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CHARLES SOULE

A NOVEL



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# **THE** *ORACLE* **YEAR**

A NOVEL

***CHARLES*** *SOULE*

HARPER  PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI • AUCKLAND



# Dedication

*For three women:*

*Mary*

*Amy*

*Rosemary*

# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

## Part I: Fall

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

The Oracle in the Desert

## Part II: Winter

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Ripples

Chapter 19

## Chapter 20

### Part III: Spring

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Törökul

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

### Part IV: Summer

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

August 23

### Epilogue: Tomorrow

### *Acknowledgments*

### *About the Author*



*Also by Charles Soule*

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*About the Publisher*

# Part I

## Fall

# Chapter 1

*Anything can happen, Will Dando thought. In the next five seconds, in the next five years. Anything at all.*

He tipped his beer up, finishing the last few swallows. He set about the task of getting the bartender's attention, which looked like it could be an ordeal. The bar hadn't been crowded when he'd arrived three or so hours earlier, but it had filled up once the game started—Jets/Raiders.

The Jets were down by three with not much time left on the clock. Will wasn't ordinarily much for sports. He wasn't sure he'd ever watched a football game all the way through.

This one was different, though. It was important.

It was important because its outcome was one of a hundred and eight things Will knew that hadn't happened yet.

The bar was just a dive near his apartment, without much to recommend it other than the base level offered by every bar in the world: drink there and you weren't (technically) drinking alone. Will had picked the second-best seat in the house—a stool as far away from the door as possible.

Unseasonably frigid November gusted in every time anyone came in or out, sweeping along the bar, stirring the little puddles of spilled beer and wadded napkins.

The first-best seat in the house, the stool farthest from the door and the wind, was directly to Will's left. It was occupied by a truly lovely girl with chestnut-colored, slightly curly hair. She seemed to be a friend of the bartender. She certainly got her refills more quickly than Will did, and a good two out of three seemed to be left off the tab. But there were any number of reasons for that, really. The hair alone.

Will had caught her name—Victoria—and he was considering saying hello to her. He had been considering it, in fact, for most of the past three hours.

His phone buzzed. He looked down—*Jorge* on the ID, which meant a gig, a good one. Probably a party at some cool venue downtown, for solid money. Even the worst Jorge job was generally a pretty good time, and on occasion they were spectacular. He had hired Will for lingerie fashion shows, postconcert after-parties packed with industry people, no-joke studio session work, even a few opening band tours. Any future Will might have as a working bassist in New York City was tied more or less directly to Jorge Cabrera.

Will tapped the front of his phone, declining the call, just as the bartender finally worked his way down to his end of the bar.

“One more?” he asked, gesturing to Will’s empty beer bottle.

“Yeah,” Will said. “Same again.”

On an impulse, Will turned to his left and smiled at Victoria.

“Get you a drink?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Will saw the bartender pause slightly as he reached into the cooler. Maybe they were more than just friends, then. But so what?

Victoria turned her head to look at Will.

“Oh, thanks,” she said, just friendly enough, no more, “but I know the bartender. I drink for free.”

“Sure, right,” Will said, “but . . . just thinking out loud . . . paid for’s better than free, right?”

Victoria tilted her head slightly.

“That’s okay, thanks.”

She made a point of looking back at the television, about as emphatic a shoot-down as she could give short of changing seats. The bartender returned, skidding a cardboard coaster out in front of Will and slapping a fresh beer down, maybe a bit harder than necessary.

The Raiders scored a touchdown and made the extra point, extending their lead to ten. Groans rolled up from most of the crowd in the bar, including Victoria.

On the bar in front of Will was a black, spiral-bound notebook, the cover creased like an old leather wallet. Spilt coffee had stained the pages along the bottom edge a fungusy brown. Will ran a thumb down one corner, flicking through the pages. He stared at the back of the bar, at the multiple distorted reflections of himself in the bottles lined up on the long shelf. He gripped the notebook, bending it along the creases.

He thought about what he knew, and what he could do with what he knew.

*Shots from inside the deli. The Lucky Corner. Two quick, then a pause, then three more, one after another. Then a long break. A held breath. Decisions were being made inside. More shots. A lot of noise. A splash against the front window of the deli, from inside. Dark at the center, tinged red at the edges where it wasn't as thick and the sunlight could shine through it.*

Will toyed with the label on his half-finished beer and considered the beers he'd already had. He thought about good decisions, and bad decisions, and how hard it could be to tell them apart.

Will turned back to Victoria.

"Jets fan?" he said.

"Yeah," she said, still watching the television.

"You want to know who's going to win this game?" Will said.

