

HANDED DOWN

TRICIA VOUTE

CHAPTER ONE

His extremities are numb and his heart is racing. He scrambles over the rocks and vigorously rubs himself down with a towel. Reaching for his flask, he tries to unscrew the top. Quick, quick, his hands are freezing. They are stiff and white and he squeezes them under his arms for a moment; then he tries again.

Finally! The top is off and he can drink. Yes! to the coffee and Yes! to its heat — he can feel it rushing passing through him.

The cold's not the issue, though, not really; it energises him and he knows he'll feel amazing in a moment. It's his heart. The pistons are slamming up and down so fast, they're about to jam right out of him. If he jumps into the sea one more time, it's going to be the death of him. His heart will do one last hammer — ba-bang — and then stop. It's how his father died and his grandfather before him.

He told Viv as much.

"And?" she said.

"And what?"

"How else do you think it happens? It's one of the definitions of death, isn't it? The heart stops."

True, it's just not what he expected from a therapist. It's something he's noticed about her, an oddity of sorts. Despite being a counsellor or therapist (or whatever she is), she's irascible at times. None of the 'tell me how you are feeling' or 'thank you for sharing that with me.' Instead, she leaves her thoughtful self on the doorstep and snaps at him.

"Can't you think outside of that box of yours, for once?"

That isn't Viv, that is Mary, he's wife — ex-wife, to be exact. She accused him of living in a cardboard box. Later, she likened it to a tea-chest and then a cage; by the end, it was a prison and that irritated him because he didn't ask too much of life. Burnt lasagne, shirts still in the laundry basket... the list was long. He could add sexless nights and snoring too. Afterall, the one who felt incarcerated was Mary, not Mark. Mary-the-long-suffering, the-forebearing. It was their name for her. He hated how Adam Faulkner bowed at her photo every time he passed his desk and said: 'Mary, Mary, pray for us sinners now and at the time of our nightie-nights.' So much so he knocked on the Chief's door.

"You know Faulkner? Do you buy his Protestant Irish lark? I'm just wondering."

That was back in the day, back when it all went wrong.

Now he's in Guernsey.

The dark line of a storm is moving across the sky and he needs to hurry home. Weather-fronts come in fast succession now autumn's arrived, and rain is forecast for midday. He zips up his fleece and clambers over the rocks, onto the grassy incline and down the road towards Fort Hommet. As he waits to cross the road, his mobile rings.

"Yes?"

"It's me, Viv. Where are you? You sound like a steam train."

Thanks. "I've just been for a swim."

"Good on you."

"It's my last of the season."

"Worried your heart will pack up? Probably wise, none of us are getting any younger."

Thanks, again.

"Anyway, look, I was just wondering — have you heard the radio this morning?"

"No."

"Seen The Press?"

"Will do when I get back. Why?"

"There's a story on the front page. It's going to get that old ticker of yours going even faster."

What is it with Viv and his heart?

"Go on."

"A baby's been left at the foot of the Gran'Mère, at Saint Martins. Looks like it's been a dead a while. It was found in the early hours by a young guy coming back from a party. His girlfriend's parents live down Les Traudes. He thought it was a bag of rubbish and decided to be a good citizen and throw it away."

"Until he found it was a baby?"

"He nearly passed out with fright. He called the Police. Actually, he called his girlfriend first and then the Police. The point is, no one knows what it's doing there or how old it is. Supposedly it's sort of mummified. They're asking for information."

"Okay."

Mark lifts his hand to greet an old lady. Her name escapes him, but he recognises her from somewhere.

"I thought you might be interested." Viv sounds disappointed.

"I don't know anything about mummified babies."

"But it's intriguing, isn't it? I mean, who leaves a baby at the foot of the Gran'Mère?"

"Someone, evidently."

Her huff is exaggerated. "You're meant to be a detective!"

"Was," he stresses. "I *was* a detective. Now I'm a ..." he thinks a moment, "I'm property developer."

