Ghost Girl

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Extract

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Chapter One

There were 152 miles between the city and Falls River and from there another 23 miles to Pecking. All of it was prairie, wide flat, and open, interrupted only by the interstate. There were towns along the way, of course, although "town" was a rather grand description for most of them. The names, however, were always hopeful: Harmony, New Marseilles, Valhalla.

I'd alloted myself two and a half hours to cover the distance, setting off in the early morning darkness with an egg salad sandwhich and a thermos of coffee. Given no nasty surprises in the January weather, I anticipated reaching Pecking by eight.

For much of the way mine was the only car on the road. In and around Falls River there was the bustle of rush hour traffic, but otherwise, nothing disturbed the white emptiness of the plains for mile

after mile. A faint breeze eddied powderlike snow across the highway, making the tracks of my tires disappear in a white sky. A litter of sundogs scampered in an arc around it. Passing through one small town, I peered down the main street. The time-and-temperature sign read –38°.

I was born and bred in the Montana Rockies, and my heart had remained in wide, wild places. Despite the enjoyable stimulation of city living, I found the confinement, the dirt, and especially the noise, oppressive. Consequently, what absorbed me most as I drove across the snow-covered prairie that January morning was not thoughts of the new life which lay ahead but rather a simple sense of unbridled freedom. I'd escaped from the city. I was alone with all that silent space around me, and the sense of deliverance it gave me verged on the ecstatic. I don't believe I actually thought about where I was going at all.

Fact was, it probably wasn't so much a case of not thinking as daring not to think. After nearly three years as a research coordinator and therapist at the Sandry Clinic, I'd thrown it all over in one wholly impulsive moment. Opening the Sunday newspaper one weekend before Christmas, I'd seen an advertisement for a special education teacher to fill a midyear vacancy in a class for the behaviorally disordered. A perfectly straightforward ad. Straightforward enough response, too. I saw it and I *wanted* it.

The strange part was that I hadn't been looking for a new job at the time. I hadn't even been thinking of looking. My time at the Sandry had been

thoroughly enjoyable and professionally fulfilling. Staffed by seven psychiatrists and a handful of specialized psychologists like myself, the clinic was small, private, and pleasantly situated. I'd been taken on mainly for research expertise and for my experience in treating children with language-related psychological problems. In the years that followed, I'd often worked very hard and certainly there'd been a fair share of ups and downs, but the challenges had been worth it. I really did think I was happy there. Nothing available on a conscious level had clued me in to any desire to chuck the large, airy therapy room full of toys, the genial group of colleagues, and the stimulating research for another chance to gird my loins in denim and crawl around on some dusty classroom floor for the kind of money that would have paid traveling expenses at the clinic. But the Siren called and without a backward glance, I responded.

Like so many other little communities I'd passed through on my drive from the city, Pecking was in a state of sleepy decay. The wide, tree-lined streets testified to a time before the railroad had pulled out, before the interstate had passed it by, but now it stood, a wan ghost of small-town America, its A&W root beer stand still there but abandoned, its "Drink Coca-Cola" girl still gamely smiling from her faded mural on the side wall of the savings-and-loan building. The downtown district was virtually gone, all the big stores having moved to the shopping mall in Falls River. There was still a bank and a drugstore, a couple of cafés, a real estate agent,

and a gas station on Main Street, and around the corner on First Street, a ranch store that sold saddles, boots, and hats, but there was no shopping district. What was available in Pecking had relocated far out on the southern fringe in an effort to tempt drivers from the interstate. A "shopping center" had been built there a few years before, and it consisted of a supermarket, another drugstore, and a parking lot so spacious it could no doubt have accommodated every car within five miles of Pecking and then some.

The school was on a side street two blocks over from Main. Built in 1898, it had once been the Pecking high school. The beautifully carved wooden plaque attesting to this status still hung above the door, although the word "High" had long since been puttied in. I didn't know how many schools there must have been in Pecking during its heyday, but this was all that was left now. An enormous monstrosity built from local sandstone, it housed grades K to six and the only special education classroom in the district.

"Good morning!" came a cheerful voice as I ascended the broad stone steps. One of the double doors swung open for me, and there stood Glen Tinbergen, the principal. "Getting settled in?"

"Just about," I replied and stamped snow from my feet. "But I don't get the keys to the apartment until Friday, so I've come down from the city this morning."

"Good gracious. All the way from the city this morning?" He was a tall man, and thin, wearing a

gray suit. I guessed him to be in his midforties, although he had one of those soft, mild faces that could be any age. His smile was welcoming. "Well, I do hope you get settled in all right. Hope you find Pecking just what you want. We're so glad to have you." We started down the hallway. "I'll introduce you to the staff at lunchtime, but for now, I'm sure you're anxious to get to your room. It's all ready for you."

