

Twenty Years Dead

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Chapter 1

For the final three miles of the journey, headlights flashed across the vegetation as the truck lurched between potholes. More than once, David saw silvered eyes staring out from the undergrowth. Just wild animals, but his imagination played tricks and created enough monsters to fill his nightmares for the next decade. He was beyond tired; a full day in the classroom followed by a hundred-mile drive on cruddy roads had ground him to dust.

The steering wheel bucked under his hands, and he had to grip hard just to keep on the road. He slowed to a crawl to avoid slamming into one of the gnarled trees that lined both sides of the route.

“They could have put it somewhere more accessible,” Helen said.

He didn’t have the chance to respond before they hit a deep pothole and the truck dropped a couple of inches, like falling into a trough on a wild sea. Something in the back of the truck made a loud metallic clang and he prayed it was just a loose tool slamming onto the flatbed.

But that was a worry for later, now he just needed to get to the damned graveyard in one piece. A light up ahead flickered on and off like a lighthouse. It probably had nothing to do with the cemetery, but David hung on to the knowledge that the journey was nearly over.

The truck groaned, creaking with each motion. Helen put her hands on the dashboard to steady herself.

“There it is,” she said.

David had been expecting it for ten minutes; ever since the SatNav had told him, ‘Your destination is on the right,’ and the screen had shown a large patch of nothing for miles around. The sign was tucked away by the side of the road, obscured by tree branches and overgrown briars that wound across the faded lettering.

Welcome to Gilroes Cemetery

His arms ached from battling the road for the last couple of miles and he push-pulled the steering wheel in a wide circle to turn the truck through the gap in the trees. The headlamps picked up a gravel surface with missing chunks like moon craters. There was a half dozen vans parked up; rugged trucks and Landrovers covered in scratches and mud. Working vehicles unlike the SUVs and pristine All Terrain jeeps he saw flitting from one shop to the next back home.

He felt the need to say something. “We’re here at last,” he announced as he steered across the ground to park in a rough line with the other cars.

“You must be knackered.”

He turned off the ignition and listened to the tick-tick-tick of the engine as it cooled down. He turned off the headlights. With the moon obscured by clouds, a sea of night pooled up against the windscreen.

The seat creaked as Helen leaned forward. He waited for her to say how creepy the place was, but she was silent. He heard her breathing.

Something moved off to David's left, but whatever was out there had already gone by the time he turned to look. He felt, rather than saw, a shape slip further into the darkness.

The drive out to the cemetery reminded him of childhood journeys sandwiched between his two aunts admonishing him to sit still. Finally, his mother would turn around and simply say, "David." No explanation. No demand. Just his name, spoken in a stern tone, but that was enough.

Nearly twenty years later he could feel the ghosts of Jean and Martel in the truck with him, and he was seven years old once more. He didn't try to explain it to Helen. She wouldn't understand.

He grabbed the torch from the pocket of the door and stepped down from the truck. He paused beside one of the Landrovers. There was a discreet decal on the back window: Matthew Johnson. Family Director. 07700 900 678. He assumed if he checked the next vehicle he would find another small sticker to identify the owner was also a professional.

The car park was at the base of an amphitheatre, where the surrounding hills were studded with gravestones. In the fading light, the only landmarks were the small burning torches which David assumed belonged to Family Directors set up beside their plots.

The cemetery was different to how he remembered. It felt compressed as if the graves were piled on top of him. His vision was limited to the first few rows of graves—the oldest part of the cemetery where the names had eroded from the gravestones. He walked past these first graves, conscious that his fear that a hand might reach up from the ground and seize hold of his ankle was based purely on too many hours watching hokey horror films and bad documentaries. That didn't happen, not in the old ground.

He went around to the back of the truck where he had loaded a pile of equipment including a chair he'd driven thirty miles to collect: old but solid. He strapped the first rucksack to his back and found a series of ragged steps which wound up between the graves. Helen followed.

"I think it's up on the right," David said. He paused. Nothing looked the same, not the trees or the graves or the surrounding landscape. He moved in that direction before Helen could reply.

When David stopped walking, the footsteps behind him stuttered to a halt. The only sound in the cemetery was the wind rustling through the leaves. Trees overhung the turn-of-the-century graves where faded engraving remembered Edwards and Fredericks and Ethels.

“You didn’t have to do this,” Helen said. “When my aunt died, my cousins paid for someone to come and sit with her.”

“Leeches.”

“It’s what people do. Professionals know how to speak to the risen. It’s just the same as having someone help when your parents are too old to live by themselves.”

He wanted to point out that he had never asked her to tag along. That she had insisted on accompanying him, even when he’d made it clear he wanted to go alone.

David surveyed the graveyard. He was fairly confident his father’s grave was somewhere at the back of the plot near the stone wall. He pushed away the guilt which suggested he should know where his dad was buried because he should have come by more often over the last twenty years, but it was a 200-mile round trip that had never become a habit.

Maybe when all of this was done he would make a point of returning to pay his respects properly. He would come every month and tidy the grave, spend a few minutes chatting to his dad. His mother wouldn’t like that, but she didn’t need to know.

“This way.”

“Are you listening to me?” Helen asked.

He stopped and turned to face Helen. “I’m doing this. You can come if you want, or you can stay in the truck, but I’m doing this.”

“I was just saying...”

He started walking again. A moment later Helen’s footsteps followed. He didn’t want to argue, not today, but he’d made up his mind about coming to his dad’s rising years ago and there was nothing Helen, his mother, or anyone else could say that would change his mind.

Way over in the corner of the graveyard there was movement. In the shadows of the late evening, it was impossible to be certain, but David assumed it was one of the Family Directors. That was okay for other people, but the idea of his dad waking up to be met by a stranger who didn’t know him and didn’t care about him was obscene. Helen was wrong; it wasn’t anything like caring for an ailing parent. The Rising would take a day at most, and once it was over, he could get on with his life and his dad could get on with his death.

As he started up the hill, he heard his breath loud in his ears. Behind him he was aware Helen’s spin classes and Yoga were paying off: she still had breath left to talk. “I think it’s a bad idea. Your mum thinks it’s a bad idea. Why do you always have to make things so difficult for everyone?”

The effort required to climb the hill gave him an excuse not to reply. He didn’t have the words to explain why it was important. It was an instinct and that was good enough for him. It should be good enough for Helen, too.

He paused halfway up the hill and looked down. His truck was a smudge of grey in the car park.

“We could be here until tomorrow night.”

“I don’t mind,” Helen said.

“You said it was a waste of time.”

“It is, but if you’re adamant you’re going to do this then I’m staying. I let Mick know I wouldn’t be in tomorrow.”

“He’s okay with that? I thought he was a hardass.”

“He likes to think he is, but I haven’t asked for time off for a couple of months and I worked extra hours during last month’s surge, so he couldn’t really complain.”

“Thanks.” He couldn’t see her face properly in the dark so he had to imagine how she might look, her soft brown eyes, her blonde hair. She had a terrible habit of being able to say just the right thing at the right time. Even when she was wrong, she was right.

“I *am* going to do this,” he told her.

“I know. I just felt I had to try and persuade you out of it one last time. It’s going to be horrible.”

“Why?”

Helen’s silhouette shrugged. “It just is. I can feel it.”

“My dad’s going to claw his way out of his grave after twenty years buried in the ground. What could possibly go wrong?” David said.

Helen laughed, soft and respectful within the stillness of the cemetery.

He waited until Helen stepped forward to join him. She placed her hand inside his, and they continued to walk the hill up to his father’s grave.