

CHARLIE BOY

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Charlie is a fictional character. William Metzger was a real Detroitier who in the 1890s scandalized his church by riding to services one Sunday on a bicycle. He opened the first automobile dealership in Detroit in the 1890s; became a manufacturer of cars; was the M in EMF, an early competitor of Ford; was for a time the sales manager for Cadillac; and was a founder of the Detroit Athletic Club and the Automobile Association of America (AAA). The representation of him in this book—and of the other people who lived in the 1890s—is fictional.

CHAPTER 1

Mama

Someone—a girl—is riding a white horse through the countryside, through beautiful, lush, emerald green rolling hills. No, it's not a horse but a unicorn, its white mane dancing in the wind as it runs. And it's Charlie's sister riding the horse. She turns and smiles. No, it's not his sister; it's his mother. She laughs and calls him by his proper name, Chauncey, as she once did. She beckons him to her as she stops her unicorn on the crest of a low, sloping hill. Now Charlie is on a horse too, and he's riding toward her as she turns and rides ahead of him, her white silk lace shawl and long white dress billowing behind her.

His mother is riding bareback and barefoot, and soon Charlie is riding side by side with her. He can smell her familiar lavender scent and hear her laughter, soft and trilling like a bird. She asks about his brothers and sisters, although she already seems to know the answers. Charlie can hear and understand her, even though she doesn't speak out loud. He wants to ask her if she's happy, if she has seen Keegan, but his words will not form. She tells him that he must keep drawing, no matter what anyone says. Drawing is a part of his destiny.

Her unicorn gallops ahead of Charlie, and he watches as his mother's long, honey gold hair streams behind her, her rainbow-colored hair ribbons fluttering. He wants to catch up

to her, but he can't. No matter how hard he tries, he can't make his horse run any faster. Suddenly his horse leaps over a cliff, and Charlie is falling, falling toward the sea...falling....

Charlie bolted upright. His breath came hard, and his nightshirt stuck to his sweat-soaked chest. It had been a dream, but it had seemed so real! Mama. He had seen her, had been next to her. He could still smell her sweet lavender scent. Shoving his brother's arm from his stomach, he turned onto his side and tried to find comfort in the bed between his brothers' bodies, tried to ignore their rumbling snores.

Mama. Just after she'd died, he had dreamed of her often—almost every night for months. But that had been three years ago. He hadn't dreamed of her for such a long time now, hadn't cried over her in even longer. He tucked his arm, with its tear-dampened sleeve, under half a pillow, sought warmth from the back of his brother Colin, and slept.

He woke when morning's light was barely entering the bedroom. After his dream, he had slept hard. He pulled himself out from under Paddy's leg. His sisters Caitlin and Brianne slept in the other bedroom, which had once been his mother and father's, but the five O'Brien boys were crammed into this one. Four of the brothers shared a bed; they rotated the fifth one sleeping on the floor—all except Aghy. The oldest at age twenty, Aghy always slept in the bed. Two nights earlier it had been Charlie's turn on the floor. Last night it was Grady's.

Charlie shuffled into the living room, shivering from the shock of the cold air. Caitlin hadn't tended to the stove yet. It was cold for late September. Pale light filtered through the front window

overlooking Detroit's busy streets. Horses' hooves clattered as they pulled carts delivering early morning milk and ice. The constant brushing of the streetcleaners sweeping drifted up to the apartment.

Charlie noticed his father's gray wool blanket folded neatly across the sofa, where he'd slept every night since Charlie's mother had died. Charlie knew that his father was already downstairs at his saloon, checking in the morning deliveries. The man spent almost all his time there. It had been ages since Charlie had shared a meal with him. Or spoken with him.

Charlie's eyes wandered to his mother's rocking chair. Her white lace shawl was draped over it; it had hung there since her death. It was always there, but on this morning he couldn't take his eyes off it. It was the one she'd worn in his dream. It had been given to her on her wedding day by her mother, just as it had been given as a wedding present to his mother's mother. Made of the finest Irish lace, it had been her pride and joy.

