

1: INVISIBLE GIRL

Nothing said lonely more than being the new kid at school. The feral cats that were my classmates scurried off to their hideaways, abandoning me with the other runts. I don't know where they went, but I knew if I tried to follow them or get their attention, they'd flash me an indifferent look and run away.

I'd hoped today would be different. Maybe I could actually make eye contact with one of them so I could confirm I wasn't just some ghost wandering the dusty tomb that was MacKenzie King School.

Nothing made me feel more invisible than the ancient hallway. Built before my grandparents were born, the school showed every one of its years. The rusted pipes above the hallway dripped on the cracked floor tiles. Water stains marked the faded paint on the walls and the floor bubbled from flood damage. The corridor reeked of stale B.O., mould, and body spray. The

kids ignored the rundown place with the same indifference they ignored me.

At my old school, I had grown comfortable with my rank in the social order. I was somewhere near the top, thanks to my best friend Jen and her ability to snark out pretty well anyone. She had a reputation for cutting down others, but she only picked on the people who pretended to be better than everyone else. She never preyed on obvious targets or the ones who couldn't return fire. Everyone adored her because of this, and as long as I was with her, the kids liked me as well. I could use Jen right about now to snark out the self-important kids strutting toward the cafeteria, led by a Goth girl in Doc Marten boots and faux leather.

Mom had moved us from our quiet suburban home on the outskirts of Edmonton to the inner city to be nearer to her downtown office job. After Dad decided he'd had enough of Mom and me and took off on us, we needed to save money. That meant I had to start over in the middle of my grade nine year at MacKenzie King. Unlike my father, I hated starting over. Different teachers, different students, different everything. I wanted my old life back with my old room, my old hangouts, and my old friends.

I found a clean spot at one of the grungy

tables and opened my paper bag lunch. A bottle of orange juice crushed a stale sprout and cucumber sandwich at the bag's bottom. I rescued my sandwich, unsealed the plastic bag, and peeled my lunch out. The cucumbers slipped out of the bread like the paper debris of a kindergartener's failed art project. I stuffed the soggy white and green discs back between the slices. I missed the fried rice and barbecue pork buns my grandmother used to make for me. Now I was stuck with whatever Mom could pull together before she headed off to work.

I scanned the room as I bit into the sandwich.

A boy sat at a nearby table. His bangs hung over his brown eyes. You could tell a lot about a person by the way he carried himself, and this guy was trouble. He propped one foot on the empty chair beside him, showing off his crud-encrusted blue jeans. No one else sat with him, but his casual slouch suggested he couldn't care less about the company he kept.

He rubbed his finger across the side of his mouth as he grinned at me. I scrunched my face, unsure of the signal. His tongue darted out and licked the corner of his lips.

Ew, I thought. Was he coming on to me?

He licked again. I stared at my sandwich and pretended to ignore him.

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Moments later, the squeak of rubber-soled footsteps stopped beside me.

Please don't be him. Please don't be him. I slowly peeked up at a Bowser T-shirt hanging loosely over a scrawny frame.

"You have a sprout hanging off your lip."

My hand instinctively reached up to my lips. He was right. My face reddened as I plucked the sprig out of my mouth and laid it on the plastic wrap. He wasn't trying to come on to me.

"Name's Dylan Parker," he said. "Saw you in science class yesterday. You're new here."

I nodded.

"What's your name, sprout girl?"

"Kristina Mah," I said. A couple of half-chewed bits of sandwich tumbled out.

Dylan smiled. "First time with your new mouth?"

I covered my mouth and tried to swallow.

"Don't worry about it, Kristina. Everyone's staring at their smartphones. The only way you could get them to look up is if you yelled." He glanced at the crowd and shouted, "Zombie!"

Several kids stirred. One rolled her eyes at Dylan and resumed texting. No one cared. A hint of a smile crept across my face. "I see you're not obsessed with tweets and pics."

He shrugged. "Can't play decent games on

a smartphone. If someone could come up with a *Mega Man* app, maybe I'd play. *Mega Man* is an old Capcom game," he added.

"Dr. Wily always creeped me out," I said.

He raised an eyebrow and nodded. "I'm impressed. You an old-school gamer?"

"Does Mario have an evil twin?" I said. "You want to split the rest of my sandwich?"

He laughed. "No, I'm not a fan of cucumber farts."

"What's your favourite game?"

"Ever hear of *Hogan's Alley*?"

"Nintendo? I loved that one," I said. "The gun was glitchy, but the game was still fun. I always shot the old man."

"You know you're not supposed to shoot bystanders, right?"

"Oh, really? I wish I knew that before."

He grinned. "I played *Grand Theft Auto* before it was cool."

Though I figured my nerd status was growing with each minute I talked games with Dylan, I didn't mind the company. The bell interrupted our conversation.

"What class do you have?" he asked.

"Language arts," I said.

"Oh right. You joined a couple days ago. Follow me. I know a shortcut."

He led me into the mosh pit of students in the school hallway, pushing past the slackers leaning against the walls and around the jocks, who refused to get out of the way for anyone.

“Coming through. Radioactive isotopes. Move aside. Dangerous materials.” Dylan rattled off odd-ball warnings as we navigated through the crowd.

“What are you doing?”

He glanced back. “It’s a game I play to see what gets people’s attention. So far, not much. Once, I thought a girl noticed me when I said I spotted Taylor Swift but it turned out she was just talking to her friend.”

“You’re the invisible man,” I joked.

“Yeah, unseen to everyone except my own kind.”

My heart sank with the realization that Dylan was right. Not a single person even glanced my way. We climbed the steps to the second floor. As we reached the landing, Dylan made the sign of the cross.

