

## **Charlie's Web**

L.L. Thrasher

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*Jonathan was panting right into my ear, so when I felt a funny tingle all over my body, I thought it was just a reaction to that. The feeling was so strange that I opened my eyes—and someone was standing by the bed.*

That someone was Charlie Bilbo, who happens to be Jonathan's father. He also happens to be a ghost, dead a good thirty years or so. Jonathan can't see Charlie, but Lizbet Lange can, even if she'd rather not. In Charlie's Bones, the first novel starring Lizbet and Charlie, former truck stop waitress Lizbet Lange has inherited a fortune from an ex-husband and is having a swimming pool installed on her new estate. When they dig up Charlie's bones Charlie appears to Lizbet demanding she help solve the mystery of his death. Charlie can only see and experience things through Lizbet, which rules out after-death intervention, but introduces some pretty humorous situations: disagreements over what type of drinks to order at the bar, for instance.

Lizbet, at the beginning of Charlie's Web, has forgotten all about Charlie. Now, Charlie reappears insisting she help solve the kidnap/murder of ten-year-old Rachel Wright that happened on Halloween of 1973. Charmed but reluctant, Lizbet agrees. After all, she tells herself, it's not like she really has a choice. There's not much arguing with Charlie and even if she does banish him back to...wherever, she immediately feels guilty and calls him back.

Lizbet is enormously appealing: sassy yet insecure, flippant yet sentimental, flaky but insightful. Unaccustomed to her wealth and social status, Lizbet—under propulsion by Charlie—flits from one witness to another, one mishap to another, gathering clues and stirring up, well, old ghosts and hidden secrets. Of course, some people want hidden secrets to stay hidden.

The novel is light, humorous, occasionally laugh-out-loud funny, and always enjoyable. Thrasher deftly handles shifting shades of tone, balancing the comic with the tragic, farce with

the dramatic, and cynical with the nostalgic. Lizbet's vaguely incestuous attractions to both Charlie and Jonathan (who are, after all, just about the same age) lends a spicy and intriguing subtext to the entire story. This novel proves that complex, elegant surprises can come wrapped in simple, straightforward packages.

*Mark Terry*