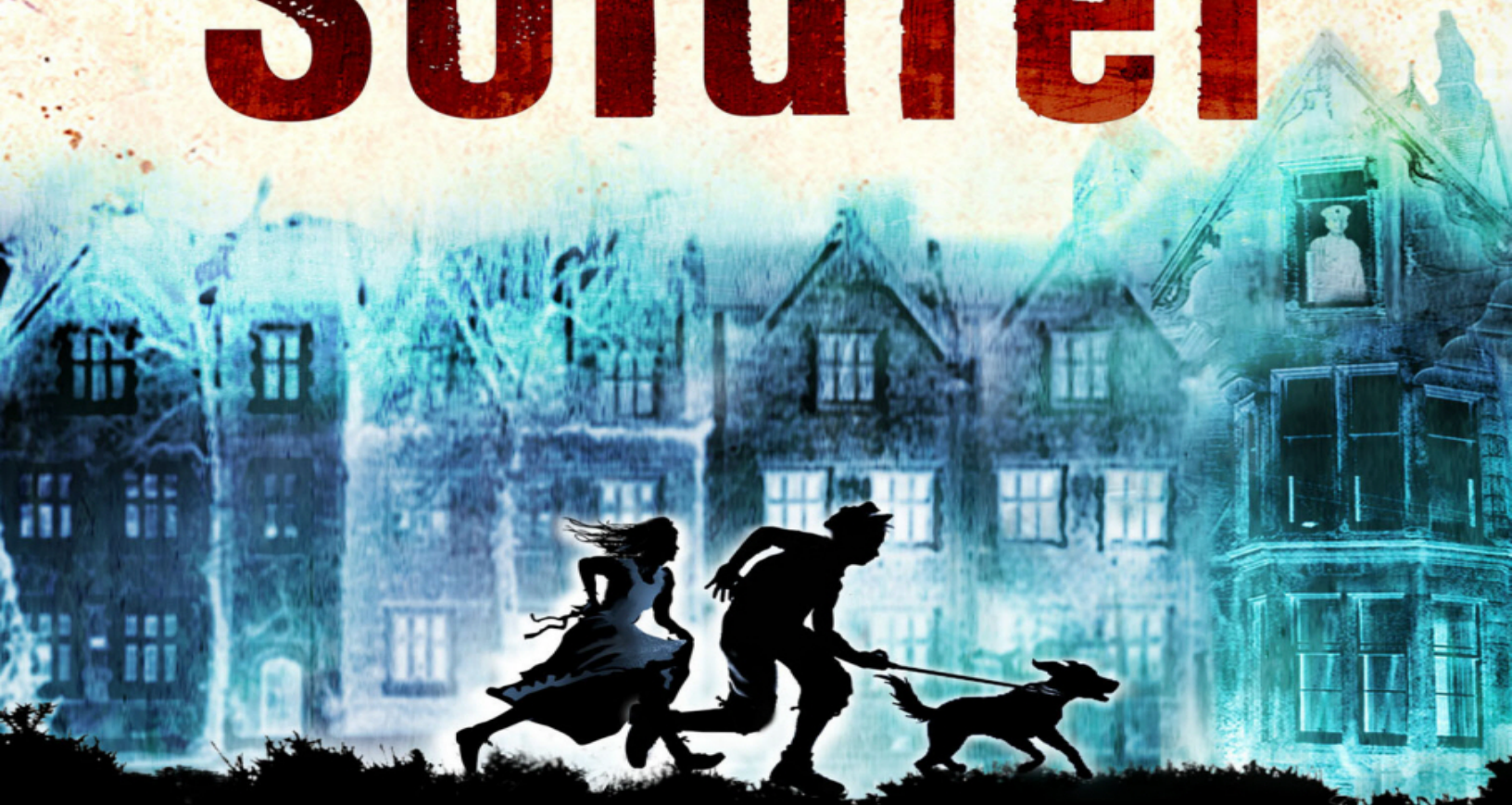




Ghost Soldier



THERESA BRESLIN

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ABOUT THE BOOOK

Nobody believes in ghosts until they see one . . .

The war has changed everything for Rob and Millie. Their father is missing in action and they are terrified they'll never see him again.

Then one night, deep in the woods, Rob and Millie see an eerie figure in the window of an abandoned house.

But there's no such thing as ghosts, is there?

Ghost Soldier



THERESA BRESLIN

RHCP DIGITAL

This book is for Brogan, who named the puppy Sandy



CHAPTER ONE

GUNS FIRING.

