

# SIXTEEN SOULS

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## Praise for *Sixteen Souls*

“*Lockwood & Co.* meets *The Taking of Jake Livingston* by way of York’s most haunted landmarks, *Sixteen Souls* delivers fun and frights in equal measure. A fantastically spooky, thrilling adventure”

**Kat Ellis**, author of *Wicked Little Deeds*

“*Sixteen Souls* is the perfect mix of eerie and heart-warming. With vivid characters, fierce friendships and flawless twists, this book immediately pulled me in – I laughed, teared up and could not put it down. YA fantasy readers and ghost-story lovers, this is for you”

**H.M. Long**, author of *Hall of Smoke and Temple of No God*

“A captivating take of loss, friendship and love that had me gripped from first to last. I finished it with a smile on my lips and a tear in my eye”

**Menna van Praag**, author of *The Sisters Grimm*

“A gorgeously written debut that had me absolutely gripped. Rosie Talbot has created a deliciously creepy world with characters that you’ll fall in love with.”

**Amy McCaw**, author of *Mina and the Undead*

“A deliciously dark debut from Rosie Talbot. I dare you not to fall in love with Charlie and his ghosts in the heart of haunted York.”

**Cynthia Murphy**, author of *Last One to Die* and *Win Lose Kill Die*

“I never have a problem screaming about books I genuinely love, and I love this book. The author’s ability to evoke entire settings with minimal details is just amazing. The writing is rich; the characters sharply drawn. Welcome to the world, Charlie Frith – I can’t wait to watch other readers fall in love with you. The only thing that made me scream louder than this book was finding out there will be a sequel.”

**K.D. Edwards**, author of *The Tarot Sequence Series*

“Imagine a story that has all the character of York, then fill it with all the ghosts from there too ... and whilst you’re at it make it QUEER. Perfect if you like books like *Cemetery Boys*, *Ninth House*, *The Fell of Dark* and *The Taking of Jake Livingstone*.”

**Rory Michaelson**, author of *Lesser Known Monsters*

“*Sixteen Souls* is a boundlessly clever, heartfelt queer take on the story of a sensitive young man who sees dead people. Talbot has crafted something chillingly delightful! Perfect for any ghoulish lover’s shelf”

**Adam Sass**, award-winning author of *Surrender Your Sons* and *The 99 Boyfriends of Micah Summers*

*Sixteen Souls* uses British English conventions, spelling and grammar, as well as British colloquialisms.

Please be aware that some of the material in this story contains themes or events of death/dying, body horror, physical torture, violence and mentions of suicide, self-harm and murder. For a full list of content warning, please visit **[www.rosietalbot.co.uk](http://www.rosietalbot.co.uk)**

