

# Make a Joyful Noise

by

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## Part I

Every one thinks we're sisters, but it's not as simple as that. If I let my thoughts drift far enough back into the long ago—the long long ago, before Raven stirred that old pot of his and poured out the stew of the world—we were there. The two of us. Separate, but so much the same that I suppose we could have been sisters. But neither of us remember parents, and don't you need them to be siblings? So what exactly our relationship is, I don't know. We've never known. We just are. Two little mysteries that remain unchanged while the world changes all around us.

But that doesn't stop everyone from thinking they know us. In the Kickaha tradition we're the tricksters of their crow story cycles, but we're not really tricksters. We don't play tricks. Unless our trick is to look like we'd play tricks, and then we don't.

Before the Kickaha, the cousins had stories about us, too, though they were only gossip. Cousins don't buy into mythic archetypes because we all know how easy it is to have one attached to your name. Just ask Raven. Or Cody.

But gossip, stories, anecdotes...everybody seems to have something to pass on when it comes to us.

These days it's people like Christy Riddell that tell the stories. He puts us in his books—the way his mentor Professor Dapple used to do, except Christy's books are actually popular. I suppose we don't mind so much. It's kind of fun to be in a story that anyone can read. But if we have to have a Riddell brother in our lives, we'd much prefer it to be Geordie. There's nothing wrong with Christy. It's just that he's always been a bit stiff. Geordie's the one who knows how to have fun and that's why we get along with him so well, because we certainly like to have fun.

But we're not only about mad gallivanting and cartwheels and sugar.

And we're not some single entity, either.

That's another thing that people get wrong. They see the two of us as halves of one thing. Most of the time they don't even recognize us when they meet us on our own. Apart, we're just like anybody else, except we live in trees and can change into birds. But when you put the two of us together, everything changes. We get all giddy and incoherence rules. It's like our being near each other causes a sudden chemical imbalance in our systems and it's almost impossible to be anything but silly.

We don't particularly mind being that way, but it does make people think they know just who and what and why we are, and they're wrong. Well, they're not wrong when the two of us are together. They're just wrong for who we are when we're on our own.

And then there are the people who only see us as who they want us to be, rather than who we really are—though that happens to everybody, I suppose. We all carry around other people's expectations of who we are, and sometimes we end up growing into those expectations.

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It was a spring day, late in the season, so the oaks were filled with fresh green foliage, the gardens

blooming with colour and scent, and most days the weather was balmy. Today was no exception. The sun shone in a gloriously blue sky and we were all out taking in the weather. Zia and I lounged on the roof of the coach house behind the Rookery, black-winged cousins perched in the trees all around us, and up on the roof of the Rookery, we could see Lucius's girlfriend Chlöe standing on the peak, staring off into the distance. That meant that Lucius was deep in his books again. Whenever he got lost in their pages, Chlöe came up on the roof and did her wind-vane impression. She was very good at it.

"What are you looking at?" we asked her one day.

It took her a moment to focus on us and our question.

"I'm watching a wren build a nest," she finally said.

"Where?" Zia asked, standing on her tip toes and trying to see.

"There," Chlöe said and pointed, "in that hedge on the edge of Dartmoor."

Neither of us were ever particularly good with geography, but even we knew that at least half a continent and an ocean lay between us and Dartmoor.

"Um, right," I said.

Other times she said she was watching ice melt in Greenland. Or bees swarming a new queen above a clover field somewhere in Florida. Or a tawny frogmouth sleeping in an Australian rainforest.

After awhile we stopped asking. And we certainly didn't fly over and ask her what she was looking at today. We were too busy lounging—which is harder to do on a sloped roof than you might think—until Zia suddenly sat up.

"I," she announced, "have an astonishingly good idea."

I'd just gotten my lounging position down to an absolute perfection of casualness, so I only lifted a questioning eyebrow.

"We should open a store," she said.

"Selling what?"

"That's just it. It will be a store where people bring us things and we put them in the store."

"And when it gets all filled up?"

She grinned. "Then we open another. We just keeping doing it until we have an empire of stores, all across the country."

"We don't have the money to buy anything," I said.

She nodded. "That's why they'd have to just give us the stuff. We'll be like a thrift shop, except we wouldn't sell anything we got."

"That seems greedy. What do we need with things?"

"We can give everything away once we've established our empire. It's just for fun."

"It seems more like a lot of work."

She sighed and shook her head. “You are so veryvery lazy.”

“That’s because today is a day especially made for being lazy.”

“No, today’s a day for building an empire of stores and if you won’t help, I’ll do it myself.”

“I’ll help later.”

She nodded. “When all the hard work will probably be done.”

“That’s the risk I’ll have to take.”

She stuck her tongue out at me, then shifted to bird shape and a black crow went winging off above the oaks that line Stanton Street. I laid my head on the shingles again and went back to my very successful lounging.

I was so good at it that, eventually, I fell asleep.

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When I woke, it was dark. Chlöe was still standing on the peak of the Rookery, and the trees around me were now filled with sleeping black birds. Above, the sky held a wealth of stars, only slightly dimmed by the city’s pollution. I looked for Zia. She wasn’t back yet so I slid to bottom of the roof and then dropped the remaining distance to the dew-damp lawn. Cousins stirred in the trees at the soft thump of my descent on the grass, but went back to sleep when they saw it was only me.

I left the grounds of the Rookery and walked along Stanton Street, heading for downtown, where I supposed I’d find Zia. I wondered if she’d actually had any success getting her silly plan off the ground, or if she’d gotten distracted after leaving me and was now up to who knew what sort of mischief.

I could understand her getting distracted—it’s such an easy thing to have happen. For instance, there were so many interesting houses and apartments on either side of the street as I continued to walk through Lower Crowsea. It was late enough that most of them were dark, but here and there I found lit windows. They were like paintings in an enormous art gallery, each offering small and incomplete views into their owner’s lives.

Zia and I like to visit in people’s house when they’re sleeping. We slip in and walk through the empty rooms, helping ourselves to sweets or fruit, if they’re the sort of people to leave them out in small welcoming bowls or baskets. There might as well be a sign that says, “Help yourself.”

