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Opening extract from

A Crack in Everything

Written by

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Published by

O'Brien Press Ltd

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A Crack In Everything

First published 2014 by The O'Brien Press Ltd,
12 Terenure Road East, Rathgar, Dublin 6, Ireland.
Tel: +353 1 4923333; Fax: +353 1 4922777
E-mail: books@obrien.ie
Website: www.obrien.ie

ISBN: 978-1-84717-635-6

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
19 18 17 16 15 14

Cover image courtesy of iStockphoto
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
The paper in this book is produced using pulp from managed forests.

CHAPTER ONE

Stepping Sideways

Izzy had only just pushed down the lever on the toaster when it exploded with an audible pop. Sparks flared up like fireworks and pungent black smoke filled the kitchen.

Dad cursed loudly – words he seriously wasn't meant to say in front of her – and jumped up from the kitchen table.

'Stand back from the bloody thing,' he said and ripped the plug from the wall. 'Are you okay, Izzy?'

She nodded, trying not to inhale the acrid fumes. 'Fine, Dad. I'm fine.' He looked comical standing there with the cord swinging from his hand like a pendulum, glaring at the toaster as if he had a lifelong grudge against it.

It wasn't like this was the first time. She knew the drill. She punched the switch on the extractor fan and opened the windows while Dad prodded the toaster suspiciously, waiting for it to attack again.

A deathly silence settled over the kitchen until Mum rustled the paper. 'The technological curse is definitely hereditary then, is it?'

Izzy grinned, aware from her mother's voice that she was stifling laughter. She couldn't help herself. It was funny.

Dad gave an affronted huff. 'Your daughter wasn't hurt, since you're so concerned.'

'Oh, good. That's a relief, as always. What item is going to suffer the wrath of the two of you next?'

She folded up the paper, poured herself the last cup of coffee and winked at Izzy, who leaned on the counter and suppressed a giggle. Dad picked up the toaster, crossed to the back door and tossed it onto the patio. It clattered onto the stones and he slammed the door after it.

'There, all gone. And good riddance. Better use the grill, Izzy.'

'You aren't leaving that out there,' Mum protested. 'It's a garden, not a dump!'

‘The toaster’s dead, love. Let it rest in peace. I’ll take it to the recycling centre later.’ He put the jug under the coffee machine and hit the red button. It gurgled away happily.

‘Careful!’ said Mum. Of all the machines in the house, Izzy thought, they couldn’t afford to lose that one. Neither of her parents would be able to function. She went to the fridge and got a yogurt instead. Far safer. She and Dad had an uncanny way with electrical items. Mainly with destroying them.

‘I won’t break it,’ Dad argued. ‘I’ve never broken the coffee machine! The coffee machine *loves* me.’

God, they were embarrassing.

‘Just stay away from my laptop, David,’ Mum warned him. ‘I’m not sure I could take another *I’ve-never-seen-that-before* helpline conversation.’ That made Dad grimace dramatically. Izzy rolled her eyes to heaven, because next thing she knew they were kissing in a way that ought to be strictly forbidden to anyone over twenty-one.

But at least they were happy together. Not coldly ignoring each other or getting divorced like the parents of half her classmates. They were happy, and she was happy for them.

Even if they were mortifying.

‘Better get dressed,’ Dad said. ‘Izzy, do you want a lift? I’m heading out by the Temple of Mammon.’

She winced. The enormous shopping centre in Dundrum didn’t call itself a ‘shopping centre’, but rather a ‘Town Centre’. And Dad didn’t even call it that. He had opinions about shopping centres. Opinions with capital letters, quotes, underlines and italics. Probably why he barely had enough business to get by these days. You’d think in a recession, an architect would be a bit more circumspect about whose buildings he was criticising. But that was Dad, through and through.

Problem was, she agreed with him. She was the only teenage girl she knew who hated the place.

‘No, thanks. I thought I’d head into town later on. Dylan’s band have a gig this afternoon.’

