

CHAPTER ONE

They found the skull first, its cranium pressing through the sludge like an emerging mushroom, eye sockets and nasal orifice caked with mud. Then the mandible, slippery ribs, vertebra, long bones, tiny wrist bones and everything in between; each bone carefully prised from the trench and placed with reverence into the picnic hamper.

Tristram balanced the skull on top of the pile and tried, unsuccessfully, to close the basket's hinged lid. 'This will have to do. I'll ride in the back of the cart and hold it all in place. Can one of you drive?'

'Of course we can drive,' Florence said, adjusting the rounded dome of her fox-fur hat, ready for action. Her face was smeared, her gloves were sodden and the hem of her coat was thick with mud. Dody had not seen such a combination of filth and high spirits in her sister since Florence and her suffragette division had sabotaged the sewage plant, the summer just gone. Nineteen twelve had been a busy time for Florence and the sisterhood and Dody was glad that, with the advent of winter, things appeared to be calming down. 'We're not much good at riding, but we can certainly drive a pony and cart, can't we, Dody?'

It seemed that since their arrival at Fitzgibbon Hall the previous afternoon, practically the only topic of conversation (other than bones) had been the McClelland sisters' lack of

riding ability. Florence had been taking lessons and was feeling confident enough to join Sunday's hunt, but the discovery of the skeleton in the dry river bed now meant that Dody could bow out with dignity. What a relief! There was only one person with whom she cared to ride, one person in front of whom she didn't mind looking foolish — and he was goodness only knew where.

'Have you any idea how old the bones are, Dody?' Florence asked, tearing Dody away from warming thoughts of Chief Inspector Matthew Pike and back to the cold reality of old bones and mud. 'Might they really be as old as the Piltdown skull? That is, I mean, if those remains really *are* old,' she added, looking at Tristram.

'You see, Dody,' Tristram clarified, 'I have my doubts that the Piltdown bones are as old as they are claimed to be. I'm banking on these bones being older.'

Florence's eyes sparkled almost as much as Tristram's.

Dody did not wish to throw cold water over the pair's excitement; she knew how desperate Tristram was to make his mark in the archaeological world and hoped he might be satisfied with medieval remains, which she suspected was the oldest the bones would be. As for the Piltdown bones — no, fragments, she corrected herself — she had no idea what to believe. Not only had she not seen them — they had been whisked off to London under a shroud of secrecy — but they were also far from her area of expertise. 'I'm afraid it's impossible to tell right now,' she said.

'But aren't autopsy surgeons supposed to know this kind of thing?' Tristram asked.

'It's not that simple. I can't even hazard a guess until I have cleaned the bones and examined them in decent light.'

It was just past four o'clock, but the winter gloom was already descending and a chill wind blew from the High Weald. Dody's behind felt as dead as the lichen-covered

log she had been sitting on for most of the digging. She had blocked her ears to Florence's many false alarms, and absorbed herself in a recent purchase of *Hugh's Manual of Anatomy*, hoping it might increase her insight into the decomposition of bones. If she was going to be stuck in this far-flung corner of East Sussex, she might as well take the opportunity to catch up on her studies. Who could tell, there might even be a paper in it.

According to Florence, Tristram had been fruitlessly scratching around the stream bed for some months now, giving Dody no reason to believe that their amateur dig would be any more successful. The unearthing of the skeleton had surprised her more than anyone.

She crouched to help Florence gather up their picnic paraphernalia, now displaced by the rook's nest of bones in the basket. They wrapped up the dirty knives and forks, crockery, glasses and empty champagne bottle in the red gingham tablecloth and piled it into the back of the cart with the buckets, sieves and shovels they had used for the excavation.

Tristram jumped aboard the cart and promptly leaped off again. 'Wait a minute. Just one more look,' he said.

'Like a child with a new toy; he can't leave the trench alone,' Florence whispered to Dody as they watched him slog back through the mud to have one last poke around.

'Anything?' Florence asked as he climbed back into the cart, long legs dangling, arm draped over his precious basket.

He wiped his hands on his coat. 'No, nothing. A truly ancient grave wouldn't contain much. I'm glad, really.'

Dody looked over her shoulder at him; he did not appear glad. The smile he returned looked strained and lacked its usual exuberance. 'No traces of jewellery or weapons?' she asked.

'I'll return tomorrow for another look when the light is

better.’ He clapped his hands, as if to snap himself from a sudden melancholia. ‘Now we’d better get a move on. We’ve quite a lot to do before Aunt and Uncle’s guests arrive.’

Florence groaned. ‘The extended Saturday-to-Monday. I’d forgotten about that.’

‘My dear Florence, need I remind you how important the opening meet is in the country diary?’

