

Unswept Graves

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Also by Robert Black, and published by Royal Fireworks Press: *LIBERTY GIRL*. This historical novel is about a girl growing up in First World War Baltimore, and is based on the diaries of the author's grandmother.



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Chapter One

The Nebraska sandhills rolled past the car window like waves in a green and brown sea. To Jasmine Wu, they seemed to be greeting her like an old friend. Soon her family's journey across the prairie from their home in Lincoln would be over. Soon they would arrive in the little town of Helmerton, to be welcomed by friends and relatives alike. It was her family's annual Spring Break visit, the same one they had been taking for as long as she could remember.

Bzzzt! Bzzzt!

The buzz of Jasmine's cell phone drew her back from the window. A new text message was waiting for her. She checked to see who the sender was, and groaned—the message wasn't exactly one she wanted. "Come on!" she grumbled. "Can't you give it a rest?"

"What's wrong?" asked her older brother Henry, sitting next to her in the back seat.

"It's my friend, Emily Tan," said Jasmine. "She hasn't left me alone since yesterday."

"Why not?" asked Henry. His expression turned mischievous. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing!" Jasmine cried. "I was just telling her about going to Helmerton, and now she won't stop asking me about it."

“Emily Tan?” said her father, who was listening from the driver’s seat. “Isn’t she that new girl you told us about? The one from Vancouver?”

“That’s where she moved from,” said Jasmine. “But she’s originally from Hong Kong—and she just *loves* telling you about that.”

“Even when you’re on Spring Break?” said Henry. “That’s pretty weird.”

“She got all excited when I told her about Founders’ Day,” Jasmine explained. “She says it’s just like some big Chinese holiday that’s coming up.”

It had been quite a discussion the day before, in fact. Founders’ Day was Helmerton’s annual celebration of its roots, and that included Jasmine’s great-great-grandparents, Charlie and Hannah Fong. They had been two of the people who originally founded Helmerton, back in 1898, along with the families of Helmer Syverson and Olaf Sommervold. Founders’ Day featured a pageant in which everyone dressed up in the style of those times, with the descendants of the founding families portraying their ancestors.

“They’ve got a Founders’ Day in China?” said Henry, sounding skeptical.

“I said it’s *like* Founders’ Day,” Jasmine replied. “She called it Ching Ming. You’re supposed to clean up the graves of your ancestors and hold a ceremony to honor them.”

“I guess that sounds a little like Founders’ Day,” said her father. Jasmine could see his brow furrow slightly in the rearview mirror as he considered the idea.

“Trust me, it’s totally different,” she told him. “Emily keeps texting me all these things we have to do, like we’re supposed to be all Chinese or something.”

“Most Chinese families haven’t been in this country very long,” her father reminded her. “I’m afraid that makes us a little strange to them.”

That was certainly true. Jasmine didn’t know any Chinese families who had a history like hers. In Helmerton, her relatives were still the only Chinese people in town, even after all these years. There were a number of Chinese and Chinese-American people in Lincoln, but Jasmine often felt like an outsider among them. She had been to some festivals at the local Chinese Cultural Association, and while they had been fun, she hadn’t thought they were anything special. She didn’t understand what Emily was making such a big deal about.

“Can you guys hold it down?” asked Jasmine’s mother. She was sitting in the front passenger seat, with her own cell phone pressed to her ear. “I’m trying to talk to Wai-po.”

Henry laughed to himself. “Speaking of people who think we’re a little strange—”

Jasmine smiled as well. Her maternal grandparents were definitely the more traditional Chinese type, despite having lived near Philadelphia for the past forty years. They even wanted to be called by their traditional Chinese family names, Wai-gong or “mother’s father,” and Wai-po or “mother’s mother.” Even Jasmine’s mother couldn’t relate to them sometimes, and she had grown up with them.

“Of course I’m doing that, Mama,” her mother was speaking into the phone. “It’s exactly how you wanted it. Don’t you think I was listening?”

It was a familiar exchange, but listening to it gave Jasmine a twinge of sadness. Her other grandmother, the one from Helmerton, was gone now. Only her Great Uncle Morten remained in town, along with his two children, her Aunt Amber and Uncle George, and their families. Grandma Wu had shared a special bond with her, one that she missed dearly.

“Mama, we’re almost into town,” her mother said over the phone. “I’ll call you back later.” She hung up the phone and looked at Jasmine and Henry. “If I ever do that to you when you’re adults, you have my permission to call me on it.”

“What’s Wai-po upset about?” asked Jasmine.

“She wants to have a huge family party for Henry’s graduation,” said her mother, “and she’s already invited all your aunts and uncles and cousins to come out here for it.”

“All right, score!” Henry exclaimed. “I’m going to rake in the loot!”

“Has she figured out where she’s going to put all those people?” Jasmine’s father asked, in the quiet tone he always used when he was just as irritated as Jasmine’s mother.

“I didn’t get that far,” Jasmine’s mother replied. “That’s probably tonight’s phone call.”