Viv laughs loudly. "Good for you. In the meantime, read the paper. It's full of speculations."

"Don't tell me. Covens and witches, and all of that nonsense?"

"Yup, all of that nonsense. And other stuff as well, like dogs digging up a neolithic burial sites. Have a read it and see what you think. Then give me a tinkle."



THE DRIVE IS FRINGED with fallen leaves and in the tree above his head, he spies a squirrel sitting on its haunches, watching him. Beneath, is a clump of mushrooms. He crouches down to check, imagining them fried in garlic and piled on buttered toast, but on closer inspection, he notices their yellow stained caps and shallow convex shape. He gets to his feet. The name escapes him, but whatever they are, he's not touching them.

He cuts through the arch into the front garden and walks over the grass towards the house. Inside, he pops his head around the kitchen door but no one is there. He crosses to the dinning room and finds it unlit and cold, with damp patches under the windows. It's time he sat down with a builder and assessed the true state of the place. Plans to develop it remain firmly in the realm of fantasy. Small hotel and chic-holiday? A viable option given the Dutch barn is large, and the one at the back has enough features to make it interesting, but 'facts' trump theory. He

doesn't need to a surveyor to list its problems: rising damp, dry rot, decaying window frames, low water pressure (he's sick and tired of showering under a dribble), and a wiring system with cables sheathed in lead. The cost? Heaven knows but it's going to be high. Get a group of men over from the mainland, people tell him; everyone does it and it's a lot cheaper. But somehow that feels disloyal and consequently he's done nothing about it. With the winter storms racing across the Atlantic, he'll have to wait til Spring.

"Morning, Mum. Slept well?"

He finds her in the 'conservatory', sitting in a cane chair with a blanket over her legs, facing a two-bar heater that burns orange. The old vine runs along the length of the glass and pots of geraniums fill the ledge. He leans over and kisses her cheek.

"Eeyaah!" She screams, swiping him away. "You're cold. Don't kiss me."

"You can't talk to Mark like that." Janice is sitting next to her.

"I don't like, I don't like it."

"Mark loves you very much."

"I don't like it."

He shrugs his shoulders. He's getting used to it.

"I tell you what," Janice tells her, "let's give Mark the Press, shall we? He's going to go and read it over a nice cup of coffee."

"No!"

"Come on, Lily. We've had a good browse, haven't we? We've got other things to look at, like that photo album on the coffee table. Let me take it now."

His mother is having none of it. Her hands grip the paper and when Janice tries to take it from her, she yanks it back and clings to it, determination set like concrete on her face.

"It's the baby," Janice tells him. "She's fixated on the dead baby."

That makes sense. He steps round and kneels on the stone floor. Looking into his mother eyes, he smiles at her and slowly takes hold of the newspaper. Her frown is all confusion and she won't let it go — who is he? What's he doing here? — but when he says, 'I'm Mark grown-up', her smile is one of beaming surprise.

"Mark grown-up? Really? Mark grown-up?"

"Yes, that's me." And he gently takes the newspaper from her hands. "Can I give you a kiss now? A good-morning kiss."

Lily nods and leans forward so he can take her face in his hands and kiss her forehead. Out of the corner of his eyes, he sees Janice mouth 'Well done'.



"TODAY IN THE STUDIO, I have Viv Le Prevost who most of you know from her Agony Aunt column in the Press. How long have you been doing that column now, Viv?"

Colin Heaume is sitting across a table of black computers. Long-armed bendy microphones jut out at her, covered in brightly coloured spongy stuff. In fact, look around and there is stuff everywhere, and not a window in sight. The last time she came into the studio, she was doing 'Thought for the Day', and they had to stop the pre-recording three times to get her to relax. Today, she does her yoga breaths, four in-four out, deep into the diaphragm. It's fine, it's all fine She'll be out in the fresh air soon enough.

"I began it about five years ago." She tries to sound lively. "It was an experiment. We didn't think it would take off, the island being so small and all that."

"People would recognise each other, you mean?"