Men yelling.

Smoke so thick that Rob can't see.

Another roar from the guns. The ground shudders. Stones and clods of earth rain down upon him. Rob stumbles, grabbing for something to hold.

Barbed wire.

Pain now. He looks at his hand, splashed with red. Blood. His blood . . . seeping between his fingers.

Help, he thinks. *I need help*. So he shouts. As loud as he can, he shouts: 'Help! Help!' But no sound comes out.

Rob puts his hands to his mouth. It's open. He *was* shouting, but he isn't making any noise. He begins to panic, his heart thudding. He'll die here. Bleed to death in the smoke, and no one will know. Not his sister, Millie, nor his mum, nor his dad.

Dad.

It was Dad he'd come looking for. Dad who was lost in the war. And among the guns and the smoke, he, Rob, was trying to find him and bring him home.

But now they'll both be missing, far away in this strange land. Rob feels his body sag. He leans against the wall of the trench to rest. The smoke swirls, less dense than before. And there, through the fog of battle, a soldier is walking towards him.

'Dad!' Rob exclaims, reaching out his arms. The man in front of him does the same. 'Dad!' Rob calls again. 'I've been searching for you—' He stops.

The man facing him in the trench isn't wearing the uniform of the British Army. His clothes are the wrong colour. And on his head is a helmet with a spike at the top. This man is a German soldier!

The German raises his arms higher. In his hands he holds a gun. He points it at Rob.

Bang!

Rob feels a hard thump across his heart.

With a cry of terror he comes awake.

And he's lying in his bed at home with his dog sitting on his chest.



CHAPTER TWO

'OH, NELL!'

Rob tried to push the dog off. But Nell was not to be moved. She licked his face as she always did each morning when she woke him.

Rob lay still for a minute to let his heart slow down. It was the second time this week he'd had a nightmare. The second awful dream since the telegram from the War Office arrived to say that his father was missing in action on the battlefields of the Western Front.

'Best dog in the world,' he whispered, stroking Nell's head. She gave a little yelp of happiness. 'Shhh!' Rob quietened her. 'We mustn't wake anyone else.'

He paused to hear if his mother was moving around downstairs, hoping that he hadn't disturbed her when shouting out in his sleep. But she was so upset by the arrival of the telegram about Dad that the local doctor had given her tablets to take at night, so now she slept later in the mornings.

'Quiet . . .' Rob spoke softly to his dog as he slid from the bed and pulled on his clothes. 'Remember the secret plan for today? We have to get past Millie's room without her knowing we're up.' Nell watched him with bright, intelligent eyes. 'She'd want to come along and that would hold us up and she'd get in the way.' Rob began to open his bedroom door. 'All right?' he asked, and utterly believed that his dog was nodding her head in complete understanding.

Boy and dog tiptoed onto the landing and down the rickety attic stairway to the ground floor of their farm cottage.

And there in the kitchen was Rob's little sister Millie, standing by the table spreading jam on thickly cut slices of

bread.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Spreading plum jam on bread,’ Millie answered, licking her sticky fingers.

‘Why are you making plum-jam sandwiches at half past four in the morning?’ Rob noticed that she was fully dressed and had her coat on.

‘Cos plum jam is Dad’s favourite,’ said Millie. She replaced the lid on the jam jar. ‘And when we find him he might be hungry, so I’m bringing these.’ She put the sandwiches in a basket and covered them with a clean tea towel. ‘There,’ she said. ‘I’m ready to go with you.’

‘Where do you think I’m going?’ Rob demanded.

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘But last night I heard you telling Nell that you’d leave the kitchen window open so she could come in and wake you really early ’cos you were going to see if you could find Dad. And if you’re going to run away to find Dad, I’m coming with you.’

‘I’m not running away!’ said Rob.

‘Well, you’re off out somewhere,’ said Millie. ‘You were saying to Nell how it was important to be up early this morning ’cos you had a plan to find Dad. Whatever it is, I can help.’

‘No you can’t,’ said Rob. ‘You’re only seven!’

‘Nearly eight,’ Millie said loudly. ‘I’m a big girl.’

‘Hush!’ Rob glanced at the door of the downstairs room where his mother slept. ‘You’re not coming,’ he declared.

‘Yes I am.’ Millie spoke quietly but very firmly. ‘You can’t stop me.’

