

Chapter One: 2018

The curator at the Museum of Medical Science has never seen anything like it. The whole museum, normally so staid and calm, is in uproar. The museum's new president, a marketing man with very little understanding of real science, has decided to invite in the press on the principle that there's no such thing as bad publicity. The curator is a man of science and he disagrees. Strongly. He looks down at the five unscientific faces who have bothered to respond to the invitation and wishes he was back in his office, drinking tea. A finding like this needs careful, delicate handling. Possibly even a police investigation. Still, he knows his place and has been told what to say. He clears his throat and starts on his prepared speech.

‘Welcome ladies and gentlemen of the press. You have been invited here today to examine a new finding at the Museum of Medical Science.’

One of the journalists, a young man with aggressively ginger hair, yawns and glances at his phone. The curator's shoulders move very slightly down from his ears, perhaps nothing will come of this after all. He continues, allowing his voice to become even more monotonous.

‘The skeleton in question was being used by some students when it became apparent that there were some, ah, irregularities. One of the students noticed that the size and shapes of the bones did not appear to fit together in a coherent fashion.’

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The curator glances up from his notes and decides that the rest of the journalists look bored too. Good. Perhaps he can dull their interest still further with some obfuscating jargon. He continues.

‘In order to examine this theory, we allowed the students to extract samples of deoxyribonucleic acid from aggregates of bone crystals. Fifty-five per cent of the bones were tested and the results were largely conclusive of their, ah, disparate origin.’

A pretty young woman with long dark hair and startlingly green eyes, sits up straighter. Damn, thinks the curator, she’s got it. She knows. He tries one last smoke screen.

‘This was not altogether surprising of course, many antiquated medical skeletons are made up from a few different sources and-’

The young woman raises her hand and the curator, hating himself, can’t resist the request.

‘Yes?’

‘How many bodies generally make up a scientific skeleton Dr Reuben?’

The curator can’t lie, never could. He sighs.

‘Well, generally one, but due to damage or deterioration you may find two or even three sources have been utilised to create an entire skeleton.’

She’s like a dog with a rat’s tail.

‘And how many ‘sources’ were used to make this one...?’

Dr Reuben, curator of the Museum of Medical Sciences, vegetarian and keen amateur tap dancer, takes a deep breath and finally makes his announcement.

‘We have tested just over half of the bones within the skeleton and every single one of them has presented a different nucleic pattern.’

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The girl gasps, tapping furiously into her laptop, but the rest of the reporters still look at him blankly. The curator's ears are now firmly lodged back by his ears as he puts his sensational findings in terms suitable for the tabloids.

'We believe every bone in the skeleton may have been donated from a different body.'

Even the ginger haired young man, whose press pass announces him to be from the 'Daily Express', is paying attention now. He asks the question that everyone's waiting for.

'How many people would that be exactly, Professor Reuben?'

Professor Rueben takes off his frameless glasses and cleans them delicately on his handkerchief in the time-honoured way of playing for time. His audience watch him in breathless anticipation, fingers poised over keys. The curator places his glasses back on the bridge of his nose and gives the statement that will rock the breakfast tables of Britain.

'There are two hundred and six bones in the human body. If each of these bones has indeed come from a different body, the skeleton could be made up from two hundred and six different donors. One skeleton, two hundred and six people.'

'Donors...' says the green-eyed young woman, almost but not quite under her breath, 'or victims?'

Chapter Two: 1925

I collected my first bone by accident.

My little brother, Michael, put his finger in the mangle. It was 1904, he was only five and the mangle held a great fascination for him. The smooth wooden handle, the intricate cogs and most of all those great wooden rollers, squeezing out water from sodden sheets. The knowledge, most of all, that it was *forbidden*. What tempts us more than that?

He shouldn't even have been in the laundry room of course, we weren't allowed below stairs, but Nanny often got lonely up in the draughty nursery so she would sneak us down into the warm, jam-sweet air of the kitchens. We'd play with bits of dough and apple peels while Nanny and Cook talked about our parents. I wasn't supposed to be listening, but of course I did. Michael was only five, but I was nine, a big girl. Nanny and Cook didn't like our parents. Nanny said Mummy had married too young, *beautiful, but impatient*, she whispered. Cook sniffed and said that was as maybe, but Madam was carrying on like a debutant even though she was twenty-seven. They agreed that Daddy, or *the Master* as they called him, was too old for her. Nanny lowered her voice even further, but I had ears like a bat, still have. Her voice hissed like the kettle, *Madam's*

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bored of him and bored of the children too. I rolled my raw dough thin, like a worm, and began to eat it.