But we really don’t take much else when we go inside. A bauble here, some unwanted trinket there. Mostly we just wander from room to room, looking, looking, looking. There are whole stories in the placement of vases and knickknacks, in what pictures and paintings have been hung, where and in what order. So we admire the stories on the walls and windowsills, the shelves and mantles. Or we sit at a desk, a dining room table, or on the sofa, leafing through a scrapbook, a school yearbook, a magazine that’s important to whoever’s home this is.

We’re curious, yes, but not really all that snoopy, for all that it might seem the exact opposite. We’re only chasing the ghosts and echoes of lives that we could never have.

So as I continued past Stanton Street, I forgot that I was looking for Zia. My gaze went up the side of the apartment building that rose tall above me and I chose a unit at random. Moments later I was inside, taking in the old lady smells: pot pourri, dust and medicine. I stood quietly for a moment, then began to explore.

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“Maddy?” an old woman’s voice called from a room down the hall.

It was close enough to my name to make me sit up in surprise. I put down the scrapbook I’d been looking at and walked down the short hall, past the bathroom, until I was standing in the doorway of a bedroom.

“Is that you, Maddy?” the old woman in the bed asked.

She was sitting up, peering at me with eyes that obviously couldn’t see much, if anything.

I didn’t have to ask her who Maddy was. I’d seen the clippings from the newspaper, pasted into the scrapbook. She’d been the athletic daughter, winning prize after prize for swimming and gymnastics and music. The scrapbook was about half full. The early pages held articles clipped from community and city newspapers, illustrated with pictures of a happy child growing into a happy young woman over the years, always holding trophies, smiling at the camera.

She wasn’t in the last picture. That photo was of a car, crumpled up against the side of an apartment building, under a headline that read “Drunk Driver Kills Redding High Student.” The date on the clipping was over thirty years old.

“Come sit with Mama,” the old lady said.

I crossed the room and sat cross-legged on the bed. When she reached out her hand, I let her take mine. I closed my fingers around hers, careful not to squeeze too hard.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she said.

She went on, but I soon stopped listening. It was much more interesting to look at her because, even though she was sitting up and talking, her eyes open as though she was awake, I realized that she was actually still asleep.

Humans can do this.

They can talk in their sleep. They can go walking right out of their houses, sometimes. They can do all sorts of things and never remember it in the morning.

Zia and I once spent days watching a woman who was convinced she had fairies in her house, cleaning everything up after she’d gone to bed. Except she was the one who got up in her sleep and tidied and cleaned before slipping back under the covers. To show her appreciation to the fairies, she left a saucer of cream on the back steps—that the local cats certainly appreciated—along with biscuits or cookies or pieces of cake. We ate those on the nights we came by, but we didn’t help her with her cleaning. That would make us bad fairies, I suppose, except for the fact that we weren’t fairies at all.

After awhile the old woman holding my hand stopped talking and laid back down again. I let go of her hand and tucked it under the covers.

It was a funny room that she slept in. It was full of memories, but none of them were new, or very happy. They made the room feel musty and empty, even though she used it every day. It made me wonder why people hung on to memories if they just made them sad.

I leaned over and kissed her brow, then got off the bed.

When I came back to the living room, there was the ghost of a boy around fifteen or sixteen sitting on the sofa where I'd been looking through the old lady's scrapbook earlier. He was still gawky, all arms and legs, with features that seemed too large at the moment, but would become handsome when he grew into them. Except, being a ghost, he never would.

Under his watchful gaze, I stepped up onto the coffee table and sat cross-legged in front of him.

"Who are you?" I asked.

He seemed surprised that I could see him, but made a quick recovery.

"Nobody important," he said. "I'm just the other child."

"The other..."

"Oh, don't worry. You didn't miss anything. I'm the one that's not in the scrapbooks."

There didn't seem much I could add to that, so I simply said, "I don't usually talk to ghosts."

"Why not?"

I shrugged. "You're not usually substantial enough, for one thing."

"That's true. Normally, people can't even see me, never mind talk to me."

"And for another," I went on, "you're usually way too focused on past wrongs and the like to be any fun."

He didn't argue the point.

"Well, I know why I'm here," he said, "haunting the place I died and all that. But what are you doing here?"

"I like visiting in other people's houses. I like looking at their lives and seeing how they might fit if they were mine."

I looked down at the scrapbook on the coffee table.

"So you were brother and sister?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Does she ever come back here?"

He laughed, but without any mirth. "Are you kidding? She hated this place. Why do you think she joined any school club and sports team that would have her? She'd do anything to get out of the house. Mother kept her on such a tight leash that she couldn't fart without first asking for permission."

"But you're here."

"Like I said, I died here. In my own room. I got bit by a bee that came in through the window. No one knew I was allergic. My throat swelled up and I asphyxiated before I could try to get any help."

"It sounds horrible."

"It was. They came back from one of Madeline's games and found me sprawled dead on the floor in my

bedroom. It did warrant a small notice in the paper—I guess it was a slow news day—but that clipping never made it into a scrapbook.”

“And now you’re here...”

“Until she finally notices me,” he finished for me.

“Why did she ignore you?” I asked. “When you were alive, I mean.”

“I don’t know. Madeline said it’s because I looked too much like our dad. We were in grade school when he walked out on her, leaving her with a mess of debts and the two of us. I guess her way of getting over it was to ignore me and focus on Madeline, who took after her own side of the family.”

“Humans are so complicated,” I said.

“Which you’re not.”

“Oh, I’m very complicated.”

“I meant human.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

He kept count on his fingers. “One, you can see me, which most people can’t. Two, you can talk to me, which most people really can’t. Three, you’re sitting there all calm and composed, when most people—most human people—would be flipping out.”

I shrugged. “Does it matter what I am?”

“Not really.”

He looked down the hall as though he could see through the walls to where his mother lay sleeping. The mother who’d ignored him when he was alive and now that he was dead, still ignored him. Her mind might be filled with old memories, but none of them were of him.

“Can you help me?” he asked.

