paired up with long-deceased relatives, mentors, and even pets. Charlotte was moved by the touching reunions, and looked around, curious to see who was there for her. She wondered about her parents, which was the first time in a long while. Would they traipse through the door, much like they should have fifteen years ago? All she was really told about them was that they had gone out on their anniversary and never made it home.

She was only two when they died, so she probably wouldn't recognize them even if they were standing right in front of her. She reverted to an old habit and started to examine everyone's noses to see if any of them resembled hers. She remembered when her classmates' moms would come to pick them up, the teacher would say, "she has your nose," so that is what Charlotte always looked for. Her whole life she wanted someone to have her nose. But looking around now, she couldn't find a match anywhere in the crowd.

"All right, settle down, everybody," Markov interrupted,

pulling out what looked like an architectural rendering of a compound. "This will help you get your bearings."

It was a simple, circular layout and included a half-moon-shaped block of what looked like attached condos along the perimeter, each one assigned with a name tag to an intern. Charlotte was too distracted to look for her own name in the group of domiciles, but she needn't have bothered, as she would learn shortly, because it wasn't there.

A distance away from the rowhouses was the office building they were in and a larger apartment complex directly across from it. Charlotte tried to gauge how far by working out the map scale, the whole "one inch equals x many feet" sort of thing keeping her mind occupied while everyone else was busy smiling. Old habits, and defense mechanisms, die hard.

"Okay, everyone with assigned living quarters can head home for the afternoon," Markov advised to cheers from the reunited interns.

Charlotte still hadn't worked the distance out exactly, but there definitely was a long way between the "living" quarters — the description of which Charlotte found somewhat ironic — and the rest of the compound. Oddly, the whole thing looked to Charlotte like one huge happy face, the condos forming a big smile and the apartment tower and office building the vacant, dilated, nondescript eyes — like hers.

"The rest of you will find a room at the dormitory across the courtyard," Markov said plainly.

What *rest of you,* Charlotte thought? There was no one else left. He meant her.

"Enjoy your time together catching up," Markov said pleasantly as he dismissed the interns. "And . . . have a nice day."

"Nice, indeed," Charlotte groaned at Markov's closing line, feeling her happy face observation had been confirmed. "And the laugh's on me."

Everyone filed out with their significant others. Long lost souls, connected once again. The only thing Charlotte seemed to be reunited with was the old feeling of being alone. Unclaimed. It was like death by a thousand paper cuts as each coupling made their way past her. She wasn't even sure whom she *wanted* to meet again on the other side. Still, she always took it for granted that there would be someone.

"We're all alone in death . . . and some of us after," she sighed, feeling sorry for herself. As the crowd departed and the office door closed, Charlotte looked up and saw someone she hadn't noticed before, another girl sitting across the room looking at her.

The girl was definitely put together from head to toe. Her dark frizzy mane pulled up high, with not a strand out of place, accented her sharp features and full lips. Her long geometric-print frock was studiously worn and faded to make it look like she didn't care, but Charlotte knew better. There was nothing casual at all about the outfit, or the girl, at first or even second glance. She seemed to be all business, except for the flirty smile she flashed in Charlotte's direction.

"Hey," the girl called out enthusiastically, before Charlotte could actually get out the words to ask what she was doing there. "I'm Matilda. You can call me Maddy."

"Nice to meet you . . . Maddy," Charlotte said, both appreciative and a touch disconcerted by Maddy's warmth. They were total strangers after all.

"I guess we're roomies," Maddy chirped cheerfully.

"Oh, ah, I'm not sure . . . I've got to talk to Pam and Prue before . . ."

"I just assumed . . ." Maddy's voice trailed off. "Since we were the only ones left . . ."

Charlotte knew that look on her face. How it felt to reach out and be, well, rejected.

"Did any of your 'friends' offer to take you along to meet their loved ones?"

"No . . . but . . ." Charlotte started in an attempt to make excuses for her friends, but stopped herself. It was obvious she was, at least for the moment, forgotten. "You know, we're all here because of me," Charlotte said, unable to resist the urge to puff herself up in front of a new girl. "All except for you, I mean."

"That's really impressive," Maddy said offhandedly. "How soon they forget, huh?"

"Yeah," Charlotte said quietly.

"Not much point in sticking around here, then. Want to go home?"

Charlotte balked for a minute, still a little dazed and slightly demoralized by it all, but then came around.

"Sounds tempting. Let's go."

Maddy smiled back invitingly as they left the office and started across the courtyard toward the enormous, circular,

sky-scraping apartment tower that would serve as their dorm for, well, however long they were stuck there.

"This is . . . home?" Charlotte asked Maddy unconvincingly as she eyed the building.

It was impressive in height but impersonal, just like the phone bank. Part obelisk, part Space Needle, perfectly suited to the strange military-type compound. Timeless and Spartan. She and Maddy walked in, stopped at the front desk, and said hello to the doorman. He looked back at them impassively, handed them keys to an apartment on the seventeenth floor, and pointed them in the direction of the elevators. Small talk, apparently, was not part of his job description.

"Seventeen?" Charlotte muttered aloud. "That's random."

"You better get used to it." Maddy shrugged matter-of-factly as they walked.

There was a crowd at the elevator, so Charlotte stopped talking. They pressed "up" and waited along with a bunch of unruly kids and a really sweet young couple — high school sweethearts, maybe — for the elevator to descend. The bell sounded, doors opened, and they all got on. The elevator started "up," slowly.

"Why should I get used to it?"

"Think about it," Maddy said. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," Charlotte answered, still a little oblivious.

"Me too. We're seventeen and . . . always will be."

Just as it began to sink in for Charlotte, the elevator stopped

at the sixth floor and a few of the kids got off. Then at the seventh and eighth, a few more exited at each level. Her heart sank as the elevator rose.

Charlotte tried to see a positive side, but couldn't. She always looked forward to getting older as the payoff for a childhood of insecurity and loneliness. Now, there was nowhere for her future self to live, no need for a future self to exist at all, in fact, even in her mind. And that girl, that future incarnation of herself, more than anyone else, was the hardest person to say goodbye to. Charlotte watched the last of the children exit on the twelfth floor, and felt a little less sorry for herself. But only a little.

The elevator doors opened to a circular hallway carpeted with a musty gray indoor/outdoor carpet. Charlotte imagined the smell of mildew, and even though she was dead, the thought of it made her itch a little. The girls made their way to their room and Maddy slowly opened the door and flicked on the light.

"What is this?" Charlotte snorted, surveying the dank accommodations.

The room was bare, industrial looking, and "issued" with cement floors and large windows, unfurnished except for a table, two folding chairs, and two beds, if you could call them that. They were bunks, actually, stainless steel bunks that were built into the wall. The plush bedding, stained-glass windows, and carved bedposts of Hawthorne Manor were just a fond memory now.

"As if anyone would ever want to steal these," Charlotte said, tugging on the immobile bunk frames with all her might.

Touching them made the circumstances much more real to her, and much more unpleasant.

"I don't know," Maddy said, a hint of optimism in her voice. "I kind of like it here. It's . . . cool."

"It's cool, all right. Like ice."

"Hey, at least we've got each other, right?" Maddy said, trying to get Charlotte to smile.

Charlotte could come to only one conclusion: whatever *this* was, it was not a stairway to heaven.