"I think I already know," she said.

"You might be surprised," Will said. "The Jets will win by four."

Victoria snorted, which still somehow managed to come out cute.

"Two touchdowns, with two minutes on the clock? Come on. Maybe I should have Sam cut you off."

"Wait and see," Will said.

"And how are you so sure? You the Oracle?"

Will hesitated.

"That's right," he said.

Victoria finally looked away from the television.

"Uh-huh," she said. "You know how many times I've heard that line in the last few months? But you're using it wrong. You're supposed to predict that we'll wake up together tomorrow morning."

Will grinned.

"I don't know about that. But the Jets will win this game."

"By four," Victoria said.

"That's right."

"If that happens, then I'm all yours. You can take me home and do whatever you want with me."

Will's eyes widened.

"Huh."

"Don't hold your breath," Victoria said.

On the second down in the Jets' next possession, one of the New York receivers caught a thirty-yard pass and ran it all the way to the end zone. The bar erupted.



Will glanced at Victoria. She was staring at him.

"See what I'm saying?" Will said.

"Yeah," Victoria said. "But they've got a long way to go, and not much time to get there."

"Mm-hmm," Will said.

The Jets kicked their extra point, and the Raiders took possession again.

*A dark splash, red at the edges where it wasn't as thick.*

Will stood, grabbing the notebook and tucking it under his arm.

"Where are you going?" Victoria asked.

"I'll be back in a sec, don't worry. We've got a bet, remember?"

"I very much do."

Will walked quickly to the back of the bar. He slipped into the men's room and locked the door. He put his hands on either side of the sink's cold porcelain and looked into the mottled mirror.

A cloudy, utterly ordinary reflection stared back: late twenties, scruffy, underemployed. But of course, the cover wasn't the book. He hadn't been ordinary for a while now.

Another cheer from the bar. Will couldn't see the TV, but he knew what had happened. The Jets had forced a fumble and ran it in for another touchdown. The bar was going nuts, and a gorgeous girl was starting to think that maybe she actually had met the Oracle that night. He could have her, and every other woman in the place. He could have the entire bar, if he wanted it. It would only cost him about ten words per person.

Will closed his eyes. He rolled the notebook into a cylinder and squeezed it with both hands, his knuckles turning white.

Good decisions, and bad decisions.

"Goddammit," he said.

Will realized he'd left his coat draped over his barstool. Stupid.

He slipped out of the men's room, risking one glance back into the bar. The beautiful Victoria was staring at the television, clapping as the Jets prepared to kick the extra point. They'd make it. Up by four.

The bar had a back exit near the kitchen. Will stepped outside, feeling the air spike his lungs as soon as he took a breath. He walked out into the night, not looking back.

## Chapter 2

**L**eigh Shore stared down at her salad. She'd allowed herself some excesses. Croutons, cheese, sliced-up bits of fried chicken, the good dressing (which they should just call pudding and be done with it). Almost fifteen bucks' worth of moral support via the build-your-own bar. She'd managed maybe two bites.

Leigh pushed her fork into her salad and wiped her hands on a paper napkin. She crumpled it and dropped it on her tray. Reflexively, she grabbed her phone and swiped it open. A Reddit thread popped up on her screen, with a single post pinned to the top.

At the top of the page, two short sentences:

TOMORROW IS TODAY.

THESE ARE THE THINGS THAT WILL HAPPEN.

**B**elow that, a list: twenty brief descriptions of events, none longer than a few sentences. Each was accompanied by a date, spread over a period of about six months. This list was all over the web—every news aggregator site maintained its own copy, each with its attendant thread of thousands of comments beneath it—but the Reddit post was the place it had first appeared, via a link to an anonymously posted pastebin.

The Site. Everyone knew what you meant when you said it.

Leigh scrolled to the bottom of the list. Nothing had changed in the five minutes since she last performed exactly this same maneuver. She looked up from her phone. Around the café, roughly eight out of ten people were on

their phones. She saw the Site on at least two of those screens, just in her eye line right at that moment.

Leigh clicked away and pulled up her e-mail. Nothing—or at least not the e-mail she was waiting for.

She hesitated, frowning, then pulled up another document on her screen—an article, her article—about three thousand words, nicely supplemented with images, links . . . everything the discerning readers of Urbanity.com expected in their content.

The article was about the Site. Leigh could have chosen anything. But the Site was . . . fascinating. Ever since its appearance, it felt like the only thing that really mattered. The only puzzle worth solving.