“Are you religious?” I asked.

“Only in this stairwell.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just walk fast.”

He sprinted up the stairs, two at a time, and then waited for me at the top as I hauled myself up by the banister.

“Want to fill me in there, Mega Man?” I asked, panting.

“Just a superstition,” he muttered.

We continued in awkward silence to the language arts classroom. Dylan split away and headed to his desk while I headed for my seat at the back.

I’d just pulled out my books when the Goth girl with the Doc Marten boots stopped in front of me. “You’re. In. My. Chair.”

Seriously?

“Sorry,” I mumbled as I got up and scanned the room for another empty seat.

Our teacher shuffled in, sporting a tweed jacket with elbow patches, a green bow-tie and black slacks covered with cat hair.

“Social time is over,” he announced. “Take your seats.”

The cool kids reluctantly broke off their conversations and eased into their desks.

“Today we move on to monsters. In particular, Frankenstein’s monster.”

Mr. Carlton tapped his computer keyboard several times. At the front of the room, the SmartBoard flickered on. A dim black-and-white image of a square-headed man appeared on the screen. The metal bolts sticking out of his neck gave away his identity—Frankenstein’s

monster. Then another image phased in over the monster—an old-fashioned lantern with a candle burning within.

I glanced around the class wondering if anyone else saw the same image. Mr. Carlton had his back to the SmartBoard. The other students slouched in their seats, barely paying attention to the image.

Slowly, I raised my hand. “Uh, sir. I think something’s wrong with the projection.”

Mr. Carlton squinted up from the keyboard. The image of the lantern was gone. Now only Frankenstein’s monster stared at the classroom. He sighed. “This is a publicity still from a time when movies were black and white. Shocking, I know, but now you can tell your friends you saw something before HD was invented. So, let’s examine what Frankenstein’s monster represented.”

Our teacher scooped up a black marker and strolled to the whiteboard. He began to scrawl the words “Dangerous Knowledge.”

Beside him, the SmartBoard screen flickered again and the lantern returned. No one else seemed to notice. They just scribbled notes in their books.

Across the room, I saw Dylan stiffen.
A girl’s voice whispered, “Help me.”

The only other person in the room that seemed to have heard the voice was Dylan, who clapped his hands over his ears. On the screen, one of the lantern's glass panels began opening by itself and the flicker of a flame ignited on the wick. I could just make out eyes staring at me from within the flame.

Then something or someone pounded on the ceiling above us. I jumped in my seat.

"What is that?" I blurted out.

Mr. Carlton sighed. "It's just the boiler kicking in and heating up the pipes."

Around me, the kids snickered. I returned my gaze to the lantern on the board. I was sure I saw eyes inside the flames, which grew brighter and brighter. Then the noise stopped and the image was gone.

Dylan uncovered his ears while our teacher droned on about *Frankenstein*. "Victor Frankenstein's monster is a symbol of the folly of humankind seeking knowledge. If you're going to open a door, you may not like what comes through."

I tuned out Mr. Carlton as I stared at the screen, willing the lantern image to return. It did not, and neither did the girl's voice.

After class, I intercepted Dylan at the doorway. "Tell me you saw what I did."

“Shh!” Dylan glanced at the teens walking by then pulled me into the hallway. “Keep your voice down, Kristina. You don’t want anyone to think you’re crazy.”

“I know what I saw, and I’m pretty sure you saw it, too.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The lantern and the eyes in the flame,” I said.

He began to chew on his lower lip. “Did you also hear the voice?”

I nodded. “What was it?”

“My brother says the school is haunted.”

I laughed. “I’m not ten years old, Dylan.”

“I didn’t believe it at first, either. Thought it was one of those dumb urban legends the ninth graders told to scare the seventh graders. But it definitely looks like this place is haunted.”

“What’s the story? Let me guess. You say ‘Bloody Mary’ in front of a mirror five times and she comes to kill you. Oooo.”

“Hey, I’m just telling you what I’ve heard.”

“Why didn’t the others see what we did?”

“I don’t know. It’s like they can’t see what’s going on around them. Maybe if their phones were haunted, they might notice. The teachers brush off the flickering lights and weird noises because it’s an old school.”

“But you heard the sounds from the ceiling, right?” I asked.

He glanced up and nodded.

“So I’m not crazy.”

“I’d rather go with being nuts than the other explanation.”

“Which is?”

“The ghosts have chosen us,” he whispered.

The temperature in the hall seemed to drop a few degrees. Goosebumps popped up all along my exposed forearms. I pulled my green sweater sleeves over my wrists. But curiosity tickled the back of my neck like an itch I needed to scratch.


“You coming?” he asked.

“You go ahead. I’ll catch up.”

“It’s your funeral.” He hustled away.

I crept toward the SmartBoard. Maybe there was something behind it, I thought. But the screen seemed to be firmly attached to the wall. I inspected the white screen, searching for a hint or afterimage of the lantern. Nothing.

The noise above picked up again. I stepped back from the screen. The sound grew louder. The screen flickered to life. The image of the lantern returned, clearer than before. The lantern’s cap resembled an overturned funnel, marked with the faint impression of a majestic bird spreading its wings.



The lantern's flame grew larger and I could make out the eyes within the fire. The outline of a girl's coffee-coloured face began to come into focus. Her intense gaze stunned me. One eye was blue and the other was green. She had a beauty mark on her right cheek, and she seemed to be mouthing something at me. Part of me wanted to run, but my curiosity rooted my feet to the floor.

I leaned closer and watched her lips. The girl in the flames mouthed the same words again and again: "*Help me.*"