



THE HIDDEN BONES

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PROLOGUE

1972

It was a single glint of sunlight piercing the hanging mists of the October morning that caught his attention. The incessant rain of recent weeks had stopped, but the sodden chalky soil clung to his boots, making every step along the freshly cut furrows more difficult than the last.

He'd expected flint. It seemed to grow better than wheat up here. The Downs were littered with the shattered white fragments of ancient tools. When he held them he felt he might almost reach out and touch the people who'd built the turf-covered burial mounds that dominated the skyline in these parts.

He bent down to retrieve his find. Spitting on his fingers, he rubbed away the soil that smeared its surface. He stood motionless – it wasn't flint. In his hand he cradled the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Not much bigger than a ten pence

piece, an orange-red disc lay at its centre. The ruddy amber disc was encased within a circle of gold decorated with four delicately incised concentric grooves that ran right around its rim.

Running his fingertips over the still-glittering metal, he felt a pang of regret as they encountered a small tear where something sharp had ripped it. Four thousand years had passed since the disc had been laid to rest. And if it hadn't been for the unforgiving efficiency of the plough, there it might have stayed for another four millennia.

He'd searched these fields a hundred times. Every new discovery collected and exchanged for the telling of a tale. But this one was different. This one was meant for him. He slipped his prize into the soft flannel of his shirt pocket and he turned for home.

As he neared the bottom of the field, he cast a sideways glance at the dark pool seeping from the belly of the chalk, its swelling waters seeking out their path towards the village in the valley bottom far below. The locals called it the Hungerbourne. But he knew it by an older name – the Woe Waters.

CHAPTER ONE

2013

There was a flutter of excitement in the pit of Clare Hills' stomach when she stepped out of her coupé onto the gravel drive of Hungerbourne Manor. It had taken two deaths and nearly fifteen years, but she was finally going to get what she wanted. The day was shaping up to be everything she'd hoped for. The journey through the rolling chalk hills of the Marlborough Downs reminded her how much she loved this landscape. The pale blue sky was streaked with gauze-thin clouds and despite the gusting March wind she'd driven the thirty miles from Salisbury with the top down.

Until his death last year, the manor had belonged to archaeologist Gerald Hart. It had started life as an elegantly understated Palladian villa, but the addition of an unbecoming low-slung porch and bay windows by its Victorian owners set it

at odds with the gentle folds of the upland valley it inhabited. Clare was only too aware that the house was somewhat less of an intruder than she was. David had avoided using the word 'widow', but she knew his invitation to help him salvage what he could from Gerald's records was born out of pity rather than any genuine need for her assistance. The fact of Stephen, and now his death, hung between them like a freezing fog. But whatever David's motives, she was glad to be here. For the first time in months she was looking forward to something.

There was no sign of his Land Rover. He'd never been known for his timekeeping and she was acutely aware that she'd never actually met the new owner of Hungerbourne Manor – Gerald's nephew, Peter. She hoped this wasn't going to prove awkward.

As it turned out, she needn't have worried. David's familiar baritone boomed out of an open sash window at the front of the house. 'Front door is open. Let yourself in!'

The paint-flaked door juddered open to reveal a dark but lofty hallway. The air smelt stale and musty, and in places the fading wallpaper had peeled from the walls, revealing grey-blue patches of mildew. She found David kneeling on an old Turkish rug amid piles of papers and open filing cabinets in the oak-panelled study. He was wearing a pair of baggy brown cords and a dark blue rugby shirt with a small hole in one elbow. His six-foot frame now erred on the comfortable side of well-built, and the close-cropped sandy hair and neatly trimmed sideburns were tinged with grey. But he still looked reassuringly like the eager young doctoral student she'd known in her undergrad days.

David Barbrook wiped his palms down the front of his cords and knelt down. What the hell had he been thinking of? When Clare had contacted the university's archaeology department, it had seemed the

most natural thing in the world to ask her down here. She needed a distraction from Stephen's death and he needed another pair of hands. But, as the day drew closer, he'd become increasingly uncertain about the wisdom of the invitation.

When the hinges of the front door creaked their un-oiled warning, he grabbed a random sheaf of papers from the rug. The echo of footsteps on the tiled hall floor stopped and he looked up. The figure in the doorway was a million miles from the Ox-fam-clad student he remembered: designer jeans, cashmere polo-neck, chestnut-brown hair cut short to frame her face. And so thin.

He threw his arms wide in a redundant gesture, indicating the sprawling array of books and papers that covered the floor. 'Can you believe this? How can a man who hadn't published a word in four decades have this much paperwork?'

A hint of amusement sparked in her hazel eyes. 'Didn't you say that was why Peter asked you here in the first place?'

He bent forward, pretending to examine a pile of papers. 'Would've been a bloody sight easier if the cantankerous old sod had answered my letters.'