‘I’m going to see if I can find out about Dad.’ Rob pointed to the clock on the wall. ‘And I need to go quickly across the fields to reach the hill at Glebe Farm in time.’

‘You carry on. I’ll follow as fast as I can.’

‘No!’ Rob snapped at her.

Nell made a low noise in her throat, looking from Rob’s face to his sister’s. Rob put his hand on the dog’s head. He

knew she got upset when he and his sister argued.

‘Millie,’ he said more kindly, ‘I’m four, almost five years older than you. And . . . and it’s a boy’s thing to do – to go and search for his father.’

Millie looked up at her brother. ‘He’s my daddy too,’ she said.

Rob gazed at his little sister. ‘So he is,’ he said finally. ‘So he is.’

Beside him he felt the dog relax at the change in his tone of voice. He sighed. ‘C’mon, then,’ he said to Millie. ‘We’ll have to hurry.’



CHAPTER THREE

NELL SLIPPED AHEAD of them as they stepped outside their cottage.

Rob took the storm lantern that hung on a nail by the door and lit it with the burning taper he'd stuck in the embers of the kitchen fire. Then he and Millie followed the dog to the nearby shed.

Inside, among a pile of straw, Nell's puppies were nestled together in balls of black and white. Millie picked up the puppy Rob had promised she could have for herself. She hadn't yet thought of what to call him and was trying out various names.

'Rex . . .' she murmured. 'Do you like that name, little doggie?' She nuzzled the puppy's cheek. 'Do you?'

With a wobbly wriggle the puppy put out a small pink tongue to lick Millie's fingers.

'See!' she said in delight. 'My dog is beginning to know me already. He turned his head at the sound of my voice.'

'I'm not surprised,' Rob said. 'You're in here every day cuddling him. Put him back. We have to get on.'

Millie knelt to replace the puppy in the straw. Then she straightened up and threw her arms around Rob's waist. 'Thank you, Robbie,' she said. 'Thank you for giving him to me. You're the best brother in the whole world.'

Rob unwrapped his sister's arms. 'We'd better move.'

'And you are the best puppy dog,' Millie told the pup, who was now being licked in turn by his mother.

'What do you think of "Lallans" for a name, Rob?' asked Millie as they left the pups and began to walk towards the hill behind their house. 'Do you think that would suit him?'

'Maybe,' Rob said.

'That's where we live, isn't it? Dad said "Lallans" means the Lowlands. When people talk about Scotland, they

always think of the Highlands. But the Lowlands are just as important. Here in the Borders we've got the best land for crops and animals. Dad told me that.'

Rob remembered their dad telling them lots of things – like how the fields around their cottage got their names. Dad said that his grandfather had called the fields after places he'd seen, such as Africa and India, when he'd gone to be a soldier in the British Army.

Rob's dad had been in the Reserves. 'Playing with guns,' his mum had said, laughing – never thinking that he'd be called upon to fight in a real war. Although Dad hadn't been called up, exactly. He'd wanted to go. Right from the start, when war was declared, he was keen to be part of it.

Rob remembered his parents talking by the fire one night.

'I'd not be away long.' His dad had a wheedling tone to his voice. 'They say it'll be over by Christmas.'

'You've always hankered to travel the world, haven't you?' his mum replied. 'You listened to the adventure stories of your granddad and now you want to see those places for yourself.'

Rob heard the big chair creak. He could picture the scene in his head. His mum, sitting on the low stool by the fire, brushing her hair out before going to bed. His dad, leaning forward to take the hairbrush and do it for her.

His mum was smiling, but concerned. 'You want to try out army life, but war isn't a game, William.'

'I know, love, I know. But I'd be in the reserves, guarding the supply units. We'd be well in the rear as the main army advances.'

His mum sighed. 'Go, if you must. It might get it out of your system. I think Rob and I can cope with the farm work here for a bit.'

'Don't worry about that. Old Tam will manage the hill sheep on his own. He's been shepherding nigh on sixty years. And I'll rent out our crop fields to Farmer Gordon. I

won't be gone long. It'll be over in weeks,' his dad had assured her. 'A couple of months at most.'

But it wasn't over in a couple of months. And his dad's unit didn't stay safe in the rear. The British Army never advanced much. The opposite happened. They were forced to fall back. So the soldiers dug trenches to try and stop the enemy coming forward. The trenches stretched in a line across France and Belgium, and that area became the battlefields the newspapers named the Western Front. Christmas passed, and then another, with more and more months of hard, bitter fighting. Rob's dad wrote to his mum constantly, with extra notes specially for Rob and Millie.