Charlie's eyes closed as he recalled the dream, seeing the shawl flying behind his mother. She had seemed so young and free, so different from the last time he'd actually seen her! On that day her sweet dimples had been shallow with pain, her face thin and gray, her body withered by the consumption. Had it really been three years already? He still woke sometimes expecting to hear her early morning humming from the kitchen.

It seemed like yesterday that he had sat reading to her while she'd lain ill, that he had stayed home from school to draw pictures for the stories she'd loved to make up. They were stories about fairies and magical beasts like unicorns. And mountains. How

she had wanted to see real mountains someday! Charlie thought of the half-finished drawing of a mountain stashed in his drawer. He hadn't looked at it for a long time.

"Charlie?" His sister Caitlin's voice surprised him from the kitchen area of the large room. A ragged brown blanket covered her slight shoulders, and gray socks peeked from under her white nightie. Golden curls, wild from sleep, tousled about her face and down her back. Eyes blue as a summer sky met Charlie's. "You'll be taking Brienne with you to school this morning?" she asked, poking a stick in the enormous potbelly stove.

Charlie stared at the shawl. "No," he said quietly. "Not today."

Caitlin stopped jabbing at the stove. Her eyes followed her brother's to the shawl. "You must go to school, Charlie," she told him. "Mama would have—"

"I *know* what Mama wants for me," Charlie interrupted. "And I'm not going back there. They'll just throw me out again. Make me read out loud and then laugh at me. Tear up my drawings. Make me write with my right hand!" His voice was strong and low. "No, I'll not be going back there."

Caitlin tinkered with the stove again before filling a large coffeepot with water from a bucket. "They wouldn't be throwing you out if you'd do as you're told."

Her tone had turned harsh. She looked so much like their mother, Charlie thought, except when she spoke like this.

"Fine for you to say," he snapped, his voice rising, then dropping as Caitlin brought a finger to her pursed lips. "Fine for

you!” he repeated, whispering this time. “You don’t have to go anymore. You can spend your day earning a living. And that’s what I’ll be doing soon enough.”

“But Charlie,” his sister said, shaking her head as she measured ground coffee into the pot, “I wasn’t working at a dress shop when I was twelve. I was going to school and...now look what you’ve done. I’ve lost count of the coffee. Your brothers will have fits if it’s not made as they like.” She frowned, then turned back to him. “I was going to school when I was twelve—until after...until I was needed elsewhere.”

“That wouldn’t have anything to do with Pa saying it’s as good to teach a dog to meow as to educate a woman, would it now?” asked Charlie. He grabbed a chunk of bread from the counter, fending off his sister’s feigned slap.

“Make sure that’s your lot for the morning, then,” she told him, “or there won’t be enough for all.”

Charlie chewed the bread defiantly in front of his sister. “I’ll be off now,” he declared. “You take Brianne to school. I’ll be working.”

Sighing with frustration, Caitlin gazed at her brother. *Only twelve*, she thought, *and such old eyes!*

She had been but thirteen and Charlie nine when their mother had died. Less than a year later they lost their brother Keegan. Only a few years older than Charlie, Keegan had been closest to him of all the boys. Charlie had changed after that. He’d begun refusing to attend school and getting into fights regularly. He hated working in their father’s saloon downstairs with his older

brothers, preferring to spend his time prowling the streets or drawing.

Caitlin studied the boy standing in front of her. He had changed physically as well. Standing a few inches taller than her, his shoulders and chest seemed to broaden by the day. He had their father's thick brow and dark shaggy hair, but his warm hazel eyes belonged to Maeve Eileen O'Brien, their mother. Maeve had loved all of her children, but she'd had a special bond with Charlie. Sometimes it had almost seemed as if mother and son were the same person split in two. Like they'd shared a soul.

"Go then," Caitlin told him softly, her eyes on the steaming coffeepot. "I'll see to Brianne."