Town wasn’t something man-made, or designed. Town was the centre of Dublin, an unwritten but perfectly understood area that had created itself, grown organically, carelessly – a grubby, worn-at-the-seams paradise divided by a river. A place of narrow lanes left over from the Viking settlement and the stately Georgian avenues of the Wide Street Commissioners.

Izzy loved Dublin, loved just mooching about, down laneways or around the iron-railed squares, listening to buskers, looking at street art and window shopping. It was a place to just generally hang out, sometimes meeting friends, sometimes on her own. Summer was heaven for that.

She should have known the city centre like the back of her hand at this stage, and yet she always found something new in it. That was its magic, the maze that was Town, a hodgepodge of public and secret places from countless eras, squished together over the course of a thousand years, always new, always old.

‘Oh, where are they playing?’ asked Mum eagerly. Too eagerly.

Izzy was still living down the last time they turned up to one of Dylan’s gigs. Marianne loved bringing that one up. Izzy had known Dylan so long her parents seemed to think of him as their own kid rather than Izzy’s friend.

‘Just a promo thing. No biggie. Anyway, you’re at work. It’s in the afternoon.’ The words came out in a quick rush and she took the opportunity to escape before they could ask any more details like exactly when and where.

The DART rattled along the tracks, green and ugly. The train was a lifeline for anyone living on the outskirts of the city, a way to get out of the suburban seaside and swing around the sweep of the bay right into the heart of town. Izzy gazed out the window instead of listening to music or playing with her phone like her fellow passengers. The treacherous sand flats of Sandymount Strand, beloved of Joyce, stretched out beyond the wall, the sea rushing in on them with white horses in the waves, breaking off the submerged sandbars. The wind was getting up, but the sky was still clear and blue. Summer wasn't always so beautiful. Usually it was notable for the extra rain, but not this year. This year it was golden and beautiful, like a childhood memory of summers past. It transformed the whole place.

Izzy pushed her way off the train at Pearse Station and joined the crowds streaming down the steep slope to street level. She wandered around the edge of Trinity College, dodging tourists clustered around their coaches and beggars holding paper coffee cups.

'Spare change, bud?' someone mumbled from the level of her knees and she saw a flash of yellow teeth in a grimy face. Gimlet eyes met hers, stopping her in her tracks. Breath caught in her throat, but she couldn't move, not right away. It felt like someone was holding the back of her neck in an iron grip. 'Spare change, love?' he said again, his grin even wider now.

Someone pushed between them, breaking the contact, and Izzy could move again. She jerked away, crossing the road and trying not to look as if she was running. There was nothing to run from. Just an old guy looking for money. But her heart hammered against the inside of her ribs.

It didn't calm until she'd reached Grafton Street, where she paused outside the bank among the shoppers and foreign language students watching a fairly crusty busker playing the guitar like a Spanish master. And here she was, getting freaked out. Stupid, really. She knew better than to let her imagination run away with her. Dad always told her that things were what they were. No one needed to imagine anything worse. Just an old beggar and her overactive imagination.

Izzy let herself breathe more calmly and the noise and conversation, the laughter and shouts, swept over her. The street was full of colour everywhere, and sound like a physical force. She lingered at the shop windows without going inside. It wasn't a day for shopping, even if she had any money to spare. This was just a day for herself. The school holidays weren't the same when you got older. She worked every hour she could get in the coffee shop down the road from her house, while most of her friends were content to waste the summer away. Well, maybe that wasn't fair. Part-time jobs and summer work were tough to come by these days.

Still, Marianne, Dylan's sister and Izzy's classmate and co-worker, could be less of a prima donna about it all.

She was looking in the window of the camera shop, lusting after an SLR she couldn't ever hope to afford, when in the reflection she caught a glimpse of the beggar again, on the far side of the road, sitting in a doorway surrounded by cardboard and a ratty-looking blanket. The same man. She was sure of it. Her spine stiffened in alarm. He didn't move, still as one of those fake statue people further down the road, just staring at her with eyes that caught the light in a weirdly metallic way. He wasn't painted gold or silver though. If he had a colour it would be 'grime'.

