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Opening extract from

Whispers in the Graveyard

Written by

Theresa Breslin

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Whispers in the Graveyard

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THERESA BRESLIN

Whispers in the Graveyard

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Chapter 1

My footprints track across the faint dew still lying on the grass. My boots crunch heavily on the hard gravel path, and I'm talking to myself as I walk, school bag bumping on my back. But the residents lodged on either side of these avenues won't complain about the noise.

They're dead.

Every one of them.

Their headstones march beside me. I stop to look at one of my favourites. A weaver. There is a carving of a leopard with a shuttle in its mouth. The animal's head is black with age, its stone roar a silent echo in a grey Scottish kirkyard. The leopard used to be on the crest of the Guild of Weavers. My dad told me.

Early-morning mist comes creeping between the

gravestones. I shiver. It's because I'm cold though, not scared.

Not yet.

I touch the old tinker's grave. A ram's horns and crossed spoons. That's how I know a tinker is buried there. The carvings and designs on the stones tell you. They all mean something. My dad told me to listen and I would hear the crackle of the gypsies' campfire, the black pot swinging just above the flames.

I wish words on paper were as easy to read and understand.

There's a big stone vase monument on this path, with a draped cloth and a trailing vine. That's a symbol from the Bible. Dad read out a psalm to me one night. 'Fruitful vine, and olive plants.' I liked the sound of those words, rolling around inside my head.

Masons used trees and plants a lot on memorials, ivy and bay leaf, lilies, thistles and roses. It's traditional. They used to strew flowers on graves in ancient times, and grow evergreens in kirkyards.

I leave the path and cross the grass past the pile of stones that make up the cairn memorial and go towards the back wall. It's empty and bare here. Only a single rowan tree growing, and just behind it the dyke is half broken down. I can go through the wood at the other

side of the graveyard past the river, on my way to school.

I climb up and pull away some of the stones. There's a ledge where I can lie, out of sight. I've got stuff stashed here. Emergency rations for when I dog off school and can't go home. An old blanket, comic books, biscuits, cans of juice. I unwrap the plastic covering and take out a soft digestive. This will have to be breakfast. It was Old Mother Hubbard time in our house this morning. Not one of our better weekends, you might say. Dad hasn't had any work for a while, not even casual.

You get used to having nothing, though. Weeks and weeks on the giro. Toasted cheese, spaghetti on toast, toast and beans, french toast, scrambled eggs on toast, toast and jam, toast and butter, toast and marg. Dry toast. Toast.

One night we were watching a film on the telly. Just the two of us. About the British Army. An old black and white one. *Tunes of Glory* or something. And there was this bit where they were in the officers' mess, and this guy leapt to his feet and went, 'Gentlemen, the King. I give you the toast.' And I just looked over at Dad, and at the same minute he was looking at me, and both of us laughed, really loud, and the next thing we're hysterical, rolling about on the floor. And then he sits up, wipes tears from his eyes and punches me on the

shoulder. We sit on the couch and watch the rest of the film together, me kind of small and skinny leaning up against his muscly arm.

That's the way it is with us sometimes. For ages after, if things were grim, one of us would just go, 'Gentlemen, I give you the toast.' And the next thing we'd be laughing ourselves silly.

Then he gets a bit of work on the black and there's money coming in. And it's good times all round. *Happy days are here again, the world is full of cheer again.* And he's the all-singing, all-dancing, ever-popular parent.

Let's go to the supermarket.

Let's treat ourselves at the chippy.

Let's just have a bottle of something from the off-licence.

'No.'

'Just a couple of cans.'

'No.'

'Sol, old son, you're being a bit of a bore. D'ye know that?'

'No.'

'I can handle it.'

Oh no you can't. Oh yes I can. Oh no you can't. Oh yes I can. What do you think, children? All of you who believe in fairy stories, clap your hands.

It was always like that with the shopping. When I was smaller he would go and have 'a quick one' while she and I trailed around the supermarket. Then we'd have to hang about the car park waiting for him. One time he was away so long all the frozen-food packages had melted. Our plastic carrier bags were full of soggy cardboard boxes, water running out the bottom. She started yelling as soon as she saw him coming towards us, all smiles and waving happily. He just turned round and walked away. I'm sure that's when she finally decided to leave.

She did give me a choice. 'Come or stay,' she said.

Some choice.

I stare at the sky. It's a darkening blue colour. A bit like my weekend. I've started to count my days in colours, from bright, clean white, all the way through to fiery, angry red. Maybe I should have gone with her. I wouldn't be having so many days with bad colours now.

I put my stuff away and cover it up. It'll be quite safe. Hardly anyone visits here. It's too old, y'see. No one buried here would have any relatives left alive.

At least that's what I thought.

Once, though, a woman came. One of those arty types. You know. With coloured scarves and long skirts and ear-rings. She did rubbings from the tombstones

and then wandered off peering at things. I liked her pictures. Didn't mind her being there either. Didn't try to scare her off. The way she touched the stones with her palms and fingers, I could tell she was listening to them. She came so close to my place I could hear her talking to herself.

'Strange, nobody buried at this end. Can't see why not. Must be a reason . . . Nothing growing either.' She frowned and put her head on one side. 'One single rowan tree.' She reached out her hand to touch the smooth silver bark, and then stopped. She shivered and moved away.

That's when I first realised nothing grew at my end. I suppose I should have wondered why that part of the wall had fallen away and had never been repaired, especially as all the rest was in fairly good order. Not even lichen and moss in the cracks to bind the stones together. But I didn't. Just as well. I might have been tempted to start poking about, and it could have been me that got it first.

The way it turned out someone else was there before me. Though I did get involved eventually. Not particularly wanting to. But then if I hadn't, things would have been very much worse.

A lot more people might have died.