“Help you with what?”

“With...you know. Getting her to remember me.”

“Why is it so important?”

“How can I die and go on if no one remembers that I was ever alive?”

“Lots of people don’t remember me,” I said, “and it doesn’t bother me.”

He chuckled, but without any humour. “Yeah, like that’s possible.”

“No, it really doesn’t.”

“I meant that anybody would forget meeting you.”

“You’d be surprised.”

He held my gaze for a long moment, then shrugged.

“So will you help me?”

I nodded. “I can try. Maybe it’s not so much that your mother should remember you more, but that she should remember your sister less. The way it is, there’s no room inside her for anything else.”

“But you’ll try?”

Against my better judgment, I found myself nodding.

He did a slow fade and I was left alone in the living room. I sat for awhile longer, looking at the place where he’d been sitting, then got down from the coffee table and walked back into the hall. There were two closed doors and two open ones. I knew one led into the old lady’s bedroom, the other into a bathroom. I went to the first closed door. It opened into a room that was like stepping inside a cake, all frosty pinks and whites, full of dolls and pennants and trophies. Madeline’s room. Closing its door, I continued down the hall and opened the other one.

Both rooms had the feel of empty places where no one lived. But while Madeline’s room was bright and clean—the bed neatly made, the shelves dusted, the trophies shined—the boy’s room looked as though the door had been closed on the day he died and no one had opened it until I had just this moment.

The bedding lay half-on, half-off the box spring, pooling on the floor. There were posters off baseball players and World War II planes on the wall. Decades of dust covered every surface, clustering around the model cars and plastic statues of movie monsters on the book shelves and window sill. More planes hung from the ceiling, held in flight by fishing lines.

Unlike the daughter, he truly was forgotten.

I walked to the desk where a half-finished model lay covered in dust. Books were stacked on the far corner with a school notebook on top. I cleared the dust with a finger and read the handwritten name on the “Property of” line:

Donald Quinn.

I thought of bees and drunk drivers, of being remembered and forgotten. I knew enough about humans to know that you couldn’t change their minds. You couldn’t make them remember if they didn’t want to.

Why had I said I’d help him?

Among the cousins, a promise was sacred. Now I was committed to an impossible task.

I closed the door to the boy’s room and left the apartment.

The night air felt cool and fresh on my skin and the sporadic sound of traffic was welcome after the unhappy stillness of the apartment. I looked up at its dark windows, then changed my shape. Crow wings took me back to the Rookery on Stanton Street.

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I think Raven likes us better when we visit him on our own. The way we explode with foolishness whenever Zia and I are together wears him down—you can see the exasperation in his eyes. He’s so serious, that it’s fun to get him going. But I also like meeting with him one-on-one. The best thing is he never asks where Zia is. He treats us as individuals.

“Lucius,” I said the next morning. “Can a person die from a bee sting?”

I'd come into his library in the Rookery to find him crouched on his knees, peering at the titles of books on a lower shelf. He looked up at my voice, then stood, moving with a dancer's grace that always surprises people who've made assumptions based on his enormous bulk. His bald head gleamed in the sunlight streaming in through the window behind him.

"What sort of a person?" he asked. "Cousin or human?"

"What's the difference?"

He shrugged. "Humans can die of pretty much anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, take tobacco. The smoke builds up tar in their lungs and the next thing you know, they're dead."

"Cousins smoke. Just look at Joe, or Whiskey Jack."

"It's not the same for us."

"Well, what about the Kickaha? They smoke."

He nodded. "But so long as they keep to ceremonial use, it doesn't kill them. It only hurts them when they smoke for no reason at all, rather than to respect the sacred directions."

"And bee stings?"

"If you're allergic—and humans can be allergic to pretty much anything—then, yes. It can kill them. Why do you ask?"

I shrugged. "I met a boy who died of a bee sting."

"A dead boy," Lucius said slowly, as though waiting for a punchline.

"I meant to say a ghost."

"Ah. Of course."

"He's not very happy."

Lucius nodded. "Ghosts rarely are." He paused a moment, then added, "You didn't offer to help him, did you?"

He didn't wait for my reply. I suppose he could already see it in my face.

"Oh, Maida," he said. "Humans can be hard enough to satisfy, but ghosts are almost impossible."

"I thought they just needed closure," I said.

"Closure for the living and the dead can be two very different things. Does he want revenge on the bee? Because unless it was a cousin, it would be long dead."

"No, he just wants to be remembered."

Lucius gave a slow shake of his head. "You could be bound to this promise forever."

"I know," I said.



But it was too late now.

## Part II

After leaving the Rookery, I flew up into a tree—not one of the old oaks on the property, but one further down the street where I could get a little privacy as I tried to figure out what to do next. Like most corbae, I think better on a roost or in the air. I knew just trying to talk to Donald's mother wouldn't be enough. At some point, I'd still have to, but first I thought I'd try to find out more about what exactly had happened to her children.

That made me cheer up a little because I realized it would be like having a case and looking into the background of it, the way a detective would. I'd be like a private eye in one of those old movies the Aunts liked to watch, late at night when everybody else was asleep except for Zia and me. And probably Lucius.

I decided to start with the deaths and work my way back from them.

There was no point in trying to find the bee. As Lucius had said, unless it was a cousin, it would be long dead by now, and it didn't make sense that it would be a cousin. I could look into it, I supposed, but first I'd try to find the driver of the car that had truck Madeline. A bee wouldn't even be alive after thirty years, anyway. But a human might.

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Most people know there are two worlds, the one Raven made and the otherworld, where dreams and spirits live. But there's another world that separates the two: the between. Thin as a veil in some places, as wide as the widest sea in others. When you know the way, it's easy to slip from one to another and that's what I do when I find myself standing in front of the locked door of Michael Clark's house. It's how Zia and I always get into places.

Slip into the between, take a step, then slip right back into Raven's world. It's as though you passed right through the door, except what you really did was take another, slightly more roundabout route.