Daddy was almost always away on Business, so we never saw much of him. Even Mummy was a mystery, seen only at sunset. A clink of ice in crystal, the softness of satin and fur, the musk of perfume, the long fingered hand, sparkling with diamonds, reaching down to pat my head or pop a chocolate into my greedy mouth. But even that stopped after Michael was born. No more sunset petting in the warm, red drawing room. No more chocolates either, just boiled fish in the Nursery and the rough rustle of Nanny's starched apron. I missed those soft hands stroking my hair, but Michael barely knew who Mummy was. Nanny stroked his golden curls and he clung to her long serge skirts. That made it all the harder for him when she was asked to leave.

Nanny was fired of course, for the finger. Michael sneaked away into the laundry while she and Cook were chatting. The poor skivvy was let go too because she was the one turning the mangle's handle. I thought that was unfair, the girl wasn't much older than me and no taller. She was swamped under vast acres of wet sheets, little feet sliding on the wet tiles as she fed the mangle's greedy maw. The only one to see little Michael was me, sat at the huge scrubbed table, playing with my dough. I saw him alright, knew what he was up to, but I'd always wanted to know what would happen if you stuck your finger into the turning mangle.

As it happens, not much. There was very little blood, only one sheet had to be rewashed. The problem was that the tip of the finger, his right hand pointer, was squashed beyond repair. I checked it for him each day, neatly bandaging it as Cook had shown me, but the blood couldn't get into it anymore and after a while it went from

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white to green and then black. After two weeks it smelled like the cellar after weeks of rain and we had to call the doctor.

Michael made a terrible fuss as it was sawn off, worse than the fuss he'd made when Nanny had left, even though I explained that it had to be removed to stop the rot spreading. I was annoyed with Michael and old enough to realise it was because I felt responsible. He was mine and I had forsaken him. Now Nanny was gone, he only had me to protect him. I wiped his tears with my best silk handkerchief and held his other hand, wishing I was small and full of chocolate.

Once the procedure was completed, I left Michael crying in Cook's lap and led the doctor down from the nursery and into the drawing room. Daddy was away on Business and there was no sign of Mummy. I offered the Doctor a glass of whisky, pouring it myself to save calling our sticky-beaked butler. I knew well enough how to do it, I'd seen that glass in Mummy's hand often enough. When the doctor had sipped at the golden drink and made the 'tchaaa' sound that adults always did on such occasions, I put my proposal to him.

I introduced myself as a fellow person of science, and told him that it would greatly help in Michael's recovery if he could hold a little funeral for the fingertip. We would make a little fingertip-sized grave and say a few words. This, I said, would enable my brother to understand his loss. The doctor frowned, but he handed over the fingertip nonetheless. It was very small, about half the size of a hazelnut, wrapped in bloody gauze. I thanked him formally, relieved him of his now empty tumbler and saw him to the door.

I didn't tell Michael about his fingertip, that was never my intention. Nor did I bury it. Bones were too important to be forgotten. Instead I went back upstairs and hid

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the fingertip under a loose floorboard in the nursery water closet. That night, I rescued it and slipped down the back stairs to the kitchen. A low fire kept the range warm all night. I stoked it and brought a small pan of salted water to a low simmer. I took a sharp knife and stripped away as much of the blackened, rotten flesh as I could and lowered the remains into the pot with a tea strainer. I watched it, bobbing around for about five minutes, then put the lid on and left it to simmer. I needed to check the instructions one more time.

Up in Father's forbidden library was one of my favourite books; *The Naturalist's Encyclopaedia*. Full of detailed drawings and even some colour plates, the book detailed a wonderful array of exotic creatures from all around the world. It also assumed that you, the reader, were attempting to create your own collection and towards the back was a detailed section on how best to preserve specimens. It was to this section I now turned.

Ten minutes later I was back in the kitchen. I watched the fingertip simmer for another forty-five minutes before carefully removing it from the water with the tea strainer. I cooled it slowly under running water and then placed it in a clean jam jar filled with a fifty-fifty mixture of laundry soap and bleach. I made sure the lid was tightly sealed before shaking the jar gently. The slowly dissolving soap flakes swirled like snow around the little bone. It was pretty enough for a dressing table, but I knew no one else would think so and the jar was too big to fit below the Nursery floorboard. I looked around the kitchen, seeking a hiding place.

After four days I set off once again down to the kitchen at midnight. I rescued the jam jar from the forest of similar jars on the bottom shelf of the pantry, pushing aside the legitimate rows of chutney, marmalade and jams to find my strange little

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specimen. I looked at it. The solution was clear now, the bone gleaming white. I tipped the smelly contents down the sink and washed the little bone under running water for about ten minutes, holding on tightly lest the tiny little thing slipped from my fingers and disappeared down the plug hole forever.