Jasmine slumped down in her seat, fuming. “She didn’t want a big party when I graduated from sixth grade last year. I just got a card from them—and it was late.”

“High school is way more important than sixth grade,” Henry said smugly.

“I’m afraid it’s also because you’re a girl, dear,” her mother sighed. “That’s how things were back when your grandparents grew up. Your aunt and I went through the same thing with your uncles when we were kids.”

“Someone should tell them it’s 2012 already,” Jasmine muttered.

Luckily, they didn’t have long before they reached their destination, and the familiar sights of Helmerton lifted Jasmine’s spirits again. They were only a couple of blocks away from Aunt Amber’s house when the car passed a lanky figure riding a bicycle. After so many months away, the rider wasn’t immediately recognizable—but the bicycle was. “Look, there’s Oz!” she cried out.

“You’re kidding!” her mother exclaimed, trying to look back. “What happened to her hair?”

Jasmine grinned. “I got some pictures the other night. She said she had to sacrifice it in the name of art.”

“What does that mean?” asked Henry.

Jasmine could only shrug. “She said she’d explain when I saw her.”

Australia Marie Phillips—known as “Oz” to just about everyone—was one of Jasmine’s oldest friends. Jasmine’s cousin had been her babysitter back when they were six

years old, and they had kept in touch ever since. Visiting Helmerton gave them a rare chance to see each other instead of talking on the phone, or texting, or chatting online.

They pulled into the driveway of Aunt Amber's house, and Oz soon pedaled up to join them. Jasmine raced over to her friend's side and was amazed by how much she had to look up to see her friend's face.

"When did this happen?" she cried. "You told me about your hair, but you never mentioned getting so tall!"

Oz got off her bicycle, drooping her head. "I was hoping you wouldn't notice," she quipped.

"Yeah, right," said Jasmine, rolling her eyes. "Why not?" She looked down at her own—much smaller—body. "You don't want to be a shrimp like me, do you?"

"Some days, I do," Oz replied. "It's weird being taller than the entire boys' soccer team. I feel like a freak."

"At least you're growing," said Jasmine. "I still look like I'm about ten."

"It's good to see you again, Oz," said Jasmine's mother. "But why did you cut off all your hair?"

Oz grinned bashfully as she took off her bicycle helmet, revealing her short, sandy-colored tresses. The difference from the way she'd looked before was striking—both Jasmine and Oz had always let their hair grow long, but now Jasmine was the only one whose hair still reached all the way down her back.

“The high school wants a bunch of junior high kids to play the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan*,” Oz explained. “My teacher says I should try out.”

“You’re going to play a boy?” Jasmine asked. Oz had always loved acting. Jasmine had seen video clips of her performances, but she had always played female characters before.

“Why not?” said Oz. She glanced down at her gangly frame. “In case you didn’t notice, getting taller is the *only* direction I’ve been growing. I could totally pull it off.”

“I think you’d be fabulous,” Jasmine’s mother said encouragingly.

“I get a chance to practice next weekend, too,” Oz went on. “Tom Sommervold made the regional track meet, so I’m covering for him in the Founders’ Day pageant.”

Before Jasmine could say anything more, she heard the commotion of her Aunt Amber coming out of the house, followed by her Uncle George’s wife, Aunt Rose. Her father looked back and waved to her. “Jasmine! Come over and say hello!”

Jasmine sighed. “Looks like I’ve got family duty.”

“Take your time,” her mother assured her. “We can spare you a minute or two.”

“It’s okay,” said Oz. “I’m just glad you came. We haven’t seen you since your grandma’s funeral.”

“Of course we came!” said Jasmine. “We still want to see everybody. Besides, Grandma wouldn’t have wanted us to miss Founders’ Day.”

Oz nodded her agreement. “She really got into it, every single year.”

“Aunt Rose said she and Grandma had been planning a new Founders’ Day costume for me,” said Jasmine.

“You’ll really like it,” Oz said knowingly.

Jasmine’s jaw dropped. “How do you know?”

“Your Aunt Rose is making my costume, too,” Oz replied. “Besides, you’re not in the big city anymore. Around here, everybody knows everything.”

Jasmine shook her head in disbelief. Before she could say anything more, Oz climbed back onto her bicycle and turned to leave. “Anyway, I’d better go. Let me know what happens with your Uncle Morten, okay?”

“What do you mean?” Jasmine asked.

For a moment, Oz could only stare at her, looking surprised. “I...I just meant...that you haven’t seen him in a while,” she stammered. “It’ll be great for you to catch up.”

Jasmine frowned suspiciously. “And why do you want to know about that...?”

But Oz was already pedaling away, leaving Jasmine alone with her question. *Something’s going on with Uncle Morten? Is it something good or something bad?* Looking over at the way her aunts were greeting them, she concluded that it couldn’t be anything bad—but what was it? And how did Oz know about it? She could only shake her head in wonder as she made her way toward the house.

