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Opening extract from

Dead Romantic

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The Girl in the Graveyard

It had been the worst night in the history of the world ever ever ever. A giant mistake, a BFG meets Hagrid kind of big mistake. I shouldn't have even gone to the freshers' party, full stop, let alone done what I did there. Ugh. The smell was making me feel sick. Every now and again as I walked along the dark streets from college it would hit me and for a split second I'd wonder where it was coming from. And then I'd remember. It was coming from me.

I wanted to be by myself, so I took a short cut through the graveyard, still sobbing my heart out. My sobbing had been the only sound in the world until I rounded the corner of the church and heard a different one. A scraping sound.

Scrape. Scrape. Huff. Scrape. Huff. Scrape. Huff. Scrape, scrape, scrape.

I tried to ignore it at first, what with it being ten o'clock at night – prime time for old men dragging chains and floating women in wedding dresses. But it kept on.

Scrape. Scrape. Huff. Scrape. Scrape. Huff. Huff. Scrape. Scrape.

'Who *is* that?' I shouted. It wasn't like me to be so stroppy but on this occasion, I did have the right. After all, I was dripping with the poo of a thousand cows. I went to investigate, picking my way through the grass. And then, I saw a figure. There, by the wall. A figure digging.

I went a bit further along the path where it was shaded from the moonlight, desperately trying to turn on some carrot-fuelled ability to see in the dark. I saw a girl digging.

A girl my age, digging.

She was wearing a hooded jacket and was partly hidden by the overhanging willow tree, but it was definitely a girl and that was definitely what she was doing. Digging.

I thought I ought to tell her I was there, so I didn't scare her.

'Hiya.'

She snapped her head around. 'What?'

I gulped. 'Hi?'

A headlight, like the kind miners wear, was strapped to her forehead and when she looked at me it shone into my eyes.

'What are you doing here?' she barked.

'I . . . what? Nothing,' I said, shielding myself from the glare. I said it like *I* was the one who should feel guilty. 'I'm

walking home. What are you doing?'

She didn't answer, just lowered her headlight and kept on digging. I noticed a Marks & Spencer's cool bag beside her on the grass.

Scrape. Huff. Scrape. Huff.

'Why are you doing that?' I asked her. 'Do you work here or something?'

'Too many questions and I don't want to answer any of them,' the girl huffed. She sounded posh. And intelligent. Intelliposh, I guessed.

Scrape. Huff. Scrape.

'I'll tell,' I threatened, not very threateningly though. I actually just wanted to watch what she was doing, thinking maybe at some point I'd see a body, but I folded my arms to look like I meant business, because that's what you should do when you find someone doing something they're not supposed to. Though it was pretty difficult to look like you meant business when you literally looked and smelled like crap. 'You're breaking a law. Probably.'

The girl stuck her shovel into the dirt so it stood up straight. She shone her headlight at me again. 'And who are you, the church warden?'

'No.'

'You have a vested interest in this particular plot?'

'No, I . . .'

'You're the town sheriff? This town ain't big enough for the both of us?'

'No!'

She turned down her headlight so I could actually open my eyes. 'Then what does it matter what I'm doing?'

I stepped closer. 'I don't know. Because it does. It's weird.'

She stood with a foot perched on her shovel, her gloved hands neatly folded on top. 'And walking through a graveyard at night dressed as excrement *isn't*?'

Oh, she had noticed. Of course she had noticed. '*I* have an excuse,' I said. 'I've been to the freshers' party at college.'

'Figures,' she said. 'Some halfwit tried to hand me a flyer for that in the cafeteria on Wednesday lunchtime.' She went back to digging.

'You've started Hoydon College too?' I said.

'Yes,' she puffed. 'I'm assuming you were forced to engage in one of the many . . . hilarious initiation ceremonies they like to put on for new students, just to see who's the most . . . desperate to win friends.' *Scrape. Huff.*

'They made me do it,' I said, slapping my soaking wet dress at the sides. My eyes stung and there was a pain in my throat as I remembered what I had just done. 'They were all cheering and chanting and I felt so alive.'

'I heard of one initiation rite called the Eat, Drink and Be Merry,' the girl interrupted. 'I believe it involves eating something disgusting, drinking something disgusting and jumping in something disgusting, usually a paddling pool full of —'

'Poo,' I finished.

'Hmm. Apparently only the most desperate of "losers" will actually do it.' The pain in my throat gave way to floods of so many tears. I never knew I had so much water in me. 'I take it you were crowned this year's Queen Loser.'

Their words kept circling inside my brain like a whirlpool of diarrhoea.

Camille will do it. You'll do it, won't you? Go on, eat it!

