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Opening Extract from...

Inflicted

Written by Ria Frances

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INFLICTED

Sometimes the only difference between despair and resurrection is kindness



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This book is dedicated to all those who were imprisoned in Theresienstadt

. . . and also to
Oliver, Charlie, Robbie and Reuben,

for whom everything is done.

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"We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

Winston Churchill

"A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees."

Amelia Earhart

Chapter One

Monday, 15 February 2010

WHEN Theo opened his eyes, his first thought was that he should be dead. The thought swung like a pendulum then vanished without scorching his memory. An iron sky rushed towards him. He lay helpless beneath it, waiting for oblivion. For a while he was aware of nothing, except a deep thirst and an excruciating pain along his forearm. A welcoming darkness oozed over him, bringing a wave of nausea. He forced his eyes apart, battling the queasiness. Blinking into the silvery light, he thought he could see leaves swaying above him. He lifted his head to make sense of his surroundings, but the shimmering light began to spin on an unsteady axis. He moaned as the darkness threatened.

He was aware of a weight against his leg. Wrenching his neck forward, he blinked until a black dog came into focus. He was lying beside him in a pile of leaves, his ebony eyes watchful as he held his head aloft. His great paws stretched out towards Theo's body.

Theo tried to move his arm but it hurt too much and felt too heavy. He strained to look at it. Tied around his wrist were scraps of pale blue material through which his blood seeped in great pools. With a gasp of horror, Theo realised what he had done. He realised what had happened

since he had passed out from the pain. Tears of rage filled his eyes.

He couldn't even do this one last thing properly, could he?

Blindly he groped for the knife. It was lying half-buried beneath yellow leaves just beyond his reach. The blade glinted with knowing eyes. He scuffled across the ground to grasp it in his good hand. The effort made him retch as the darkness flooded his consciousness. He fought against it, choking on the bile in his throat. The dog did not move.

Aware of a ripping sound a little way behind him, Theo started as he realised he was not alone. The light flooded back.

Kneeling in the leaves was a slight woman whose head was covered in white curls. She was frowning as she frantically bit, then tore at a piece of material that Theo realised was a shirt. It matched the makeshift bandages around his arm. When the woman had contented herself that she had torn away enough of the cloth, she moved with aching slowness to her feet.

Theo desperately wanted to shut his eyes, but he continued to stare as the woman bent over him and continued wrapping his wound.

"Ah, good. You are awake."

She spoke without looking at him in a voice that had a slight accent. She was very old, Theo realised, although her dark eyes were bright above the slack swell of her cheeks. From her ear to the corner of her mouth ran a shocking white scar that traversed the sags of skin, converging with wrinkles and slashes of crimson and purple that branched beneath the loose folds of her chin. Theo couldn't stop staring at it, but the woman did not seem to notice.

The scar jolted his memory. Theo realised he knew this woman. This scarred human who was saving him from his sixteen-year-old self; the one who could not face what he had done to Eden.

He knew her from the beach; she baked cakes for the mobile coffee van on the big green where the tough boys played football. He knew her from his memories, standing at the junior school gates, waiting for the children in his class that she fostered; difficult children who had often antagonised him with their interpretation of the pain in their past.

Theo did not know her name, but he knew that from her reputation as a kind, yet solitary individual, his attempt at suicide remained in constant hands: he did not know if he still wanted to die after the horror of it, but for her renowned reserve, he was thankful.

"I'm Anete," she said, "but you can call me Anna. Everyone else does."

With a sigh, she climbed to her feet, using the tree as a crutch to shoulder her weight. Brushing the leaves from the front of her trousers, she whistled to the dog that leapt up and stood expectantly at her side. She tussled with a thick navy jacket that had been hanging from a branch.

"Now," she said, between deep breaths, looking at Theo for the first time. "Do you think you can walk?"

Theo stared at the dog. He nodded.

"Good," she murmured, zipping the coat slowly up to her chin. "Because these days I am far too old to drag you... here, lean on me and the tree, boy. We'll help you stand."

Theo stumbled to his feet as the world gushed around him for several moments. Anna held onto his hand with a firmness that belied her advanced years. After a while,

he took a hesitant step beside her. Together they hobbled through the empty woodland behind the black Labrador who gambolled ahead. The bare trees berated him in the murmur of the wind. They seemed to part, permitting passage through the muddy crumble of rotting leaves. The unsettling disdain of winter.

Anna did not speak to him during the short walk from the willow tree to her house. Theo was grateful. How could he possibly explain to her what he had done or why he had done it? Sneaking looks at the ugly scar on her face, Theo wondered how she had become so mutilated. He had heard people whispering about it when he was smaller, the life of this woman as of everyone else in this sleepy, coastal part of Sussex, being a public affair.

He hated the gossips. He hated that privacy was attacked by spiteful claws masked in cotton gloves. It was even worse since Eden. He wanted to kill them, those women who lingered in pairs too long outside of the house, with their pushchairs and yapping dogs. They feasted on his mother's suffering.

