Friends for Life
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For all the Jessicas
and the people who loved them.
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.
When he came out of school at three fifteen and saw Jessica waiting for him on the bench, Francis’s first feeling was one of relief. A part of him had half expected to discover that the meeting at lunchtime had been some sort of delusion, and the sight of Jessica, waiting as she had promised, was oddly reassuring.

She had, he saw, changed her clothes. The zebra dress had gone and she was now wearing jeans and a puffer coat, with a pair of Uggs on her feet and a knitted hat on her head. She stood up as he approached.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.” Francis stopped in front of her.

There was a slightly awkward pause.

“If we try and talk out here,” said Jessica, “you’ll freeze. Is there somewhere we could go?”
“You could come home if you like,” suggested Francis. “That is . . . if you can. Are ghosts allowed to move around?”

“I don’t know about other ghosts,” said Jessica, “but this one can go where she wants. Is it far?”

“About five minutes. I live on Alma Road.” Francis led the way toward the school entrance. “You changed.”

“You mean the clothes?”

“Yes. How does that work exactly? You have like a . . . a ghost wardrobe somewhere?”

“I can wear whatever I like,” said Jessica. “When I first found I was dead, I was in this hospital gown, and it was weeks before I realized I didn’t have to be.” She glanced across at Francis. “I just have to think about it.”

“That’s all? You just think?”

“It takes a bit of concentration,” said Jessica, “but . . . yes.”

She paused midstride for a moment, there was a faint blurring around her body, and the jeans and puffer coat disappeared, to be replaced by the zebra dress she had been wearing earlier.

“That . . . is a neat trick,” said Francis.
“I saw a picture of it in a magazine someone was reading,” said Jessica, “and I thought . . . why not? You can’t feel the cold when you’re a ghost, you see.”

“Useful,” said Francis.

“And it’s kind of fun.” Jessica switched back to the jeans and coat. “You see something you like, no need to wonder how much it would cost. Just think yourself into it.”

“So it’s not all bad?” said Francis. “The being dead thing, I mean.”

“Well, it’s not what I expected.” Jessica frowned. “Not that I expected anything, really. I thought once you died that was the end, and everything stopped. Nobody ever warned me I could wind up as a ghost.” She paused. “But I suppose it’s all right, once you get used to it. It’s . . . kind of peaceful, you know?”

“Peaceful is good,” Francis agreed.

“A bit lonely sometimes, but I never get tired, or hungry. There’s nobody telling me where to go or how to behave. I can do whatever I want.”

“And what do you do?”

“Oh, you know . . . go here and there.” Jessica waved an arm vaguely in the direction of the town. “There’s
things going on all over the place, and I can watch any of it.”

“But you can’t talk to anyone.”

“No.”

“Not even other ghosts?”

“I’ve never met any other ghosts,” said Jessica. “I don’t even know if there are any. Which is odd, if you think about it.” She looked carefully at Francis. “It doesn’t bother you, does it?”

“What?”

“Me being a ghost.”

Francis considered this. He had been bothered, when he first saw Jessica, that she might be crazy—or that he might be going crazy himself—but when she had put her arm through the back of the bench to show that she was a ghost . . . that part hadn’t bothered him at all. Surprised him, certainly, but not bothered.

“I think if I’d seen a ghost,” said Jessica, “you know, when I was alive, I’d have run a mile. But I could see it didn’t really worry you, did it?”

“No,” said Francis. “No, it didn’t.”

It had probably helped, he thought, that it had all happened in daylight—out in the sunshine with the
sounds of a busy school in the background—but it wasn’t just that. There was something about the girl walking beside him that made it impossible to be frightened of her. Everything about her—apart from the fact that she was dead—was too normal to be scary.

It also helped that, for some reason, he liked her.

“I suppose,” said Jessica, “you’re one of those strong, silent types who aren’t really frightened of anything.”

“Oh, definitely.” Francis pushed open a gate and led the way up the path to the door of a tall, redbrick, Victorian terraced house.

“Mr. Fearless. That’s me.”

Jessica followed Francis into a narrow hallway, dominated by an enormous oil painting in an elaborate gilt frame. It was a full-length portrait of a severe-looking man in naval uniform, with gold epaulets on his shoulders and one hand resting on the sword at his waist.

“Wow,” she said. “Who’s he?”

“The Admiral.” Francis pulled off his coat and hung it on a stand. “My great-great-grandfather.”

He picked up his bag and headed for the stairs.
“I just have to get changed. Won’t be a minute.”

He went up the stairs two at a time and, in his bedroom, quickly changed from school clothes into jeans and a T-shirt. He came out to find Jessica waiting for him on the landing. She had gotten rid of the puffer coat and the woolen hat, and was wearing a loosely fitting knitted top with the jeans.