My new classroom was on the second floor, last room on the left. I hadn't seen it previously. They'd been in an understandable hurry to fill the vacancy, and I was too far away to manage anything more than the interviews and an afternoon's apartment hunting; so I was braced for the worst, knowing only too well the penchant principals had for sticking their special classes into libraries, ex-closets, or other unaccommodating places. What a pleasant surprise when I discovered myself in a spacious corner room with large windows running along two adjacent walls to give a panoramic view of the snowy schoolyard and the ancient elms bordering it. The room had been laid out carefully in an orderly but welcoming fashion, and my heart warmed to my predecessor. I knew nothing about her nor why she had left so unexpectedly, just before the Christmas holidays, and I hadn't felt I should pry, since no one offered any information; however, judging from the friendly look of the room, I was sure I would have liked her.

Adjacent to the room was an old-fashioned cloakroom with lines of coat hooks running down

opposite walls and long, narrow benches beneath for sitting on to remove boots and such. The teacher's desk had been pushed in at one end of the cloakroom, and this idea impressed me. I'd never known what to do with a desk I could rarely sit at, and this seemed a nice solution to keeping it out of the way, yet accessible. Pulling open one of the bottom drawers, I dropped my sack lunch into it.

"Of course, you can change things to suit your taste," Mr. Tinbergen said as I removed my jacket and hung it on one of the hooks. "We've kept everything the way Mrs. Harriman had it, just for the kids' sakes. And for the substitutes'. Three whole weeks of 'em. The kids. God bless 'em, have had a lot to put up with. Been hard on them. How many substitutes have there been? Eight? Nine? I've lost count—too many, that's for sure. So I've tried to keep things familiar. But it's your room now. If you want to change things around, feel free."

Mr. Tinbergen had migrated back into the main classroom and was pushing chairs in around the several small tables dotted around the room to make a tidier arrangement. "Do you want me to stay? To introduce you to the kids?"

I didn't, to be honest. What I really wanted was some time to myself to go through the files again, to look at what the children had been doing, to acquaint myself with the nooks and crannies of the classroom and generally suss out my little queendom. However, not knowing him, I didn't think I'd better say that, so I smiled, nodded, and said it would be very nice, if he wanted to stay.

There were only four children in this class, making it the smallest I'd ever had outside an institution. Given this, the beautifully appointed classroom, the friendly principal, and the chance to live away from the city, I congratulated myself. Impulsive as the decision had been, it was a good move.

At quarter of nine, the first child arrived, tugged into the classroom by his mother. Reuben was a beautiful kid. At nine he was tall and slim, with an exquisitely well-formed body. His hair was dark and glossy, cut in a Dutch-boy style, which gave him a quaint, not-quite-real appearance, rather as if he were an actor preparing for a period part. His eyes, large and dark, looked everywhere but at me.

The diagnosis in the file said autism, and it took only a few minutes with him to realize it was accurate. Reuben functioned well, however, within the confines of his handicap. He could speak, use the toilet, and perform a number of academic feats with considerable skill.

Only child of a middle-aged professional couple, Reuben had had many advantages and a great deal of time spent in an effort to assuage the effects of the autism. He'd been to California, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina to participate in programs designed to modify the more difficult behaviors. At home he had two "nannies" employed specifically to see that Reuben got through his daily exercises and programming, had his vitamins, and was otherwise encouraged to follow various professional recommendations to ameliorate his handicap. And he had swimming lessons and piano

lessons, not only for the experiences they provided but also to give Reuben a chance to mix with ordinary children. Despite both working in Falls River, his parents had specifically chosen to build their new home on a twenty-acre tract outside Pecking in the belief that a rural environment with its more varied seasons, clear-cut cycles, and numerous hands-on experiences would be better for Reuben than life in town. And it was they, Mr. Tinbergen pointed out, who had sought to have a special education program available locally for their son. Previously, all special education students had been bussed into Falls River, but Dr. and Mrs. Adams had been persistent and were influential enough in their own right to have seen the formation of this small class four years earlier. Unspoken but unmistakable was Mr. Tinbergen's intimation that we all had to kowtow a bit to the Adamses, as without them, none of this would have been.

After getting Reuben settled with a toy at one of the tables, I turned to see a small face peering through the window of the classroom door. "Hello," I said. "Is this your room?"

The door cracked open to reveal a small girl with thin, matchstick legs and pinched features dwarfed further by what could only be described as a Pre-Raphaelite hair style—a great wodge of dark, curly hair parted unevenly down the middle and descending over her back in a sheet. She was attractive in a pale, overwhelmed sort of way.

I knew immediately who this was—Jade Ekdahl—simply because she was the only girl in the

class. What had caught my eye immediately in reading Jade's file was the fact that she was an elective mute. Although reportedly she talked at home, at school she had never uttered a word to anyone. Indeed, not only did she not talk, she also did not laugh, cry, cough, burp, hiccup or even sniffle, which, tales had it, left snot to drip inelegantly down from her nose into her lap. She had been retained an extra year in kindergarten in hopes that time might help her overcome her speaking difficulties, but nothing had changed. She'd been promoted on to first grade, where she seemed competent enough at her schoolwork, but she was dismally isolated. Still not speaking at the end of that year and by now almost eight, she was moved down the hall to this room.