I didn't like it in Clark's house when I got there that evening. There was an air of...unpleasantness about the place. I don't mean that it smelled bad, though there was a faint smell of mustiness and old body odour in the air. It was more that this was a place where not a lot of happiness had ever lived. Because places hold onto strong emotions just the way people do. The man who doesn't forgive? The house he lives in doesn't either. The house full of happy, laughing children? You can feel its smile envelop you when you step through the door.

Clark's name had been in that last clipping in the old lady's scrapbook. When I looked it up in the telephone book, I found three listings for Michael Clark. The first two belonged to people much too young to be the man I was looking for, but this house...I knew as soon as I slipped inside that I was in the right place.

The front hall was messy with a few months' worth of flyers and old newspapers piled up against the walls, the kitchen garbage overflowing with take-out food containers and pizza boxes, the sink full of dirty mugs and other dishes. But there weren't any finished liquor bottles, or beer cases full of empties.

I found Clark sitting on the sofa in his living room, watching the TV with the sound off. Just as the rest of the place, this room also a mess. Coming into it was like stepping onto a beach where the tide had left behind a busy debris of more food containers, newspapers, magazines, dirty clothes. A solitary,

long-dead plant stood withered and dry in its pot on the windowsill.

Clark looked up when I came in and didn't even seem surprised to see me. That happens almost as often as it doesn't. Zia and I can walk into someone's kitchen while they're having breakfast and all they do is take down a couple of more bowls from the cupboard and push the cereal box over to us. Or they'll simply move over a little to give us room on the sofa they're sitting on.

In Clark's case, he might have thought that I was another one of those personal demons he was obviously wrestling with on a regular basis.

I didn't bother with any small talk.

"It's not like they made it out to be," the man said when I asked him about the night his car had struck Madeline. "I didn't try to kill her. And I wasn't drunk. I'd had a few beers, but I wasn't drunk. She just stepped out from behind a van, right in front of my car. She didn't even look. It was like she wanted to die."

"I've heard people do that," I said. "It seems so odd."

"I suppose. But there are times I can understand all too well. I lost everything because of that night. My business. My family. And that girl lost her life. *I took her life.*"

There was more of that. A lot more.

When I realized I wasn't learning anything here except how to get depressed, I left him, still talking, only to himself. I looked up at the night sky, then took wing and headed for the scene of the accident that Michael Clark kept so fresh in his mind.

Between my ghost boy's mother and Michael Clark, I was beginning to see that the dead weren't the only ones haunted by the past.

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The place where Madeline had died didn't look much different from any other part of the inner city. It had been so long since the accident, how could there be any sign that it had ever happened? But I thought, if her brother's ghost was still haunting the bedroom where he'd died, then perhaps she hadn't gone on yet either.

I walked along the sidewalk and down an alleyway, calling. "Hello, hello! Hello, hello!"

I did it, over and over again, until a man wrenched open one of the windows overlooking the alley. I looked up into his angry features, though with the light of the window behind him, he was more just a shadow face.

"It's three o'clock in the morning!" he yelled. "Are you going to shut up, or do I have to come down there and shut you up?"

"You'll have to come down," I called back, "because I can't stop."

"Why the hell not?"

"I need to find a dead girl. Have you seen her?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake."

His head disappeared back into the apartment and he slammed the window shut. I went back to calling for Madeline until I heard footsteps behind me. I turned, warm with success, but it was only the grumpy man from the window. He stood in the mouth of the alley, peering down its length to where I stood.

He was older than I'd thought when I'd seen him earlier—late fifties, early sixties—and though he carried more weight than he probably should, he seemed fit. If nothing else, he smelled good, which meant he at least ate well. I hate the smell of people who only eat fast food. All that grease from the deep-frying just seems to ooze out of their pores.

“What’s this about a dead girl?” he asked.

I pointed to the street behind him. “She got hit by a drunk driver just out there.”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“I just want to talk to her,” I told him. “To see how she feels.”

“You just said she was dead. I don’t think she’s feeling much of anything anymore.”

“Okay. How her *ghost* feels.”

He studied me for a long moment, then that thing happened that’s always happening around Zia and me: he just took me at my word.

“I don’t remember anybody dying around here,” he said. “At least not recently.”

“It was thirty years ago.”

“Thirty years ago...”

I could see his mind turning inward, rolling back the years. He gave me a slow nod.

“I do remember now,” he said. “I haven’t thought about it in a long time.” He turned from me and looked out at the street. “This was a good neighbourhood, and it still is, but it was different back then. We didn’t know about things so much. People drank and drove because they didn’t know any better. A policeman might pull you over, but then if it looked like you could drive, he’d give you a warning and tell you to be careful getting home.”

He nodded and his gaze came back to me. “I remember seeing the guy that killed that poor girl. He didn’t seem that drunk, but he was sure shook up bad.”

“But you didn’t see the accident itself?”

He shook his head. “We heard it—my Emily and me. She’s gone now.”

“Where did she go?”

“I mean she’s dead. The cancer took her. Lung cancer. See that’s another of those things. Emily never smoked, but she worked for thirty years in a diner. It was all that secondhand smoke that killed her. But we didn’t know about secondhand smoke back then.”

I didn’t know quite what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I don’t think he even noticed.

“Now they’re putting hormones in our food,” he said, “and putting God knows what kind of animal genes into our corn and tomatoes and all. Who knows what that’ll mean for us, ten, twenty years down the

road?”

“Something bad?” I tried.

“Well, it won’t be good,” he said. “It never is.” He looked down the alley behind me. “Are you going to keep yelling for this ghost to come talk to you?”

“I guess not. I don’t think she’s here anymore.”

“Good,” he said. “I may not work anymore, but I still like to get my sleep.” He started to turn, then added, “Good luck with whatever it is you’re trying to do.”

And then he did leave and walked down the street.

I watched him step into the doorway of his apartment, listened to the door hiss shut behind him. A car went by on the street. I went back into the alley and looked around, but I didn’t call out because I knew now that nobody was going to hear me. Nobody dead, anyway.

I felt useless as I started back to the mouth of the alley. This had been a stupid idea and I still had to help the dead boy, but I didn’t know how, or where to begin. I felt like I didn’t know anything.