She was looking at another portrait, almost as large as the one in the hall downstairs, but this time of a young woman in a dress from the 1920s. She was standing with one arm resting on a rather grand fireplace, looking out of the picture and laughing.

“Who’s this one?” she asked.


Jessica nodded as she continued to study the painting.

“You can tell a lot about people from the clothes they’re wearing, can’t you?” she said. “The Admiral downstairs, for instance. His uniform’s all buttoned up, and it holds him in, like all the rules he has to obey.” She gestured to the picture in front of her. “But what she’s wearing is loose and free. You can see she’s not held in by anything, and she likes it.”
She turned to Francis, as if expecting him to say something. But he didn’t.

“Sorry. I forgot. Boys aren’t really interested in clothes, are they?” She moved toward the stairs. “Are we going back down?”

“I just have to put this in my room.” Francis was holding his schoolbag and heading toward another, narrower flight of stairs that led up rather than down.

“I thought that was your room.” Jessica pointed to the bedroom.

“That’s where I sleep,” said Francis. “I have another room upstairs for . . . other stuff.”

“Can I see?”

Francis very nearly said no. In fact, the words were already forming in his head to explain why she couldn’t—that there was nothing up there, that they’d be more comfortable down in the kitchen, that he was hungry and needed something to eat—but for some reason those were not the words that came out. He never really knew why. Except that it seemed to be one of those days when the ordinary rules did not apply.

“Sure,” he said. “Why not?”
Francis led the way through a door at the top of the stairs into a room that ran the entire length of the house.

The first thing Jessica noticed were the drawings taped to the wall in front of her. They were fashion designs, done mostly in pen and ink, for a series of coats, dresses, and gowns. Beneath them was a work-bench with a sewing machine, and stacked beneath that were rolls of material in a kaleidoscope of patterns and colors. To the left, under a skylight, was a table covered in a length of off-white cotton with parts of a paper pattern laid out on top. To the right, a dressmaker’s dummy stood at one end of a battered leather sofa.

They were not the sorts of things you might expect to find in a boy’s room but, most surprising of all, and only visible when she stepped into the room and looked
behind her, was a set of shelves on which were displayed several rows of dolls. There were at least fifty of them, each dressed in a different outfit.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“I told you.” Francis’s voice was studiedly neutral, but he was watching Jessica carefully as he spoke. “It’s mine. It’s where I do stuff.”

Jessica walked over to the shelves with the dolls.

“So all these are yours?”

“Yes.” Francis came over to join her. “I was trying to make a sort of illustrated history of fashion in the last fifty years.” He picked up one of the dolls. It was dressed in a studded leather jacket and had its hair cropped and dyed in the pattern of the American flag. “Each doll represents a particular style, you see? Fly girl, punk, grunge . . .”

Jessica pointed to a doll dressed in a suit of what looked like molded pink plastic. “What’s that one?”

“It’s a Miyake,” said Francis. “Japanese designer.”

Jessica turned away from the dolls for a moment and gestured to the drawings pinned on the wall opposite. “And those are all yours as well?”

Francis nodded. “I’m interested in fashion. Always have been.”
Jessica stared around her, and then her face broke into a smile. “I would have killed to have a place like this when I was alive!” she said.

Francis did not reply directly, but something in his shoulders and his face seemed to relax for the first time since they had entered the room.

“Let’s talk about fashion later,” he said. “First, I need to know more about being a ghost.”

He put the doll with the cropped hair back on the shelf and walked over to the sofa.

“So tell me,” he said as he sat down. “How did it start?”

It had started, as far as Jessica could remember, with finding herself standing at the window of a small room on the third floor of the hospital, looking out through the darkness at a parking garage on the other side of the road.

Although she could not remember how it had happened, she had known at once that she was dead. She knew it in the same way that she knew that the body under the sheet on the bed beside her had once been hers. She did not need to see the face, or read the
messages on the little cards attached to the bunches of flowers. She just knew.

Being dead, as she had told Francis earlier, did not worry her particularly. She was not in any pain or discomfort and the predominant feeling was a general sensation of calm and quiet. When the nurses came to take away the body, she had felt no inclination to follow them. It was, after all, only a body.

What did puzzle her, though, was what she was supposed to do, now that she was dead. After standing by the window for what felt like several hours, she had, for lack of anything better to do, drifted out into the corridor and then explored other parts of the hospital. She had quickly discovered that she could move through walls and doors, float up through ceilings and sink down through floors as easily as if they did not exist, and such freedom of movement might have been rather enjoyable if . . .

. . . if she had not had the nagging feeling that she had missed something.

“Missed what?” asked Francis.

“I don’t know.” Jessica’s forehead wrinkled as she searched for the best words to describe how she had felt. “It was like I knew I was supposed to do something,
only I didn’t know what. And there wasn’t anyone who could tell me.”