"Quite. Sign him off as 'Jeff from the Vale' and everyone's going to know it's Ol' Falla with his blind cat."

Colin laughed. "Jeff Falla if you're out there..."

"As an example," she interrupts. "I don't know if Jeff Falla exists."

"Well, we'll soon found out."

"You get my point though."

"Absolutely. It's something that's always amazes me, if I'm honest, how personal they are. How do you choose which one to answer?"

"I answer them all, but the one I choose for publication depends on what's going on locally or in the national conversation. If there's been a discussion about gender issues, I'll probably use that as my guide."

"Interesting." He pauses. "Of course, I've got you into the studio today to talk about something else, something that's got the island talking, and that's the baby found at the Gran'Mère. You being a psychologist, having spent your career working as a therapist, what do you think it means?"

"Where does one start? If we look at the act itself..."

"Let's start there."

"Okay, but without the forensics I'm only guessing. Still, I'd say it's a kind gesture, even a loving one. And it's a deliberate act of association, of course, and for all we know there might be a pagan element to it too."

"The Gran'Mère has always been venerated, hasn't it. For those in the audience who don't know much about her, she's the granite figure outside St Martin's church. Her full name is La Gran'Mère du Chimquière and she probably began life in the megalithic period as a standing stone and was carved into a woman later on. Have you ever seen her decorated, Viv?"

"Not long ago, actually. I was driving past and stopped

because she was decked out in all these garlands, from a wedding. She looked lovely.”

“That’s usually the way it goes, isn’t it? A friend had her wedding photos taken next to her, and I’ve seen coins left on her head too. But never a baby at her feet. And that’s what we’re talking about now, isn’t it? The mummified body of a baby.”

“It isn’t that surprising, if you think about it.”

“Really?” He laughs nervously.

She smiles. “The mummified bit is unusual, yes. But not The Gran’Mère. She’s a woman, a maternal symbol. If you’re going to leave a dead baby anywhere, you’d leave it there.”

“Like the Virgin, you mean?”

“Why not? Some symbols have this universality about them, like fertility and motherhood. What matters is how the community understands them. And let’s be honest, she’s rather beautiful, isn’t she? Simple with this sort of — how can I put it? — enduring, never-changing presence. That’s comforting for many people.”

“You think whoever did it was trying to offer the child up to her?”

She sucks her lip. “I don’t think so. ‘Offer up’ sounds sacrificial to me. I wouldn’t go down that line, but then I haven’t read the forensics so I can’t say for sure. Still, talking personally, I’d see it more as an act of grieving. Someone’s asking the child to be protected. Giving it to the mother to look after it.”

“Rather than bury it?”

“Maybe. I mean, there’s something very final about putting someone in the ground and covering them up, isn’t there? Some cultures see that as totally abhorrent.”

“Which might explain why it’s mummified. It’s never been buried?”

“Exactly. The dead are mummified to preserve them. And

you only preserve what you value. Again, to me this is an act of love, even maternal love. There's the flower too, remember."

"Yes, a flower was found with the child."

"A fresh one. It's a minor a point, but it supports my cause for some sort of maternal act."

Colin stretches in his chair. "Thank you, Viv." He gives her the thumbs up as she talks into the microphone. "We'll take a break with a piece of music from Mike Oldfield. One of my all-time favourites. Moonlight Shadow. Here it is. Colin Heaume for Guernsey Today. See you in mo."



OUTSIDE, she takes a deep breath and lets the salt air fill her lungs. She's seen Colin Heaume through some sticky moments in his life, not least his marriage, and she's written-off enough bills to keep him solvent. Today is payment in kind, and it's worked out rather well, given the topic. It increases her profile. It takes her beyond the trash of daily moans to psychological profiling, something that has always fascinated her. Here's hoping the Chief of Police was listening. Give me a job, Mr. Comissioner. It also helps she likes Colin's taste in music. Just not in shoes. Fake alligator blue loafers with black bows, seriously? No wonder his wife left him. She could analyse his problems from those shoes alone. Like she's analysed Mark with his laced-up Churchills.

