

Spooky & The Ghost Chorus

KAREN KALBACHER

Copyright © 2014 Karen Kalbacher

All rights reserved.

TO A LITTLE BEAR...

Years and years ago I purchased a tiny bear dressed as a black cat who seemed to have a personality that was all her own. She is the Guardian of Halloween and the lover of Candy Corn.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

- 1 Poltergeist? What's that?
- 2 The Dark Path
- 3 Taking the Dark Path
- 4 Whatever Happened to Frank?
- 5 Ghost Hunt
- 6 Grounded
- 7 Rescue Mission
- 8 It's All Going Downhill Fast
- 9 Buried Alive
- 10 One of Us

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the support of my mom

Rita Kalbacher and my friends. They have seen the illustrations of Halloween Hollow. They've seen the bear and none of them have run screaming. To Josh Reichardt for putting up with Spooky's sass and to Xiomara Santiago for proofreading my terrible grammar and my cousin Sean Gibbons for reading the roughest draft. I am eternally grateful.

1

POLTERGEIST? WHAT'S THAT?

Charlotte hit the ground with a splashy thud. Mud suction-cupped her down and under itself. In seconds she was a mud mummy. She stared up at the sky. Huge chunks of mud were heading her way. "I'm going to be buried alive," Charlotte whispered because she was too exhausted to scream bloody murder. Mud pressed down on her like a thick cloying blanket. The smell of earth got into her lungs and her mouth was gritty. She couldn't move. *Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God!!!!!!*

Three days earlier...

"Why do all the buildings face away from the woods?"

"I don't know," Mom said absently. She was unpacking. Charlotte stared at the back wall of the house. "Why don't we have any windows at the back of the house?"

"I don't know," Mom rumbled.

"But it's dark back there! Can we cut a hole in my bedroom wall and make a window? I want to look at the woods." Fox Town had windows everywhere. Her old bedroom had been flooded with sunlight. Just another reason moving sucked. Mother eyed her

sour-faced daughter. "Seriously, I can borrow an axe and just whack, whack my way through. Then you can buy a window, a big window. I'll grow grapes in my bedroom or pumpkins. Everyone loves pumpkins! Plus, you can make pie. I like pumpkin pie. Love it, actually. What do you think?"

"Oh Charlotte stop! I'm not letting you whack a hole through my brand new house. Just put a picture of a window up."

"That is a truly awful thing to do Mom. That's just...prisoner stuff. Why aren't there windows there? Whoever heard of a house with windows only on one side? It's so weird here. Are people afraid of the woods? Who's afraid of trees? They're just leafy and awesome."

"We just moved here, today, Charlotte. I don't have all the answers. I don't have any answers. Go outside and meet someone." She held up a vase Grandma had given them. It was pink and swirly and too girly for Charlotte's tastes. She liked orange and black and sometimes that weird lime green color of magic smoke. That vase was just...ick.

"Make friends. Ask them questions." Translation: "Leave me alone, Charlotte." Charlotte took the hint and walked out the front door into Bearville. The sidewalks were wide and whitewashed. The sky was a pleasant late summer/early fall blue. Trees sat in little pots every few feet. It even smelled good, like coffee and baked goods. But the place was just spooky. When Charlotte looked across the street there were just blank walls. "Why *do* they hate windows so much around here?"

A polar bear in a pink skirt snickered. Charlotte frowned at her. "Why are you laughing at me?" she asked.

"Because you don't know anything," said the bear. "And because you have no fur. What's the matter bear, you got *the mange*?"

"First, I'm not a bear. I'm a human. Second, I just moved here today, this morning, and you're right. I don't know anything about Bearville. Third, it's mean to make fun of someone for being different." Charlotte ticked her fingers for each number. The polar bear yawned at her, showing a mouthful of sharp teeth. Ignoring her lack of apology Charlotte pressed on, asking, "Why are all of the buildings facing away from the woods?"

“Why don't you go down the Dark Path and find out for yourself, Mangy,” The polar bear girl said as she walked off laughing.