“So what did you do?”

“Well, I thought maybe whoever was supposed to tell me hadn’t been able to because I’d been wandering around the hospital, so I went back to the room on the third floor and waited.”

“Waited?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“In a way, I suppose I’m still waiting.” Jessica sighed. “Not all the time, obviously. During the day I go out and do stuff. But I always go back to the hospital in the evening. It’s not like I have to, but . . . well, it is a bit like that, I suppose.”

“And you think one day someone will turn up and tell you what to do?” asked Francis.

“Who knows?” Jessica gave a little shrug. “I just have this feeling that, if anything’s going to happen, it’ll be there. In that room.”

“And you’ve been going back there every night . . . for a year?”

“Yes.”
Francis gave a sympathetic whistle. “A year’s a long time.”
“I know.”
For a while, neither of them spoke, and then Jessica pointed around her to the dolls and the drawings on the walls.
“Anyway, your turn. When did all this start?”
Francis was about to answer when he was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening and someone calling from downstairs.
“That’s Mum,” he said. “Hang on. I’ll be right back.”
Francis got down to the landing on the second floor in time to see his mother, a tall, untidy-looking woman, taking off her coat in the hallway and hanging it up on the stand.
“How did it go?” asked Francis, leaning over the banister.
“Could have been worse. Sold two plates!” His mother looked up at him and smiled. “How was your day?”
“It was okay.”
“No . . . trouble or anything?”
“No. No trouble.”
“Good.” Francis’s mother was heading toward the
kitchen. “I think there’s a pizza left in the freezer. I’ll call you when it’s ready, okay?”

Francis went back upstairs to the attic, where he found Jessica dressed as she had been when they arrived, in the puffer coat, Ugg boots, and knitted hat.

“I’d better be going,” she said.

“You don’t have to,” Francis assured her. “I’ll need to go and eat at some point, but—”

“It’s getting late,” Jessica interrupted him. “I ought to get back to the hospital.” She hesitated before adding. “But I could see you tomorrow. If you like.”

“Definitely,” said Francis. “Lunchtime? Same place?”

“Okay.”

Francis moved to the stairway—he had some vague idea of walking Jessica to the front door—but she made no attempt to follow. Instead, she stared down at the carpet, seemingly lost in thought.

“Do you have any idea,” she said eventually, “why you can see me, when no one else can?”

“No,” said Francis. “Do you?”

“Not really.” Jessica looked up. “But I did wonder if maybe you were the one who could tell me what I was meant to do next.”
“I’m sorry,” said Francis. “I wish I could, but I don’t know anything about . . . ghosts. I don’t know anything about anything, really. Except clothes.”

“No . . . well, never mind.” Jessica smiled. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

And she disappeared.
When Francis walked across the playing field at lunch break the next day, Jessica was sitting on the bench waiting for him, dressed in a salmon-pink party dress.

“It’s what a woman was wearing when she came into the hospital last night,” she said, standing up to give him a twirl that revealed half a dozen petticoats. “Do you like it?”

“I do,” said Francis admiringly. “Most impressive.”

“It’s a Sarah Burton.”

“Even more impressive,” said Francis. Sarah Burton was one of his favorite designers, though this was not an outfit he recognized. “How do you know?”

“I checked the label when they were undressing her.” Jessica sat down, patting the dress over her legs. “I really ought to be wearing jewelry with it, like she was,
but I can’t do jewelry. I don’t know why. I can do shoes and hair, no problem, but when I try and imagine jewelry . . . nothing happens.”

Francis sat down beside her.

“So that’s what ghosts do in the evenings, is it? Hang around in the emergency room and check out what the patients are wearing?”

“It’s not the only thing,” said Jessica. “I like watching the operations and stuff as well. But I like seeing what people wear. I’ve always liked clothes. Even when I was little, I preferred watching Tim Gunn on TV to Peppa Pig. That’s what my gran said, anyway. And my favorite toy was always the dress-up box.”

Francis said that he had never had a dress-up box, but that he could still remember the excitement of finding his mother’s copies of *Vogue*, and how he had carried them away to his room and looked at nothing else for days. That was when he was four. When he was eight, he had asked for a sewing machine for his birthday so that he could begin making his own versions of the designs he copied from magazines or had seen in shopwindows.

Sitting on the bench in the wintry sunshine, while Francis ate his sandwiches and drank his thermos of
tea, they discovered that an interest in clothes was not the only thing they had in common. They were, for a start, almost exactly the same age—not counting Jessica’s year as a ghost—with birthdays only a week apart. They were both “only” children. They had both been brought up by single mothers, and both had had to move house unexpectedly, when they were twelve, and had not enjoyed it at all.

