



THE LOST SHRINE

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CHAPTER ONE

The strengthening breeze rippled the newly green foliage of the ancient giants. His breath was coming in gasps as he made his way towards the stand of beeches that crowned the hilltop. He was out of nick, that was for sure.

It was unseasonably warm for the May Day Beltane ceremony. Beneath the full-length white tunic that he'd fashioned from an old cotton sheet, his leather biker's trousers chafed against his skin. He hadn't had time to change. They'd been expecting him and he couldn't afford to be late for the ceremony. Behind him he could hear the murmuring of the small, ramshackle assortment of middle-aged men and women who had followed him from the pub car park in the village far below. He halted, glad of the chance to catch his breath. Then, he raised the gnarled yew branch high above his head and the crowd behind him fell silent.

‘Great goddess of the sacred grove, accept our libation.’

He lowered the staff and rammed it into the ground, then turning, beckoned a short woman sporting a faded denim jacket and Indian cotton print dress forward. She approached him carrying a small wooden bowl outstretched in her cupped hands.

As he took the bowl from her, the sticky amber liquid within swished against its roughly hewn surface, releasing the scent of honey into the warm May air. Three times he circled the staff before turning to face the trees. Then, raising the vessel skyward, he tipped it forwards, sending the contents splattering onto the ground in front of him. The crowd erupted into a spontaneous cheer.

Holding his hand aloft to silence them he began to move – this time alone – in the direction of the wood. As he strode uphill towards the small clearing at the centre of the copse he could hear the clamour of shouts accompanied by the insistent beat of a bodhrán, skin stretched tightly across its large wooden frame, rising to a crescendo on the hillside below. Brushing past ribbons and strips of coloured cloth tied to the overhanging branches, the spaces between the great, smooth trunks grew wider. Light filtered through the gently swaying leaves and branches in a hypnotic dance of light and shade.

The intensity of the sunlight cascading through the gap in the woodland canopy as he stepped into the clearing was overwhelming. His vision dazzled, he cast his eyes to the ground. When he raised them again he struggled to comprehend the scene in front of him.

Dark shadows crossed the few remaining leaves from the previous autumn’s leaf fall in a confusion of oscillating stripes. He squinted, straining to focus. All around him, swinging from the limbs of the trees that fringed the clearing, were an assortment of crudely carved wooden figures. As his vision grew accustomed to the light he could see that they’d been smeared with a viscous

brown liquid. And, hanging between them, he could now make out other figures too. Figures that had until recently lived, and walked, and breathed just as he did now. And whose time had been deliberately cut short. He was surrounded by a macabre menagerie of creatures: crows, magpies, rabbits, even a fox. All dangling from lengths of orange baler twine, congealed blood matting their fur and covering their feathers.

He felt suddenly light-headed. He closed his eyes and hungrily gulped in air. All at once the memory of the sweet, floral aroma of the mead that had filled his nostrils was replaced by the overpowering stench of death. In front of him, in the centre of the clearing, lay the body of a hare, head tipped back. Its throat ripped open. Its blood splattered across the centre of the glade.

A sudden gust of wind caused the grotesque statuary hanging round the fringes of the clearing to jerk violently from side to side like dancing marionettes. One shadow longer than the rest swung pendulum-like, its inky presence casting a shiver-inducing chill across him.

He moved forward, blinking, struggling to cope with the fluctuating light. He was close enough now to see a bluebottle crawl across the head of the figure, moving from the corner of the lipstick-covered cherry-red of her mouth, across the bridge of her aquiline ash-grey nose and finally alighting on her open eyeball. He took in the dark hair falling almost to her waist, and the familiar form of her tall, slim figure. From somewhere a memory surfaced of those lips moulded seductively around a cigarette. He turned aside, retched and threw up.



CHAPTER TWO

‘I think I’ve solved our little problem.’ Despite herself Clare couldn’t prevent a smile spreading across her lips as she put the phone down.

David looked up from his seat on the other side of Clare’s desk and snorted. ‘I’d hardly call being forced to close the unit a little problem.’

‘Do you want to know what the solution is or not?’

He gestured towards her impatiently.

‘I asked Margaret to put some feelers out. See if she had any contacts who knew if there was any work going.’

David looked at her disapprovingly. Professor, now Dame, Margaret Bockford had been a supporter of the Hart Archaeological Research Institute since its foundation. Her support had even survived the university marketing department’s decision to give them a trading name of the Hart Unit. In Margaret’s view a

lamentable development, and one that had proved to be a source of endless mirth among their colleagues. But Clare knew David resented having to ask anyone, and especially Margaret, who'd already done so much to help them, for assistance.

'You can pull all the faces you like, but you've seen the figures. We're in no position to be precious about this. Anyway, there's no point in having friends in high places if they can't do you the odd favour.'

David raised his eyes to the ceiling. 'OK. What did Margaret have to say for herself?'

'She's found us a job.'

'What sort of job?'

'Fieldwork. An evaluation ahead of a housing development.'

He straightened up in his chair. 'Really? I haven't heard of anything going round here.'

'It's not round here.'

'Where, then?'

'The Cotswolds.'