“What are you doing?” someone asked.

I looked up to see Zia sitting on the metal fire escape above me.

“I’m investigating.”

“Whatever for?”

I shrugged. “It’s like I’m a detective.”

“More like you’re nosy.”

I couldn’t help but smile, because it was true. But it wasn’t a big smile, and it didn’t last long.

“That, too,” I said.

“Can I help?”

I thought of how that could go, of how quickly we’d dissolve into silliness and then forget what it was we were supposed to be doing.

“I’ll be veryvery useful,” she said as though reading my mind. “You’ll be in charge and I’ll be your girl Thursday.”

“I think it’s Girl Friday.”

“I don’t think so. Today’s Thursday. *Tomorrow* I can be Girl Friday.”

I gave her another shrug. “It doesn’t matter. It turns out I’m a terrible detective.”

She slid down the banister and plonked herself on the bottom step.

“Tell me about it,” she said.

“It started out when I went looking for you and your store, but then I got distracted...”

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“And now I feel like I’m forgetting what it’s like to be happy,” I said, finishing up. “It’s like that stupid ghost boy stole all my happiness away, and now, ever since I talked to him, all I meet are unhappy people with very good reasons to be unhappy, and that makes me wonder, how could I ever have been happy? And what is being happy, anyway?”

Zia gave a glum nod. “I think it might be catching, because now I’m feeling the same way.”

“You see? That’s just what I mean. Why is it so easy to spread sadness and so hard to spread happiness?”

“I guess,” Zia said, “because there’s so much more sadness.”

“Or maybe,” I said, “it’s that there’s so much of it that nobody can do anything about.”

“But we can do something about this, can’t we?”

“What could we possibly do?”

“Make the mother remember.”

I shook my head. “Humans are very good at not remembering,” I said. “It might be impossible for her to remember him now. She might not even remember him when she’s dead herself and her whole life goes by in front of her eyes.”

“Supposedly.”

“Well, yes. If you’re going to get precise, nobody knows if that’s what really happens. But if it did, she probably wouldn’t remember.”

“And you can’t just kill her to find out,” Zia said.

“Of course not.” I sighed. “So what am I going to do? I promised Donald I’d help him, but there’s nothing I can do.”

“I have an idea,” Zia said, a mischievous gleam in her eye.

“This is serious—” I began, but she laid a finger across my lips.

“I know. So we’re going to be serious. But we’re also going to make her remember.”

“How?”

Zia grinned. “That’s easy.”

She stood up and slapped a hand against her chest.

“I,” she announced, “am going to be a ghost.”

I had a bad feeling, but nevertheless, I let her lead me back to the apartment that Donald’s mother was haunting as much as he was, and she wasn’t even dead.

\* \* \*

Zia practiced making spooky noises the whole way back to the ghost boy’s apartment, which really

didn't inspire any confidence in me, but once we were outside the building, she turned serious again.

"Is she alone in the apartment?" she asked me.

"There's the ghost boy."

"I know. But is there anybody in there to look after her? You made it sound like she'd need help to take care of herself."

"I don't know," I said. "There was no one else there last night. I suppose somebody could come by during the day."

"Well, let's go see."

We flew up to the fire escape outside her kitchen window, lost our wings and feathers, and then stepped into the between. A moment later we were standing inside the kitchen. I could only sense the old woman's presence—at least she was the only presence I could sense that was alive.

"Oh, Ghost Boy," Zia called in a loud whisper. "Come out, come out, wherever you are. If you come out, I have a nice little..." She gave me a poke in the shoulder. "What do ghosts like?"

"How should I know?"

She nodded, then called out again. "I have a nice little piece of ghost cake for you, if you'll just come out now."

Donald materialized in the kitchen by walking through a wall. He pointed a finger at Zia.

"Who's she?" he asked.

Zia looked at me.

"You didn't say he was so rude," she said before turning back to Donald. "I'm right here, you know. You could ask me."

"You look like sisters."

"And yet, we're not."

He ignored her, continuing to talk to me. "Is she here to help?"

"There, he's doing it again," Zia said.

"This is Zia," I said. "And Zia, this is Donald."

"I prefer Ghost Boy," she said.

"Well, it's not my name."

"She's here to help," I said.

"Really? So far, all she's been is rude and making promises she can't keep."

Zia bristled at that. "What sort of promises can't I keep?"

He shrugged. "For starters, I'm here, but where's my cake?"

They held each other's gaze for a long moment, and it was hard to tell which one of them was more annoyed with the other. Then Zia's cheek twitched, and Donald's lips started to curve upward, and they were both laughing. Of course that set me off and soon all three of us were giggling and snickering, Zia and I with our hands over our mouths so that we wouldn't wake Ghost Boy's mother.

Donald was the first to recover, but his serious features only set us off again.

"Okay," he said. "It wasn't *that* funny. So why are you still laughing?"

"Because we can," Zia told him.

"Because we can-can!" I added.

Then Zia and I put our arms around each other's waist and began to prance about the kitchen like Moulin Rouge can-can dancers, kicking our legs up high in unison. It was funny until my toe caught the edge of the table, which jolted a mug full of spoons, knocking it over and sending silverware clattering all over the floor.

Zia and I stopped dead and we all three cocked our heads.

Sure enough, a querulous cry came from down the hall.

"Who's out there?" the old woman called. "Is there somebody out there?"

That was followed a moment later by the sound of her getting out of her bed and slowly shuffling down the hall towards us. Long moments later, she was in the doorway and the overhead light came on, a bright yellowy glare that sent the shadows scurrying.

Zia and I had stepped into the between, where we could see without being seen, but Donald stayed where he was, leaning against the kitchen counter, his arms folded across his chest. He was frowning when his mother came into the kitchen, the frown deepening when it became apparent that she wasn't able to see him.

We all watched as the old woman fussed about, trying to gather up the spoons that, with her poor eyesight, she couldn't really see. When she was done, there were still errant spoons—under the table, in front of the fridge—but she put the mug back on the table, gave the kitchen a last puzzled look, then switched off the overhead light and went back to her bedroom.