Clare gestured at him to lower his voice.

'It's alright, Peter's not here. He had an appointment with a client.'

Without waiting for an invitation, she joined him on the rug and began tidying the documents that littered the floor into neat stacks. 'What letters?'

'I wrote to Gerald to ask if I could help him publish the Hungerbourne excavations.'

She looked at him from behind a stack of journals. 'Write the report for him, you mean.'

He leant back on his heels and nodded. 'If that's what it took.'

British Heritage was going to fund it. Part of their Backlog Project. I just needed access.'

'And Gerald wouldn't play ball.'

He shook his head. 'Peter did his best to persuade him. But the mardy old sod wouldn't have it. And now it's too late.' He sighed, then blasted Clare square-on with what he hoped was one of his more disarming smiles. 'This doesn't need two of us. You OK with ladders?'

She nodded but said nothing. Was he imagining it or was there a hint of reluctance? 'Good. Peter said the rest of Gerald's papers are in the loft. Why don't you take a look up there and I'll crack on with this lot.'

Whatever she'd envisaged today would be like, this wasn't it. Two flights of increasingly narrow stairs had led her up past the old servants' quarters. And now she found herself clutching the sides of a rickety loft ladder and bracing herself for the short climb through the hatch set into the ceiling of the upper landing.

At the top, she felt for the light pull and tugged. A fluorescent strip light flickered on, revealing a room lined with wooden shelving that was crammed from floor to ceiling with boxes of every shape and size. Reassured by the sight of stout wooden floorboards, she clambered through the opening. She ran her hand over the lid of the nearest box, disturbing a thick layer of dust she knew her mother would consider unacceptable. But the intimation of age and the musty smell only served to induce a tingle of anticipation. There were no external clues to the contents of any of the boxes. She would just have to work her way through them one by one.

They were mostly crammed with offprints from academic journals and photocopies of old articles, randomly interspersed

with the sort of old lampshades and discarded china that could be found in every attic in the country. After an hour searching she had nothing to show for her efforts except an aching neck. David definitely had the better end of the deal, sorting through Gerald's study.

Straightening her spine, she brushed her hands down the front of her polo-neck in an effort to dislodge the dust that clung to the soft wool. Black hadn't been the most practical choice. She adjusted the waistband of her jeans. She'd lost weight since Stephen's death; maybe it was time to treat herself to some new clothes.

As she turned back towards the loft hatch, she caught sight of four large wooden packing crates wedged into the bottom run of shelves by the far wall. They weren't at all like the collection of decaying cardboard boxes she'd been rummaging through. Dangling from the side of the nearest crate was a small length of twine, at the end of which hung a mildewed luggage label. In the shadows of the corner of the room, she screwed up her eyes, trying to make out what was written on it. Kneeling down beside the crate, she fumbled for the penlight on the key ring in her pocket. She peered at the small circle of light illuminating the faded ink, but it was too indistinct to read. She turned the label over. Clearly marked in capital letters were the words *HUNGERBOURNE BARROWS*.

She knelt, motionless, unable to believe what she saw. She could feel the pulse in the ends of her fingers and realised she'd been holding her breath. Hungerbourne had been Gerald's most famous site; the most spectacular Bronze Age cemetery dug in modern times. But in September 1973, after just one season's digging, he'd announced the dig was over.

She'd seen the beautifully crafted goldwork in the British Museum. But the rest of the archive had remained closed to

public view. During the dig, Gerald had published a painfully brief magazine article with photographs of some of the more spectacular finds. And the archaeological world had held its breath waiting for the final report – the great man’s pronouncements on what he’d unearthed. But none came. And gradually the Hungerbourne excavation had been forgotten. Until last year, when, a few months before Gerald’s death, the nationals ran a story on the destruction of the finds and all of the records in a fire in the manor’s coach house.

So how could they be sitting here in front of her? Far from being reduced to a pile of ashes, they appeared to be untouched in their original crates. She knew she should tell David. But no one had seen this stuff for forty years. It wouldn’t hurt to keep it to herself for a few minutes more. Besides, David would think she was a complete pillock if she told him and it turned out to be nothing more than some reused packaging.

She stood up and leant over the first crate, scanning its contents with the small beam of light. It was full to the brim with crumpled newspaper. Rummaging through the crinkled pages, her hand came to rest on a rusty metal box. Its lid lifted easily, revealing an assortment of hardback notebooks, out of one of which poked the corner of a photo. She opened the book and withdrew the photograph, stepping back into the glare of the fluorescent light for a better view.