He *was* the one she'd seen earlier on Nassau Street. He grinned the same way, held her gaze as if to hypnotise her and hold her there. Like a cobra with its prey.

The street cleaning truck rumbled by, breaking the spell. Izzy shuddered and turned with a start, able to move again in an instant. He was gone. As if he'd never been there. No sign of him at all. Just an empty doorway, a tangle of blanket and some ragged ends of cardboard. No one was there at all.

Izzy shook her head. She'd imagined it, seen some sort of trick of the light in the reflection. There was nothing there.

But at the top of the street, she thought she saw him again, lurking by the vast grey arch of the gates to St Stephen's Green. Izzy turned away, wincing and wishing there was a cop around. The creep was shadowing her.

She jumped as her phone rang in her pocket. As she fished it out, her hands were shaking so hard she almost dropped it. She glanced over her shoulder. He was gone again and a loud group of tourists stood there instead, comparing brightly coloured maps.

'Let me guess.' Dylan's voice sounded deep with amusement. 'You're sightseeing.'

Seeing something. Not sights. Not good ones.

She looked around, half expecting the beggar to be back, half dreading catching sight of him again.

Her voice shook. 'How can I sightsee here? I've seen it.'

Dylan didn't notice her tone. He laughed. 'Yeah, sure. You can sightsee anywhere, Izzy. Especially here. I know you. Okay, you're wandering around town looking at the buildings and pretending you're window shopping?'

Busted.

Or at least that was what she *had* been doing, before she'd acquired a potential stalker.

'You in town?' she asked, deliberately not answering his question. That amused him even more. She could hear it in his voice.

'Just got in. So are you coming?'

'Now?' She couldn't check the time and talk at the same time. She tried to balance the phone against her shoulder and twist her wrist around to look at the watch. After two. Shit, how had that happened?

Mari's voice sounded in the background, saying something about Izzy always being late – which was a lie if she was talking about work – and then she laughed. Izzy knew that laugh. It was the flirty, *I'm-so-gorgeous-aren't-you-just-sick* laugh she reserved for those guys she fancied beyond reason. Like the bass player in Dylan's band.

'Soon,' said Dylan. 'You'll come though, won't you?' He broke off before she could answer, said something she couldn't quite make out to the others and then he was back. 'I've got to go. Soundcheck's starting. Look, this thing won't even take the whole afternoon. We're going to grab a bite to eat and maybe go clubbing later?'

Izzy frowned. Like she could afford that. She'd love to, though. It had been so long since she'd been out with Dylan. With the guys from the band they'd get in wherever. That was probably what Mari was counting on. Dylan was two years older than both his sister and Izzy, finished school and starting university. Hanging around with him – embarrassing nerd-muso brother or not – opened up a world of possibilities for Mari.

'I've kind of got to go home,' she muttered, wishing she could just blithely say 'yes' and not think about the consequences. 'I've work in the morning and I promised Mum and Dad. But I'm on my way now. Be there soon.'

It wasn't far to Exchequer Street. She could make it with plenty of time. All she had to do was cut down by the side of the shopping centre, past the theatre and head down South William Street. Ten minutes max.

She was only halfway there when the phone rang again.

She tried to juggle fishing her ringing phone out of her pocket and avoiding the crowds of afternoon shoppers who would probably just trample her to the ground and keep going if she stopped. Stumbling out of the way of three suits on lunch break and some tourists who were clearly lost and flapping brightly coloured maps around like sails, she hopped up onto the steps leading to a design shop.

'Where *are* you?' Marianne barked, before even a hello or anything.

'I'm on the way.'

'I'm standing here on my own. They're all up there fiddling with the sound system and making a racket. Hurry up!'