Zia and I stepped out of the between, back into the kitchen. Our sudden appearance startled Donald, which was kind of funny, seeing how he was the ghost and ghosts usually did the startling. But I didn't say anything because I didn't want to set us all off again—or at least it would be enough to set Zia and me off. I could feel that chemical imbalance spilling through me because she was so near—a sudden giddy need to turn sense into nonsense for the sheer fun of it—but I reminded myself why I was here. How if I didn't fulfill my promise, I'd be beholden to a ghost for the rest of my days, and if there's one thing that cousins can't abide, it's the unpaid debt, the unfulfilled promise. That's like flying with a long chain dangling from your foot.

"How did you do that?" Donald asked.

Zia gave him a puzzled look. "Do what?"

"Disappear, then just reappear out of nowhere."

"We didn't disappear," she told him. "We were just in the between."

I thought he was going to ask her to explain that, but he changed the subject to what was obviously more often on his mind than it wasn't.

"Did you see?" he asked us. "She was standing right in front of me and she didn't even notice me. Dead or alive, she's never paid any attention to me."

"Well, you *are* a ghost," Zia said.

I nodded. "And humans can't usually see ghosts."

"A mother should be able to see her own son," he said, "whether he's a ghost or not."

"The world is full of shoulds," Zia said, "but that doesn't make them happen."

It took him a moment to work through that. When he did, he gave a slow nod.

"Here's another should," he said. "I should never have gotten my hopes up that anyone would help me."

"We didn't say we wouldn't or that we couldn't," Zia said.

I nodded. "I made you a promise."

"And cousins don't break promises," Zia added. "It's all we have for coin and what would it be worth if our word had no value?"

"So you're cousins," he said.

He didn't mean it the way we did. He was thinking of familial ties, while for us it was just an easy way to differentiate humans from people like us whose genetic roots went back to the first days in the long ago, people who weren't bound to the one shape the way regular humans and animals are.

Instead of explaining, I just nodded.

"Show me your sister's room," Zia said.

Donald led us down the hall to Madeline's bedroom. He walked through the closed door, but I stopped to open it before Zia and I followed him inside.

"It's very girly," Zia said as she took in the all the lace and dolls and the bright frothy colours. Then she pointed to the pennants and trophies. "But sporty, too."

"Not to mention clean," Donald said. "You should see my room. Mother closed the door the day I died and it hasn't been opened since."

"I've been in there," I said.

"But Maddy's room," he went on as though I hadn't spoken. "Mother makes sure the cleaning lady sees to it every week—before she tackles any other room in the apartment."

"Why do you think that is?" Zia asked.

"Because so far as my mother was concerned, the sun and moon rose and set on my sister Maddy."

"But *why* did she think that?"

"I don't know."



“You told me something the last time I was here,” I said. “Something about how maybe you reminded her too much of your father...”

“Who abandoned us,” he finished. “That’s just something Maddy thought.”

Zia nodded. “Well, let’s find out. Did your sister call you Donald?”

“What?”

“Your sister. What did she call you?”

“Donnie.”

“Okay, good. That’s all I needed.”

“Hey, wait!” Donald said as she pulled back the covers and got into the bed.

Zia pretended he hadn’t spoken.

“You two should hide,” she said.

“But—”

“We don’t want your mother to see anybody but me.”

“Like she could see me.”

That was true. But the mother *could* see me.

I didn’t know what Zia was up to, but I went over to the closet and opened the door, pulling it almost closed it again so that I was standing in the dark in a press of dresses and skirts and tops with just a crack to peer through. Donald let out a long theatrical sigh, but after a moment he joined me.

“Mama, mama!” Zia cried from the bed, her voice the high and frightened sound of a young girl waking from a bad dream.

Faster than she’d come into the kitchen earlier, the mother appeared in the doorway and crossed the room to the bed. She hesitated beside it, staring down at where Zia was sitting up with her arms held out for comfort. I could see the confusion in the old woman’s half-blind gaze, but all it took was for Zia to call “Mama” one more time and a mother’s instinct took over. She sat on the edge of the bed, taking Zia in her arms.

“I...I was so scared, Mama,” Zia said. “I dreamed I was dead.”

The old woman stiffened. I saw a shiver run from her shoulders, all the way down her arms and back. Then she pressed her face into Zia’s hair.

“Oh, Maddy, Maddy,” she said, her voice a bare whisper. “I wish it *was* a dream.”

Zia pulled back from her, but took hold of her hands.

“I am dead, Mama,” she said. “Aren’t I?”

The old woman nodded.

“But then why am I here?” Zia asked. “What keeps me here?”

“M-maybe I...I just can’t let you go...”

“But you don’t keep Donnie here. Why did you let him go and not me?”

“Oh, Maddy, sweetheart. Don’t talk about him.”

“I don’t understand. Why not? He’s my brother. I loved him. Didn’t you love him?”

The old woman looked down at her lap.

“Mama?” Zia asked.

The old woman finally lifted her head.

“I...I think I loved him too much,” she said.

The ghost boy had no physical presence, standing beside me, here in the closet, but I could feel his sudden tension as though he was flesh and blood—a prickling flood of interest and shock and pure confusion.

“I still don’t understand,” Zia said.

The old woman was quiet for so long I didn’t think she was going to explain. But she finally looked away from Zia, across the room, her gaze seeing into the past rather than what lay in front of her.

“Donnie was a good boy,” she said. “Too good for this world, I guess, because he was taken from it while he was still so young. I knew he’d grow up to make me proud—at least I thought I did. My eyesight’s bad now, sweetheart, but I think I was blinder back then, because I never saw that he wouldn’t get the chance to grow up at all.”

Her gaze returned to Zia before Zia could speak.

“But you,” the old woman said. “Oh, I could see trouble in you. You were too much like your father. Left to your own devices, I could see you turning into a little hellion. That you could be as bad as he was, if you were given half a chance. So I kept you busy—too busy to get into trouble, I thought—but I didn’t do any better of a job raising you than I did him.

“You were both taken so young and I can’t help but feel that the blame for that lay with me.”