Next, having dried the bone on a tea towel, I took a handful of rice from the jar, filled a matchbox with the grains and buried the bone in their midst. After a week in my bloomer pocket, the matchbox opened to reveal a perfect piece of ivory, roughly the shape of a tiny chess pawn. I wrapped the thicker end in some gold wire I'd snipped from the back of a picture frame and attached it to the chain that had, until recently, held a crucifix. From that day on I wore it every day, next to my skin, hidden below the stifling lace collars our new, militant Nanny insisted upon. Every now and again I'd put my hand to my throat and think, *my little brother will be safe forever now.*

It worked too. Michael quickly recovered from his trauma and got used to his reduced index finger. When he was sent away, first to prep and then Harrow, he did well. Was so popular no one ragged or taunted him. He even made the first eleven and never dropped the ball, despite his loss. I missed him like a limb. When he came home for half-term hols I'd ask him to teach me things, algebra and calculus were beyond my governess and her grasp of history was no better than my own. As he scribbled on the page I saw how easily he held his pen between thumb and middle finger. It was as if there never had been a pointer in between. He was perfect. Nothing could harm him.

Chapter Three: 2018

The bluish glow from Claire Taylor's laptop is the only light in the small, overly-furnished room. When she started writing up the story on the Museum of Medical Science yesterday evening there was no need to turn on any of the lamps. She yawns, stretches, and cricks her neck. She rubs her green eyes and aggressively twirls her long dark hair up into a bun, fidgety with exhaustion. *Coffee*, she thinks, and heads to the tiny kitchenette where a fridge, microwave and kettle suffice her limited culinary ambitions.

The *swoosh* of the fridge door opening wakes Beelzebub. He arches his smooth black back, shakes his whiskers out and slinks into the kitchen in hopes of a snack. He winds dangerously around her ankles as she pours boiling water into a cracked Chelsea Football Club mug, providence unknown.

Apart from the fact that it's a long way from Taunton, the main attraction of the flat is that it's fully furnished. She wants nothing from before, no reminders. *The Taunton Taylor Twins*. The relief of being able to walk the streets without scanning the faces of passers-by for signs of suspicion or sympathy is immeasurable. That's why she accepted the job in London three years ago. But London is expensive, particularly central London, so she followed the train line out from the Euston office and found Watford. It's more her kind of place. Breathable. And she likes the view of leaves from

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her window. It's like home, but not too much like home. She doesn't want that. Work, eat, sleep, repeat. That's all that is required.

The thought of work stiffens her resolve. She rummages in the cupboard for food, finding three chocolate Hobnobs, slightly soft, and a half bag of sticky raisins. That'll do. For Beelzebub's more discerning palette she peels back the foil on his fancy cat food and spoons the repellent grey muck onto a saucer. He purrs in contentment and she takes a moment to scratch his soft head. It was a good idea, she thinks, getting a cat. They're both strays; she rescued Beelzebub from the Watford cat rescue last year. He was feral, rescued as a kitten from a derelict building site. The volunteers at the rescue centre called him Beelzebub due to his preternatural howling and vicious, unprovoked attacks. Claire fell for him at once. She likes survivors.

She carries her meal back to the table, refusing to panic at the clock's warning that it's now five a.m. She's promised to email the copy to her editor by eight, but three hours should be plenty of time. She's written up the bones of the piece, has her headline and byline ready:

Mystery at the Museum!

DNA testing on antique skeleton reveals

bones were from multiple donors.

Donors. That's the word that catches in her throat, that makes the cursor wink on the Word document. Bones are individual, sacred remains, not Lego bricks. There's more to this story, some shadowy, evil collector of human remains. Her journalist's nose is twitching to investigate further. The cursor winks, inviting revelation, but she doesn't

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want to say too much just yet, has nothing but a hunch anyway. She eats a Hobnob, wincing at the lack of crunch, and flexes her fingers over the keyboard. Just enough to kindle a spark, that's what she needs.

Chapter Four: 1925

I'd never known any women doctors. There were some around, a few hundred allegedly, but it simply wasn't done amongst the people we knew. Girls dreamed of marriage, not study, and if they were the strange, bluestocking types they went up to St. Hilda's and studied poetry. But I wasn't interested in flowery verse. Daffodils on a hill, wandering lonely as a cloud. Stuff and nonsense. I was interested in bodies.

I got away with it because of father's death. Had he been alive there was no way that I'd have been allowed to do something so unfeminine. He valued beauty in a woman, not brains. He'd thought hiring my mediocre governess was a waste of money, so there was no way he would consider sending me to school. But after he died, everything changed.