‘You’ve told me ad nauseam about the hunting, the house guests, what a privilege it is to be asked for longer than everyone else, et cetera, et cetera. It’s not that we aren’t aware of the customs, Tristram, we just choose to ignore most of them — isn’t that right, Dody?’

Dody nodded wryly. Florence was quite happy to bow to society’s customs when they suited her: having her older sister along as chaperone meant she could remain in the company of this pleasant young man.

‘Where shall we put the bones?’ Dody asked. ‘We can’t very well drag them in through the front door of the Hall.’

Tristram scooted towards the front of the cart, carrying the basket of bones. ‘The old ice house should do, provided I can remember where it is. I haven’t been there since I was a boy. Follow that path through the woods and let’s see where it takes us.’

Florence clicked her tongue at the placid pony, and they trundled off down the rutted path and into the gloaming.

The path was narrow and sunken: just wide enough to take the cart. As far back as Neolithic times, Tristram explained, pigs had been driven along routes such as this to find pannage in acorn-rich clearings called dens, which eventually became settlements. The pony’s hooves barely made a sound as they trod the rich leaf mould. On both sides of the track massive oaks loomed and golden leaves fluttered as if pressed to the ground by a descending sky. Every now and then they came

across great clumps of trees smothered in ivy. Dody found herself fighting the same feelings of claustrophobia she felt on the London tube and was glad of Florence's distracting whisper.

'Isn't this exciting! Are you pleased I persuaded you to come?'

'I didn't have much choice, did I?'

There were plenty of places Dody would rather be spending the precious days of her holidays than the draughty old hall owned by Tristram's uncle, Sir Desmond. It was Sir Desmond, in fact, who had insisted that Florence be accompanied by a chaperone. Their mother had volunteered Dody for the job, having no idea about the plans she was disrupting. If only she'd had the courage to tell Mother about Pike.

'It's not my fault the Fitzgibbons insisted I be chaperoned,' Florence shot back. 'Mother and Poppa would have been quite happy for me to be here on my own.'

'Mother and Poppa are hardly conventional,' Dody remarked. Their parents did have their limits, however. They had been most distressed when, at the age of seventeen, Florence declared she had met the love of her life — a poet acquaintance of their mother, and a man twice her age. After a ferocious argument with Poppa Florence had run away to London to find him. What she had found was an empty garret and a note from the poet to his landlady asking her to feed the cat. He was visiting his wife and children in Blackpool and would notify her upon his return.

Dody smiled and patted her sister's knee. 'But of course I'm pleased I came. Someone's got to make sure you behave in front of Sir Desmond and Lady Fitzgibbon.'

'Granted. Tristram's uncle isn't the type of company I usually seek. In fact, my tongue is quite blistered from all the biting.'

Dody laughed. 'As is mine.' I hope your young man's worth it, she added silently to herself.

The woods began to thin and they found themselves following the course of a dry-stone wall that ended at a lych gate. Through the gloom Dody discerned the boxy outline of a Norman church, then scattered gravestones and stone crosses as skew-whiff and as filthy, no doubt, as the bones in the basket.

'St Crispin's Church,' Tristram announced.

Florence slowed the pony.

'Built on the site of a pagan place of worship,' he continued. 'This whole area is supposed to be haunted.'

'Of course,' Dody said, casting her eyes aloft.

'Oh, do tell!' said Florence.

'What? And terrify you with tales of ghoulies, ghosties and long-leggedy beasties? I think not.'

Normally Florence would have bristled at such condescension, but this time all she did was laugh. 'Tristram!'

'All right, then, if you insist.' He looked at her from beneath well-defined brows and drew an exaggerated breath. 'Once upon a time this path was one of the favourite haunts of a local witch,' he said, as if he had recited the story countless times. 'Apparently the old girl took great joy in leaping from the bushes and scaring the daylight out of travellers. Once she appeared to some men in the form of a hare and they set their dogs on her. She tried to escape through the rectory window, but one of the hounds — a great black brute — grabbed her leg and pulled her back out and the rest of the hounds tore her to pieces. Ever since then, when the people of the area hear the ghostly hounds baying at night, the pounding of hooves and the call of the hunting horn, they say it is the Witch Hounds seeking their prey.'

'The cries of wild geese flying south from Scandinavia,' Dody countered. 'I'm sorry, Tristram, but I've heard that

story before.’

‘Probably something similar, Dody. The Gabriel Hounds are said to roam the north, the Wish Hounds the southwest — you’ll find most ancient cultures have legends involving ghostly packs of hounds or Herne the Hunter type tales. This black dog sometimes makes independent appearances too. We’re travelling along the old corpse way, the route a funeral procession takes to the churchyard. If a black dog appears it is thought to be escorting the dead soul to the afterlife. A black dog sighted without a funeral procession, however, is supposed to foreshadow death.’

‘And you believe that, Tristram?’ Dody asked.