She fell silent, but I knew Zia wasn’t going to let it go, even though we had what we needed.

The ghost boy’s mother *did* remember him.

She *had* loved him.

I’d fulfilled my part of the bargain and I wanted to tell Zia to stop. I almost pushed open the closet door. I’d already lifted my hand and laid my palm against the wood paneling, but Donald stopped me before I could actually give it a push.

“I need to hear this,” he said. “I...I just really do.”

I let my hand fall back to my side.

“But why don’t you ever talk about Donnie?” Zia asked. “Why is his room closed up and forgotten and mine’s like I just stepped out for a soda?”

“When I let him die,” the old woman said, after another long moment of silence, “all by himself, swelled up and choking from that bee sting...” She shook her head. “I was so ashamed. There’s not a day goes by that I don’t think about it...about him...but I keep it locked away inside. It’s my terrible secret. Better to let the world not know that I ever had a son, than that I let him die the way he did.”

“Except you didn’t kill him.”

“No. But I did neglect him. If I’d been here, instead of driving you to some piano class or gym meet or whatever it was that day, he’d still be alive.”

“So it’s my fault...”

“Oh no, honey. Don’t even think such a thing. I was the one who made all the wrong choices. I was the one who thought he didn’t need attention, but that you did. Except I was wrong about that, too. Look what happened to Donnie. And look how you turned out before...before...”

“I died.”

She nodded. “You were a good girl. You were the best daughter a mother could have had. I was so proud of you, of all you’d achieved.”

“And my room...”

“I keep it and your memory alive because it’s the only thing left in this world that can give me any pride. It’s the light that burns into the darkness and lets me forget my shame. Not always. Not for long. But even the few moments I can steal free of my shame are a blessed respite.”

She fell silent again, head bowed, unable to look at what she thought was the ghost of her daughter.

Zia turned and glanced at where I was peering at her from the crack I’d made with the closet door. I knew her well enough to know what she was thinking. It was never hard. All I had to do was imagine I was in her shoes, and consider what I would say or do or think.

I turned to Donald.

“Is there anything you want to tell your mother?” I whispered.

He gave me a slow nod.

“Then just tell Zia and she’ll pass it on to your mother.”

He gave me another nod, but he still didn’t speak.

“Donald?” I said.

“I don’t know what to say. I mean, there’s a million things I could say, but none of them seem to matter anymore. She’s beating herself up way more than any hurt I could have wished upon her.”

I reached out a comforting hand, but of course I couldn’t touch him. Still, he understood the gesture. I think he even appreciated it.

“And I don’t even wish it on her anymore,” he added. “But then...while I feel bad about what she’s going through, at the same time, I still feel hurt for the way she ignored me.”

I opened the door a little more, enough to catch Zia’s eye. She inclined her head to show that she

understood.

“I’ve talked to Donnie,” Zia said. “In the, you know. The hereafter. Before he went on.”

The old woman lifted her head and looked Zia in the eye.

“You...you have?”

Zia nodded. “He understands, but he really wishes you’d celebrate his life the way you do mine. It...hurts him to think that you never think of him.”

“Oh, god, there’s not a day goes by that I don’t think of him.”

“He knows that now.”

Zia gaze went back to me and I made a continuing motion with my hand.

“And he wants,” she went on, then caught herself. “He wanted you to know that he’ll always love you. That he never held you to blame for what happened to him.”

The old woman put her arms around Zia.

“Oh, my boy,” she said. “My poor, poor boy.”

“He wants you to be happy,” Zia said. “We both do.”

The woman shook her head against Zia’s shoulder.

“I don’t even know the meaning of the word anymore,” she said.

“Will you at least try?”

The old woman sat up and dabbed at her eyes with the sleeve of her housecoat.

“How does one even begin?” she said.

“Well, sometimes, if you pretend you’re happy, you can trick yourself into at least feeling better.”

“I don’t think I could do that.”

“Try by celebrating our lives,” Zia said. “Remember both your children with love and joy. There’ll always be sadness, but try to remember that it wasn’t always that way.”

“No,” the old woman said slowly. “You’re right. It wasn’t. I don’t know if you can even remember, but we were once a happy family. But then Ted left and I had to go back to work, and you children...you were robbed of the life you should have had.”

“It happens,” Zia said—a touch too matter-of-factly for the ghost of a dead girl, I thought, but the old woman didn’t appear to notice.

“It’s time for me to go, Mama,” Zia added. “Will you let me go?”

“Can’t you stay just a little longer?”

“No,” Zia said. “Let me walk you back to your bed.”

She got up and the two of them left the room, the old woman leaning on Zia.

“I’m going to wake up in the morning,” I heard the old woman say from the hall, “and this will all have just been a dream.”

“Not if you don’t want it to,” Zia told her. “You’ve got a strong will. Look how long you kept me from moving on. You can remember this—everything we’ve talked about—for what it really was. And if you try hard, you can be happy again...”

\* \* \*

Donald and I waited in the bedroom until Zia returned.

“Is she asleep?” I asked.

Zia nodded. “I think all of this exhausted her.” She turned to Donald. “So how do you feel now?”

“I feel strange,” he said. “Like there’s something tugging at me...trying to pull me away.”

“That’s because it’s time for you to move on,” I told him.

“I guess.”

“You’re remembered now,” Zia said. “That’s what was holding you back before.”

He gave a slow nod. “Listening to her...it didn’t make me feel a whole lot better. I mean, I understand now, but...”

“Life’s not very tidy,” Zia said, “so I suppose there’s no reason for death to be any different.”

“I...”

He was harder to hear. I gave him a careful study and realized he’d grown much more insubstantial.

“It’s hard to hold on,” he said. “To stay here.”

“Then don’t,” Zia told him.

I nodded. “Just let go.”

“But I’m...scared.”

Zia and I looked at each other.

“We were here at the beginning of things,” she said, turning back to him, “before Raven pulled the world out of that old pot of his. We’ve been in the great beyond that lies on the other side of the long ago. It’s...”

She looked at me.

“It’s very peaceful there,” I finished for her.