Mother remarried with indecent haste; she was in a bridal gown before most widows would have finished trimming their dresses with black crepe. Tongues wagged but then they always had around mother and she cared not one jot. Her new husband was an American, very rich. Made a great deal of money, from beef I think, so she was on the next ship to New York and that was that. She sent cards for a while, but I never saw her again.

Michael was thirteen and just starting up at Harrow. My only emotion at Father's funeral was how nice it was to see my brother during term time. He cried a little, but I suspect it was more because he felt he should. Very few people attended the funeral and no one came back to the house. It was a warm, sunny day and we spent a

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lovely afternoon playing croquet on the back lawn. I didn't cry until Michael returned to school the next day.

Michael inherited the estate and the fortune of course, but to my surprise Father had left a substantial sum in trust for me too. Our solicitor, a decent fellow with a love for the novels of Charles Dickens, took a fancy to my professed desire to study medicine. He released sufficient funds for me to study in Edinburgh. I was a little young, just seventeen, but I was bright and I looked older than I was.

I took a train up to Edinburgh with my governess, sat an exam and a month later I was accepted into Doctor Elsie Inglis's Medical School for Women. I could have applied to any of the Scottish Universities, they'd been allowing women to attend, albeit grudgingly, for twenty years, but I'd read about Miss Inglis and her stance as a Suffragist. I thought her wonderful; she was so very unlike Mother. Thanks to Miss Inglis, we students were allowed to attend practicals at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, although we were still regarded as rather second-rate. In my first year anatomy class we had to stand and watch from the gallery whilst male students rolled up their shirtsleeves and sliced into the fresh cadavers. Only when they were done could we come down and examine the bloodless messes they'd left behind on the slab.

Gentlemen first was the rule, but I've never been fond of rules. I found a porter with a hungry eye and paid him five shillings a week to let me into the Infirmary's morgue at night. There, under the merciless light of the remarkably efficient electric lights, I practiced my anatomy. I could tell, even then, that I had talent. Finally I could practice my skills on bodies that had not already been mutilated. Unlike their messy butchery my scalpel followed cleanly from thorax to naval, slid around the cavity that held the heart, sliced fine samples from lungs. I was neat, I was precise, I was a natural.

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During this time Michael was reciting Latin declensions and slicing a sixer past the outfielders. He loved it. I don't know if it was because we were now ostensibly orphans, but he wrote to me every single week. It was probably enforced by his housemaster after Sunday lunch, but I cherished those smudgy little letters. I'd save one up all week and read it at a Crawford's tearoom, treating myself to a pot of tea and a Dundee cake. Once the table was arranged to my satisfaction, teapot, cup, spoon, cake and fork placed just so, starched napkin neatly folded on my lap, I'd slice open the envelope with a scalpel from my bag. Then, with one hand on the little bone-charm at my throat, I'd read slowly, so slowly, about his latest adventures. Tuck and wheezes and cricket or rugger. Only when I had the whole letter memorised in its entirety would I turn to my cooling tea and nibble my cake. Even then my only thoughts were of my baby brother. My sunshine boy. My darling.

#

War was declared during my second year. Most people were certain the fighting would be over by Christmas, but Miss Inglis thought we should pitch in and help the war effort. She wanted to send a female medical unit to the front, but was rebuffed by both the Red Cross and the War Office. Undeniable, she had us all fundraising, sending letters all around the country to her rich Suffragists. It didn't take her long to get the money she needed. By the end of the war she'd sent units to France, Serbia, Romania, Russia and Corsica. But the first was in France, the 200-bed *Abbaye de Royaumont* hospital. I was to know it well.

As I was only in my second year I was nowhere near qualified, but I put my name down as a volunteer anyway. The country was in a patriotic fervour, keen to beat the beastly Bosch, and I wanted to help even if I was just mopping floors. Plus there

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was always the chance that I might get some real doctoring practice, test my skills at last. I remember I was excited at the prospect; I thought I'd have a great adventure.

What a naïve fool.

Unfortunately Michael thought the same. We always were likeminded. He sneaked out of school with a few other young fools and signed up. Just fifteen, but like me he looked older than his years. He and the other boys presented faked papers, not that the recruiters really cared. Fodder for the cannons. Michael passed the medical easily; even though he was so young he was tall and muscular- he already played rugby for the Firsts. My little almost-man easily passed for eighteen. A perfect specimen- bar the piece missing from his trigger finger. This was noted, but he knew Morse code so they made him a signaller. Within months he was at the front, flashing a trench lamp.

