

THE GRAVEYARD RIDDLE

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CHAPTER ONE

Frankie is a chestnut-brown dachshund and a very wise little dog. For example, I took him for a walk every day after school and he always turned left out of our driveway. He knew *exactly* which way to go: the graveyard.

This afternoon was like any other. We curved around the semicircle of houses at the bottom of Chestnut Close and came to an alleyway. Frankie stopped to sniff at a patch of weeds. Sometimes I wondered if he was actually smelling something good or pretending so that he could have a rest. His legs were really little, after all.

“Come on, Frankie. Let’s go,” I said. He shook himself and we set off again.

Some people thought I was weird because I liked going to the graveyard. To them, a graveyard is creepy. It makes them think of spooky things like rotten corpses and wailing ghosts. I don’t feel like that at all. To me the graveyard is full of color and light and wildlife. In fact, it’s probably my favorite place in the world.

We came out of the alleyway and I took a long, deep breath. A gentle breeze moved through the trees, making a soft *shhh* sound as warm yellow dots of sunlight danced across

the headstones. When Dad lived with us, I used to go to the graveyard when he and Mum started arguing. There was no shouting there. It was always peaceful.

As we walked along the pathway, Frankie stopped in mid-trot and began to sniff at the air. His long brown ears flapped gently in the wind as he searched for the scent he'd picked up.

"What is it, Frankie?" I said. "Can you smell the souls of the dead people?" I looked down at the headstone beside us. It read:

Benjamin Henry Brady

Born 31st July 1884

Died 27th January 1954

Frankie's wet brown nose wriggled. I knew that a dog's sense of smell was forty times stronger than ours. Could Frankie smell Benjamin Brady's aftershave, still lingering in the air? He sniffed a few more times and then pulled on his leash. He was ready to carry on.

We passed the large horse chestnut tree that had a hexagonal bench around its trunk, and a rusty tap where visitors could fill their watering cans. We usually stayed on the main pathway, headed toward the church, and then took a loop back to where we started, but just past the tap, I spotted a path we hadn't used for a while. It was overgrown with a tangle of ivy

and brambles, and led to the oldest part of the graveyard. No mourners visited that part anymore. They were all dead and buried themselves.

“Let’s go this way for a change, shall we, Frankie?” I said. My little dog sat down on the pathway, confused that we weren’t going on our usual route.

“Come on, it’s not far,” I said.

The path soon became thick with weeds, and I had to trample them down so that we could get through. Surrounding us were ancient headstones, peeking at us through the undergrowth like gray ships bobbing on a sea of green. Some were speckled with bright splashes of orange lichen, as though they’d been splattered with paint.

I carried on walking, but a vicious-looking bramble caught my ankle. It drew blood and I took a tissue out of my school blazer pocket and pressed it against the scratch. After a few seconds, it stopped bleeding.

Frankie sneezed. He was almost buried in weeds.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all,” I said. “Come on, let’s head back.”

I scooped Frankie under my arm, stood up, and then stopped. Beyond the path was an old redbrick wall that circled the perimeter of the graveyard. Part of the wall had crumbled away and there was now a V-shaped gap in the middle. I didn’t remember noticing it before.

“I wonder what’s through there?” I said. I took a few careful steps, checking for more brambles and crushing any nettles underfoot. The pathway stopped, so I had to walk in between the actual graves where the ground was uneven. When we got to the crumbling wall, I put Frankie down. He gave himself a shake and sniffed at the air. Through the gap I could make out some windows and a door.

“It’s a house!” I said.

We scrambled over the pile of bricks and found ourselves in knee-deep grass. In front of us was a cottage. It had a crooked doorway in the center with four small, black-framed windows, a wonky roof, and a chimney. It looked a bit like a toddler’s painting of a house. The once-white walls were now dirty gray with patches of green, slimy moss. The roof had missing tiles and a deep overhang that almost hid the windows. It must be very dark inside. Beyond the house was another brick wall. It was as if the house had been deliberately hidden from view.

“Isn’t it incredible, Frankie?” I said. “I never knew this was here. A secret house!” Frankie was busy snuffling around at all the new smells. I waded through the grass and peered through the downstairs window. The glass was cracked in the corner and thick with dirt, as though a curtain had been drawn on the inside.

Frankie began to pull on his leash. A blackbird was

stabbing at a patch of soil with its bright orange beak. It stopped to watch us for a few seconds, then carried on, deciding that we were not much of a threat. The door to the house was dark green and slightly ajar. I hesitated for a second, then gave the door a nudge with my knee. It didn't move. I leaned my shoulder against it and shoved hard a few times.

Very slowly, the door inched open until there was enough space to squeeze through. I peered inside. There was no way anyone was living here. Surely there was no harm in taking a look?

“Come on,” I said to Frankie. “Let's go inside.”

We walked into a small, square room with a low ceiling. It was dark and I had to wait for my eyes to adjust to the gloom before I looked around. The room was empty apart from an open fireplace filled with rubble, and a wooden chair covered with a thick layer of dust. It smelled musty and damp: a bit like the smell in the kitchen cupboard underneath our sink.

“Wow,” I said, turning around. “I wonder how long it's been since anyone lived here?” Frankie sniffed at the dusty wooden floor and sneezed. Against a wall was a wooden staircase with no handrail and a lot of missing steps.

“I guess we won't be going up there anytime soon,” I said. I could just make out two doorways at the top.

There was another room downstairs and Frankie pulled me toward it. This room was much the same: dusty, dark, and

very bare. I walked over to the window. On the windowsill was a round pebble. I picked it up. It was cold and smooth, like a tiny egg.

“I wonder where this came from?” I said. I put it back, then wiped a small, clean circle in the dirty glass with my hand. Through it, I could see the gap in the crumbling wall, the tops of the headstones, and the newer graves near the main pathway.

“I can’t wait to tell Matthew about this place!” I said to Frankie. “I bet he never knew this was here either.” Matthew Corbin was my best friend and lived in the house opposite mine on Chestnut Close.

I checked my watch and decided to head home, as Mum would have dinner ready soon. I was turning to go when I heard something. A slow, creaking noise coming from upstairs. It sounded like someone was moving very carefully across the floorboards. I looked up at the ceiling, listening hard.

“I think there’s somebody upstairs,” I whispered. I held tightly on to Frankie’s leash and we walked slowly back to the first room and toward the broken stairs. I peered up, terrified that a face might suddenly appear at the top. The creaking sound stopped.

“H-hello?” I called. “Is someone there?” I listened, but there was no reply. All I could hear was the breeze rustling through the long grass outside. That must have been it—the

wind blowing through the cracks in the windows, making the floorboards creak. Frankie growled.

“There’s nothing there, Frankie. It’s just the wind,” I said.
“Come on, let’s go.”

I hurried back to the door and we squeezed through the gap. When we were out in the long grass, I turned and tugged on the door to try to shut it. It wouldn’t budge.

That’s when I spotted something across the top of the door frame. I took a step back. There were words scratched into the dark wood. I felt a shiver tingle down my spine to the soles of my feet as I read what it said.

“Lord, have mercy upon us.”