Until, one day, the letters stopped.

Missing him was a horrible big achy Dad-shaped space in life, Rob thought. He reached out his hand and, sensing his mood, Nell came to him at once. The dog seemed to know that silence was required and, although keen to have a run across the fields, she kept close by him.

'Stay by me,' Rob said. 'Good dog.'

They went round the edge of the first field, the one called Africa. Before the war started, when passing this way, Rob and Millie would pretend they were travelling through the real Africa. They'd wipe sweat from their brows and play make-believe that there were dangerous lions and elephants among the long grass. But now, with the telegram arriving, it was as if it wasn't right to have fun any more. Rob increased his pace.

Millie chatted as she trotted beside him. As usual, any conversation with her was a constant stream of questions.

'Will my dog be able to do everything Nell does?' she asked her brother as they opened the gate to the pasture land. 'Like herd sheep, and fetch things for me?'

'You'll have to train him, but he should understand what you want. His sire was pure bred and Nell is the smartest dog in the world.'

‘Why are we going to the hill at Glebe Farm?’ Millie went on. ‘Is it because the railway line is there? Are we getting on a train?’

He should have realized that Millie would work out what he was doing. Even though she was young, she was really brainy. Always got top marks in tests at school – better than Rob ever did.

‘I’m . . . we are not getting on a train,’ he answered her. ‘But yes, we are going to watch for a train – a certain type of train. It’s called a hospital train. I heard that they’ve converted train carriages into units for wounded soldiers. The ships bring them across the Channel from France and then they’re put onto trains to take them straight to hospitals in the big cities of Britain.’

‘But Rob, are you sure we’ll see a hospital train on *our* railway line?’

‘The line going up the hill past Glebe Farm carries on into Edinburgh, and one of the big hospitals there has been made into an army hospital. I was in the post office and I heard Mrs Shelby reading it out from the newspaper. She said they’d have special trains bringing our wounded home so that they could get proper medical care and be near their loved ones. It’s been well organized, she said. “Good to know our boys are being looked after.” That’s what she said.’

‘Yes, but how do you know the train is coming through this morning?’

‘Kenneth told me. His dad works on the railway, so he knows. He said they’re running the hospital train at this time so as not to be in the way of the normal daytime trains.’

‘How did Kenneth know that our daddy would be on this train?’

‘He doesn’t, and neither do I. But the soldiers on the train will have come from the battlefields, and I think some should be from Dad’s regiment.’

‘Oh, I see what you mean!’ exclaimed Millie. ‘If the wounded soldiers are being sent to their loved ones, then the ones from Dad’s regiment will come to Edinburgh. You are so clever, Rob, to work that out.’

Rob grinned at her. Usually he was better at doing things with his hands than with his head, but he was pleased with himself for coming up with this idea.

‘How will we get to talk to them?’ Millie was out of breath and Rob slowed to answer her.

‘I reckon they’ll reduce speed on the hill like every train does. Then we’ll run alongside and call out to the men. We can shout out our father’s battalion and see if anyone knows him.’

‘Oh, someone will know him,’ Millie said confidently. ‘Daddy is such a nice man, and very friendly, always singing songs. I’ll bet he’s made lots of friends.’

Rob looked at his sister. He didn’t want to crush her hopes, but he knew that it was a bit far-fetched to think that anyone on the train would have actually met their father personally. But it was reasonable to hope that there would be someone from his regiment. Lots of men from round these parts – from Glendale and the neighbouring towns and villages – had enlisted in the same regiment, the Border Guards. Rob reckoned that when they were sorting them out as they carried them from the ships, they’d send the men to their regiment’s recruiting area. That would mean the Border Guards would be on the train going to the hospital in Edinburgh.

The sheep scattered as they ran across the grazing lands, their white shapes fuzzy in the breaking dawn. Light was shining from the kitchen of Glebe Farm. Mr Gordon would be getting ready to milk his cows as his wife put the bread dough in the oven. Now they were at the hill and they could see the wide spread of the crop fields, the woods and meadows of the rolling Lowlands.

Then, in the distance, a blow of red sparks rose high into the air with billows of smoke and steam. A chugging, rattling noise, getting louder and louder.

Racing towards them was a train. A very long train, the engine going full blast and pulling behind it a great many carriages.

‘Oh no!’ Rob cried. ‘We’re too late! We’re going to miss the train!’