He vowed not to ask Anna about the scar even though part of him wanted to know; to find out if she was like him. He remembered her greeting him every day when he passed her in the playground after school; a striking woman with distant eyes and long dark and silver hair woven into a plait. He thought she must have been ancient even then, but somehow she had not seemed old, unlike his crusty headmaster. Every day, Anna had smiled at him and somehow that crinkled smile at the school gates had faded the depravity of the tormenters, before the moment when his brother Seb appeared beside him on the pavement, skidding to a noisy halt on his bike as the bullies vanished like smoke.

Theo wasn't sure whether to be pleased that Anna had saved his life or furious that he had to face the consequences of his actions by continuing with his pathetic existence. He searched for a sense of relief or the familiar foreboding to restore his equilibrium but found only a hollow numbness. He trailed beside Anna because his exhausted brain could not suggest an alternative.

"Blackie, sit!" she commanded when they stopped outside a bungalow with wide windows looking out over a small front garden that featured one rose bush surrounded by a bed of gravel.

Theo smiled. Anna caught his eye.

"I know! It isn't a very original name for a black dog is it? But there you are." She shrugged, unlocking the front door. "He doesn't seem to mind. Come through. I'll make you something to drink."

Anna ushered Theo through the door. The warmth of the house engulfed him, as Blackie slid quietly past him in the airy hallway. Anna turned to lock the door. She pushed three bolts across, before patting the door and hobbling past Theo. She turned before reaching the door at the end of the hall through which Blackie had disappeared. Theo shifted on his feet, clasping his arm.

"Well come on then."

Anna beckoned him over her shoulder with papery fingers. Theo kicked off his shoes, placing them on the brown mat under the radiator. He followed Anna.

Theo found himself in a spacious kitchen with freestanding units and an enormous sink. An ancient sofa covered with dog hair and faded pillows sat beneath an expansive window giving a view to the back of the property. The garden, a perfect rectangle, stretched away

from the house with a lawn lined with empty, immaculate flowerbeds. The soil seemed to be waiting for the prospect of life, below the spectre of high, wooden fencing. There was a faded photograph of a sullen child above a dresser housing a dusty array of literature. Magazines depicting glorious cakes lolled over books, their titles scrawled in a foreign language. Theo shuffled from foot to foot. He hugged his arm to his body, trying to concentrate on his surroundings, but the pain had become unbearable.

Anna waved towards the sofa. "Sit boy. Please."

Theo sat, closing his eyes as the warmth of the room enveloped him. How could he bear the pain? It was tearing at him. Anna shrugged out of her coat, pulling a new shirt from the wicker basket by the back door to cover her vest. There was a blue bow below at the base of her throat. It matched the ripples of her scar. Theo tried not to stare.

"I remember you when you were small. At the school."

Theo nodded, struggling to concentrate on her strange voice over the volume of pain.

"Yes," he grimaced. "I remember you."

"You must be at least sixteen now, no? Here…"

Anna was leaning over him with a glass of water in one hand and a couple of painkillers in the other. Theo nodded, trying to thank her with his eyes he tossed back the pills whilst Blackie circled in front of him before lying upon his feet. Anna smiled, then left him, busying herself in the kitchen. Theo sank back in the mound of pillows, his suffering vivid in each deep exhalation of breath.

Anna glanced at him over her shoulder as she washed dishes in the sink. There was a comfortable silence between them. As Theo watched her shifting around her home she felt familiar to him; the curve of her cheek, the hunch of

her back, her hair nestled in the nape of a neck that would not look out of place on a much younger woman. Her clothes were youthful too, Theo decided, her legs clad in denim below the white shirt patterned with blue flowers. He thought she might have been beautiful once, before age withered her skin; before the scar.

Theo tried to focus on what she was doing, but with the warmth of the room and the incessant throbbing, his eyes became heavy.

When Theo woke up there was an old song playing on the radio. Anna was standing over the stove, stirring something in a saucepan. The smell made his mouth water. The pain in Theo's arm was less chronic than before. He noticed that it was now properly bandaged. Anna must have done it while he slept.

Anna took two bowls from a cupboard above her head and poured the liquid into them. Placing them on the table, she started when she saw Theo staring at her.

"Good," she said. "You are awake. I've made soup."

Theo continued to stare at her without moving. She bustled around the kitchen.

"Come on, it will go cold."

"Thank you." Theo hauled himself upright, shuffling towards the wooden table. He summoned the courage to look directly into Anna's eyes. "You have been very kind to me even though you don't know me at all."

Anna smiled. "You are welcome, boy." She picked up a spoon and handed it to Theo. "We are not strangers and I could not just leave you alone and bleeding."

"My name is Theo."

Anna shrugged, putting a crusty loaf of bread on a wooden board.

"I see you walking on the beach often, when I deliver my cakes to Antonio the coffee man. I see your brother…"

"Seb."

"Yes, Seb. He loves my cakes. He buys slices for a girl."