‘Of course not,’ he snorted. ‘But you have to agree it makes for interesting study.’

Florence shivered and increased the pace of the pony. ‘Chilly, isn’t it?’

Dody smiled. Her sister’s reaction came as no surprise; Florence shared none of her own scientific rationalism. What *had* been a surprise, though, was Florence’s apparent interest in the young man who was, at this moment, riding in the back of the cart, clutching a basket of old bones. Since the poet, Florence had sworn off men, declaring they were nothing but a distraction from her life’s cause, which was the fight for voting rights for women. Before meeting Tristram she had even gone so far as to echo the man-hating Christabel Pankhurst’s adage that men were little more than carriers of venereal disease. How the leopard had changed her spots! What was it about Tristram, Dody wondered, that had swayed Florence into giving love a second chance?

Dody had yet to form an opinion, good or bad, of Tristram Slater. He seemed pleasant and well mannered, as one would expect a wealthy young man of his class to be — albeit his hair was possibly an inch too long at the front, his suits slightly too flamboyant and his deep voice a touch on

the loud side. Everything about him seemed just one degree above the mean — even his nose was a fraction larger than most Roman varieties, and his dark-brown eyes burned a bit too brightly whenever he addressed Florence.

His knowledge of archaeology and history was impressive, though, and the vigour with which he pursued his amateur calling bordered on obsession. In that personality trait he and Florence had much in common. They had met during his political campaign, and although his interest in Labour Party politics had quickly waned when he failed at the hustings, he remained an avid supporter of the militant suffragettes and their (in Dody's opinion) hare-brained schemes. He gave the impression of being a young man still searching for himself: one with too much time and too much money, who became easily bored. Dody hoped, for Florence's sake, she was reading him incorrectly.

They came to a fork in the path. Tristram tapped Florence on the shoulder, indicating they should veer left and take that route back to Fitzgibbon Hall.

'No point having an ice house far from one's domicile,' he said. 'The river is close by too. You can't see it from here, but we're travelling parallel to it. The river itself is too fast to ice, but it has some gentle tributaries that freeze well. I used to skate on them.'

Dody attempted to peer through the undergrowth but saw no sign of the river. A dull drone came from somewhere nearby, but it could have been the sound of a distant train as much as a body of rushing water.

After travelling for about a quarter of a mile Tristram asked Florence to stop and jumped from the cart. 'The ice house is somewhere around here, I'm sure of it, though I expect it's overgrown now. It hasn't been used for ice since Uncle Desmond had the mechanical refrigerators installed — horrible leaky things. They still hang game here, though, so

look out for a foot trail in the wood.'

Florence spotted it; a rough path bordered by brambles and bracken that led to a large dome covered with vegetation and ringed by scraggly saplings. On first glance it seemed nothing more than a naturally formed bank.

'You should see this place in spring,' Tristram said, collecting the basket from the cart. 'A glorious mist of bluebells, and violets the colour of Florence's eyes.'

Oh Lord, Dody thought, this is no time to start waxing romantic. She moved to the front entrance of the ice house, took off her gloves and ran her fingers down one side of the moss-felted stone arch. The door was made of thick oak with iron reinforcing. Tristram tugged on the circular handle, needing two hands to heave the door open, and they found themselves in a tunnel about six feet high and nine feet long, ending at another heavy door.

'Double-doored to improve insulation,' Tristram said, placing the basket on the tunnel's brick-paved floor. 'We don't need to go into the dome itself. The bones will be safe enough in the passage.'

Dody looked around the tunnel of bricks and thought of the pictures of igloos she'd seen in *The National Geographic Magazine*. 'This passage won't be light enough to work in, even in daylight with the front door wide open. Is there any source of natural light in the dome itself?' she asked.

'There's a trapdoor in the dome's roof through which ice used to be delivered after being cut from the rivulets, but it's so overgrown I doubt we could open it.'

'Then surely there is an outbuilding nearer the house I could use: a stable, perhaps?' Dody asked.

'I'm afraid Aunt Airlie would have a fit if she knew the bones were anywhere near the house. She's very sensitive to this kind of thing, just like our Florence.'

Our Florence?

Dody sighed softly. If she put up too much of a fuss and postponed her investigations until a suitable place was found, she might be forced to join the hunt.

‘I suppose with the door open and lanterns on the walls I might be able to make do,’ she conceded.

‘Splendid,’ Tristram said, helping the women back into the cart. He joined them on the bench seat next to Florence, and this time Dody took the reins, giving the young couple the chance to sit close together.