She'd been in line at a Starbucks when her phone had buzzed with a text—a link, sent to her by her friend Kimmy Tong. Clicking through, not understanding why Kimmy thought this was worth her time. Giving her order, then googling around a little bit while she waited for her latte, realizing what the Site was actually claiming to be, and just . . . staring at it. Reading it, over and over again. Not hearing her name when the barista called it, until he all but shouted it right in her face with the bitchiest possible inflection.

The Site emerged into the public consciousness so quickly it was like a UFO appearing over Washington. From one day to the next—one hour, it seemed, as she remembered it—it became the only thing anyone could talk about.

Twenty events, all accompanied by dates. The first two had already happened by the time the Site went viral, but the rest all were slated to occur in the future. Since then four more of those dates had passed, and on each, the event on the Site occurred, exactly as it described. Or more accurately, predicted—by an unknown person, presence, supercomputer, or alien that had become known as the Oracle, in the same way that the Site had become the Site.

Leigh continued scanning the text of her article, doing one last check for sense and typos. She had chosen to write about the Oracle precisely because the subject had already been so exhaustively covered. A strategic thing. If she could bring some new angles, new interpretations, then it was almost more impressive than writing about something less familiar.

She thought she might have pulled it off—she'd tried to get into the Oracle's head in a way that most articles didn't seem to attempt, ignoring any discussion of the effect of the Site's prophecies on the world and focusing more on how they might affect the prophet. That was the idea, at least. She'd read the piece too many times to be sure what it was actually about anymore—but her intentions were good.

Leigh's current beat at Urbanity.com was "city culture"—shorthand for list-based clickbait about New York's clubs and shows and celebrity squabbles and the best bagels in Brooklyn. Urbanity did produce some actual reportage—not much, but a little, in some of the other sections—and her Oracle article was something like an audition to get over to that side of things.

Leigh flipped back to her e-mail account—still nothing. She frowned, frustrated, then tapped her phone a few times and her article went live, now freely available to every one of the site's millions of readers. The die was cast.

She stood up and emptied her tray into the trash bin, reflexively twinging a bit at the waste. She walked the two blocks back to the office, her stomach churning.

Urbanity had a few floors of a nondescript building at Fiftieth and Third. Just a cubicle farm with conference rooms along the sides on six, and the executive offices up on eleven.

Leigh sat down at her desk, glancing at the small mirror hanging on one wall of her cube. Her relationship with her reflection was evolving in a frustrating way as she neared thirty. Every look was accompanied by a little held breath. She didn't know what she expected to see—maybe some echo of her mother's face—streaks of white in her hair or lines fanning out into the dark skin around her eyes.

*Why did you do that?* she asked herself.

She had a job in New York City, writing for a living, actually using her journalism degree. More or less. She could pay her bills with a minimum of month-to-month shuffling and humbling calls home. Fully half her friends couldn't come close to any of that.

*So why did you just do that?* she repeated to herself.

A head appeared over Leigh's cubicle wall—Eddie, one of the company's photographers. Approaching middle age, not fighting it all that hard, and very good at what he did. Eddie had taken some of the photos for her article about the Site and helped her lay it out.

He was smiling.

"Just saw your article went live, Leigh. Good for you. I told you it was solid. Did they say anything about moving you over to News, or was this a onetime thing? Either way, they almost never take work from people on other desks, long as I've been here. You should be proud you got the green light."

Leigh looked back at him, saying nothing. Eddie's eyes narrowed a little.

"You didn't," he said.

The fundamental truth to Leigh Shore was this—something she'd realized years back but could not seem to change, no matter the opportunities, long-term relationships, and overall happiness it denied her—nothing was less interesting to her than something she already had. And nothing was more interesting to her than something someone told her she could not have.

"I was tired of waiting, Eddie. I e-mailed them the article over a week ago—and they didn't even respond. You know what I'm capable of, right? You just said so. I needed to show them something. I've been asking for a change of assignment for coming up on two years, and they just keep sending me out to bullshit club openings or whatever. When the verticals come back on this article, it'll speak for itself. Sure, maybe it's a little bit of a gamble, but—"

Eddie exhaled loudly, more of a grunt than a sigh.

"You know this site is owned by a multinational entertainment conglomerate, right? You can't just . . . post things. It's not your Tumblr. People get sued over this sort of thing, Leigh, and they most definitely get fired."

Eddie turned away.

"I'm going to go check your goddamn article and pray you didn't credit me on it."

Leigh opened her mouth, about to say she'd pull the post off Urbanity's site. But what would that do, really? It was already out there.

The first prediction to happen while people were paying attention was a claim that fourteen babies would be born at Northside General Hospital in Houston on October 8, six male, eight female. Exactly correct, even though the last infant was born at two minutes to midnight, and the mother was a woman who showed up at the hospital about half an hour earlier. She wasn't even from the area—she was driving through with her husband.

