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Opening Extract from...

Mummy's Little Soldier

Written by Casey Watson

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SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CASEY WATSON

Mummy's Little Soldier

A troubled child.
An absent mum.
A shocking secret.

HARPER element

This book is a work of non-fiction based on the author's experiences.
In order to protect privacy, names, identifying characteristics,
dialogue and details have been changed or reconstructed.

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I'd like to dedicate this book to all those brave soldiers, men and women, who continue to dedicate their lives to serving their country so that all our grandchildren, mine included, can look forward to a peaceful future. A special mention goes to the parents and grandparents of serving soldiers, airmen and seamen, who will surely be facing their own private battles, as well as being filled with pride. Bless you all.

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Chapter 1

Working in a school, or so my thoughts ran, I should really love words, shouldn't I? Words are good, after all. Words are a brilliant way of communicating with one another. Words are one of the best ways invented for expressing how we feel. But as I looked down at the word that had appeared on the screen of my mobile, I could think of a fair few more I shouldn't even be *thinking*, much less typing out furiously in response to it.

The word that had been texted was 'whatever'. Which was to be expected, as it was the word that was my daughter's current favourite, in reply to pretty much anything I said. Except she spelt it 'whateva!' Which was another thing.

I'd had the last word that morning, which had been no kind of victory, because when you're a mum and you start the day by having words with your teenage children, you spend the rest of it feeling miserable, even if you're in the right. Which I was, about that one thing she'd promised

to do but 'couldn't', but that didn't make me feel any better.

And now the text, just to rub it in. Just to make her point. I flipped the phone shut, shoved it into my bag and headed into school. Better not to answer it. Not just yet.

Also better to put it behind me and focus on work. Everyone has one of those days sometimes, after all. But there are some days that you really don't want to be one of *those* days, aren't there? The first day of term being one of them.

Which would have been the case anyway – first days of term tend to be complicated at the best of times – but it seemed that today I wasn't even going to be allowed the luxury of licking my wounds a bit while easing into it.

'Ah, Casey!' Julia Styles called, marching down the corridor towards me, bristling with efficiency and thick manila files. 'Brilliant. You've saved me a journey.'

Julia Styles was the school SENCO, or special educational needs co-ordinator, and it was her job to oversee everything special needs-related. It was also her job, in conjunction with the other relevant senior staff, to act as gatekeeper of where I worked – the school's behavioural unit.

'I have?' I asked her, as we reached each other, wondering why she'd been in search of me anyway. The first day of a new term usually involved me heading to *her* office, for a sit down and a chat about my latest bunch of pupils, as well as a catch-up about the holidays over a mug of coffee or two.

But not today, it seemed. Julia linked an arm through mine and swivelled me around. 'We're off to a meeting in the meeting room,' she explained, leading me back the way I'd come. 'All a bit last minute, I know, but I decided we all needed to put our heads together. Donald's already up there. Gary's coming, obviously. I've sent Kelly off to hunt Jim down as well.'

Donald was the deputy head, Gary the school's child protection officer and Jim was my alter ego; we both did similar jobs. We had the same job title, too – the rather fierce-sounding 'behaviour manager'. Even though neither of us was very fierce at all. Kelly Vickers, who'd just gone off to find him, was one of the twenty or so teaching assistants in the school, and was these days pretty much my number 2.

'Quite a gathering, then,' I said, as Julia and I mounted the stairs up to the room in question. 'What's brought all this on? Something happened?'

'Oh, don't look so worried,' Julia reassured me. 'Nothing bad's happened. Well, not yet, anyway.' She grinned. 'No, you know what it's like, Casey. I just had one of those eureka moments. As you do. No, we've got a couple of potentially rather complicated children joining the school today, and since they're the sort of kids who are going to require input from all of us I thought "I know! How about I take the bull by the horns and get *all* of us together, then?" So I did! Seemed to make a great deal more sense than trying to organise half a dozen separate meetings on the hoof, as usually happens. Means we'll all

be on the same page before we start working with them, won't it?' She pushed the door to the meeting room open and smiled again. 'I believe it's called "joined-up thinking". Something jargon-y like that, anyway. Ah, Gary, Donald. Hi. You got my notes, then. Thanks so much for coming.' She threw her files down on the big table that dominated the space. 'Quite the party, eh? Ah, and here are Kelly and Jim. So that's almost all of us. Who's brought the bubbly?'