The black-and-white image showed a small group of people in front of a dilapidated wooden shed. Above the door, a hand-painted sign read ‘The Brew Crew’. The figures were arranged in two rows, the men standing at the back with the women sitting on wooden boxes at the front. They were all clutching tin mugs raised aloft in a gesture of salute. In the middle of the back row, a slim, dark-haired man of middle

years grinned into the camera lens. He wore an open-necked shirt with its sleeves rolled up above the elbows and stood two or three inches taller than his colleagues: Gerald Hart. This must have been his dig team. They looked a happy bunch. But why wouldn't they be? Fabulous finds, burials, gold – the Hungerbourne Barrows were every archaeologist's dream.

Clare stood on the back doorstep of the manor, trying without success to remove the last vestiges of dust from her jumper. She'd left David in the study, trying to reach Peter on his mobile. Across the courtyard, the mouth of the coach house gaped open, the fire-blackened hinges where its double doors had once stood jutting out like the decaying pegs of some hideous hag.

Picking her way across the moss-covered sets, she stepped inside. At the centre of the smoke-scarred room rested the burnt and twisted wreck of an old Volvo, its once sturdy and dependable hulk reduced to a mass of blackened metal and contorted plastic.

She caught a sudden whiff of petrol. The sharp acrid smell, the warped metal struts – she stood transfixed, gripped by the sudden realisation that this was how the end had been for Stephen.

'I don't know what the fuck you're playing at, but if you're not out of there in ten seconds I'm calling the police.' It was a male voice and its owner was clearly mad as hell.

She stood stock-still, unsure of what to do. As the stranger's footsteps approached, she swung round to find herself standing on the foot of a tall, slim man, in his mid-fifties. Dressed in an open-necked blue-checked shirt and neatly pressed jeans, his distinguished angular features morphed from anger to bafflement in a split second.

'What the . . . ?'

‘I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to . . . What I mean is . . .’ She could hear the words spilling from her lips like a guilty child, but appeared to be unable to control them. Eventually, she managed to pull herself together enough to say, ‘I’m here with David.’

He looked around at the innards of the gutted building. ‘Best we don’t hang around in here. I don’t know how safe it is.’

She nodded. Out in the courtyard, standing in front of a new BMW four-by-four that looked as if it had never ventured further off-road than its current location, she drank in a long draught of fresh Wiltshire air.

He bent his head towards her. ‘Sorry if I startled you.’ He made as if to extend his hand, but then seemed to think better of it, letting it drop by his side. ‘Peter Hart.’

In the daylight, she could see his eyes were a cool, deep blue, their colour accentuated by his well-cut coal-black hair. She couldn’t take her eyes off him. It was remarkable. The man standing in front of her was the living embodiment of the figure in the Brew Crew photograph.

She shook her head and pieced together a smile. ‘Clare Hills. And I’m the one who should be apologising. I just came out for a breath of air.’ She wasn’t sure how to explain what had drawn her into the burnt-out structure. ‘They said in the papers that’s where he kept it.’

He nodded. ‘I wanted him to pack it off to a museum, but he wouldn’t have it.’ He shrugged. ‘Uncle was something of a traditionalist when it came to security. One damned great padlock to which he held the only key. Add a couple of old jerry cans full of petrol and . . .’ He mimicked the rising flames with a gesture from his upturned hands.

She shivered and closed her eyes, concentrating hard on her

breathing. When she opened them again, he was looking back towards the gutted building.

‘If Gerald hadn’t seen the flames he’d have lost more than a few old pots.’

He doesn’t know. David can’t have spoken to him yet.

He said, ‘The police thought it was someone local.’

‘It was started deliberately?’ She couldn’t disguise her shock.

He nodded. ‘When I heard someone poking about in there just now I thought they’d come back.’ He paused, before adding as if by way of explanation, ‘There was a lot of trouble over the visitor centre proposal. Some of the locals got the idea they could make a few quid by opening up the barrow cemetery as a tourist attraction. The village was split right down the middle. Half of them could see the pound signs lighting up in their eyes and the other half didn’t want anything that would spoil their rural idyll. But after the fire destroyed the archive there was nothing to put on show, so it all fizzled out.’

Clare couldn’t conceal her shock at the idea that a bunch of NIMBYs might have done this. ‘Someone could’ve been killed.’

‘I think they were.’

He beckoned her back towards the doorway of the coach house, pointing to the back wall. In the dim light, she hadn’t noticed it before; but, barely discernible beneath the soot-streaked filth, someone had scrawled in red spray paint, BEWARE THE WOE WATERS: BRINGERS OF DEATH.

For a moment, she struggled to make sense of it all. Then, with a horrifying clarity, she realised what he was trying to tell her. ‘You think whoever did this killed Gerald.’

‘As good as. This was only the tip of the iceberg. He had so many silent phone calls that he would unplug the phone when he was here on his own. It was a nightmare trying to get hold of him.’

‘Couldn’t the police do anything?’

‘They tried tracing the calls, but they were all from pay-as-you-go mobiles. Uncle worried himself sick about it. He never really recovered. In the end, his heart just gave out.’