The reason that Jade's case had caught my eye was that for the better part of the previous ten years, from college right through my work at the Sandry Clinic, my special research interest had been elective mutism. Fascinated by this disturbance, in which an individual is physically and intellectually capable of speaking normally but refuses to do so for psychological reasons, I had worked with these children extensively. Now I found it quirky that on finally deciding to end all that, who should turn up in my class but another elective mute. You're blessed with them, Mr. Tinbergen had remarked when I pointed out this coincidence. I'd replied something along the lines of not so much being blessed with them as haunted by them.

"Good morning, Jadie," Mr. Tinbergen said. "Come on in. This is your new teacher. Your real teacher, not just another substitute."

Jadie—as everyone called her—glanced up at me briefly and then scuttled by to hang up her coat in the cloakroom. What I noticed immediately was her posture, quite unlike anything I'd previously encountered while treating elective mutes. Hunched over almost double, she had her arms crossed and tucked up under her, as if she were clutching an unwieldy load of books. I made a mental note to inquire about scoliosis.

The two final pupils arrived by bus and so came into the classroom together. Six-year-old Philip was a small skinny black kid with a horsey-looking face. His hair was cut very short and his two front teeth stuck out, emphasizing the equine likeness. Born in Chicago to a mother addicted to hard drugs, Philip had had a very unpromising start to life. He'd been premature, addicted himself, and had failed to thrive throughout much of his first year of life. As he passed through a series of foster homes during the times his mother felt unable to cope with him, his development had been slow, erratic, and often unreported so that when, at age three, he was finally taken permanently from his mother's care, no one had any realistic idea what Philip was capable of. When he was five, he was placed in a long-term foster home with a local couple who had taken several other "hard-to-place" children and were raising them successfully. Without a doubt, the newfound warmth and stability were good for

Philip, but he had made dishearteningly little progress. Although he grunted and gestured, he still had virtually no speech. He urinated in the toilet but would only open his bowels when wearing a special diaper, which had resulted in horrific bouts of constipation and frequently soiled pants. And he had made almost no academic progress in two years at school. A class for mildly mentally handicapped children probably would have been a more appropriate placement for his educational needs; however, Philip's behavior made him unwelcome. Racked with fears, he was withdrawn and unwilling to approach new situations, and when frustrated, he responded with panicky violence.

The final student was Jeremiah, eight. A native American of Sioux descent, he was the oldest of five children in a family eking out a living doing God-knows-what on a five-acre tract of land littered with rusting car bodies and old stoves. Jeremiah was a fighter. His pugnacious behavior was so extreme, his mouth so foul that the parents in his previous school had banded together to keep him from returning, even with resource help. So he'd ended up here in a last-ditch attempt to save him from custodial detention. I had an irrational love for this sort of kid, for the loud, feisty, streetwise ones who never knew quite how to quit, and the moment I saw him with his black hair stuck straight up, as if it had never seen a comb, and his cocky little rooster strut, I knew I'd found another one.

"Well, children," Mr. Tinbergen said cheerfully, when everyone had arrived, "guess what? This is

your new teacher. *Your* new teacher. Not just another substitute, but your own teacher. Miss Hayden. Miss Torey Hayden. And she says you may call her Torey. That's what her other boys and girls have called her. So let's say hello to Torey."

All four children stared at me. No one spoke.

"Well, come on, now. Let's make Torey feel welcome. Reuben? Can you say good morning?"

"Good morning," Reuben echoed in a singsong falsetto.

"Philip?"

Philip grunted and hid his head in his arms.

"Jeremiah?"

His grunt was not much more intelligible than Philip's.

"And Jadie says hello, too, don't you, Jadie?" Then Mr. Tinbergen turned to me. "Welcome to P.S. 168. Welcome to our school."

I smiled self-consciously.

"And now, I'll let you go. I'm sure you're anxious to get on with things." With that, Mr. Tinbergen finally went out the door.

Pressing it gently shut behind him, I turned back to the class, to the four of them sitting around the table. "Well," I said, "good morning. Good morning to you, Philip. And to you, Reuben. And to you, Jeremiah. And good morning to you. Jade—Jadie? Is that what you like people to call you?"

"She don't talk, so you might as well not make a point of it," Jeremiah said.

"I can still talk to her," I replied.

"Oh Jesus," Jeremiah replied and rolled his eyes. "You're not going to be one of *them* teachers, are you? Not one of them always wanting her own way."

"Is that what you're worried about?" I asked.

"Is that what you're worried about?" he mimicked perfectly. "Oh Jesus, you guys, listen to her. Listen to that boogy old broad."

I grinned. Back in the saddle again.