That's another thing about the first day of term, particularly when it's the first term of the academic year as well. For those of us who work in schools, it's a bit like the first day of January. The 'happy new year' we've all anticipated over the long summer break. Some with an element of dread (or so I'm told; that never applied to me personally), and some with a degree of manic energy and enthusiasm that would have everyone else wondering what they'd slipped into their cornflakes.

And that was all to the good, because if you didn't start the school year full of optimism and energy, there was a fair chance you'd be burnt out by Christmas. 'Come and sit by me,' Gary Clark said, pulling out the chair beside him around the other side of the table. 'Come join me in the naughty corner so we can whisper and pass each other secret notes.'

I slung my bag down on the seat next to him, gratefully spying the kettle and jar of instant on the desk on the corner. 'Need a coffee first,' I told him. 'Can I get you one as well?'

Gary shook his head. 'Coffee?' he asked, nodding pointedly in Julia's direction. 'No way. I want a slug of whatever *she's* having.'

That's the thing about those sorts of days as well, isn't it? That they always seem to have an infinite capacity to get worse. Though once we were gathered around the table, that was the last thing on my mind, because Julia went straight to work on her short but important agenda so that we could be finished before the children started 'hunting us down'.

Her terminology wasn't far off the mark, either. While mainstream school went about its business, most of the people currently in the meeting room were a hard-to-pin down sort of bunch, because that was the nature of the roles we all played. While the head, Mike Moore, oversaw his flock from the calm, tidy-to-within-an-inch-of-its-life environs of his huge office, Donald Brabbiner was invariably fire-fighting somewhere or other, while Julia and Gary, likewise, were out of their offices almost as much as they were in them. Jim Dawson, too, had a peripatetic schedule, his job being similar to mine, but also quite different, in that he roamed the school, also firefighting where needed, but mostly monitoring those kids who might, for whatever reason, need to be pulled out of lessons and come to me for a spell.

In fact, I was the only one in the room who stayed pretty much where I was most days – in the little ground-floor room that had been both my classroom and my office since

I'd begun working at the school. Which meant I was easier to find, yes, but also that I was something of a magnet for all the kids who, strictly speaking, weren't my responsibility any more, and who I regularly had to shoo back to their lessons.

Right now, however, ex-Unit kids were the only kind of kids I had, my last bunch having finished their stint with me at the end of the previous summer term, most to go back to mainstream lessons, one because she was done with school now, and one, rather distressingly, because her life had imploded and she was now in foster care a long way away. Her name was Kiara and she'd been on my mind a lot over the summer. I wondered how she was doing and hoped she was okay.

But today, as was the way of things, it seemed I was about to have my classroom repopulated – by three new kids, two of whom were new to the school as well. 'And they've come with quite a hefty amount of baggage,' Julia explained, opening the first of the files in front of her. 'Which is why it seemed sensible for us to get our heads together before they get here.'

She began with a boy by the name of Darryl. Darryl, being eleven, was coming to us from his primary school, which was obviously a big transition in itself. But in Darryl's case it was a little more complicated. He struggled academically, on account of having some learning difficulties, but also socially, because he had Asperger's syndrome, which is a mild form of autism.

I knew something about this, because my own son, Kieron, had Asperger's, so this was familiar territory. But

there are degrees of difficulty faced by kids with Asperger's and it sounded as if Darryl struggled more than Kieron – it seemed he was coming to us after a particularly fraught final year in primary, during which his behaviour and mood had gone markedly downhill.

'He's been badly bullied, by all accounts,' Julia explained, not needing to glance at her notes, having doubtless already memorised the contents. 'And he stresses about everything: crowded corridors, people touching him, loud noises, altercations …'

'All of which he's going to find in spade-loads here,' Gary pointed out.

'Exactly,' Julia said. 'He struggles with eye contact too. And he's also developed several compulsions in the past couple of years apparently, which is going to make him a magnet for bullies here, from the outset. He has this thing about hair. Likes to touch it – *needs* to touch it – and not his own, either. Any hair in reach, according to what his former SENCOs passed on. It's a self-soothing thing he needs to do when he's anxious. You'll have come across that sort of thing before, Casey, yes?' I nodded. 'Which, again, is going to mark him out and make life even more stressful for him. Which is why I thought – assuming you all agree, of course –' she looked around the table – 'he should start off splitting his time between learning support and the Unit, at least till he's found his feet and his anxiety levels lessen. I was hoping you'd be able to work on his social skills, Casey.'

