

Dead or Alive

By Katie Olexy

Warning: mention of drowning and dead bodies.

Nobody has written a book on what to do when your dead, childhood best friend appears at your doorstep, looking perfectly *alive*. His brown hair was still the same shade of Rocky Road ice cream, and his eyes were still the same seaweed green. He looked the same. *Charlie* looked the same.

Our whole town had been looking for Charlie for the past four months. And, in that last month, the sheriff found Charlie's famous blue dirt bike down by the lake, with his body floating in the cold and brackish water. According to the police, Charlie had been riding back to his apartment from baseball in the rain. I guess he lost his traction and ended up falling down the side into the water. Police concluded that given the rainstorm, Charlie couldn't get up the hill because it was muddy.

I wasn't used to the fact that Charlie was gone from my life. We wouldn't go to the same ice cream parlor 24/7. We wouldn't make fun of the school's stadium, never having the letters up on the side, always being Mer Have Uni instead of Mert Haven Uni. And we wouldn't skip our last class of the day because we couldn't stand the professor's voice.

With all of those emotions welling up inside me, seeing my best friend on my doorstep drew those back. Shock ran through me as I instinctively stepped back. I kept the door wide open. Charlie stepped inside my apartment. His baseball jersey clung to his skin, making him appear thinner than I remembered him being.

He looked around like he had never been in my apartment before, which was a complete lie. He'd spend more time at my place than his own. I never understood why. He had a much bigger apartment than I did — a nicer one at that.

He didn't speak, which made the whole situation more jolting than it already was. My feet carried my body down the hall to grab him a towel, fully on auto-pilot. Anyone would throw their arms around their loved ones who came back from the dead, but *I* didn't know what to do. My whole body felt like it was glued together, only allowing my feet to carry me places.

Charlie took the yellow towel from me, wrapping it around his broad shoulders. "I...I saw your bike," I gulped, "*Everyone* saw your bike. They said you drowned in the lake from the

storm. It was brutal, the way police described it. Your mom...she kept your bike. It's, um, still hanging up in your room." I was surprised that I had finally spoken. The way my voice shook was a telltale of how I felt.

Charlie only nodded. He turned to me, his eyes taking me in. His eyes took notice of the slight bags underneath my eyes, a clear sign that I hadn't been sleeping since his 'death.'

"Do you, um, do you want something to drink?" I asked. It felt like a stupid question, but it was the only thing my brain concocted or *permitted* me to say. Charlie nodded again, his damp hair falling in front of his face. He pushed it aside and slowly sat down on the leather couch.

I held my tongue, not even bothering to ask him not to sit since he was soaking wet. I walked into my kitchen and stood amid the tile flooring. I let go of the breath I was holding, feeling my chest expand as I took in a few gulps of air. My fridge was in front of me like it was telling me to speed up and grab a soda.

It took a few seconds before I mustered up the energy to pull open the refrigerator door. I still had Charlie's favorite orange soda, which I had bought a few days before he went missing. I hadn't even bothered to throw them away or even drink them.

I opened the can, leaving the tab on because Charlie always liked to take it off and play with it. I handed him the soda and sat down on the recliner across from him. So many questions were going through my head, but I couldn't settle on just one to ask him. He took the tab off of the soda and set it on his knee. He downed the whole drink before leaning forward and setting it down on the coffee table.

He picked up the soda tab, flipping it between his fingers. Charlie admired the edges when he brought it close to his face. He leaned back on the couch and adjusted the towel, sticking it up in the back so it covered his neck.

I nervously tapped the side of my leg at the silence between the two of us. Charlie's green gaze darted around the room. Nothing had changed in my apartment. I kept the same pictures of us, no matter how difficult it was to see me and Charlie in every one of them.

He slowly stood up from the sofa, the towel falling off his shoulders. He walked over to the fireplace where I had displayed a few pictures. Charlie picked up one particular frame: the two of us at our first college football game. Charlie had his arm around me, his cheek pressed against the side of my head.

I remember that day. He had insisted that he paint his face orange and green, our school's colors, which was a terrible idea because he couldn't get the paint off that night. He had to show up to class with his face tinted bright orange and green.

Charlie ran a finger over the glass frame. A small smile appeared on his face. Just that one action helped me realize that this was *truly* Charlie standing before me. "Still don't get why you painted your face," I muttered. He looked over at me and shrugged before setting the picture back onto the fireplace. Charlie walked around the living room, picking up any picture frames or admiring paintings I had done.

"Ch...Charlie."

His back faced me, not even bothering to turn around at my voice. A second passed, and then another one, and then a few more. I heard him sigh heavily before turning around to look back at me. "I don't know why I'm here," he finally spoke, the first words he had stated since his sudden arrival. My eyes widened at his voice, but my expression changed when his words set in.

From what everyone else knew, Charlie was still dead. He was still gone, yet here he was, breathing and now *talking*. I never thought I'd ever hear his voice again. Charlie's feet padded against the hardwood as he walked over to me.

He knelt in front of me, taking my hands into his. His eyes gazed up at me as he sat on his knees. "I don't know what happened," Charlie continued, "I remember falling into the water and trying to get up. Nothing helped. Then, that's when everything went dark, but after a few moments, I woke up in the water." My heart stopped, well, it felt like it did. Charlie stared up at me as the gears shifted inside my head.

"Riley, someone pulled me out from death," he said, "Someone brought me back, and I think it was you. I think *you* brought me back." I swallowed back the laugh of disbelief when I saw the look on his face. Charlie's words stayed in my brain.

"You brought me back, Riles."