“I wonder,” said Jessica, “if that’s why you can see me. Because we’re so alike.”

“Not that alike,” said Francis. “One of us is dead, remember?”

“You know what I mean!” Jessica poked him with a ghostly elbow that disappeared several inches into his coat. “Having all those things in common . . . it can’t just be a coincidence, can it?”

They were still debating the possibility when the bell rang for the start of class, and it seemed only natural that, when Francis went to his class, Jessica should go with him.

She sat in a chair beside him, and although conversation was limited—at least for Francis, who had to be careful how and when he spoke to someone no one else could see—they both rather enjoyed it.
Jessica was useful, too. In the pop quiz in Mrs. Archer’s history class, Jessica was able to check around the class to see what everyone else was writing. And in Mr. Williams’s math class that followed, she was able to give Francis a wonderfully clear explanation of integer inequalities. The fact that she did it while wearing an exact copy of Mr. Williams’s shiny blue suit with all the pens in his top pocket made even that lesson . . . kind of fun.

Later, back at the attic room on Alma Road, Jessica asked what he was working on at the moment, and Francis showed her the table covered in a length of off-white cotton cloth with part of a paper pattern pinned to the top.

“It’s some cotton pinpoint I was given,” he explained, “and I thought I’d try and make a top.” He reached for a sketchbook and flipped it open. “That’s the design.”

“Neat,” said Jessica. “Who’s it for?”

“Betty.” Francis pointed to the dressmaker’s dummy standing by the sofa. “It’s just an exercise, really. Practice, you know.”
Privately, Jessica thought it was a shame that a dummy would be the only person ever to wear the clothes Francis made, but she said nothing. Instead she talked—mostly about fashion and the styles she liked and the ones she didn’t—while Francis draped the pieces of a paper pattern over the dressmaker’s dummy to check the size, and then pinned the result to the material spread out on the table before cutting them out.

He worked with an easy confidence that Jessica could not help but admire, and it was an hour or so later, seeing him hunched over the sewing machine running down a seam, that she noticed him pause for a moment to stretch his shoulders in a different direction. He’s getting a cramp, she thought, like Gran used to do. Forgetting for a moment that she was a ghost, she reached out to massage the muscles at the bottom of his neck.

Immediately, Francis stopped and turned around. “Was that you?” he asked.

“Um . . . yes . . .” Even without a body, Jessica could feel herself blushing. “I was going to rub your shoulders. It’s what I used to do for my gran.”
“But I could feel you!” Francis was puzzled. “How could I feel you touching me if you’re a ghost?”

“I don’t know.” Jessica reached forward, put her hands on his shoulders, and pushed her thumbs along the muscles of his neck. They disappeared beneath his skin. “You can feel that?”

“Oh, yes . . .” Francis leaned back so that the thumbs went even deeper, and closed his eyes. It was a strange but definitely pleasant sensation, relaxing and yet somehow invigorating at the same time. As if he were sitting out in the sun on a summer’s day, and the warmth was soaking through to his bones.

“Wow . . .” he said. “You are just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

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The next day, they met in the morning rather than at lunchtime. Francis came out of the house at quarter to nine and found Jessica waiting for him on the sidewalk, and they walked in to school together, went to class together, hung out together at recess, and returned, when school had finished, to the room at the top of the house on Alma Road.
After almost twelve hours in each other’s company, neither of them showed any signs of being bored. In that curious way these things happen sometimes, they seemed to fit together.

Which was why they did the same thing the day after . . .

And the day after . . .

And the day after that.

If someone had asked Francis if he didn’t think spending most of his waking hours with a ghost was a bit . . . odd, he would probably have agreed that it was. But he didn’t care. As the days passed, he hardly thought of Jessica as a ghost. She was simply . . . his friend. She was also the only person his own age he had ever met who could talk about synthetic fabrics as easily as most people talk about the weather, who knew the difference between a pleat and a dart, and who could recognize a Sarah Burton design when its owner was brought into the emergency room.

Compared to all that, the fact that she was dead seemed unimportant.
As for Jessica, you would probably have to have been dead for a year yourself—with no one able to see or hear you—to understand how much it meant to her to have Francis to talk to. She had not properly realized how lonely her life—or rather, her death—had been, and now she had found someone who was not only able to talk to her but was clever and funny and interesting . . .

Her only worry was that, at some point, he might want to go back to being with people who were alive—though fortunately Francis showed no signs of that at present. When she asked him once if being with her was keeping him away from his other friends, he replied, simply, that there was no one else he wanted to be with.

And it was true that he made very little effort to speak to anyone else while he was in school. For that matter, no one else seemed to make any particular effort to speak to him.

Except for Quentin, of course.

But he was not someone you could describe as a friend.