

The Ghost of Northumberland Strait

Chapter One

It's so creepy in this old house. Am I the only one who feels it or does Nikki and her newest, stupidest boyfriend sense that something's up, too? Derek seems as on edge as me but does he think anything's wrong? Does he feel someone's home and watching us break into their house, their eyes on us constantly? Seeing us treat their stuff bad?

I'll tell you, I've had my house broken into and sure didn't appreciate it. That was back in Alberta, a few years ago.

We were getting back from a long drive, the whole family. We'd been visiting Aunt Kathy and Uncle Richard over spring break, way up north in Spirit River. Nikki can always sleep in the car. Wish I could. Most of the way home, she sat there, head back, mouth open, snoring like a chainsaw. Soon as I'd start to fall asleep, I'd feel sick to my stomach.

When Dad pulled into our steep driveway, I was so relieved to finally be home. That was just way too much time to be trapped in a moving vehicle with my parents and a snoring sister. It was dark out, but as soon as the headlights hit the garage door, we all saw the damage. Dad said something I shouldn't repeat and Mom told him, "Darwin! The kids!" As if it was something I'd never heard before. Mom looked back over her shoulder at me to see if I'd burst into flame at hearing Dad swear. I just played dumb, pretended not to hear. It made Mom feel better.

The three of us hopped out as Nikki began to regain consciousness, and as soon as she understood what was going on, she was up and out of the car, too. The garage door was pried open from the bottom like a tin can. It was dented and a lot of the paint was scraped away. The thieves had stolen most of Dad's tools. Like he said, "Anything worth anything," was gone.

They weren't only thieves; they were vandals. Mom had planned to refinish the patio furniture later on that spring and had bought 4 cans of blue spray paint. There were blue streaks up and down the walls, on the concrete floor, and on the inside of the garage door. The vandals had also painted the inside of the garage window so that no light could get in. The empty cans were scattered on the floor. That mess was bad enough. Then I saw my bike.

I'd got the bike at Christmas along with promises that spring would come early that year and I could get out and ride it. Well, that hadn't happened yet. I was hoping that by the time we'd got back home from Auntie Kathy's that the snow'd be gone. It was the end of April, and our lawn was still solid white and the street in front of our house was really icy. Worse than that, it was cold. Way too cold to be out riding a new mountain bike. They'd slashed both the thick-treaded tires, taken off the seat and somehow bent the frame.

That's what stupid Mark reminds me of in this place when he cuts the rusty padlock off the latch and kicks open the door instead've just turning the knob and walking in. He

wrecks things for the sake of wrecking things. And for the sake of impressing Nikki, of course. Boys will hold their breath until they turn purple to get Nik's attention.

I wait outside for a bit on that sloping veranda, breathing in the salt air, letting them go on ahead. Our cousin Derek is with us, my Auntie Cynthia's son, my age but obnoxious. When we first moved here with Mom, we stayed with them for a bit then we moved in with Grammie. I like Grammie's house way more than Derek's. Auntie Cynthia's nice to me but I think she can be kind of mean to Mom. They're sisters.

"You comin, Charly Pederson? Or are you chicken?" he calls out to me from inside the dark hall.

"I'm not chicken, I'm just looking around out here. Is that *okay* with you?"

At the far end of the veranda, two chains, different lengths, hang and swing in the wind. Out here, on the island, lots of old houses have porch swings and I wonder if one used to hang from those chains. Back in Alberta, my best friend Allie had a swing but it was mounted on a metal frame and sat in their backyard. We had some good laughs on that swing.

A railing runs most the way around that veranda. It stops dead where it's broken away maybe from the weather and time, or maybe by other vandals like Mark. How could you know? I always want to know stuff like that, the stuff I can't know. What things used to be like and how they got to be how they are now. Mom says I'd like studying history, but when they show us those videos about Louis Riel and Cape Breton coal mining in Social Studies, I know she's wrong.

I step into the dark hall and stand there just inside the door letting my eyes get used to the gloom. I hear Nikki's voice first.

"I don't like this place, Mark. And anyway, the bell's going to go soon. We should be getting back."

"Naw. We've got lots of time. What're you afraid of? I'm right here."

Then it's Derek's turn. "Oh, brother. Knock it off, will you? That's just gross."

I know what is going on and I'm glad I'm still safe in the hallway. For a moment, I actually catch myself feeling sorry for Derek, having to watch them kiss. Getting used to the dark, I can see a dusty staircase to my right, its banister clogged with cobwebs. I wonder if Nikki saw these when she came in? I don't mind spiders but they freak her out. Bad. Heading down the hall and following the sound of their voices, I find them in the kitchen.

"Hey, chicken. You made it in."

"Shut up, Derek." And he does.

"Dark in here." This is Mark's brilliant observation. He thinks that because he's in Grade Eleven, he automatically knows everything. Nikki's boyfriend swaggers over to one of the kitchen windows and gives the yellowed, brittle shade a hard tug. It rolls up with a snap! And in a burst of dust. Now we can better see what the place looks like. It's like lots of kitchens I'd seen in prairie museums on summer vacations – only less lived-in. But that's more the smell than the look. The air's stale, kind of like the air in our garden shed back home when it got really hot out.

There's a counter, pretty low, and a deep sink with a few black spots where the enamel had chipped away. There's a fridge, a broom and dustpan in the corner, a square, wooden table and four chairs. Everything has a layer of dust on it and Derek is busy writing his name and drawing silly faces on every surface with his finger.

Mark lets out a low whistle. "Check this." He points to the black and silver wood-burning stove with his free hand, the one not clutching Nikki's waist. "The rocking chair's right there – just like they say."

"Who says?" Nikki asks, looking around the room as if expecting something to leap out at her from the shadows.

"Everybody round here. That's who. You haven't heard the story of the O'Leary house?" Mark talks about it like it's world-famous. Grammie told me the story but Stupid's already launching into it so I'll have to hear it again. Good story – when Grammie told it.

"You like ghost stories?" she'd asked me, handing me a steaming mug of tea, sweet with sugar. We were at Grammie's kitchen table the Monday after we'd moved in there and I'd just got back from school. It'd been a better day than I'd been having so far. Maybe mom was right. Maybe things would get easier after I'd settled in a bit. Grammie had a deck of cards lying on the plastic cloth between us. She was going to teach me to play Queens.

"Sure. There ghosts around here?" She'd got me curious.

"Are there ghosts?" Grammie sat down across from me. "Charly girl, you can't imagine! There're stories up and down this Island about ghosts and goblins and about things folks just can't explain." She leaned toward me. "Strange things. Spooky things."

"I don't care so much about ghosts from other places but what about from right here? In your town? You got ghosts right here?"

"Well, yes. Of course, there're ghosts from around here. I used to know one of them." She sipped her tea, watching me over the rim of her mug.

"What?"

"Mmm-hmm. I used to be friends with a current ghost when she wasn't yet a ghost – before she died, that is."

"No way."

"Oh, yes way."

"How'd she die then?"

"Murdered. Thrown down a well. I sure did miss her after it happened." With that, Grammie gave a long sigh and started to deal. "Okay, dear, we each get eight cards. Your sister joining us or is she going to stay up in her room?"

"Grammie!"

"What? What's the problem?"

"You can't just tell me that you were friends with a ghost and then play cards! You're making it up anyway. You're just teasing."

"No. I'm certainly not." But I could tell she was trying not to smile. Grammie's nice, but she thinks she's funny. She stopped dealing. Three cards lay in front of me facedown.

“Want to hear the whole story? It takes a while, and I can’t tell it and play cards at the same time. I take both my cards and my storytelling too seriously to play and talk. So which will it be?”