“I don’t want to go to Hell,” he said. “What if I go to Hell?”

His voice was very faint now and I could hardly make him out in the gloom of the room.

“You won’t go to Hell,” I said.

I didn’t know if there was a Heaven or a Hell or *what* lay on the other side of living. Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. But there was no reason to tell him that. He wanted certainty.

“Hell’s for bad people,” I told him, “and you’re just a poor kid who got stung by a bee.”

I saw the fading remnants of his mouth moving, but I couldn’t make out the words. And then he was gone.

I looked at Zia.

“I don’t feel any better,” I said. “Did we help him?”

“I don’t know. We must have. We did what he wanted.”

“I suppose.”

“And he’s gone on now.”

She linked her arm in mine and walked me into the between.

“I had this idea for a store,” she said.

“I know. Where you don’t sell anything. Instead people just bring you stuff.”

She nodded. “It was a pretty dumb idea.”

“It wasn’t that bad. I’ve had worse.”

“I know you have.”

We stepped out of the between onto the fire escape outside the apartment. I looked across the city. Dawn was still a long way off, but everywhere I could see the lights of the city, the headlights of cars moving between the tall canyons of the buildings.

“I think we need to go somewhere and make a big happy noise,” Zia said. “We have to go mad and dance and sing and do cartwheels along the telephone wires like we’re famous trapeze artists.”

“Because..?”

“Because it’s better than feeling sad.”

So we did.

And later we returned to the Rookery and woke up all the cousins until every blackbird in every tree was part of our loud croaking and raspy chorus. I saw Lucius open the window of his library and look out. When he saw Zia and I, leading the cacophony from our high perch in one of the old oak trees in the backyard, he just shook his head and closed the window again.

But not before I saw him smile to himself.

\* \* \*

I went back to the old woman’s apartment a few weeks later to see if the ghost boy was really gone. I meant to go sooner, but something distracting always seemed to come up before I could actually get

going.

Zia might tell me about a hoard of Mardi Gras beads she'd found in a dumpster and then off we'd have to go to collect them all, bringing them back to the Rookery where we festooned the trees with them until Lucius finally asked us to take them down, his voice polite, but firm, the way it always got when he felt we'd gone the step too far.

Or Chlöe might call us into the house because she'd made us each a sugar pie, big fat pies with much more filling than crust, because we liked the filling the best. We didn't even need the crust, except then it would just be pudding, which we also liked, but it wasn't pie, now was it?

Once we had to go into the far away to help our friend Jilly, because we promised we would if she ever called us. So when she did, we went to her. That promise had never been like a chain dangling from our feet when we flew, but it still felt good to be done with it.

But finally I remembered the ghost boy and managed to not get distracted before I could make my way to his mother's apartment. When I got there, they were both gone, the old woman and her dead son. Instead, there was a young man I didn't recognize sitting in the kitchen when I stepped out of the between. He was in the middle of spooning ice cream into a bowl.

"Do you want some?" he asked.

He was one of those people who didn't seem the least bit surprised to find me appearing out of thin air in the middle of his kitchen. Tomorrow morning, he probably wouldn't even remember I'd been here.

"What flavour is it?" I asked.

"Chocolate swirl with bits of Oreo cookies mixed in."

"I'd love some," I told him and got myself a bowl from the cupboard.

He filled my bowl with a generous helping and we both spent a few moments enjoying the ice cream. I looked down the hall as I ate and saw all the cardboard boxes. My gaze went back to the young man's face.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Nels."

He didn't ask me my name, but I didn't mind.

"This is a good invention," I said holding up a spoonful of ice cream. "Chocolate and ice cream and cookies all mixed up in the same package."

"It's not new. They've had it for ages."

"But it's still good."

"Mmm."

"So what happened to the old woman who lived here?" I asked.

"I didn't know her," he told me. "The realtor brought me by a couple of days ago and I liked the place, so I rented it. I'm pretty sure he said she'd passed away."

So much for her being happy. But maybe there was something else on the other side of living. Maybe she and her ghost boy and her daughter were all together again and she *was* happy.

It was a better ending to the story than others I could imagine.

“So,” I asked Nels, “are you happy?”

He paused with a spoonful of ice cream half way to his mouth. “What?”

“Do you have any ghosts?”

“Everybody’s got ghosts.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “I suppose one of the measures of how you live your life is how well you make your peace with them.”

My bowl was empty, but I didn’t fill it up again. I stood up from the table.

“Do you want some help unpacking?” I asked.

“Nah. I’m good. Are you off?”

“You know me,” I said, although of course he didn’t. “Places to go, people to meet. Things to do.”

He smiled. “Well, don’t be a stranger. Or at least not any stranger than you already are.”

I laughed.

“You’re a funny man, Nels,” I said.

And then I stepped away into the between. I stood there for a few moments, watching him.

He got up from the table, returned the ice cream to the freezer and washed out the bowls and utensils we’d used. When he was done, he walked into the hall and picked up a box which he took into the living room, out of my sight.

I could tell that he’d already forgotten me.

“Goodbye, Nels,” I said, though he couldn’t hear me. “Goodbye, Ghost Boy. Goodbye, old lady.” I knew they couldn’t hear me, either.

Then I stepped from the between, out onto the fire escape. I unfolded black wings and flew back to the Rookery, singing loudly all the way.

At least I thought of it as singing.

As I got near Stanton Street, a man waiting for his dog to relieve itself looked up to see me go by.

“Goddamned crows,” he said.

He took a plastic bag out of his pocket and deftly bagged his dog’s poop.

I sang louder, a laughing arpeggio of croaking notes.



Being happy was better than not, I decided. And it was certainly better than scooping up dog poop. If I was ever to write a story the way that Christy did, it would be very short. And I'd only have the one story because after it, I wouldn't need any more.

It would go like this:

Once upon a time, they all lived happily ever after. The end.

That's a much better sort of story than the messy ones that make up our lives. At least that's what I think.

But I wouldn't want to live in that story, because that would be too boring. I'd rather be caught up in the clutter of living, flying high above the streets and houses, making a joyful noise.