'Where exactly in the Cotswolds?'

Clare hesitated. She knew he wasn't going to like her reply. 'Bailsgrove.'

'Bailsgrove! You're not serious?'

'What's wrong with Bailsgrove?'

'Don't give me that. You know as well as I do. Bailsgrove was Beth Kinsella's dig.'

'And?' She looked at him defiantly, struggling to keep an even tone to her voice. If truth be told she was no keener on this than he was, but if they had to close the unit she'd be out of a job. It was alright for David, he was safe as houses in his lecturing job with the university. But if the unit shut she had nowhere to go.

'And Beth Kinsella was found dangling dead as a dodo amid

a collection of assorted rotting bunny carcasses on that site.'

'Since when did you believe everything you read in the papers? Anyway, we can't afford to be picky.'

'Picky! Christ, Clare. The place will be crawling with police. I'd have thought you'd have had enough of that after Hungerbourne. Besides which, Beth Kinsella was a famous nutter. What sort of a state do you think her records will be in? It'll be a nightmare.'

'Did you know her?'

'I knew *of* her – that was enough.'

'Well, maybe you should suspend your judgement until you see the site records.' Clare picked up a sheet of paper from her desk and turned it round so that David could read the figures. She jabbed a finger at the bottom line. 'In any case we don't have a choice.'

He looked down at the page of A4 and exhaled deeply, then mumbled into his chest. 'It'll cost a fortune in fuel.'

'If we turn this job down that will be the least of our worries.'

'To a quiet night in.' David raised his glass, then leant forward and kissed Sally, who was curled up beside him on his living room sofa.

'Amen to that!'

'What shifts are you on next week?'

'God knows. Makes no difference. Until the chief's back from his heart attack – if he comes back – I'm on twenty-four-hour call. So right now I don't even want to think about work. How about you – anything exciting happening in Ivory Towers?'

David took a large glug of his Syrah. 'Looks like we may have avoided bankruptcy, if you can call that exciting.'

'You're joking. The university can't be broke, surely. Not unless someone's been fiddling the books.'

Sally looked genuinely shocked. Even after all this time, David thought, she still suffered from a rose-tinted vision of academia.

He shook his head. 'Not the university. The Hart Unit.'

Sally made no attempt to suppress a smile. 'So Clare's not such a whizz with the finances after all.'

He wished just for once she would at least try to disguise her resentment towards Clare. But he knew that the state of undeclared warfare that existed between the two women wasn't going to end any time soon. He'd learnt to operate on what his grandmother would have called the 'least said soonest mended' principle where the two of them were concerned.

He took another slurp of his Syrah to prevent him from saying something he might regret before he replied, 'She can't magic work out of thin air. The housing game's flatlining.'

'What's that got to do with your lot? I thought you were a research institute.'

'Most of our work is commercial. It comes from the construction industry. That's what finances the research.'

'So, what are you planning to do about it?'

'Margaret's found us a job up in the Cotswolds.' He had no intention of telling her about Clare's involvement. That would only aggravate the situation.

'Whereabouts?'

'Bailsgrove.'

'You're kidding? The Bailsgrove. Where that weirdo hung herself?'

David placed his glass on the coffee table. 'Beth Kinsella was a well-respected archaeologist.'

'That's not what the papers said.'

'I'd have thought you of all people wouldn't believe everything you read in the red tops.'

'Oh, come on, David. Sometimes the facts speak for themselves. She was found strung up alongside a bunch of wooden carvings smeared with rabbit blood.'

‘Hare blood,’ he corrected her.

‘Whatever. It really doesn’t matter. It’ll be Hungerbourne all over again.’

‘Well, that didn’t turn out entirely badly now, did it.’ He smiled and leant forward in an attempt to kiss her.

She pulled away from him. Evidently she wasn’t going to be distracted so easily. ‘That’s not the point. What the hell were you thinking of?’

That was a question he’d asked himself, though he had absolutely no intention of admitting it to Sally. He stared down into the inky-red dregs in the bottom of his glass. ‘We didn’t have a choice. It was Bailsgrove or bust.’

Putting down her glass, Sally clasped her hands behind the back of his neck. ‘Is the unit really that broke?’ He nodded. ‘Look, I know a few people from my time in the Gloucestershire force. I could ask around, see what the lie of the land is after the suicide. What was the woman’s name again?’

‘Kinsella – Dr Beth Kinsella. It’s sweet of you, Sal, but I don’t see what good it’ll do. We’ve already said we’ll do it.’

‘Well, at least you’d know what you’re in for. And it might help cut through some of the red tape.’

David leant forward and gave her a long, lingering kiss. ‘Don’t ever let me forget. You’re an absolute treasure.’

‘Coming from an archaeologist I suppose I should take that as a compliment.’

Clare sat alone in the spare room of her Salisbury flat surrounded by cardboard boxes. It had been more than two years now since Stephen’s death and still she found herself enmeshed in what was left of his life.

She’d forced herself to go through all of his personal effects

within the first few months after he'd died. There was no denying it had been tough. There were so many memories of their life together. But that's exactly why she'd known she had to get on with it there and then. If she'd left them she knew she'd never be able to bring herself to do it. And there was another reason too. She'd had to sell their house.