It was almost dark by the time they glimpsed the lights of Fitzgibbon Hall. Modest as far as country estates went, the Hall consisted of twenty-three rooms and three staircases, and sat in two hundred and fifty acres of its own deer park and woods. In daylight it was a monstrosity of grey stone, twisted chimneys and faux Gothic towers, but at dusk, with its leering gargoyles hidden, it looked almost welcoming. Ancient monkey puzzle trees lined the wide carriageway, their scale-like foliage clattering in the chill breeze. The dry leaves of deciduous trees scuttled alongside the clapping pony. Exhausted by their labours, Dody’s companions fell silent.

Suddenly the pony shied. A black shape bounded in front of the cart and disappeared into the shadows. Dody caught her breath and touched her sister’s knee. ‘Good Lord, did you see that?’

No answer; Florence and Tristram were both asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Neither sister could bear the idea of tea with the steadily arriving trickle of Saturday-to-Monday guests and begged Tristram to send their apologies to Lady Fitzgibbon. They were both cold and desperate for a comforting bath. For Dody, especially, changing into the required gown for tea and then only a few hours later changing once more into a dinner gown was an unnecessary and impractical chore. She had been too long in the workforce to waste time on such trifles. Even Florence, who usually liked nothing better than the feel of a silky teagown against her skin, confided that she needed time alone to prepare for the ordeal of dinner.

Dody had not mentioned the startling appearance of the black dog to Florence. That she herself had been momentarily frightened was unusual. The only things Dody feared tended to be of this world and walked on two legs. Goodness knew how Florence would react to such a tale — she would probably insist on sharing a bed as she had as a small child.

Their bedrooms were joined by a shared bathroom, making it easier for Annie, their maid, to attend to their needs. In their London household, Annie was both parlour maid and Florence's lady's maid. Dody, who favoured practical, tailored clothing, and who usually styled her hair in a simple chignon, did not often require her services. She would need Annie tonight, though, if she wanted to avoid

the indignity of her pompadour unravelling into the soup.

Dody sat in her silk kimono, reading at her dressing table while she waited for her turn in the bath. The sounds of Florence's splashing reached her as Annie grunted and slid a heavy portmanteau from beneath the bed.

'I think it's time I unpacked this, don't you, Miss Dody?'

Dody propelled herself around on the dressing-table stool. 'No, Annie, leave it, please. It contains medical equipment that is not to be disturbed.' If Annie were to discover what was in the suitcase, she would probably resign on the spot.

'If you say so, miss, but it isn't proper for a lady's maid not to know everything in her mistress's bags.'

'No, I'm sure it's not,' Dody said, returning to her book. The maid's curiosity would be the death of her one day.

With a medley of theatrical sighs, Annie laid Dody's second-best gown on the bed — her best gown was saved only for Pike.

Dody marked her place in the book and closed it. 'Annie, what on earth is the matter? You sound as if you are laying out a suit of armour.' Though perhaps armour *would* be the appropriate attire for the dinner ahead, she thought gloomily.

'Nothing, I'm sure, Miss Dody,' the maid replied.

Surely Annie was not still annoyed about the portmanteau? Dody paused to examine the young woman, hair awry, lace cap askew. 'You're not enjoying it much here, are you?'

Annie sniffed. 'To be honest, Miss Dody, I'd rather be back in London.'

'Are the staff not treating you kindly?'

'They're not treating me at all. I may as well not exist. I'm not a proper lady's maid, see; if you and Miss Florence were proper ladies, you'd have a maid each — that's what's being whispered in the servants' hall.'

'If we had taken to heart everything that has been said

about us, Annie, we'd have been driven mad years ago. Frankly, I am relieved not to be considered a proper lady.'

'And I have to share a room in the attic — a bed, what's more — with a scullery maid in training from the workhouse.' Annie scratched her head, knocking her lace cap to the floor.

Dody understood how offensive such an arrangement would be to Annie. The hierarchy of the servants was as rigid, if not more so, as that of those they served. 'I'll speak to the housekeeper about it, if you like,' she said.

The maid scooped her cap up off the floor, then bobbed to view the dressing-table mirror and re-pinned it. 'Won't do much good, miss. I've already tried speaking to Mrs Hutton and she says what with the house guests and all, they're a few servants' beds short and I'll just have to lump it.'

Dody was surprised to hear that Annie had mustered the courage to approach the intimidating, black-clad housekeeper, though it pleased her that the maid was learning to stick up for her rights. Still, when in Rome ...

'You should have left it to me, Annie,' she said.

'Yes, miss. I suppose I'll get the bed to myself when Edith goes back to the workhouse. Normally she's only here a few days a week.' Annie scratched her head again.

Dody frowned. 'Itchy head?' she asked as she reached into her Gladstone bag for her magnifying glass. 'Here, let me look.' She took hold of the girl's hand and pulled her towards the electric lamp on the dressing table.

Annie attempted to struggle free. 'No, miss, it's all right, really!'

'No, it's not all right, and I think you know that as well as I do.'