Charlie lifted a brown cloth jacket and a gray wool cap from a wall hook and opened the apartment door.

"Will you be home for the evening meal?" she asked him, but the only answer was the door closing with a firm thud.

CHAPTER 2

Work

As he left the slaughterhouse, Charlie wished he could sneeze out the foul stink that lingered in his nose. The huge warehouse had been hot, the stench of blood and animal parts smacking him in the face as he entered. As much as he wanted to make his way in the world, he decided that he would try other places before working in a place like that. Someday he was sure he would earn a living with his drawings, but for now he just needed money.

He walked past several crooked houses with tattered roofs. Chickens scratched in the front yards. A goat stood tied in front of one house, chewing what little grass grew in the narrow yard. Shading his eyes with his hand, Charlie looked at the sun's position in the sky and judged it to be about two or three o'clock. He'd had nothing to eat since the bread that morning.

And he was thirsty. He spotted a well in a front yard with a tin cup hanging from its rope. He helped himself to a drink of the cool well water.

He walked down the side of the street, careful to avoid the horses and buggies and the many bicycles. More than once he sidestepped steaming brown piles left by horses as he drew near the river. The shipyards along the Detroit River boasted noisy sawing and hammering and the bustling of men carrying lengths

of wood on their broad shoulders. Charlie thought about applying at The Detroit Drydock Company for work. Two of Colin's friends worked there. Maybe they could say a word on Charlie's behalf.

Unsure of what to do next, Charlie sat on a large wooden keg and watched the sun shimmer across the Detroit River. He observed several men sawing a length of lumber that had been set across two kegs. More men hammered on the side of a huge ship anchored at the dock; they were hanging alongside the ship by ropes tied to their waists. Charlie promised himself that when he had money in his pocket and food in his belly, he would come back with drawing paper and spend an afternoon sketching the docks. Someday he wanted to draw a ship from its beginning frame to its final launching.

His stomach grumbled. The water had quenched his thirst but not his hunger.

As he started down the street again, one of several men riding bicycles yelled at him to get out of the way. Charlie moved just in time to avoid a collision. A narrow alley entrance caught his eye. He was tired of the busy street. Standing at the mouth of the alley, he saw that it ran behind rows of small houses and shops, all crammed within a few feet of one another. Golden reddish leaves lay scattered across the tiny backyards. He began wandering down the alley.

One of the yards looked like a junkyard filled with hundreds of bicycle parts. Mounds of broken wheels and bent handlebars were scattered among what Charlie thought looked like old typewriters and maybe parts of a cash register.

Bicycles. People rode them everywhere. *Maybe*, thought Charlie, *I could sell some of these parts to a bicycle shop. Or to one of the factories along the river.* He had heard that they took scrap metal and melted it to build buggy parts. Maybe he could at least get enough money to buy a meal somewhere. There was so much piled in the yard that no one was likely to miss a few things.

The back door to the house stood ajar. One of the high, soot-smearred windows stood open as well. Charlie swatted at a fly buzzing in his face. The high-pitched music of a heat bug filled the stillness of the autumn afternoon. Charlie removed his cap and wiped his brow before settling the cap back on his damp, curly hair.

From inside the house, tinkering sounds, like someone hammering lightly, floated toward him. Stepping carefully, Charlie rummaged through the junk piles. He decided that a bent bicycle wheel and a chunk of typewriter might serve his purposes.

“Hey, kid! What are you doing?”

A hand found Charlie’s jacket collar and held him tight. Bent wheel under his arm, Charlie didn’t even look to see where the voice was coming from. He dropped the wheel and started kicking for freedom.

“Stop! Stop!” the voice behind the hand yelled. Charlie struggled a while longer, but it was obvious that the man holding him was stronger than he was. He stopped kicking. Resigning himself to his fate, he stood still and pulled his cap down over his eyes.

“What did you think you were going to do with a broken bicycle wheel?” the man gripping his collar asked.