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Chapter Two

“This is awesome!” cried Jasmine, checking her reflection in Aunt Rose’s full-length mirror. “All I need is a frilly umbrella, and I’ll look like Mary Poppins.”

“Mary Poppins?” said Oz. “She didn’t have a frilly umbrella.”

“She did in the cartoon part,” said Jasmine. She looked over her new Founders’ Day costume again, admiring the long skirt and the old-fashioned blouse with its high neck and long sleeves that puffed out at the shoulders. Only one part of her ensemble wasn’t right yet.

“We still need to find some shoes,” said Aunt Rose, who was kneeling down to adjust Jasmine’s hemline. She picked up one of the bright pink sneakers that Jasmine had worn to the house. “I don’t think they had these in the 1890s.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault that my feet are so small,” Jasmine protested.

“It’ll be all right,” Aunt Rose assured her. “We’ve still got time.” She stood up and turned to Oz next. “Now, how about your costume?”

“It’s looking great!” said Oz. She stepped forward to show off her outfit, a white shirt with a dark blue bow tie, and a pair of dark gray knickerbockers with black shoes and knee socks. Anyone who didn’t know her would never have

guessed she was a girl. Even the people who did know her might have had trouble recognizing her.

Aunt Rose looked over her handiwork as Oz modeled for her. “Hmm, I don’t know,” she said after a moment. “It could use something more—” An idea came to her, and she turned to Jasmine. “You know, I think there’s an old tweed cap at your Uncle Morten’s house. See if you can find that.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Jasmine. She shot Oz a look of mock annoyance. “Maybe then we’ll find out what my surprise is.”

“Okay, okay,” said Oz, holding up her hands in surrender. “I never should have said anything yesterday.”

Jasmine grinned, unable to hold her severe expression. She had been teasing Oz all morning, after going the entire night before without discovering the secret Oz had mentioned. Uncle Morten had only said there was something waiting for her at his house, without telling her what it was. That was all he had told Oz, too, so now they were equally in the dark. If she hadn’t had her new costume to think about, her curiosity would have been making her crazy by this point.

“You’re both in luck,” said Aunt Rose. “George said Morten’s taking the afternoon off from the market, so you can go see him then.”

“And then I’ll finally be out of trouble,” Oz quipped.

By early afternoon, the spring weather had warmed to the point where they could wear their costumes without coats as they walked down the block to Uncle Morten’s house. Jasmine still had to wear her pink sneakers, but that didn’t stop her from imagining herself in the upcoming pageant.

They reached Uncle Morten's front yard, walked up onto his front porch, and rang the doorbell. It was the first time Jasmine had been there since her grandmother's funeral, and for another moment she felt the pang of her loss. At least this time she was able to sweep it away with thoughts of the surprise that was waiting for her.

Uncle Morten answered the door promptly, as if he was just as eager as Jasmine was. The night before, she had thought he looked older than she remembered—thinner, with wispier hair and more wrinkles on his face. But when he returned her hug, his arms felt as strong and wiry as they had ever felt. Perhaps her grandmother's death had simply made her more aware that time was passing.

"Right on time!" Uncle Morten exclaimed, stepping aside to let them in. Looking at Oz, he added, "And I see you've found a new boyfriend."

"Uncle Morten!" Jasmine cried. "You're going to make Oz paranoid about her looks."

"Either that, or you'll convince me I'm a great actress," said Oz. "Oh, wait—I already knew that."

Jasmine grinned. They stepped into the house, and she felt the old familiar sense of walking into the past. The house had been built in the 1920s for her great-great-grandparents. Before then, the family had lived in an apartment over the market they owned. Now the house belonged to Uncle Morten, who had shared it with Jasmine's grandmother after his wife and Jasmine's grandfather both died. Reminders of those older generations and the times they lived in filled the house, from the furniture to the pictures on the walls to the

creaking of the floor as they walked across it. An old, musty scent crept into her nose, and, for some strange reason, it more than anything else brought back memories of the times she had visited before.

“You two look just like pictures from the time when my father and his brothers were kids,” said Uncle Morten. “They weren’t born until Helmerton had been around a few years, of course, but it’ll be close enough for the pageant.”

Jasmine smiled, remembering the family’s old stories. According to town history, Charlie Fong had already staked a claim on the land when Helmer Syverson and Olaf Sommervold first arrived there in 1898. He had been a railroad worker and had planned to start a new life with his savings.

“I’ve always thought your family was pretty amazing,” said Oz. “Coming out here to the middle of nowhere, all by themselves—”

“Well, I do think my grandmother—Hannah—wondered sometimes about living in the middle of nowhere,” said Uncle Morten. “Back then, most Chinese folks stayed together in places like San Francisco. But my grandfather wanted to be a part of something new. That was his dream.”

“That probably made it easy for him when the Syversons and Sommervolds showed up. They must have gotten along great.”

Uncle Morten nodded. “They did. I’m even named after Helmer Syverson’s oldest son, you know.”

As they spoke, Jasmine’s eyes wandered across the pictures on the nearest wall. In the center of the arrangement was a