The maid's eyes filled with tears. 'I looked myself. I'm clean. I wouldn't come near you and Miss Florence if—'

'This is something you cannot help. We understand that.'

Now, please stay still and let me examine your hair.'

Dody insisted they exchange places: Annie perched on the dressing-table stool, Dody standing over her and peering through the magnifying glass at her hair. Dody found several clusters of pediculosis eggs, like grains of sand, clinging to the shafts of hair around the girl's temporal region. 'As I thought,' Dody said, putting down the magnifying glass. 'This needs immediate treatment.'

'But what will the other servants say?' Annie said desperately. 'What do I tell Mrs Hutton? I'll be a laughing stock.'

Dody fully understood Annie's shame, illogical though it was. Now she would be regarded as even more inferior by the Hall staff, many of whom, like Annie, would have come from impoverished backgrounds and also experienced the shame of head lice. By entering domestic service, they would have hoped to leave all that behind them. 'You would have caught them from the workhouse girl. I'll have to speak to Mrs Hutton about it.'

'Oh, no, miss. Edith's a sweet little thing, really. She might lose her job because of it.'

'Well, let's worry about you first. I'll ask Mrs Hutton to tell the other servants that you have been taken ill and that you will be sleeping on my bedroom floor. I will treat your hair and you will remain in here until the treatment is complete.'

'And Edith?'

'Someone will have to have a word with the workhouse authorities. The inmates will have to be inspected and, if necessary, treated.'

Dody left Annie softly weeping at the dressing table and moved into the bathroom to report the situation to Florence. Tired of waiting for Annie's assistance, Florence was wrapping herself in a fluffy dressing gown. She took the

news with barely a shudder and allowed Dody to inspect her dark locks. After being told what to look for, she did the same for Dody and they pronounced themselves clean.

The footman was sent for and asked to procure a tin of paraffin. When that had been delivered, Dody ordered Annie into the bath, saturated her hair with the evil-smelling liquid and wrapped her head in a bandage.

‘Keep that on for twelve hours and don’t go near any open flames,’ Dody instructed.

While Dody was attending to Annie, Florence had summoned Mrs Hutton and explained the situation.

The middle-aged housekeeper’s simple black satin belt was weighed down by a chatelaine of keys and button hooks, indicating her lofty status in the household, and providing an incongruous jingling accompaniment to her grave, measured footsteps. Dody vacated the bathroom to find an expression of scorn on the tall, imperious woman’s face.

‘We would appreciate it if our maid’s problem could be kept from the other staff, please, Mrs Hutton,’ she said.

Annie did not seem to be the cause of the housekeeper’s concern. ‘I can’t afford to send Edith back just yet. There is far too much work to be done. I will have to treat her myself.’

‘Very well, here you are,’ Dody said, handing the housekeeper the paraffin.

‘Conditions like this are a fact of life for someone of Edith’s station. All the same, the workhouse must be informed and standards improved.’ Mrs Hutton touched her own hair, severely drawn back from her ears. ‘I will have to tell Lady Fitzgibbon. She is on the Workhouse Board of Guardians and will take particular interest in this,’ she said.

‘Of course.’

Mrs Hutton affixed an icy smile to her handsome, haughty face. ‘Meanwhile, if I might offer my services to

both the Misses McClelland? I am an experienced hairdresser and important guests are expected for dinner. I am sure you would not wish to let down your gracious hosts.'

'Oh, yes, thank you. That would be wonderful!' Florence gushed before Dody could get a word in.

Dody retreated to the bathroom and sat with Annie while Florence was being attended to. Dody had always thought Annie's fingers were like hay rakes, but if Florence's stifled yelps were anything to go by, Mrs Hutton's must be even worse. Dody swallowed and waited for her turn.

The dining room reflected the house itself: a mixture of Classical and Gothic styles, dominated by a heavy oaken dresser at one end of the room and a stained-glass window depicting the family crest at the other. The dresser would have blended into the dark oak panelling around it, if not for the dancing reflection of lights on the pewter plates propped upon its shelves. All around were signs of an ancient family lineage: shields and swords on the walls, heraldic crests and thick-oiled family portraits.

Tristram had confided in the sisters, however, with no small amount of shame, that Sir Desmond, his uncle by marriage, came from new money — Sir Desmond's father having been knighted in recognition of the profitability of his iron foundries. The family crest, and even some of the portraits, had been purchased from the previous owner of Fitzgibbon Hall, along with acres of the local countryside. The family's chief source of income now was farming; the Fitzgibbons were landed gentry, but only just.

A luxurious, red-berried creeper twisted around the several pairs of silver candelabra illuminating the massive dining table. Bowls of imported fruit formed a decorative line down its centre, and highly polished silver cutlery gleamed in the flickering light. Dody counted twenty guests, with at

least half staying over for the Saturday-to-Monday. At the head of the table, Dody and Florence sat squeezed on either side of the plump Sir Desmond, his cherubic features and full head of ash-grey curls an odd contrast to his unfashionably small, clipped moustache.

