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THE SOUL HUNTERS

CHRIS BRADFORD



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For Mary –
A dear friend and old soul.
Thank you for your healing.

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Mesoamerica (Guatemala), 2500 BC

'In honour of Ra-Ka, Lord of the Underworld, Fire of the Earth,' bellowed the High Priest, 'we make this sacrifice!'

Clenched in the High Priest's fist the human heart pulsed, its dying throbs seeming to beat in time with the ceremonial drums that thundered atop the stone pyramid. Rising above this temple, a huge volcano rumbled and spat lava. Streaks of molten red rock ran like veins down its blackened slopes and into the steaming jungle below.

As the High Priest offered up the heart to the fiery peak, a huge cheer erupted from the people gathered in the plaza at the foot of the pyramid. The volcano answered with another ominous rumble. Then the drums ceased and the crowd fell silent.

With great care, he laid the heart in a wooden bowl and set it down before an immense statue of a godhead with cat-like eyes and a snarling fanged mouth. The High Priest himself wore the skull and mottled pelt of a jaguar. His red-painted face protruded through the skull's open jaws, framing his sharp features with even sharper teeth: a nose

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bladed like a battleaxe, high jutting cheekbones and narrow eyes as hard and black as obsidian rock. In the flickering light of the fires, the High Priest appeared as fearsome as the gods the Tletl people honoured.

The Priest approached the stone altar where the victim's body still lay: a young boy, no more than fourteen, his sightless eyes wide with a terror and pain he no longer suffered. With a curt nod, the High Priest commanded his acolytes to complete the sacrificial ceremony.

Two bare-chested men, their muscles oiled and bulging, drew back a stone slab in the temple's uppermost platform and wreaths of sulphurous steam billowed into the darkening sky. Four jaguar-masked acolytes lifted the boy's limp body from the altar and carried it over to the opening. Once more the drummers struck up a heavy beat and the people in the plaza began dancing frenetically to the pounding rhythm.

'Ra-Ka!' called the High Priest. 'To you we offer this boy's heart, body and soul in sacrifice! Consume them with your fire!'

To another almighty cheer from the crowd, the body was tossed into the pool of lava bubbling far below. Flesh and bone were incinerated in an instant. The High Priest raised his blood-soaked hands in tribute, while the drumming rose to a crescendo before suddenly ceasing –

All was deathly silent. Then the earth began to tremble. Barely noticeable at first, it grew from a tremor into a shuddering quake.

The trees shook . . .

The birds took flight . . .

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Huts began to collapse . . .

Stone walls caved in . . .

And down in the plaza the ground *cracked* open like a dry riverbed, fissures snaking their way between the feet of the panicking worshippers.

Growling deep in its throat, the volcano exploded, spewing forth balls of flaming magma and hot clouds of black ash. Shocked by the wrath of their god, the people in the plaza wailed in terror. But the High Priest was unmoved. He stood before them, fearless and formidable.

'Now for the *main* sacrifice!' he declared as the earthquake receded. 'This pure offering will appease our Fire god and bring about a new dawn.'

With a scythe-like smile, the High Priest turned to a young girl. Barely into womanhood, she possessed long curling locks of jet-black hair, an unblemished golden-brown face, and large round eyes that shone like stars. Held firmly by four acolytes, whose skulls were gruesomely elongated, the girl struggled to escape their grip as they dragged her, kicking and screaming, towards the altar. The drums had resumed their thundering rhythm and the crowd took up a ritual chant.

'*RA – KA! RA – KA! RA – KA!*'

The girl, having been lifted on to the altar, felt the cold hard stone press against her bare back. She felt too the slick warm wetness of the previous victim's blood. Terror now silenced her screams and her strength sapped away as each limb was pinned down by the four masked men.

The dark, seemingly soulless eyes of the High Priest fixed upon her, his gaze harbouring such hatred and evil that any

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last vestiges of hope she might have held were extinguished. Grinning cruelly, he stood over her, brandishing an ornate jade knife in his hand, its hilt carved with the icon of a were-jaguar. Only moments before, the girl had seen that very blade butcher her friend. She'd been forced to watch in sickened horror as the High Priest had reached inside the victim's body and ripped the still-beating heart from his chest.

Now, with her own heart hammering hard, the girl knew she had to fight with all her might. She struggled in a final frantic bid to break free, but it was futile, and she felt all resistance strangely draining away as the High Priest uttered an incantation in a tongue so ancient it sounded like dark magic . . .

'Rura, rkumaa, raar ard ruhrd,
Qmourar ruq rouhk ur darchraqq,
Ghraruq urq kugr rour ararrurd . . .'

The drums pounded in her ears and the chanting from the crowd grew louder and ever more frenzied.

'*RA – KA! RA – KA! RA – KA!*'

Falling under the High Priest's spell, the girl became lost in a trance. Her soul seemed to separate from her body and float upwards, so she watched, as if from above, the jaguar-masked Priest raise the jade knife, still dripping with her friend's blood, up over his head.