The kettle had boiled by this time so, having agreed, I went off to make a couple of teas and coffees; if an army

marches on its stomach, a school definitely seems to run on its bladder – at least via the frequent application of hot drinks. Didn't matter if it was blowing a gale or, like it was today, still positively summery; the soundtrack of any room in school that the children weren't actually in was the click of switches, the ting of teaspoons and the shouts of 'Who's for a brew?' Oh, and the accompanying rustle of various biscuit packets being opened.

By the time I'd returned to the table, Julia had opened the second of her folders of notes, this one markedly fatter. 'Cody Allen,' she said. 'Thirteen. So she's going into year 9, and I think she's going to need a good bit of support.' She then glanced at Donald, who nodded. 'Julia's right,' he said. 'I've already met her. And had a meeting with her new foster carers yesterday.'

This made me prick my ears up. 'She's just gone into foster care?' I asked, thinking immediately of Kiara, and just how painful a business it had been, however necessary, for her to be dragged away from everything she knew.

But Donald shook his head. 'Not "just",' he said. 'She's been in care since she was four, by all accounts. Her current carers are the latest in a long line who've looked after her, sad to say.'

'She's apparently the strangest child,' Julia said. 'Very complicated psychologically. Her mum has learning difficulties and the reason Cody ended up in care was because she used to shut her up in a cupboard for long periods when she was little.' She gestured to her notes again. 'According to what's here, almost as one would put away a doll.'

There was a silence while we all tried to digest this. Didn't matter how much you read about, or heard about or saw, some images were still difficult to process.

'*Exactly*,' Julia said, articulating what we were all thinking. 'So, as you can imagine, she's not the most straightforward child. We don't have all the reports from her last school yet but social services have been very helpful and what we do know is that she's … well, the notes I have here say she's convinced she's inhabited – well, I suppose the more correct word's "possessed" – by the devil, and that when she's not being a poppet, which she apparently can be, she tends to frighten other children.'

'You don't say,' Gary observed wryly.

Julia acknowledged his comment with a trace of a smile. Then removed it. 'But the most important thing is that she's unpredictable, volatile and can apparently be very violent. She might have a kind of Tourette's thing going on too – though that's not been diagnosed – and we're fairly sure she'll end up having to go somewhere more specialised, but Mike's agreed to take her temporarily – again, I hope you're all happy with this, at least in principle, as long as she *is* manageable – so that she can be observed and formally assessed. Again, we're thinking she should split her time between the learni– er,' she stopped then, and listened. 'Er … is that what I think it is?' She then burst out laughing.

As well she might. As well might everyone else. Which everyone else did. Yes, it was definitely going to be *that* sort of day. Because what they could hear was some kind of rap-like singing … a ringtone my phone didn't have last time it

rang but which I knew, I just *knew*, it had now. With the volume set to maximum.

Flipping Kieron.

'I'll kill him,' I growled, albeit to no one in particular, as I plucked my handbag from the floor beside my chair. 'I'm sorry. Hang on. I'll have my hand on it in just a minute … just got to … hang on. Nope … ah, maybe it's here …' I burbled on, realising I couldn't actually remember where I'd put it, and cursing the day when I'd set the number of rings before it went to the answerphone, on the basis of the length of time it always seemed to take for me to find it in my bag. Oh, the bitter irony.

And that's when the day got even *worse*. 'Hang on,' I said, snatching my satchel up and then, realising it was pinned under my chair leg by the strap, giving it a tug that was a little too much on the forceful side of tugging, meaning that when it suddenly came free, my arm shot in the air at precisely the moment when Gary, beside me, had lifted his hot tea to his lips.

His roar of pain as our forearms connected and the mug left his hand probably lifted the ceiling panels. 'Jesus H!' he yelped, leaping from his seat as the tea cascaded over him, and the chair he'd vacated toppled backwards onto the floor.

Jim was up on his feet too, and being closest to the tea things in the corner, grabbed a bottle of mineral water that had fortunately been left there by someone, popped the lid off and sprayed a jet of that over Gary, it being one of those sports types you can squeeze.

'You okay, mate?' Jim asked him, once all the water was gone.

Gary looked down, his whole front now a mass of sodden, dripping clothing. And then at me. 'You know those days?' he said, as I struggled with a packet of tissues that had – oh, second cruel irony – come immediately to hand. 'Those days when you get out of bed,' he went on, 'and think – hmm, you know what? I suspect it's going to be one of *those* days? Hmm,' he finished, wiggling his sopping tie towards me. '*That*. Or, there's a thought. Do you think it might have been a poltergeist?'