Tristram sat on Florence's left. On the opposite side of the table, on Dody's right, sat Father Ignatius Flood, a long-necked gentleman wearing a Roman collar and more speckles of dandruff on his shoulders than hairs on his head. At the other end, Lady Fitzgibbon was surrounded by a group of mixed age, sex and marital status, whose names Dody had already forgotten. Most were attractive, well dressed and flirtatious. She hadn't yet worked out who had designs on whom, but she had no doubt that a system of codes had already been established — shoes, or a tray of food left outside a bedroom, or a ribbon carelessly draped over a door handle — to signify who was available.

Thus far she had not had much time to get to know Lady Airlie Fitzgibbon. The mistress of the house struck her as a quiet, unassuming soul, quite the opposite of her husband. Still, Dody supposed, she must have some backbone if she was a workhouse guardian, one of the few positions of civil responsibility open to women. She had also founded a needlework school for disadvantaged girls in Uckfield, the nearest village of any consequence, and tutored them herself in fine embroidery. Dody watched as she attempted to join in the social banter around her, the exertion leaving her looking strained, her skin almost translucent in the candlelight. Dody wondered how the delicate, ethereal creature coped with the unsavoury aspects of workhouse guardianship, or, worse still, a successful Saturday-to-Monday house party.

Lady Fitzgibbon's father, Tristram's grandfather, ninety if he was a day, sat on her right. 'Aye-Aye' lived in a comfortable house on the estate that had once belonged

to the estate agent. Every now and then he would pick up an ear trumpet from the floor next to him, place it in situ and call out 'Aye?' in a shrill, loud voice that made the other guests cringe.

He said little; there was a childlike quality about him and some dribbling, and he required frequent assistance from Lady Fitzgibbon, who had requested that the staff serve him before the other guests so he could retire early. It did not take long for Dody to realise that the old man was not only going deaf, but was also almost completely blind.

Perhaps he was aware of the strain his wife was under, or perhaps he was always this attentive, but whatever his reasons, Sir Desmond frequently excused himself from his place to personally offer Lady Fitzgibbon wine or to talk softly to her, as if soothing a nervous child, or a foal.

On one such occasion, when their host had left his seat to fetch his wife's shawl, Father Flood took up conversation with Dody. He blew his nose loudly into a handkerchief the size of a tea towel and informed her that his cold had almost forced him to cancel his attendance, but the curiosity of meeting Sir Desmond's fascinating collection of house guests had won out. Was Dody aware that tomorrow's hunt would be riding across seminary lands?

'Surely you saw the seminary building when you were excavating the river bed with Mr Slater?' he said with a soft Irish lilt. 'Our lands adjoin.'

Dody had. It was a bland, many-windowed, red-brick building located about a mile from where they had been digging.

Sir Desmond returned to his place and broke in before Dody could answer the priest. 'And what do you think of the Piltdown discovery, Miss, er, Doctor McClelland?' he asked. 'Exciting, what?'

The liveried footman helped Dody to leek and potato

soup. She nodded her thanks and replied, 'It seems to be quite a controversial discovery, Sir Desmond. I look forward to hearing how it is received at the Geographical Society at the end of the month.'

'Yes, I have heard some doubt about its authenticity — mainly from foreigners, I might add. They can't stomach the fact that the first Englishman may be older than anything previously found in Europe — that an Englishman was the first European, if you will. The discovery is the epitome of everything that is great about this country of ours.'

At this, a big black labrador sauntered into the room, rested its head on Sir Desmond's lap and looked up at him with adoring amber eyes. Sir Desmond affectionately scratched the dog's ears. 'What say you, eh, Mr Cole?'

Mr Cole must have been the 'ghostly' black shape Dody had seen bounding across the carriageway earlier that evening. She smiled to herself. This Gothic house must be getting to me, she thought; of course there is a rational explanation for everything.

'If I may interrupt, Sir Desmond,' Mr Hugh Montague, sitting diagonally opposite Tristram, said with a silken smirk, 'I read that this first Englishman of ours seems to be less evolved than we are, meaning that he might be of non-white origin.'

'Well, Hugh,' Sir Desmond drained the last drop of wine from his goblet and signalled the footman for more, 'we all had to start somewhere.'

'I warrant there are several paupers in the village who could well be associated with the chap in this find.' Montague chuckled. 'They say people often revert to the form of an ancient ancestor, that pauperism is hereditary ... Have you seen the fellow who begs on the corner of the High Street near the pump? Not a tooth in his head — probably our bone man's cousin.'

‘And you *would* know about that sort of thing, wouldn’t you, Hugh?’