Chills ran spiny fingers down her back again, like a trickle of sweat, bringing with it once more the feeling that she was being watched. She glanced around, but couldn't see anyone. No sign of creepy guy. Where was he now?

'I'll be there in a minute or two.' Surely Mari could stand to be on her own and not the centre of attention for five minutes. Or maybe not. That was Mari all over.

'Come on, Izzy. I don't know anyone else. Hurry *up*. Oh, they're getting ready to start.'

The line went dead and Izzy rolled her eyes.

I promised Dylan I'd be there.

At the best of times Marianne could be a bit of a bitch. She couldn't help it, she always said. It was just the way she was. A handy excuse, but at the same time, Izzy couldn't recall a time when she didn't know Mari and Dylan, or when Mari hadn't been the centre of all attention. Though they were in the same class in school, they only associated because they'd known each other forever. They just didn't have a lot else in common. Mari was boy-mad these days and Izzy never found anything so very amazing about the boys Mari obsessed over. If the truth was told, Izzy was far closer to Dylan than Mari. And sister or not, often enough even Dylan pretended he didn't know Mari. Most of the time Izzy could follow suit. Mari certainly didn't want to know her at school. Mari was ... well, Mari.

Izzy slid her phone into her pocket and looked up to find a gap in the sea of people into which she could slot. Her eyes fell on the graffiti on the alleyway wall.

It was right next to her, cut off by railings from this side and a massive bin from the other. About ten feet high, starkly drawn in black and white. An angel. The figure crouched there, her hands clasped nervously before her, balancing on the tips of her toes with her wings outspread behind her, as if at any moment she might take off. She looked over her shoulder, right at Izzy. The eyes ate into her soul.

When Izzy looked closer, the face was smudged, a smear of morning-after mascara, half on the pillows and half on the cheeks. She looked as if she'd been crying. Worse, she looked afraid.

Captivated by the image, Izzy stepped down and dodged through the other pedestrians until she could slip into the alley itself. She squeezed past the bin, trying neither to inhale nor imagine what she might be getting on her clothes. Even Mum and Dad might ask some questions when she'd only had this jacket a couple of weeks.

Her boot scuffed on something as she stepped closer to the wall, a mound of ash, as if a pile of newspapers had been allowed to burn right down there. Izzy bent closer and touched it. A shiver ran up her fingers, along her arm. The angel gazed down, with a Mona Lisa air. She did the eyes thing, her gaze following Izzy wherever she stood.

Izzy stepped away, alarm snaking around her spine, all the way down, crashing against the wheeled bin and sending it skittering out onto the path.

Someone yelled at her, cursed and kicked it back in before they carried on their way. She dug out her phone and switched it to camera. It made that overly loud, false camera shutter noise as she took the picture.

Something hard slammed into the small of her back, pitching her forward, off balance and flailing. She crashed face first against the wall, the black and white graffiti blurring before her eyes. The same something snatched her phone right out of her hand. Pain lanced down her arm, like wires beneath her skin. Without thinking, she launched herself up and after the shambling figure retreating down the alleyway.

The creep.

She couldn't lose the phone. She just couldn't. The stupid thing cost too much.

He turned back towards her, giving the impression of a dirt-lined face like crumpled newspaper. The same guy she had seen earlier, the old beggar who'd been following her, waiting for a moment like this.

He stopped dead in his tracks and turned side on, still looking at her. And grinned again. A horrible yellow-toothed grin, far too big for his face.

His image flickered like ancient film, newsreel from a bygone age. Vanishing. Izzy blinked, her mouth dropping open as he started to fade from his head down.

Vanishing, right there, in front of her eyes.

No way!

Izzy dived towards him, grabbing at the place he had been and her fingers closed on the tattered edges of a filthy wool overcoat just before the shimmer of invisibility claimed it too. She felt herself yanked forwards, her feet jerking out from beneath her and she tumbled after him into the alley.