I had no idea about any of it, the school wrote a terse letter to our home address, saying that he was AWOL, but it never reached me. I had wondered why his weekly letters had stopped, but I was swotting for exams and reasoned that he, too, was busy. Yet while I thought he was practicing algebra in Harrow, he was playing at soldiers in Ypres. By Easter 1915 he was dead.

I received the telegram in class, they all fell silent. One or two had lost people already, but the real bloodbath was yet to come. I looked at the square of card. The War Office *deeply regretted* informing me that Michael James Davenport had been killed in action. *Lord Kitchener expressed his sympathy*. The handwritten words swirled in front of my face. I tucked the telegram into my pocket, refusing to acknowledge it. I finished the class and then went to my usual table at Crawford's. Ordered my tea, my Dundee cake and felt for the little bone on its chain around my neck. *The whole thing had to be*

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a mistake. Michael was only fifteen, he was at school in Harrow. The War Office must be talking about another Michael James Davenport. My Michael was fine.

But the bone charm was gone. The wire was loose. The little bone must've slipped through, falling into some grimy Edinburgh gutter to be washed away forever. I'd failed. It was the end of the magic. I opened the telegram again and the words blurred as I collapsed right there at the table.

I never ate Dundee Cake again.

Chapter Five: 2018

Claire attaches her document, clicks 'send' on the email and sits back in her chair with a sigh. Just made the deadline, or if you wanted to think positively, she's made it with five minutes to spare. But she's not proud of the story; it gives away too much and yet says nothing at all. There is a dark and powerful story here, she can sense it. Whose bones were they? When was the skeleton put together? Why were these random bones gathered together in this macabre way and by whom? Did some crazed serial killer try, like Frankenstein, to make a monster in his own image? Or was it an insane grave robber, pillaging the sanctity of more than two hundred final resting places?

Louder than these question comes an image, shimmering in her head- frail bones in a shallow grave, muddied and gnawed by foxes like the remains of a Sunday roast pulled from a suburban rubbish bin. She shakes the vision from her head. She must investigate this story. Hopefully her editor will also see its potential and allow her the time and resources she needs.

It's the weekend, Saturday morning to be precise. Having submitted her copy there's no need to go into the office, so she could catch up on her sleep. Her eyes burn with tiredness, but she's too edgy to rest. She decides to catch the train into town and visit the Museum of Medical Sciences again. Not as a member of the press this time, but quietly, surreptitiously. See what she can sniff out.

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The station is busy. It's a sunny day (rare) at the weekend (even rarer) and it appears as if the entire population of Watford has decided to catch a train to somewhere nicer. Claire pushes her way through the crowd, waves her rail pass at the ticket barrier and catches the 9.12 to Euston with 45 seconds to spare. There's even a seat, which she takes, remembering only as the train pules away that she'd meant to buy some breakfast. Instead she allows herself the luxury of a nap during the 25-minute journey.

By the time the train clatters into grimy Euston Station she is refreshed, but very hungry. She buys a suspicious looking 'Breakfast Bun' from a kiosk and eats it messily as she heads down to the tube station. Even after three years working in Euston she is still uncertain about the labyrinthine tube system as she rarely ventures into the rest of London unless sent by the paper. Why would she? She has no friends here. Licking egg yolk and bacon fat from her fingers she consults the station map.

South Kensington. When she rises back up to street level she ignores the enticing sweep of steps up to the Natural History Museum, heads towards the V&A. Also rudely ignoring the charms of that noble old lady, she walks up Exhibition Road, disregarding the bold banners of the Science Museum now, as she turns left into Prince Consort Road. There, opposite the imposing façade of the Royal School of Mines, is her destination.

Having eschewed three world-class museums on her way here, the Museum of Medical Sciences appears even more marginal than it is. Located in a section of the late Victorian red brick frills of Albert Court, below a flat belonging to an absent Saudi businessman and another occupied by studious Qatari princess, it's easy to walk straight past the Museum's entrance. There's no gaudy neon sign or plastic banners to announce its presence, just a discrete engraved brass plaque by the front door. There's no need for

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promotion; the Museum's not open to careless visits by the general public. To gain access an appointment must be made and a valid scientific reason presented for why one wants to examine its priceless collection of medical artefacts. Apart from the large collection of anatomical teaching skeletons, these artefacts range from ancient Egyptian surgical knives to elegantly crafted Edwardian dissection tools. There's also a vast library of medical procedures that detail everything from trepanning and leeches to electro therapy. Claire knows that she cannot simply walk in, it was explained at the Press Meeting, but she has deliberately chosen not to make an appointment. She wants to catch the Museum unawares.