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ROSIE TALBOT

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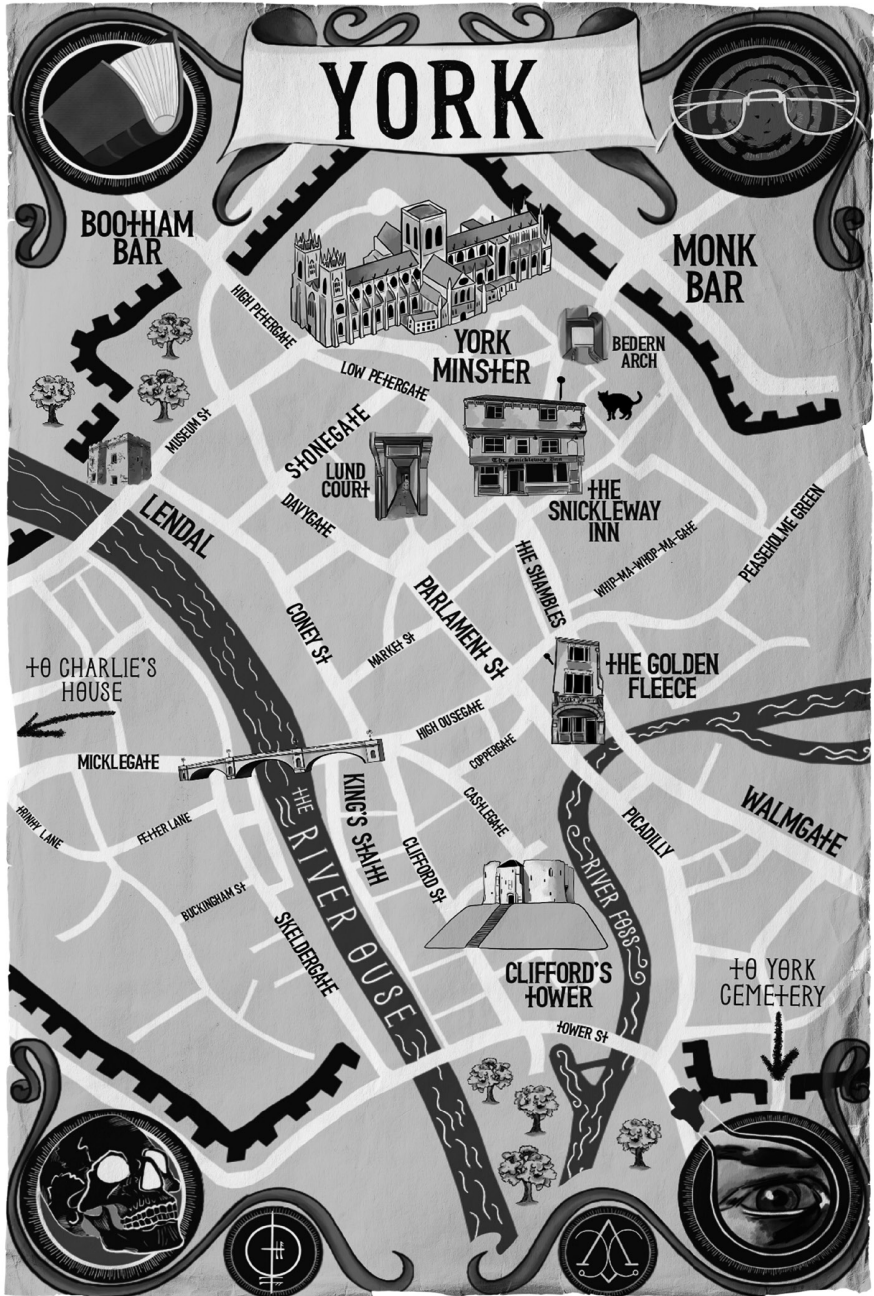
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*For the living*  
*(please read this book out loud for the dead)*



# I

## THE HAUNTING OF CHARLIE FRITH

It's the recently deceased that trouble me the most. Older ghosts aren't so bad. They're always dressed in jerkin and hose or corsets and wide skirts, so they're easily avoided – eyes down, earbuds in and they've no idea I can see them. But the newly dead look just like everybody else, and that's what makes them so dangerous.

I don't go rambling about the old part of York more than I have to, and never on my own. Today, Heather walks beside me as I move carefully down The Shambles, her stethoscope tangling in the yellow lanyard that holds her hospital ID. In the six years since her death she's not changed: same messy plait, pretty plump face, grey high-waisted slacks and a wrinkled shirt, her sleeves rolled up no matter the weather. She's nattering away in that honeyed voice of hers and I'm



not really listening, but I let her words wash over me and keep walking, trying to disguise the slight limp that's been nagging me since the bus.

My prostheses have started to rub. I should have double socked, but then my sockets get too tight and I'm sore and aching by the end of the day. There's nothing I can do about it now. I never take my lower legs off in public, especially since the twins got at them with Mum's glittery varnishes. Now I've got pink and purple sparkles all over the covers.

We move along the cobbles. The old timber-framed buildings overhang, as if competing for daylight. It feels like each side of the row is leaning into one another, the jewellery shop longing to whisper a secret to the fudge makers opposite. Nothing is level here, not the walls or jambs to the squat doors, not the panes of glass in their quaint Victorian shop-front windows. Some have metal signs shaped like pies or shields hanging above them, with ornate metal brackets to fix them to walls of brick, cob and wood, walls that haven't really been clean for hundreds of years.

History hangs in the air like a stink I can't escape. Guy Fawkes was born here, they strung-up Dick Turpin here and Saint Margaret Clitherow was pressed to death beneath her own front door. So, it's no surprise that the ghosts are almost as numerous as the tourists.

I'm often told I'm an old soul for a lad of sixteen, but they've got it wrong. I'm no Old Soul. Actually, I do my best to avoid them.

I have to side-step around a ghost in a fur-trimmed cloak

by feigning sudden interest in a window display of bunting and babygrows. Next, I twist back like I heard someone calling my name, all so a woman in a ruff doesn't bump into me. Unlike the other living people on the street, I'd be as solid to her as she is to me.