Come on, Camille, eat it. Go on, drink it down, drink it all!

Down it, down it, down it, down it! Wahey, she downed it all!

Shove her in. Go on, Camille. Look at the state of her!

Stupid dares. Stupid A levels. Stupid friends. I actually big fat hated them all, and I didn't big fat hate anything usually. Except hard-boiled eggs. And people who were mean to animals. And velvet.

'I thought they'd think I was cool.'

'I presume you were trying to impress some boy.' *Scrape. Huff.*

I nodded. 'Damian. He's in our Sociology class. He's awesome. It was him doing the handbrake turns on the hockey pitch on the first day of term. And he can jump the train tracks in a Tesco trolley. He's just the best.'

'The best at what precisely?' said the girl. 'I think you should wake up and smell what you're covered in.'

I wiped my nose on the back of my pooey hand. 'I saw him, Damian, when I was in the paddling pool. Stupid arm around Tamsin Double-Barrelled. Someone else was filming it for YouTube. Even Damian had his phone out. And I lost my cherry scrunchie. I loved that cherry scrunchie. It matched my new dress.'

'I wouldn't expect anything less from that halfwit,' I

heard her mumble.

'No, Damian's different. He's not a halfwit.'

'Hmm, because only brain surgeons try to jump train tracks in a shopping trolley. This would be Damian de Jagger, I'm surmising?'

'It's pronounced Dee Yay Grrr actually,' I said, pleased that she had got it wrong. 'Do you know him?'

She stared at me again. 'Yes, I know him. The boy is bacteria.'

The moonlight bounced off the gravestones, shimmering on the marble. I was cold. My poo coat was no longer keeping me warm. 'How much longer will you be?'

She sighed. 'And you need to know that because?'

'Because . . . I . . . one of my best friends lives at the vicarage and I won't be able to sleep thinking about someone digging up the graves here.'

'Where was your best friend tonight?' said the girl.

'What?'

'Where was your best friend while you were at the party?'

I glared at her. 'She was . . . there. Somewhere.' I couldn't remember seeing Poppy at the pool for the Be Merry. But she was definitely there for the Eat and Drink. She hadn't been chanting or anything. She'd just been watching with everyone.

'Seems to me that a best friend would have stepped in at some point and stopped you.' *Scrape, huff, scrape . . .*

'Look, can you stop doing that, please?' I said louder, not quite shouting but still cross all the same. That's what drink did to me. I became someone I didn't like. Someone

shouty. Someone who had realised they didn't have a friend in the world.

'If you're so concerned about time, you could offer to help.' The girl stopped and threw something over to me and it clattered on the footpath. A small spade.

I stared at it. I stared back at her. 'You want me to dig with you?'

She sighed again, like I was really getting on her nerves. 'I'm not digging. I'm filling in. Many hands make light work, don't you know.'

So I picked up the spade. And I walked over to where she was under the willow tree and I helped her shift the dirt into the hole. The hole was big and long. I still didn't know exactly what she'd done there. I mean, people only carry shovels in graveyards for two reasons: to bury something or dig something up. Or someone.

So there we both were. *Scrape, scrape, huff, huff, scrape, scrape, huff, huff.*

'Have you been having a picnic?' I asked, nodding towards the cool bag.

'No,' she said. I was waiting for her to say something else, but she just carried on digging. Well, filling in.

'So what's in the picnic bag then?'

'I think I said I was finished with questions.' She began kicking the earth to get more of it in the hole.

'So you *are* doing something wrong,' I said, copying the kicking thing.

'Wrong in *your* book, maybe,' she said.

'What does that mean?' No answer. I brandished the spade. 'If you've robbed a grave, it's wrong in anyone's book.'

Scrape. Kick. Scrape. 'Not in mine it's not.'

'So you *have* robbed it?'

She looked at me. 'I like to think of it as reclaimed.'

'Ugh!' I cried, and my cry echoed around the graveyard. 'You can't!'

'You can,' she said. 'I can. Needs must.'

'Needs must?' I cried. 'I know there's been that crunchy thing where everyone's lost their money but you can't go around prising wedding rings off dead bodies, that's just horrible! Ugh!'

Before I could say another word, she took the spade from me, slung her shovel on top of the cool bag and left me, alone, standing there, stinking of poo and staring into the coal-black air. Well, the air wasn't black, the sky was. Air is just air. Come to think of it, *what* is dark? The air's not dark, cos if you trapped night air in a jar you wouldn't have a dark jar. And the sky's technically not dark either. But it felt dark.

Everything felt very dark indeed that night. But in a really weird way, I kinda liked it.