With the blade poised to strike, the High Priest glanced towards the horizon, waiting for the exact moment when the sun set and the last rays of light on earth would be extinguished . . . *forever.*

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London, present day

As I approach the museum, a group of teenagers gathered in the darkness stop their whispered conversation and watch me climb the steps to the front entrance. I ring the doorbell and wait. A distant pounding of drums sounds in my ears . . . *or maybe it's my heartbeat* . . .

I can sense their eyes upon me. The gang's silence is unsettling, but I daren't turn around in case I provoke them. Then the museum's doors swing open, light spills out on to the street and, showing my invitation card, I'm ushered inside.

The gang left behind and quickly forgotten, I hang up my coat and head through to a noisy foyer thronging with smartly dressed guests.

'Genna! You're here!' Mei cries. She embraces me in a hug and whispers into my ear, 'Thanks for coming. This evening was going to be such a *bore* without you!'

I blink in puzzlement. 'A *bore*?'

My gaze sweeps round the foyer, taking in the astounding array of artefacts on display: a carved Lulua tribal mask

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from the Congo; a shimmering bronze Greek shield embossed with the face of Medusa; a gleaming gold statue of the Buddha; a pair of samurai swords with ivory-white handles. The room is abuzz with breathless chatter as guests, reporters and photographers all crowd round the various exhibits. In one corner a DJ discreetly plays an eclectic mix of Latin, African and Asian music, adding to the lively atmosphere.

'How could this be a bore? I mean, this is just – it's truly *amazing*!' I gasp. 'Thank you *so* much for inviting me!'

Mei rolls her eyes at me and laughs. 'Jeez, no wonder my parents like you so much. If you go on like this, they'll want to swap us!'

I throw her a quizzical look. 'Aren't you interested in their exhibition *at all*?'

She shrugs indifferently. 'We've got tons of old stuff lying around the house. I see it every day. Honestly, I don't understand why everyone gets so excited about it.'

'Mei, your parents are a real-life Indiana Jones and Lara Croft!' I exclaim. 'They travel the world discovering lost treasures, and tonight they're showing their *private* collection. It's no wonder people are excited.'

'Well, *you* clearly are!' Mei remarks. 'But it's not much fun when they're away all the time.'

I wince. 'Sorry . . . I forgot how hard it is on you and your brother.'

'Don't worry,' Mei replies, putting on a smile. 'Me and Lee know we take second place to their globe-trotting. We've accepted it –'

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'Genna! How wonderful to see you,' calls Mei's mother, gliding over in an elegant purple dress, a champagne glass in hand. 'So glad you could make it.'

Mei straightens at her mother's approach. Despite her lack of interest in antiquities, she's like her mother in every other way: long arrow-straight black hair, piercing tiger-brown eyes, high cheekbones and a flawless complexion.

'I wouldn't miss it for the world, Mrs Harrington,' I reply, greeting her with a smile.

'Lin, I think we've discovered our long-lost daughter!' says Mei's father, chuckling as he appears at my side, a twinkle in his eye. Tall with a broad chest and a boxer's jaw, and dressed in a smart khaki suit, he looks like the quintessential English explorer from the movies.

'See? Told you!' Mei mutters, rolling her eyes. 'Swap us in a heartbeat!'

'*Bǎobèi*, you'll *always* be our greatest treasure,' her mother says soothingly to Mei. 'Now I'm sure Genna's dying to see our latest discoveries. Do give her the *full* tour. Oh, and tell your brother that his friends don't have to wait outside.'

Answering her mother with an obedient nod, Mei leads me through to the first room where there's an astonishing collection of Middle Eastern treasures. While Mei messages her brother, I turn to the first exhibit: a four-thousand-year-old Persian vase.

'Were you just being polite to my parents?' asks Mei, glancing up from her phone. 'Or do you *really* find this stuff interesting?'

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'Of course I do.' I nod sincerely, examining the delicate pattern painted in blue upon the vase's surface. 'You know I love history.'

Mei cocks her head to one side, looks at the vase and fails to be impressed. 'But it's so deadly dull. It's all in the past!'

'Doesn't feel that way to me,' I reply as I head over to a display cabinet containing an Egyptian stone tablet.

'Whatever floats your boat, I suppose,' says Mei. 'You hungry?'

I lift my gaze from the tablet's intricate hieroglyphs. 'Not really.'

'Well, *I* need something to relieve the boredom,' Mei says with a sigh, pocketing her phone. 'You knock yourself out here, while I'll get us some food from the buffet.'

Mei heads for the hospitality area just as Lee's friends enter the foyer. They make straight for the buffet too, clearly more interested in the food than the exhibition. I turn my attention back to the stone tablet and, as I lean my head against the glass of the cabinet, I once more become aware of the distant pounding of drums. The rhythm is hypnotic. At first I think it must be the DJ, then realize the sound is coming from down a hallway. Intrigued and strangely compelled at the same time, I follow the beat to a room at the far end. As soon as I enter, the drumming stops.