All the men at their end of the table, barring Tristram, joined in with Sir Desmond’s guffaws as if sharing an in-house joke.

‘I’ve heard some say that the Piltdown creature is not a man at all.’ Mr Montague added to the hilarity between wheezing gasps of breath, his words seeming at odds with his handsome, mature countenance. A man who spoke and behaved thus should have the appearance of an oaf, Dody thought, pondering Nature’s deception.

‘They say that it is a woman,’ Sir Desmond proclaimed. ‘That a woman is the missing link between men and monkeys!’

Florence stiffened. Dody braced herself.

Tristram drew a controlled breath. ‘Gentlemen, please. Spare the ladies and save the ribald conversation for the billiard room.’

Sir Desmond wiped a dribble of soup from his chin. ‘Of course, Tristram. Please do accept our apologies, ladies.’

Florence shot Montague and Sir Desmond a look that could have frozen water, and Dody was left to fill the ensuing silence. ‘Mr Slater, do tell us what you know about the Piltdown remains.’

Tristram glanced at the men around him and relaxed his posture, flicking both sisters a hesitant smile. ‘The skull fragments were found in a gravel pit on the Barkham Manor lands near Piltdown hamlet, about three miles from Sir Desmond’s, in a dried-up river bed shared by both properties,’ he explained. ‘They were discovered a couple of years ago by a labourer digging for gravel there, and he gave them to Charles Dawson, the archaeologist. Over time, more skull remnants were found by Dawson at the gravel pit, along with a jawbone, a tool made from a prehistoric elephant tusk

and some fossilised remains of animal teeth. The items in the pit made him conclude that the remains must be thousands of years old, from the Pleistocene era, probably.'

'And your opinion?'

'Frankly, I have my doubts, Doctor McClelland. Dawson is a glory seeker. Some of his previous finds have been of dubious authenticity.'

'But I believe the anatomist Professor Arthur Keith is working on a skull reconstruction to present to the Royal Society,' Dody said. 'Surely he must have faith in the find.'

'Indeed he must, Doctor McClelland. Unfortunately, few are privy to exactly what is to be presented. I haven't seen the bones myself, let alone the reconstruction, so I suppose I am hardly one to pass judgement on their age. I question the lack of scrutiny, however.'

'Of course they're authentic,' Sir Desmond said, puffing out his broad chest. 'And earlier in the drawing room, you mentioned that you might have stumbled upon something equally ancient on *my* land.'

'Yes, Uncle. I'm hoping Doctor McClelland will enlighten me when she examines the bones tomorrow morning.'

'What, you are not joining the hunt, Doctor?'

'I'm afraid not, Sir Desmond.'

'Damn shame.' He indicated Dody's hand, the one holding the heavy soup spoon. 'You look to have good hands. A good seat too — no doubt about that.'

He ground his knee into Dody's under the table. The cramped seating arrangements made it impossible for her to shrink away without rubbing against Father Flood's knee. She gritted her teeth and concentrated on her soup.

After the soup came the fish course, a whole poached salmon with a lemon glaze, followed by pheasant and game chips, the pheasant bagged by Sir Desmond himself weeks previously. For main course they dined on rolled lamb — Mr

Cole receiving more than his fair share of tit-bits from his master — with capers and vegetables, all accompanied by enough French wine to sink a dreadnought. The conversation circled from the pending hunt to the price of grain, wool and tariffs, to political tensions in Europe and then back to Tristram's discovery.

The men returned to their exchange about the atavistic tendencies of paupers and the inferiority of non-European races. Unable to take it any longer, Florence excused herself before the champagne jelly was served, citing a headache. Dody, slapping Sir Desmond's hand from her upper thigh, was about to follow when Tristram rose from his chair and suggested Florence might like to take some air in the garden. Best to leave them on their own, Dody thought, reluctantly dropping back into her seat, wishing she'd had the foresight to cry headache first.

To distance herself from the disagreeable company of Sir Desmond and Mr Montague, she asked Father Flood to remind her of the names of the guests at the other end of the table. He ran through the list as if he were dictating *Burke's Peerage*, excessively aware, she thought, for a man who had opted for a life of poverty, of every guest's financial and social station.

'None of them Catholic, unfortunately,' he concluded, 'and the seminary in such dire need of a new refectory roof.' At his self-deprecatory wink, she responded with her first genuine smile of the evening.

'Doctor McClelland?' The question forced her to turn from the priest and face Mr Montague. 'If Tristram's bones are not ancient, what then?'

Sir Desmond shifted in his chair and tugged at his bursting waistcoat. 'Don't be absurd, Hugh,' he muttered. 'What else could they be?'

'If that is the case, Mr Montague, I will have to inform

the local constabulary.’ Dody smiled sweetly at both men and rammed her knee into Sir Desmond’s. Hard.