That's the price of seeing the dead. They can vanish through walls, pass right through regular people, but me, I'm flesh and bone to them. They can touch me. They can hurt me. The dead can be very demanding, not to mention dangerous if they get too keen and I can't leg it before they draw blood.

Sod that.

I'd have preferred to get the bus out to Monk's Gate shopping park where the floors are smoother and the ghosts fewer, but there is a shop here Heather insists we visit.

"What do you think about themed bookends?" She follows half a step behind me, acting like she's a confused ghost desperately trying to communicate with the living. The dead haunt people as often as places. I mean, there's nothing much for them to do except hang around and complain, even if no one but me can hear them.

I don't answer Heather's question, talking to a ghost on a street this haunted would be daft. She goes on some more, reeling off a list of gift ideas, and I go on pretending I've no idea she's there until she cuts off mid-sentence. I can't help following her line of sight to a boy propped against the doorframe of a nearby shop. He's a child of the slums, frostbitten fingers, no shoes, stinking rags draped over a flickering, skeletal body.

There is no sixth sense, no gentle tapping on the inside of my skull or uncanny sensation that something otherworldly lurks nearby. Feelings like that are for books and movies. The child looks as real to me as anyone living, but then boots and trainers march through him and he half fades from view.

A wash of cold fear weighs on me. Heather blocks my view of the kid and talks me down until I can't hear my heartbeat any more.

Of the three kinds of ghosts: free, tethered and looped, the looped ones are the worst. Trapped in the memory of their death, they're unaware they're even deceased, existing beyond our time and place in a bubble of their own. But sometimes their personal reality bleeds into our world, and that's very bad news for me.

I turn away, guilt tightening my chest.

I have to preserve my sense of what's real.

My foot catches the edge of the pavement and I trip. Heather lunges and grabs my arm, supporting me in an impossible stumble down into the cobbled gully. I scan the narrow thoroughfare, hoping no one saw me cheat gravity. When there's no sudden onslaught of eager dead I release my breath.

"All right?" Heather asks. I nod, as subtly as I can. She lets go of me but her lips are pressed thin with worry.

We need to be more careful.

Adjusting my weight, I catch my reflection in the darkened window of a gift shop closed for redecoration. Heather is beside me but I'm standing alone. The dead don't have

reflections. I look like the kind of lad that might cause trouble – square face, snub nose, broad frame with muscle on big bones – like my dad.

We set off slowly. I know the shop as soon as I see the book and quill sign above the door. Despite my unease I crack a grin.

Inside, the green walls and cabinets are stuffed with everything from tabletop games and fancy stationery, to collectable replicas of The One Ring and Harley Quinn’s baseball bat. It’s full and cramped but Heather knows how to move in a crowd without being walked through. We take our time browsing but half my attention is always on remembering not to give myself away. It’s all too easy to forget no one else can see or hear her.

“Charlie, do not turn around.” The voice is female, but it’s not Heather’s. The accent is so clipped it sounds deliberately posh, almost fake. “You’ve picked up a tail.”

I pivot slowly, proud of my self-control, to face the blonde woman in her mid-thirties standing amongst the robed mannequins in the centre of the shop. From the string of natural pearls at her throat to the cut of her skirt suit and neatly pinned curls, Audrey Nightingale is straight out of a 1940s photograph. Picture perfect.

Her lips tighten. “I said *don’t* turn.”

“What are you doing here, Nightingale?” Heather asks, crossing her arms.

“Looking out for our boy, of course.” Stepping around a young couple taking selfies, Audrey focuses her hawk-like

gaze on me again and reaches for the three-headed toy dog I've picked up. I quickly look away. Like all ghosts, her hand goes right through solid objects. Seeing it always gives me the shivers.

Although Audrey hates my rules, she usually follows them, so she must be in a pissy mood today. "Do you want me to leave, or do you want to know who's following you?" My expression must say it all, because she continues. "Outside, with the dark hair and the green jacket."

Heather pretends to be studying a display of replica swords to get a look at our tail. "You sure?"

"Oh, I'm sure. He *thinks* he's being subtle."

Sharp spring light catches the edge of his face through the windowpane. I turn away at the same time he does. My age, maybe a year or so younger, but dressed like he's trying to look older in chinos and a cable-knit jumper under a new waxed jacket.

I don't doubt that he's following me. Audrey rarely makes mistakes. I look back. He risks another glance at the three of us, his gaze lingering on Audrey, then he strides into the shop opposite.