“Oh, brilliant! I'm going to just love it here, I can tell already!” Charlotte shouted at her back. She stared at the smooth walls across the street for awhile. Some of them had advertisements for local businesses on them. But they all had signs that said the doors were on the opposite side of the building. That made Charlotte's curiosity meter go crazy. “Strange, stranger, strangest town I've ever been in.”

She walked down the end of her block and turned expecting to see the woods but someone had built a tall fence and added some benches, trees and a trash can all facing north, away from the woods. Charlotte walked farther to the edge of another street and looked south. There was a billboard blocking the view here. “What the...” Charlotte kept walking but there were weird fences and odd little rest stops and even a statue of a polar bear wearing an open cape to block the view. Finally she bumped into a brown bear. “Oops! Sorry, I was looking for a way to see the woods.”

The brown bear had a good laugh but stopped when she realized Charlotte was serious. The bear gave her a curious stare. Her eyes were large and a brown so dark chocolate they were practically black holes in her fuzzy face. Charlotte realized the bear was wearing black velour pajamas with a jacket over it to hide them. “Now why would a young person such as you want to see the woods,” the brown bear asked.

Why are you wearing pajamas? Charlotte thought but was too polite to ask. “I like trees? And you don't seem much older than me,” Charlotte said. The bear laughed again, a raspy, silly sound like wheezing or croaking. In fact, it was a lot like a dog sneeze. “I think I moved to a strange town,” Charlotte told the bear.

The bear shrugged. “You can see the woods from the Dark Path. Doubtful you'd see it anywhere else in the whole town.”

“Why?”

“Because the scaredy bears are afraid of the woods. Everyone's afraid of the woods,” she said with another laugh. The bear had a list in one hand and she checked it. “It was nice to meet you...?”

“Charlotte,” Charlotte replied.

“Charlotte,” the bear repeated. “Well it was nice to meet you Charlie, but I have some shopping to do. If you really want to see the Dark Path, go down Eighth Street to the bear statue with the outstretched cape. If you go around him, you'll see it. Go left around him. Always best to go left around things. Don't know why you'd want to do it. It's pretty creepy.” She drawled creepy, like the bear was savoring the word. “Bye,” she said and started to walk off. Charlotte followed. “Hey, what's your name?”

“Sp...ah, Mina. I'm Mina. See you around Charlie,” she waved, winked and walked away.

“It's Charlotte.” Charlotte tilted her head. It looked like a long black cat tail was hanging out from underneath the bear's jacket. “Mina the bear with the cat tail,” Charlotte whispered.

There were a few other bears on the street. Charlotte watched them for a few minutes before ducking down Eighth Street and standing in front of the bear. “You look like a flasher,” she told the statue. The statue did not say anything, as she had insulted his honor. She touched the cold white marble of him. “Are you supposed to be a superhero?” Again the statue ignored her, so she felt comfortable sneaking around it. She went left as instructed. Behind the cape there were a lot of spiky rose bushes that tried to keep her from looking but someone had recently pushed through them. Charlotte could see the dirt path behind it. She could also see ancient oak trees the size of houses. Their leaves were just starting to blush with Fall colors. Flowers were just starting to die on the edges of the wood. But mums dotted sides of the path and they were brilliant reds, oranges and yellows. Cheerful mums. But then it got dark. It was like everything ended there in a black hole. Charlotte shivered.

“I didn't go in,” Charlotte told her mom later over pizza. She had stood at the edge for an hour daring herself to go into the woods. Finally she gave up and started looking for all the relevant stores; comic books, regular books and candy. Her mom was wearing her best frowny face. “I didn't. I would need a flashlight and something to mark the trail first. Don't want to get lost forever. I wonder if I can get some glow in the dark paint at the store.”

“No,” Mom said. “I don't want you disappearing into the woods. You could get eaten by wild animals.”

“I live in a town full of bears,” Charlotte remarked, “I could get eaten by wild animals on the way to school. A polar bear was rude to me today. The woods are probably safer.”