Not easy to stage, but naysayers on blogs and message boards came up with all sorts of ways it could have been done. The most popular was that the CIA ran the Site and had induced labor in a number of women at a secret facility near the hospital, lining them up like brood mares to make sure everything worked out as planned, sending out the lucky lady to the hospital a little bit before midnight.

Never mind that the CIA worked exclusively outside the United States, and inducing labor was far from a precision maneuver subject to split-second timing, and why would any woman agree to something like that, and and and.

The next prediction was dated about two weeks after the births:

PACIFIC AIRLINES FLIGHT 256 LOSES CABIN PRESSURE ON ITS DESCENT  
FOR LANDING IN KUALA LUMPUR. ALTHOUGH THE PLANE LANDS



SAFELY, SEVENTEEN PEOPLE ARE INJURED. THERE ARE NO DEATHS.

**A**gain, the Site was dead-on. A bird hit a window weakened from lack of maintenance, and it cracked just enough to cause a blowout. Exactly seventeen people were hurt, no more, no less. And even that could have been faked, people claimed, but the world was much less willing to take the conspiracy theorists seriously on that one, because that event had been caught on film.

A crew of enterprising Indonesians brought a camera out to the airport and filmed Flight 256 as it came in for a landing. The clip was online within hours, and it very clearly showed the flock of birds entering the frame. Most turned at the last minute. A few didn't. When you started asking people to believe that the CIA had developed the ability to remotely control birds, and had somehow rigged the plane so that only seventeen people would get hurt, it became easier to just believe that the Site was real.

Someone out there could predict the future. The Oracle.

**M**ost religious groups either denounced the Site or pointedly ignored it. A few embraced it. Politicians and pundits incorporated the Site into their rhetoric without a blip. Invitations to the most exclusive events, offers of sexual favors, payments, employment were extended to the Oracle, all of which were, as far as anyone knew, ignored.

**F**ads appeared based on the content of the predictions—chocolate milk was the drink of choice for children and adults alike due to:

APRIL 24-MRS. LUISA ALVAREZ OF EL PASO, TEXAS, PURCHASES A QUART OF CHOCOLATE MILK, SOMETHING SHE HAS NOT HAD IN TWENTY YEARS, TO SEE IF SHE STILL ENJOYS THE TASTE AS MUCH AS SHE DID WHEN SHE WAS A CHILD.

**B**artenders across the country had learned to mix Brownouts: chocolate milk, amaretto, and vodka.

And if the Oracle wouldn't make him- or herself known, the public satisfied itself with the people named in the predictions. Luisa Alvarez had been snapped up as a spokesperson for Hershey's. She seemed to enjoy the spotlight immensely, until some sort of fanatic tried to assassinate her at a press event. The would-be killer's motive: to prevent the Oracle's prediction

from coming true. To “save the world” from the pernicious influence of a false prophet.

Luisa had been placed under heavy security after that, her public appearances drastically curtailed. Hershey’s didn’t want anything to interfere with her ability to buy that milk when the big day came.

The word from Anonymous and its various allied hackery organizations was that the Site had been set up using simple, existing anonymization tools that all but guaranteed that no one but the Oracle would know who the Oracle was, or be able to issue new predictions. Their current verdict: whoever set things up for the Oracle was extremely conversant with the ins and outs of modern data security. Beyond that, they didn’t have much to say.

The world’s markets endured a series of roller-coaster climbs and reversals. The outcome of the next presidential election was suddenly thrown into doubt when Daniel Green, the incumbent, fumbled his first few opportunities to comment on what the Site’s emergence meant to the country.

There were no answers—not yet, really, just the hope that at some point, all this would make sense. Clearly, a plan was at work, but what, how, where, when . . . and most importantly, why . . . no one knew. Not yet.

Leigh settled back into her chair as she read the last few lines of her article. It was better than she remembered. Not perfect, but at least as good as most of what Urbanity published on what passed for their news desk. Eddie needed to relax.

A ping—an e-mail hitting her work account. Leigh pulled it up

*From: jreimer@urbanity.com.*

*Upstairs, please.*

*—Reimer*

Leigh stared at her monitor for ten seconds or so. Her hand reached out slowly and clicked her mouse, minimizing the e-mail app and revealing a previously hidden browser window behind it. Showing the Site. Of course it was.

Reflexively, Leigh’s hand moved. She hit refresh, even though she cringed a little bit inside as she did it. The Site never changed.

But it had.

At the bottom of the page, after the last prediction, six new words had appeared: