

# 1

Francis needed to be alone.

He needed to be alone so that he could think, which was why, despite the weather, he carried his bag and his lunch to a bench on the far side of the playing field.

Solitude is not always easy to find in a busy school, but it was February, the temperature was barely above freezing, and the cold, Francis knew, would keep most people indoors. And if anyone did come out, they would probably avoid that particular bench. It was directly opposite the main school building, and students at John Felton usually preferred to spend their lunch break somewhere that was not in full view of the teachers' lounge and the school office.

Francis did not mind being watched—not from that distance, anyway. All he wanted was the chance to think without any distractions. And he was sitting on

the bench, his hat pulled firmly down over his ears, holding a cup of hot tea in chilled fingers . . . when a distraction came walking across the grass toward him.

It was a girl about his own age—though not anyone he recognized as being at the school—and possibly the most distracting thing about her was what she was wearing.

Or rather, what she wasn't.

Despite the cold, she had no coat. All she had on was a little black-and-white-striped dress—someone who knew about such things would have recognized it as a Victoria Beckham zebra dress—that left her arms and shoulders exposed to the winter air. Wherever she was heading, Francis thought, there were good odds she would freeze to death before she got there.

From the corner of his eye he watched as, to his surprise, the girl continued to walk directly toward him until she stopped, and then sat down on the other end of the bench. The wooden slats were still coated with frost, but this did not seem to trouble her. She sat there, and stared calmly out across the field at the building on the far side, without uttering a word.

Francis had not wanted company, but he was curious. Why had she come across the field to sit beside

him? Why had she not spoken? And why was she apparently immune to the cold?

“You might want some of this,” he said, holding out his mug. “It’s only tea, but it’s warm.”

The girl turned to face him, then turned her head in the opposite direction, as if to see who he was talking to. When she realized there was nobody else, and that he must have been talking to her, a look of shocked surprise crossed her face.

“Are you . . . are you talking to me?” she asked.

“Sorry.” Francis withdrew the offered mug. “Won’t happen again.”

“You can hear me as well?”

“Yes,” said Francis. “Sorry about that, too.”

The girl frowned. “But nobody can see me! Or hear me!”

“Can’t they?”

“Unless . . .” The girl peered at him intently. “You’re not dead as well, are you?”

“I don’t think so.”

Francis did his best to keep smiling while he quietly emptied the remains of his tea onto the grass and screwed the cup back onto the thermos. It felt like it might be time to pack up and leave.

“I don’t understand . . .” The girl was still staring at him.

“You’re . . . um . . . you’re dead yourself, are you?” Francis tried to keep a casual tone in his voice as he packed his thermos into his bag.

“What? Oh . . . yes.” As if to illustrate her point, the girl lifted an arm and ran it through the planks that made up the back of the bench as if they had no more substance than smoke. “But I don’t understand why you can see me. I mean . . . nobody can!”

For several seconds, Francis did not move. Frozen, with the thermos in one hand and his bag in the other, his brain replayed, on a loop, the action he had just witnessed.

“In all the time I’ve been dead,” said the girl, “no one—I mean *no one*—has been able to see me or hear me. Not ever.”

“Would you mind,” said Francis slowly, “doing that again? The thing with your arm? Through the bench?”

“What, this?” The girl repeated the action of brushing her arm through the wooden slats behind her.

“Yes. Thank you.”

The girl looked briefly puzzled, but then her face

cleared. "Oh! You wanted to check you hadn't just imagined it!" she said.

"Yes," said Francis.

"Well, you didn't," said the girl. "I'm definitely dead, but nobody's been able to see me before. I mean, I've stood in front of people and screamed, but none of them ever . . ." She looked across at Francis. "But you can?"

Francis managed to nod.

"Well, that is just *weird!*" said the girl. "I mean, you walk around for a year, totally invisible, and then you sit down on a bench and the . . ." She looked across at Francis. "You gave me quite a fright!" She paused again before adding, "I suppose it must have been a bit of a shock for you, too."

"It was a bit," said Francis. "Still is, really."

"I don't understand it." The girl shook her head. "No one's ever been able to see me. I mean . . . I'm dead!"

"How?" asked Francis.

"What?"

"I just wondered how you'd died."

"Oh, I see." The girl gave a little shrug. "I can't remember that bit. I suppose I must have been killed in

an accident or something. All I know is I found myself at the hospital one evening, and I was . . .”

“Dead?” suggested Francis.

“Yes.”

“And nobody could see you or hear you . . .”

“No.”

“Right . . . That must have been . . . Right . . .”

There was a long silence, which was eventually broken by the sound of the school bell signaling the end of lunch break.

“That bell means you have to go in to class, doesn’t it?” said the girl.

Francis agreed that it did. He picked up his lunch box and put it in his bag, but made no move to leave.

“The thing is . . .” said the girl, “I wonder . . . would you mind coming back? After?”

“You mean at the end of school?”

“Yes. I don’t mind waiting. Like I said, nobody’s been able to see me or hear me before. And it’s . . . good to have someone to talk to.”

“Okay,” said Francis.

“You don’t mind?”

“No.” Francis stood up and pulled the bag on to his shoulder. “No, that . . . that’d be fine.”

He took a few steps in the direction of the school.

“I’m Jessica,” said the girl. “Jessica Fry.”

“Francis,” said Francis. “Francis Meredith.”

On his way back to the main building, it briefly crossed his mind to skip class, go to the office, and tell someone what had just happened. He wondered what they would do. Would they call the hospital? His mother? A psychiatrist?

Not that it mattered, he thought, because he had no intention of telling anyone that he had just met a ghost on his lunch break.

He had quite enough problems without claiming he could see dead people.