“No.” Mom was using her best ‘mom voice.’ Charlotte bit her lip. She let it go for now but there was no way she wasn't going into those woods. She just had to keep quiet so Mom didn't make her promise not to do it.

“After dinner, go unpack your room,” Mom said and settled on another slice of pizza. “I'd rather not have you living out of boxes.” Charlotte wanted to complain about the lack of windows and her need for fresh air but it was no use. Her mother was determined to love it here. Charlotte wasn't so sure yet. She saw herself again at the edge of the dark woods. She had desperately wanted to go in but couldn't make her feet go. For a minute she wondered if there was a truly frightening reason none of the bears in this town went into the woods.

Charlotte pushed her plate away. She was suddenly full. The pizza felt like a lump of dead play dough in her stomach. “May I be excused?”

“As long as you go upstairs and unpack your room. Your father and Dale will be here tomorrow. I don't want them tripping over more boxes then they absolutely have to, got it?” Charlotte nodded.

She stared hard at her mother for a minute. Mom was tall, willowy, with a curtain of long blond hair. Her nose was tiny and turned up. She was very pretty with wide green eyes. Charlotte had a big nose, was tiny and her hair changed color randomly from white blonde to a rich red. “Am I adopted,” Charlotte had asked once. Her mother had rolled her eyes and told Charlotte to clean up her shoes. But she hadn't said no. Maybe tomorrow when Dale got here she would ask him what he knew. Dale looked like a carbon copy of Dad so he definitely was one of them.

Upstairs in her windowless room, Charlotte was surrounded by her whole life in a sea of cardboard boxes. She missed Fox Town. She had a window there. Popping open the first box she saw all the stuffed animals lovingly packed. She dumped them all onto the bed so they could breathe better. She had poked some holes

into the box but she was worried that they might have suffocated. Frank was her favorite. He was a small wiener dog dressed in a hotdog costume. She gave him a hug. She really was too old for stuffed animals now, being twelve but... She gave Frank another hug and put him up by her pillow. The rest of the guys were various teddy bears, foxes and lots of animals in costumes. She touched each one and then patted Frank's head so he wouldn't feel like he wasn't her favorite.

The next box was full of clothes. She opened a drawer and dumped everything in together. Clothes weren't worth organizing. You just wore them and tossed them in the hamper. A box marked 'bureau junk' was likewise just tipped into the drawer. "That's three boxes down!" Charlotte did a little dance and tossed the boxes into the hallway. She turned to face the big blank wall that was just crying out for a window. She tapped it a few times. It was solid. She had hoped it was just boarded over. But it was solid brick. There had never been a window there. "Creepy," she breathed.

A moan answered her. Charlotte froze. The moan started up again, softly but gaining strength. Charlotte shivered. It was getting closer! A white streak exploded through the windowless wall wailing. It raced over her head and into the hallway. Charlotte chased after it. It careened into the wall and knocked a picture of the family to the ground. Glass shattered and spread out all over the floor like a mine field. The thing bounced off another wall and into her parents' bedroom.

Charlotte leaped over the glass and slid on socks into the bedroom. She was just in time to see the thing ram into her mother's girly vase. It flew into the air. Charlotte tried to catch it. She wasn't fast enough. It hit the hardwood floor with a scary thunk. The white thing went through the window as if it were open and was gone. She raced over to the window and saw it tear off into the town, smashing streetlights and tearing up flower gardens.

"Charlotte! What is going on up here," her mother demanded. Charlotte spun around. Mom's face was red and splotchy; definitely angry and in 'blaming Charlotte mode.' Not good. The girly pink vase took that exact moment to fall into two perfect halves; clink, clink. "Oh, that's not even fair!"

2

THE DARK PATH

Mom did not hesitate. She grounded Charlotte instantly. “But Mom, I didn’t do...” Charlotte closed her mouth. Mom pointed toward her room. Worst part was she could see Mom trying not to cry. She loved that dumb, ugly old vase. So Charlotte felt guilty even though she hadn’t broken it. “I’m sorry it broke,” she said from inside her bedroom. “But I didn’t break it.”

“Don’t come out until tomorrow,” Mom sniffled. “And think about what you did... Oh Charlotte! My momma gave me that vase. I know you didn’t like it. I know you didn’t want to move here... But you didn’t have to take it out on my vase.” She closed the door. “Mom...” Charlotte felt like mold. She felt lower than mold. She felt like mold poop. Poor Mom!

“What was that thing?” *Ghost*. The word popped into her brain. “It couldn’t be...a ghost?” Outside she heard the moan again. “I have to know,” she whispered. But how? She couldn’t see outside in her prison style bedroom. “I’m going to have to sneak into Dale’s room.” But could she do that without getting into more trouble? She bit her lip. She really didn’t want to upset her mom more but... *Ghost*.

Charlotte knew she had to wait until Mom was downstairs. She halfheartedly unpacked another box and kicked most of it under the bed. She listened at her door for her mother. It was quiet. To be sure, she dumped some more clothes into a pile in her closet.

She could hang them up later, eventually, maybe. Again she listened at the door. Opening the door slightly, she peeked out. The glass was gone from the hallway. Charlotte felt another pang of guilt for not at least helping Mom clean it up. But she had made her go to her room. She could hear the faintest hint of the ghost moaning. Sneaking out, she walked across the hall to where Dale's room was going to be. She had picked her room based on the woods, not knowing about this town's crazy hatred of trees. But she couldn't help but feel ripped off when she saw Dale's huge window open to the fattening moon.

The streetlights were glowing, a sickly orange. Some of them were out. Charlotte saw a flash of white flying past one. The unmistakable sound of glass breaking reached her and another light went dark. The moaning was sad. Charlotte wondered what made a ghost depressed. They were already dead. How did it get worse from there? The ghost flew into a tree chasing the birds loose. Neighbors started coming out of their houses to see what was making all the noise. But the ghost stayed in the tree. No one saw it, no one but Charlotte.

In the morning, something jumped on the bed and Charlotte woke up swinging. “Oomph,” her attacker said as he dropped to the floor. “Dale! You know better than to try and wake me up! Are you okay?” Her little brother rubbed at his face. “I missed you too,” he sulked. “Oh come here,” Charlotte said and dragged him back up onto the bed. “You woke me up. You got what you deserved.” She winked to take the sting out of it and she hugged him. “I did miss you.”

Mollified, Dale smiled. “Dad and I got to stay in a hotel and watch horror movies.” “You're eight! You're going to have nightmares,” Charlotte told him but inside she was jealous. Mom never wanted to watch horror movies. They didn't even have the TV hooked up yet.

“Oh,” Dale grumbled, “Did I ever! I slept like five minutes straight last night. Worth it.” Charlotte ruffled her brother's black hair.

"I saw a ghost last night. At least I think it was a ghost," she said. Dale's eyes got larger and larger till they were the size of cake plates. "It was moaning and wailing and it came straight through the walls. It broke Mom's pink vase." Dale snorted. "What?"

"You broke the vase. Mom told us this morning." Great. Convicted without a trial. In America. Charlotte gritted her teeth. "You almost had me there, though," Dale said. "A ghost would have been cool. Make this town more interesting."

Charlotte didn't say another word to him on the way downstairs. How could he think she would wreck Mom's ugly vase? People around here really didn't appreciate her. She was still angry when Dad hugged her goodbye and left for work. She was still mad when Mom told her she couldn't go outside. "Grounded, remember," her mom had not so gently reminded her. By the time she got back to her room she was fuming. Dale trailed after her. "Go away," she snapped.

"Hey! I didn't break anything," Dale said easily.

"Neither did I, not that anyone believes me." Charlotte pulled open a few boxes and started tossing books in the direction of her bookcase. Dale started organizing them by author and genre. He popped each one onto the bookcase with a thoughtfulness that calmed Charlotte's nerves. After the third shelf he harrumphed. "Hmm?"

"Nothing," he muttered. He harrumphed again.

"What?"

"Nothing," Dale muttered. Two minutes and another shelf and he was at it again.

Charlotte glared at him. "What are you 'harumphing' about over there?"

"Did you know 99 percent of your books are on Halloween," he asked. "So?" "And the other 1 percent is on ghosts...except for this book on how to make...no, that's how to make a fox costume. Don't you like mysteries?"

"I like the mystery of our haunted new town. I'm going to find that ghost tonight," Charlotte growled. "Then maybe someone around here will believe me." Frantic knocking at the front door cut off whatever smart-alecky remark Dale was about to say. The two of them raced to the top of the stairs.

Dale whispered, "Assume eavesdropping positions." Charlotte dropped to her stomach and crawled forward until she could see the front door open. Dale moved around to the side to look down from the railings. They were old hats at this kind of surveillance. It was how they discovered they were moving. Charlotte's stomach knotted. Was this more bad news?

Mom opened the door. It was a larger version of the polar bear in the skirt from yesterday. She was holding a broken flower pot. Dale glanced at her. She mouthed: *what?* He pointed to the pot then to her. She shook her head no and pinched him. They glared. Downstairs the bear woman was talking.

"Last night was like a terror spree! People heard screams. Thirteen streetlights were smashed. Mrs. Henderson's flower pots were all broken. A few people had their pets run away and the birds all look a bit shell shocked," the bear told her mother.

"Oh, that's just awful! Does that sort of thing happen a lot in Bearville? I wouldn't have moved here if I had known it had vandals."

"That's just the thing Mrs...?" "Delgado," Mom supplied. "Delgado, we never had vandals. Not once. At least not in the twenty years I've lived here." The polar bear stared Mom down until Mom's face started to turn an angry shade of red.

"Just what the heck are you implying, Mz..?"

"Harris," the bear huffed. "I'm implying that your daughter did it. My daughter said she was asking about the Dark Path and trying to get to the woods. They even saw her talking to that weirdo Mina. We don't need influences like her in our town. She doesn't even have the decency to have more fur."

"Get out of my house," Mom told the bear. "This is a

terrible welcome. You get out of here. My daughter didn't break your streetlights! How do you think she reached them? Flying?" Cursing, she slammed the door shut. She was livid. Charlotte was worse. She dragged Dale back to her room. She held a finger over her lips until she closed the door.

"You don't seriously think I moved here and went on a terror spree last night?"

"No," Dale said. "But if anyone sees your collection of books, they're going to assume you're a serial killer. I knew moving to a town full of bears would be a bad idea. I look too much like lunch to them. Mom and Dad are crazy. But at least they'll just eat me. Sounds like they're going to lynch you."

Charlotte bit her lip. "Not if I can find that ghost and show it to them," she mused. "Then they'll have to believe me."

"I doubt it," Dale said. "Ugh, am I going to have to go to your lynching?"

"No," Charlotte growled. "Listen, do you want to help me sneak out tonight and find that ghost?"

"I'm not going out there at night. I'll be lynched right next to you. But I'll help you get out there if you want. Don't know why you would, unless you're suicidal."

"Don't have much of a choice, do I? If I don't find the ghost, this town is going to get in the habit of blaming me for everything bad that ever happens." Charlotte grabbed up a few of her books on ghosts.

"Hey, aren't you going to help me unpack my room," Dale asked.

"No, I have to figure out how to catch a ghost."

"Great, I know where I stand with you..." Charlotte dumped the books onto her bed.

"Fine, one hour of unpacking and then we make a plan to catch an unruly ghost."

"You mean a poltergeist?"

"What?"

“A poltergeist... when they smash stuff, they're poltergeist. It's German.”

“The ghost is German?”

Dale sighed heavily and opened the door. “Let's get the unpacking over with, okay? Promise to tell you everything I know about poltergeist while we work.”

They started opening boxes but to Charlotte's dismay, Dale actually liked to put his clothes in drawers according to what they were. He also put things on shelves where they belonged or in the closet. “Ugh, this is taking forever! Tell me something interesting before I die right here on your boring beige rug.”

“Poltergeist is the German word for 'noisy ghost.' It means an unquiet spirit. They usually haunt people instead of like beds at spooky inns or closets of bad kids. But that's just a theory. Any ghost hunter worth her shorts knows that ghosts become poltergeists when they're upset,” Dale finished and handed his sister a flashlight. “Put that in your ghost hunting kit.”

Charlotte felt a dollop of fear. This had all seemed like a great idea when she was mad about everyone in town blaming her. But thinking about an unquiet spirit gave her the heebie jeebies. Also, she was terrified of being outside alone, in the dark, with just a flashlight. “Are you sure you don't want fame and glory by helping me catch a spirit?”

Dale snorted. “No, thank you,” he said. “I don't want to get lost in the dark in a town full of bears. I look a lot like a snack in the dark. Besides, helping my sister get fame and glory is really all I need.” Charlotte was going to ruffle his hair but he kept talking, “And someone needs to tell Mom and Dad what happened if you never come back.”

Gulp.

He gave her a sidelong glance. “You can always change your mind. I wouldn't fault you.”

Charlotte bit her lip. But she knew in her heart that she

wouldn't be able to clear her name until she caught that ghost. As much as it made her heart pound, she was doing this thing. "No way, I'm not afraid. Just tell me how to catch a ghost. Can I trap it in something?"

"I don't know, I'm eight," Dale grumbled. "Get out of my room. Go look through your books. All you're doing in here is messing up my stuff."

"Fine! But you better be working on how to sneak me out of here tonight or I'll come in here when you're not home and mess up the alphabetical order of your books!" Dale paled. Charlotte smirked the whole way back to her own room.

Once she closed the door, it was a different story. She only had a few boxes left, so she opened the closet and shoved them inside. "There, one thing done. I'm all unpacked," she said, clapping her hands. Now she could concentrate on how to catch her ghost and what to put him in when she had him.

The first book she grabbed said it was impossible. She tossed that one towards the bookcase where it crashed into a few more books and landed in a sad pile on the floor. The second book was more promising. It said you could create a vessel to keep the ghost inside. But it didn't tell her one: what a vessel was and two: where to get one. She filed that in her brain for asking Dale later. The third book she had been called, "How to Get Haunted: A Guide for Attracting Spirits to Your Home." It was written by Spookamina Bear. "Huh? Like Mina?" Charlotte flipped the book to the back but there was no author's photo. The bio said she was a mysterious recluse and that her last known address was Bearville. "That can't be a coincidence, can it?"

Well if it was the same Mina, she sure knew a lot about ghosts! A vessel, it turns out, is anything you can carry something in like a bottle or a skull or a hollowed out pumpkin. You could entice a spirit into one if you had something it liked. So you had to know the spirit. Spookamina recommended the ghost's favorite candy when it was alive. Charlotte puzzled over that. She didn't

know this ghost personally. How would she know what candy to use?

Charlotte's curiosity got the better of her and she read the whole book. She carried it with her to lunch and when she was told to go out and play. She raised an eyebrow at Mom but she seemed to have forgotten that Charlie was grounded. Charlie did not argue, she grabbed Dale and zipped outside.

She read page after page while playing catch with Dale. They even walked around the neighborhood discussing different pages. Dale was always interested in learning. He was a curious little person. Charlotte often felt he was the older one. Or maybe she was just the crazier one. The book said ghosts were naturally attracted to crazy people and also interesting people and most surprisingly: ducks.

"Let's see if there's a park in town," Dale said when he heard that. "Maybe we can borrow a duck."

"Do you think someone would stop us if we had a duck under one arm?"

Dale shrugged. "Don't know anything about this place yet. Just that they are super terrified of whatever is that way." Dale pointed towards the woods. "The woods are that way," Charlotte told him.

"Huh, who ever heard of a whole town being afraid of the woods? Maybe at night but these people are bears. Bears. What scares a bear?"

They found the park and the playground. There were a few brown bears playing basketball with some black bears. They were all in basketball shorts and half of them had shirts off for teams. They saw Dale and waved him over. Dale gave her a look but she waved him on. At least one of them should make friends in this town. She wandered over to a large dirt pile and sat down to finish her book.

Her eyes were pretty blurry thirty pages later. So when she looked up and thought she saw a panther, she was probably

hallucinating. Charlotte rubbed at her eyes until the panther resolved itself to a familiar brown bear in cat pajamas. Definitely not a panther. She was looking through the bushes across the pond from Charlotte and she could hear her making the ‘psst, psst’ sound people used to attract a cat. “This is the oddest town ever,” Charlotte told herself but she was already on her feet and heading over there.

By the time she got to the other side of the pond, Mina was gone. Instead there was a pile of candy corn sitting on the ground next to a lantern shaped like a pumpkin. There were more candy corns inside the lantern. “A ghost trap! It’s a ghost trap,” Charlotte said. She flipped the book open to the right place. “Oh man, now all I have to do is come back tonight and get the ghost first.” For a second Charlotte felt bad. She probably shouldn’t spoil Mina’s trap. Then again, once she showed everyone the ghost, what was to stop her from giving it back to Mina?

She hunted around the trees and all over the park and the surrounding area. If she could just catch up with Mina, maybe she could explain to her why she needed to borrow the ghost. “I only need him for a minute,” she would say. And Mina would say, “Oh sure, just bring him back before he runs out of candy corn.” But she didn’t find her. A couple of times she thought she saw a cat tail in the trees and once she had found a big fat black tom cat but no Mina.

Charlotte went back for Dale. He was shaking hands and drinking juice with a bunch of bears. “Hey, there you are,” he said. “See ya fellas.” He came over. “Did you finish your book?” Charlotte nodded and filled him in on everything she had seen. When she was done he looked thoughtful. “What if she’s really angry that you took her ghost?”

“Borrowed,” Charlotte corrected.

“Borrowed,” he agreed. “Still, she won’t know you’re borrowing it until you give it back. So to her it will be stealing.” Charlotte had thought of that so she said nothing for a minute.

“Okay, how about we make our own trap. I catch the ghost fair and square. Then give it to her when I’m done. Then it’s a gift. Not a theft.”

“Better, but you don’t even know where to find her. I don’t know Charlotte. Do you have to prove anything? Most people will probably forget about the vandalism if it only happened that one night. Just let that cat/bear/person have it.” Dale was so sensible. Charlotte thought about what he said until a few bears started yelling, “Psycho!” Worse still they pointed right at her.

“I think you might be wrong about this place Dale,” Charlotte muttered.

“Yeah,” Dale agreed. “You better catch that ghost tonight.” Charlotte nodded once and they raced home but not before a rock sailed past them.

Charlotte ate dinner and hid out in her room. She was going through the boxes in the closet. “I know I have something that would work in here,” she said. She was getting desperate. She needed to get a vessel and beat Mina to the punch or it was open season on Charlotte time. Dale had almost been hit by the rock and Charlotte’s face still felt hot she was so angry. But it wasn’t here! She had an old plastic jack-o’-lantern in here before she moved. But it hadn’t made it to the new house. She was back to her original plan: Get the ghost before Mina did.

The sun went down and Dale appeared. “I didn’t have any candy corn, so I have this.” He dropped a chocolate bunny into her hands. “It’s left over from Easter. It’s probably gross and gray...but he’s a ghost.” “Thanks. I’m going to put this in the lantern in the park. That way it has something extra. The ghost will definitely go for it then,” Charlotte said, pocketing the chocolate bunny.

“So, you didn’t make your own vessel?”

“I couldn’t find anything to work with,” Charlotte told him. “I know, I know, don’t frown at me. I’m just going to borrow the ghost. I promise. It’s not like I can keep it as a pet! Now how do I

get out of the house?”

“That's the easy part,” Dale assured her. “Take the flashlight and go down to the kitchen. I'll distract Mom and Dad. You sneak out.” Charlotte took the flashlight and Frank, her stuffed dog for security, and hid them in her pockets. She went into the kitchen. No one even noticed. Dale was upstairs yelling, “Spider! Mom! Dad! Help!”