“I...I...I don’t...,” Charlie stammered.

The man flipped Charlie’s cap brim up with his free hand. He seemed fairly young, maybe in his late twenties. He took in the boy’s dirty jacket and patched pants. “You hungry?”

“No.”

“What’s your name?”

Charlie glared at him.

The man stared back. “Okay,” he said at last. “But I’ve got some chicken with your name on it.” He studied Charlie a moment longer, then let go of the boy’s collar and walked toward the house. He paused at the door and looked back. “You coming?” he asked before disappearing through the doorway.

Charlie stood, undecided. Why was this man offering him food when he had just tried to steal from him? By all rights, the man could call the law—could make sure that Charlie spent the next year or more in a workhouse with other children accused of crimes.

Charlie was curious about the man. Plus, given what the man’s yard looked like, he wondered what the inside of his house was like. He thought of the offer of chicken, and his mouth watered. Hesitantly, he walked to the house and went through the doorway.

It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the cool darkness inside, but when they did, Charlie felt as if he’d walked into a different world. Wooden counters, floor-to-ceiling shelves, and an enormous wooden table in the middle of the room all lay covered in piles of bicycle gears, wheels, chains, typewriter ribbons, and cash register parts, few of which appeared to be in working order.

Tools of various sizes hung from large hooks in the ceiling's wooden beams.

“Almost as bad as the yard, huh?” remarked the man. He chuckled at Charlie's open-mouthed response to his shop. “Bet you've never seen so much junk in one place before.”

Charlie just nodded, taking in the hundreds of metal parts lining the shelves.

The man steered Charlie toward a stool in front of the large worktable. As Charlie sat, the man gathered a small bag from a corner shelf and brought it to the table. He cleared an area in front of them, pushing up the pile of junk on the other side of the table, and set the bag down. Then he wiped his hand on his hip and held it out to Charlie.

“Will,” the man said. “My name is Will Metzger.”

Charlie's blank stare changed as his focus shifted to the man in front of him. Remembering his manners, he stood, extending his right hand as well. “Charlie,” he offered. “Charlie O'Brien.”

They shook hands, and Charlie sat back down and watched Will pull a large, bulky cloth from inside the bag. He unwrapped it to display an apple and several pieces of fried chicken.

Charlie's stomach growled.

“I don't often eat this well,” Will told him, sitting on a stool next to Charlie, “but I was lucky enough to have eaten at a restaurant last night, and I brought home as much food as I could.” He laughed. “I even have some of my friend's leftover chicken!”

Will put the apple and a piece of chicken in front of Charlie. Charlie sat unmoving, unwilling to trust the man just yet.

“Go ahead,” Will encouraged, shoving the food closer to the boy. “Eat. There’s plenty for us both.”

Charlie looked at Will. “Why are you giving me food?” he asked.

Will smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “Because you look hungry.”

“I have a home, you know,” Charlie said defensively. “I ain’t no guttersnipe.”

“Well, that’s fine, kid,” said Will as he picked up a chicken leg. “But I have a home too, and I still get hungry in the middle of the afternoon.” He bit into the chicken.

Charlie sat thoughtfully for a few seconds before picking up a smooth chicken breast with both hands. He inspected the meat briefly before taking an enormous bite, both cheeks bulging like a squirrel’s. The trill of a heat bug and the tittering of birdsong floated into the dark room while they ate.

Charlie finally broke the quiet. “What do you do with all this junk?” he asked, looking around as he chewed.

“Well,” replied Will, wiping both hands on his pants, “this ‘junk’ is how I make my living.” He gazed around the room with pride. “I’m going to invent the best bicycle this country has ever seen.” He seemed lost in thought for a moment before clearing his throat. “But until I do that, I build bicycles and repair typewriters and cash registers.” He took a bite of chicken, talking through it. “I was a partner in a bicycle business until a while ago. But now I’m on my own.” He waved a hand to indicate the room and all it held.