Downsizing was a bit of an understatement for the scale of change her life had been subjected to following her husband's death. He'd left her everything. But it had become increasingly clear as time had moved on that everything amounted to almost nothing. The biggest shock came when she'd discovered that Stephen had remortgaged the house without so much as mentioning it to her. Their home, her home. It was in his name so legally he'd had every right to do what he liked with it. But when she'd found out she couldn't help feeling betrayed.

In life he'd provided for her every whim, at least in material terms: a substantial detached house in the home counties, exotic foreign holidays, the best restaurants. But in return she'd given up everything. Including, she now realised, the person that she might have been.

Once her initial anger had subsided she'd come to the realisation that she couldn't put all of the blame on him. When she'd met him, at the May Ball in her second year at university, he'd swept her off her feet. He was stylish, confident and best of all devoted to her. And she'd all too willingly abandoned any dreams she might have had of pursuing a fledgling career in archaeology in order to become his wife.

Their marriage had seemed to her, at least at the time, a happy one. So nothing could have prepared her for the tsunami of emotions that she'd been subjected to when she'd discovered that he'd invested all of their capital – and more – into a property

finance scheme in the US that had turned out not to be worth the paper it was written on.

The final straw was being forced to sell her sports car. She'd loved her little Mazda MX5. But it wasn't a very practical mode of transport for an archaeologist and once the precarious state in which Stephen had left their finances became clear she hadn't really had much choice in the matter. And as it turned out she'd rather taken to her little blue Fiesta.

The one untouched part of Stephen's life that she hadn't managed to work her way through was the hotch potch of paperwork and personal memorabilia from his study. In life it had been his space – his retreat – and in death she found his presence there just too overwhelming.

His colleague James had offered to give her a hand. But he'd done so much to help already, she hadn't felt she could impose any further. And, besides, so much of it was personal stuff she wasn't sure she was willing to let anyone else trawl through it, however good a friend he may have been to Stephen. But it must have been obvious to James that despite her protestations she was finding the idea of going through it all too much to bear because he'd suggested just binning the lot.

Eventually she'd acquiesced, but despite it all she couldn't bring herself to do it. By which point she'd run out of time, and when the removals company had arrived she'd just had them box it up. And here it had remained, dumped in a corner of the spare room of her flat where, aside from its accusing presence when her mum or Jo came to stay, she'd been able to ignore it. At least until now.

Clare closed the lid of the box she'd been going through and made her way into the kitchen. She'd had enough for one night. And she had more pressing concerns on her mind at the moment.

Making her way to the fridge, she extracted a half-full bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and poured herself a glass, then set about preparing her supper – a bagged salad accompanied by the finest oven-ready cannelloni the Waitrose reduced shelf had to offer.

Padding back into the living room, she flipped open her laptop and flicked through her emails. Within a couple of minutes she'd found what she was looking for. She clicked the link and it took her thorough to the property web pages. There it was – her house – or at least that's what she was intending it should be. It wasn't anything fancy – a three-bedroom ex-local authority semi. What Stephen would have made of it, heaven only knows. But it had good-sized rooms, a lovely big back garden and best of all it was in her beloved Marlborough Downs.

Despite the traumas she'd undergone while she was digging at Hungerbourne, her time there had reminded her how much she loved the softly undulating hills and wide open skies of the Downs. It was where she'd rediscovered her passion for the past, and where too she'd taken the first steps towards rebuilding her life and embarking on a career in archaeology.

She'd put an offer in on the house a few weeks ago. With the capital she'd scraped together from selling her few remaining assets and her salary from the Hart Unit, she'd worked out that she should just about be able to afford it. She might have to rent a room out but if that's what it took then so be it.

She looked around her at the familiar walls of her rented flat. It had served her well over the last couple of years. And she'd done her best to make it feel welcoming, but somehow it had never really felt like home. She was ready to move on now. Buying her own place felt like a statement of intent. It would be the first home she'd ever bought and paid for herself. She'd gone straight from her mum's council house in Chelmsford to university and then to

life with Stephen. But this one would be different; she was finally going to have a home of her own. And finally, too, she felt as if she was in charge of her own destiny – shaping her own life, rather than letting others shape it for her.

But she'd made the offer on the house before she'd discovered quite what a precarious financial situation the Hart Unit was in. If the institute folded, she'd be out of a job and she could kiss goodbye to her dreams of a new home and the next steps in her new life. The vendors had been prevaricating for weeks. It was clear that they wanted more money than she could feasibly offer, but she'd left the offer on the table and it would seem they hadn't had as much interest as they'd hoped. As she'd pointed out to them, the whole place needed gutting. They'd inherited it from their elderly mother, and it was patently obvious that there'd been little or no work done to it since she'd moved in – which, judging from the swirling carpets and avocado bathroom suite, had been some time in the 1970s.

Then finally this morning she'd had a call from the estate agent. The vendors had accepted her offer. So all she needed to do now was to keep the Hart Unit afloat. And she was determined to do just that – whatever it took.