“Brilliant Dale!” Both parents were terrified of spiders. They would be arguing forever about who would go kill it. Charlotte listened until she heard them start. Then she slipped out the front door. It closed behind her with a quiet and final thump.

Charlotte was outside, alone, at night. She raced down the street and hid at the end behind a mailbox. The wailing started slowly behind her. Shivering, she turned to see it fly into the streetlight she was under and smash it. “Oh no!” She raced down another street trying to not be seen. The ghost seemed to be following her. It hit the wall above her head and a chunk of concrete fell at her feet. She heard dogs barking. Lights started going on. Charlotte had to duck down a few streets to get away without being seen. But she wasn't sure she knew where she was.

Clicking on the flashlight, she read the street signs until she could figure out how far she was from the park. She was a few blocks left and four blocks down from it. She clicked off her flashlight and ran. The ghost was still zooming around wreaking havoc. She heard more glass smashing, more dogs barking. Lights were coming on all over town. Heart pounding, she practically dived and rolled into the park.

There was noise all around her but the park was silent. She did her best to keep it that way and got to the lake mostly by memory and feel. When her sneakers squished in the mud she turned the flashlight on and headed around the pond to the ghost trap. The chocolate bunny in her pocket was probably a melty gray mess by now. She took it out gently and topped off the trap with it. Carefully, she sat down in the grass a few feet away to wait.

She hugged Frank. The stuffed wiener dog in a wiener costume smelled familiar and safe. Charlotte was nervous. She had never captured a ghost before. Also, once she did, how did she show it to people before they just threw more rocks at her?

Charlotte tried hard not to cry. She had been here two days and people already misunderstood her. It was so hard for her to be like everyone else, especially when everyone else, even Dale seemed to know the rules. No one ever told Charlotte what the rules were until she had broken them and they were yelling.

She heard the ghost wailing overhead again. Excited, she squeezed Frank. The ghost floated down through the trees and stopped yelling and started sniffing. Charlotte held her breath. The ghost flew down and hovered over the ghost trap. It sniffed and sniffed. It floated in slow circles and Charlotte got a good look at it.

It was young, maybe even younger than Dale. It had probably been a wolf when it was alive. It had a bow in its hair and the face was so sad as if it had been crying for days. It wiped at its face and did another loop. It touched the edge of the lantern. The lantern glowed orange and sent up a burst of green light that sucked the poor little ghost down inside like water down the drain. Inside she could see a miniature version of the ghost whizzing around and around like an angry bee.

Now was Charlotte's chance. She stuffed Frank in her pocket and raced forward only to have Mina swoop in with a yowl and grab up the lantern. She raced off with Charlotte's ghost. "Hey! Wait! I need that ghost," Charlotte whispered as loud as she dared. Mina didn't hear or care. She just raced off toward Eighth Street. "Oh no, she's taking my ghost to the Dark Path!"

Charlotte took off after the bear. She forgot about being quiet in her pursuit and started crashing through bushes and then jumping over curbs. Mina was all in black but for some odd reason her pajamas had a large purple bow on them. Charlotte followed the bow down a few streets and almost lost her a few times but it

helped that she knew where the bear was going. The statue of the cape wearing polar bear loomed. Charlotte called, "Wait, wait!" But Mina went left around the statue.

Charlotte followed even though the statue was clearly still pouting at her. And she found herself on the Dark Path. The air got thick with fear and a need to turn back. Charlotte shivered. She was frozen. Too scared to run forward, she stalled. Mina knew it. She turned and called, "Sorry Charlie, I really am. But I need this little guy. It's important." She waved and raced down the path until she vanished into the darkness.

"Mina! Please! They're all going to lynch me!" Charlotte watched.

Mina stopped for a second, wavered and raced away down the path. She vanished into the darkness. Charlotte stood there shivering and fighting against the urge to run home. "I just have to have that ghost!" Charlotte forced one foot to inch forward and then the other. She did that five times and it was like popping a bubble. The fear evaporated and Charlotte was running on the Dark Path.