That's weird, I think, peering round for the source of the sound. The space is dimly lit, only the display cabinets spotlighted. Being the furthest from the foyer, the room is still empty of guests. But it's full of treasures from South

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America. Curious, I peer at the first artefact, a small clay figurine of a pregnant woman. Next to this is an Aztec death mask inlaid with turquoise and mother-of-pearl, and beside that – I grimace at the sight – a shrunken mummified head! Then I notice, in a glass cabinet all of its own, a knife of pure jade. The six-inch blade is so green it almost glows.

For some reason I can't take my eyes off the knife. The hilt is carved with a bizarre icon of what looks like . . . a jaguar crossed with a man. Unbidden, my fingers reach out for the latch to the cabinet and, surprised to find it unlocked, I pull it open. At once there's a thrumming in my ears. I think it must be the noise from the foyer but, no, it's distorted, as if it's playing through a damaged speaker. I hear what sounds like a girl screaming, then the heavy beat of drums again, followed by the rumble of distant . . . *thunder?*

Still my fingers stretch out towards the knife, its curved blade like a tongue of green fire. The room around me turns hazy, unreal; the thrumming in my ears grows more intense. A sharp acrid smell like . . . *singed hair* . . . fills my nostrils. I'm about to clasp the hilt when –

'I wouldn't touch that if I were you.'

I spin round, startled. The room comes sharply back into focus and the noise from the foyer suddenly grows louder. A boy in a dark-grey Adidas hoodie and slack jeans is standing in the open doorway, watching me.

I feel guilty, like I've been caught in the act of stealing.

He sees the anxious look on my face and grins. 'Oh, don't worry. I won't tell anyone,' he says, quietly closing

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the door behind him and striding over to me. 'But best not to play with knives, especially ones that are priceless.'

'Priceless?'

He nods. 'That's a ceremonial knife from Guatemala. Over four thousand years old.'

I stare in amazement at the knife. It's so well preserved that it looks as if it was carved yesterday. 'What sort of ceremony was it used for?' I ask.

'Human sacrifice.'

My eyes widen in shock and a chill runs through me, as if someone's just walked across my grave. Then I look at the boy and wonder if he's teasing me. 'I don't believe you.'

He shrugs. 'Believe what you want. But it's what it says there.' He points to a small information panel beside the cabinet. Then he takes a step closer. 'What's your name?'

'Genna,' I mumble and glance shyly up at him. My pulse races a little. With a flop of black hair over his hazel eyes and pale skin, he has a rough, just-got-out-of-bed look. But it's an appealing look nonetheless – and while it appears he doesn't see much sun, he clearly goes to the gym, judging by his well-toned physique.

He flashes me a smile. 'Well, Genna, I'm Damien. Best we close this display case before anyone finds out we've been having a sneaky peek, eh?'

As he reaches across to flip the latch, our bodies touch and a spark of static electricity passes between us. The air suddenly seems hot and tingling with energy. For a moment we just stare at one another, our eyes locked.

I shift on my feet, feeling awkward and slightly uncomfortable at our closeness.

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'I *know* you,' he breathes.

I brush aside a loose strand of hair from my face. 'I-I don't think so,' I stammer. The room suddenly feels overly warm and thin on air.

He clasps my wrist and looks deeper into my eyes. His pupils now seem unnaturally large and ever-expanding. Like spilled ink. *Contact lenses?* Strange I didn't notice them before.

I try to pull my hand away, but his grip tightens. His voice deepens too, into a dog-like growl. 'I've been seeking you!'

'*What?*' Now I'm confused and a little frightened. The pressure on my wrist increases. '*Ow!*' I cry. 'That's hurting!'

But Damien takes no notice. He starts dragging me towards the door.

'LET ME GO!' I shout, trying to wrench myself free of his iron-like grip.

And then the door opens and Mei walks in, a plate of buffet food in her hand.

'There you are, Genna!' she says with a relieved smile. 'Honestly, I've been looking all over for you.'

The panicked expression on my face stops her in her tracks, however. She glances between me and the boy, and her smile is replaced by a scowl. 'Everything all right?'

'Yeah, of course,' says Damien, releasing my wrist. 'Was just giving Genna here a guided tour.'

Mei glares at him. 'Well, she's seen enough, thank you . . . as have I!'

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'Suit yourself,' says Damien with a shrug, and he brushes past her and stalks out of the room.

I let out a shuddering sigh. My body is trembling and my mouth bone-dry.

Mei narrows her eyes at me. 'Genna? Are you –?'

'I'm fine,' I say, avoiding her curious gaze. Then, steadying myself on rubbery legs, I make my way back to the foyer, collect my coat and head for the door.

Mei runs after me, a mix of confusion and concern on her face. 'Genna! Where are you going?'

'Sorry, but . . . I-I-I don't feel well,' I say, pushing past a group of newly arriving guests and out through the main doors.

I hear Mei calling after me but I don't stop. I don't even reply. As I hurry down the road to the tube station, I risk a glance back. Damien is standing in the front window of the museum. Just staring at me.

I quicken my pace and daren't look back again.

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