Florence and Tristram sat on a garden bench with their backs to the Hall, sheltered from the wind by a thick privet hedge. He held up a lantern and shone it around the leafy nook. ‘There,’ he said, breath billowing like a magician’s smokescreen. ‘Did you see it?’

‘See what?’ Florence asked as her eyes strained towards the light’s perimeter.

‘Don’t ask questions, just look.’ He lifted the lantern towards a leafless bough swaying in the breeze. ‘Did you not see her? Sitting there on the branch, little white legs hanging down, wings glistening in the moonlight?’

Florence punched his shoulder. ‘Tease.’ Tristram’s doing his best to cheer me up after the disastrous dinner, she thought, touched.

‘I am teasing indeed, and I apologise; I couldn’t help it.’ He chuckled. ‘When I was a boy, Aunt Airlie swore that fairies inhabited this nook. We used to play hunt-the-fairy-at-the-bottom-of-the-garden, in this very spot. Needless to say she always found one first, and by the time I had worked out where she was pointing, the fiendish little thing had vanished.’

Florence thought the game sounded charming, and told him so. She slipped off the bench and grabbed the lantern, shining it into niches and hollows. ‘I see. This flat rock here,’ she pointed to a garden paving stone, ‘is where they have their dances and balls.’ She turned to a crisp leaf filled with water. ‘And this is their swimming bath, and rising behind it is their many-tiered library — the rose trellis. The rose flowers, when in bloom, serve as comfortable reading chairs.’

‘Exactly. And the old feather-lined bird’s nest in the privet is where the Fairy King lies in comfort with his concubines.’

Florence raised her eyebrows. 'Sounds a bit saucy.'

'Oh, fairies are not bound by the same rules as we are.'

'Then single lady fairies do not require chaperones?'

'Definitely not. Provided the feelings are mutual, boy and girl fairies may behave as they wish.'

Florence laughed. 'What a wonderful imagination you have.'

Tristram lowered his eyes. 'It's fun to pretend. One can spend too much time dwelling on life's sorrows, don't you think?'

His playful mood seemed to have quickly evaporated. He had been such fun at her parents' house, Florence reflected, but seemed almost a different man here. Not that she really minded; it showed he had depth, that he did not deserve the playboy label Dody had tagged him with. Florence wished to God he would tell her what was troubling him, though.

She joined him on the bench and for a moment neither spoke. She remembered when she was working as a volunteer in his campaign office, folding pamphlets. Her suffragette division had been supporting Tristram in his fight for the seat of Maidstone. He was a fully paid-up member of the Male League for Women's Suffrage and, if elected, had intended to provide the suffragettes with a strong voice in parliament. They had known in their hearts that he had but a slim chance of winning over the staunchly Conservative electorate, that his intense speeches about the inevitability of change and franchise for all would pass over most heads. Tristram was pathologically unable to lie (unlike the poet) and the people did not want the truth. Even the Labour Party officials had known Tristram's campaign was doomed before it had begun. They must have thought it safer to taint a newcomer with the odour of defeat than risk a more valuable party member. He'd been nothing but cannon fodder to them. 'More time for my archaeological studies now, I suppose.'

he'd said, without bitterness or rancour, when news of his defeat reached him.

He now took hold of her hand, cold despite her long evening gloves, and pulled it into the pocket of his coat. 'I'm sorry about this evening, Flo. I expect you want to go home now.'

'A man cannot choose his relatives, Tristram.'

Tristram snorted, so unlike him. '*You* drew some lucky cards.'

'I assure you my parents can give equal offence and more, to those they find truly distasteful.'

'Actually, I'm quite fond of my parents. Uncle Desmond does not think much of my father, though. Jealous, I think. You see, my father is from an established bloodline and Sir Desmond is not.'

'You sound as if you're talking of horse pedigrees.'

'Not much difference, really. And it's a bloodline that, theoretically, I am no part of, so no threat, you see. I think that's why Uncle Desmond tolerates me, seems quite fond of me, even.'

Florence laughed, then wished she could take it back when Tristram's expression told her he had not been joking. 'What on earth are you talking about?' she asked with concern.

'I'm trying to tell you that I was adopted, Flo.'

For once she was at a loss for words.

'I expect you *really* want to go home now,' he added gloomily.

Anything but, Florence thought, despite being stunned by his revelation. I've been looking for depth, for the real Tristram, and now I have found him. This explains so much. How wonderful that he chooses to confide his secret to me.

Florence lifted his chin with her gloved hand and made him meet her eyes. 'Would a fairy princess worry about her prince's annoying relatives, especially if they aren't really his

relatives at all? I thought the fairy kingdom was above such earthly pettiness.'

'No, I suppose not, but we're not fair—'

'Oh, do be quiet, Tristram,' she said, pulling his head towards hers.