"Girls like Seb."

Anna nodded. She tore great chunks of bread and urged Theo to eat them. They ate in comfortable silence. He was grateful that she did not ask him difficult questions about what he had done and why he had done it. If she had, he wouldn't have known how to answer her. As he spooned the delicious soup into his mouth, his eyes were continually drawn to the scar on her face. It moved when she ate, becoming more pronounced.

"It's not so bad now, but at the time it was very bad indeed. Like your arm."

"What?"

"You are staring at my scar, wondering how I got it."

"No." Theo looked down at his plate, his face flushing.

"You are," she insisted, clearing the plates and rising stiffly to place them in the sink. She filled two mugs from a pot of coffee that was standing on the drainer. "It is natural for you to be curious. I'm used to it. Would you like me to tell you how I got it?"

"No." Theo gulped. "No, you don't have to."

"Of course I don't have to… but it has been a long time... a very long time since I had a good lunch time companion. Maybe if I talk you will not think about

you…" She glanced down at his encased arm. A slow grin began to spread over her craggy face making her dark eyes glitter. "And… as we've already decided, we are not strangers."

Theo smiled shyly. He opened his mouth to thank her for the food, but Anna was already talking. He was ashamed that she had caught him staring. He was behaving like everybody else. He hated that, because mostly, he considered everyone else to be an idiot.

"I am old," she began. "Older than your grandparents I should imagine. But I remember like it was yesterday..." Anna's dark eyes rolled towards the ceiling, seeing something more, something beyond.

"Theresienstadt," she whispered.

Theo took a sip of his coffee. It burned his tongue. His eyes watered. It was strong but not unpleasant.

"Theresienstadt?"

"Yes," she insisted. Her eyes no longer sparkled. "Have you heard of it?"

Theo shook his head. She looked directly into his eyes.

"Theresienstadt, in what is now the Czech Republic. Perhaps you have known it as Terezin?"

Theo's face remained blank.

"It was a ghetto, a camp, where they imprisoned people like me."

"People like you?"

"Yes, Jews."

Something inside Theo jolted when she said that. His arm began to pound again. "You… you are German?"

Anna tutted, rolling her eyes in the soft sags of their

"Why did he die?"

"Pardon, Theo. I did not hear you," Anna inclined her head towards him. He could smell the powdery warmth of her skin. "My ears are not so good."

"I said – why did he die?" Theo croaked.

Anna shrugged. "Nobody knew why. One minute Josef was asleep in his crib, the next he was dead..."

"Someone did it?"

Anna frowned, glancing at him. She shook her head slowly. Worry clouded her eyes, like the pretty English teacher at school who seemed to know more about him than he had ever let on.

"No," Anna murmured. "It just happened. Sometimes these things just happen… don't you think?"

Theo jumped up. His arm seethed at the movement. "But babies don't just die, do they?" he yelped.

His eyes rolled like giant marbles in his face.

Anna drew back. "Theo, be calm... I have upset you..."

Theo trembled. He bit down hard on his bottom lip. A tooth pierced the skin. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. He swallowed, cradling his throbbing arm against his body. He could feel blood pulsing in his neck.

"Theo, please," Anna spoke quietly. "Please Theo. We'll talk of something else."

Theo closed his eyes. He took several deep breaths. When he opened them, Anna was handing him a glass of water and more painkillers. She squeezed his shoulder then eased herself into the sofa.

She patted the cushion beside her. "Sit here with me Theo. You need to rest."

Theo did as she asked. He felt comfortable in her presence although somehow it felt wrong; like loving Jon as much as he did when he was only his stepfather.

"Tell me more about your life," Theo said when the pain became manageable.

Anna patted his leg.

"You are a good listener."

Theo smiled at the rare compliment.

"The Nazis took the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia in 1938; later the country came under their rule which meant the Jews were persecuted. In 1939 they began to segregate us… in restaurants, from certain industries. We were not allowed to go swimming anymore."

Theo frowned.

"They did it slowly. Little by little they took our lives away from us; snatches of pleasure… our radios, so we could not hear the news. A curfew was imposed meaning we could not leave our homes before sunrise or after dusk. A slow persecution of the Jews… and I was one of them.

"When war broke out it became worse. Even our money was controlled. We were forced to sell jewels… gold, silver, Mother's platinum and diamond ring… for little money. Hotels were closed to us. We were forced to sit at the back of the trams. The country became separated… known as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the Slovak Republic. The Protectorate government banned Jews from public service which now meant Father's patients were limited to those in the Jewish community."

Theo looked directly into Anna's eyes. He was enthralled by listening to her, yet horrified by the details.

"What did you do?" he asked.

Anna smiled, the lines around her eyes creased like crumpled paper. She reached out one knobbly hand and patted his hand.

"At first, we tried to pretend it was not happening, but when we realised that the Nazis were rounding up Jews who were not obeying their rules, we did the only thing we could do," she said softly. "We ran."