If he can see Heather and Audrey then he's dead – recently, judging by his clothes. Maybe he wants me to contact his relatives and deliver a message, something I'd *never* do. I'm not an errand boy for the dead.

Experience tells me I'm wrong. First off, he doesn't look desperately relieved that someone can see him. Secondly,

there's something in Audrey's expression that chills me – a tendon standing out in her neck, a taut alertness in her eyes.

She glances at the street. "We need to get you out of here."

There it is again, that flash of fear. She's trying to hide it, but she's afraid and she's not the type to scare easily. Likely then that he's a Hungry One, a spirit who believes a taste of my special ghost-seer flesh and blood will restore him to life.

God. I don't need this.

"He's seen us together." Heather's voice is higher than usual. "We should split up."

"Meet me back at the bus stop, yeah?" I mutter.

With a reluctant nod at me and a firm glower at Audrey, Heather squeezes my hand and slips away. A shop assistant gives me an odd look, which is rich coming from someone dressed up in Dothraki leathers. I move towards the till, grabbing some wrapping paper from a nearby stand on my way, then hurry to pay for the toy dog.

How am I going to leave without Waxed-Jacket following me?

"We'll go out the back," Audrey whispers, giving me directions to the storeroom. "The code is 4531Y."

"How'd you even know that?"

"Know what?" the bloke at the till asks, assuming I'm talking to him.

"Oh—" I can feel the heat in my cheeks. "Nothing."

I stuff the toy in my backpack. The shop assistant rolls the wrapping paper into a tube for me. I hold it like a sword as I

head to the back of the shop and the staff-only door marked, NO ADMITTANCE, EXCEPT ON PARTY BUSINESS.

Sweat makes my hands slippery, but I manage to key in the code and open the door without turning to double check I'm getting away with it.

Audrey waits for me on the other side.

"Move quickly," she says, "but not *too* quickly. Head up, like you're meant to be here."

Hurrying past simple shelves stacked with products, I catch my breath when a voice carries out of the little kitchenette off to the side. Although I brace myself for an angry confrontation with an employee demanding to know what I'm doing here, I reach the fire exit without meeting anyone.

"It's alarmed," says Audrey.

I grimace, place my hands on the bar and press down hard.

A heartbeat later I'm hurrying through the food market, ears still ringing. It takes me fifteen minutes to circle around the city centre, heading north under the shadow of York Minster because there are too many restless dead around Clifford's Tower. Mad Alice isn't in her alley so I slip through Lund Court on to Swinegate, narrowly avoiding a collision with a top-hat-wearing tour guide and his congregation of eager ghost hunters.

I'm limping by the time I cross the river at the Memorial Gardens and head along the old city wall towards the train station. When I finally pause for breath, Audrey is gone. I'm alone. No one is following me. I chew on some gum to get the taste of fear off my tongue.

Heather is leaning against the bus stop when I arrive, looking on as I check through the pockets of my puffer for my ticket. My left stump is stinging. I'll have to take my prostheses off as soon as I get in. To ease the ache, I sit on the metal bench and settle back against the glass shelter. Heather sits beside me and because there's no one else around, I allow myself to lean in to her a little.

My thoughts go back to the lad dying in the cold over and over again. I wish I could help him, but last time—

No. I can't think about last time.

Tucking the roll of paper under my arm, I pull the toy from my bag, suddenly worried that I've not made a proper choice at all.

I turn it for Heather to assess. "Think he'll like it?"

"He'll love it." There's an edge to her voice, something left unspoken, but I've no energy to pry.

Our bus appears, only half full, meaning we can ride home together. Relief lifts me up. We stand. The bus pulls in and as we step on board I flash my ticket at the dull-eyed driver. He barely looks at it, but he brightens when he sees the toy dog.

"Got my lad one of 'em for Christmas. Guardian of the underworld that."

I nod and smile.

Heather and me sit by the window near the front so I can stretch out. As the bus pulls away I notice a figure watching from where the old city wall runs opposite the station. Wax-Jacket is bold as anything, standing in full sun like he wants



me to know he's there. Heather hasn't spotted him. Good, she'll only worry.

A sudden, ice-sharp thought sends me sitting upright.

He didn't follow me; Audrey would've marked him. So, he knew where I was going. He got here first and waited.

The jolt I feel has nothing to do with the rumble and whine of the engine as the bus follows Queen Street and turns on to Blossom. No, there's no such thing as sixth sense, but my bones feel heavier and there is a pulse in my skull like I'm holding out against answers to a question I never wanted asked.

For the first time in a long time I feel haunted.