She gets into her car and switches on the engine. The sounds of the song blast through the radio.

She couldn't find a way to break through.'

A perfect summary of how she feels about Mark Roussel. No way through his bloody defences, that's for sure, and she drives off singing along.



THE CANOPY IS UP and he's leaning into the bubble car, trying to work out why the brake cables are broken. Viv is talking on the radio and there's something warming, even comforting in the way she speaks. He likes how she caught the word 'offering' and challenged it.

Now the programme has moved on and Colin Heaume is talking to the Chief Minister about the upcoming conference. Guernsey is hosting a Davos-like meeting of world financiers and Colin is wondering about the season. A windy-isle with storms and rain? Doesn't sound very Davos to him. The Chief Minister disagrees; they're going to be too busy sorting out the world for fripperies. Like sunlit cocktails on a super-yacht? Colin asks. Exactly, comes the humourless reply.

"Coffee?"

Janice is standing on the other side of the car with a brew of Yirgacheffe beans in her hands. He straightens his back and switches off the radio.

"It's cold out here. You should have a coat on."

He takes the mug and sips the coffee. A little too weak; a touch too much milk but she's getting there.

"Designed for Noddy that car is." Janice says.

It's more like aeroplane on wheels with tandem seating and tapering body, and a steering bar that swivels on its axis. He loves everything about it, from its duck-egg blue to its toddler-size. And he loves his childhood memories too, squeezed into the back at his mother's feet.

"He's getting on a bit," he taps the car affectionately. "I'm going to have to get him to a garage. It's beyond my mechanical skills."

Janice shrugs. "It'd help if you looked at the engine. It's at the back, isn't it?"

"I'm looking at the brakes, not the engine," he points out.

"Righty-ho." She wanders towards the house. "Noddy," she says over her shoulder. "Perfect name for it."

"Toys have names, not cars," he calls back.

"It is a toy."

He brings down the canopy. The car has character, it has a personality, and perhaps it does deserve a name, he just can't think of one. It's a stout, determined thing, male for certain. Bumble is a possibility — but then, no, you don't bumble-about, do you Stan?

Of course, Stan. A bit of a bruiser is our Stan. No messing about with the ol' cruiser. A Cockney through and through.

Later, he changes his mind. No self-respecting Stan would wear duck-egg blue. Far too Wedgwood. He'll have to think of something else.

The newspaper is on the kitchen table and he takes it to the Aga, leaning against the stove to warm himself. He reads it again, this time with more attention. Details are sparse but there's enough here to set him thinking.

Viv is right, of course: it's an act of love, no doubt about it. There might be some post-modern pagan re-inventalism involved (if such a word exists) but it isn't theatre, and it isn't designed to shock. Like most things in life, the act is simple and the reasons complex. They left a fresh flower with the baby, afterall.

Half the island is talking witchcraft (he heard it on the radio phone-in) and the other half are prosaic to the point of callousness: it fell out of someone's rubbish; it was dug up by a dog. The people he despises most are the Instagrammers, taking shots of themselves with their arms about the Gran'Mère. Janice showed him a photo of a teenager cradling a doll in a pillow case. It's enough to make him despair, but it's the same everywhere: lazy thinking and sensationalism. Narcissism too, of course.

Questions bombard him: what's the difference between purposeful and natural mummification? Why leave it now, at the start of winter? And why in the dark, right up against the foot of the menhir so no one would step on it.

He's only worked on a few child deaths in his time and he loathed each one of them. Children aren't meant to die, it's as simple as that. The usual stages hold, of course — the initial response, the investigation, the case management — but somehow it's more intense, more emotional. The deaths are more covert too and the post-mortem findings are unclear. The accepted figure in the U.K is that two children a week die at the hands of their carers. He hopes Guernsey's figures are lower.

In this case, though, there's no chance of interviewing the carers and deciding whether they're bereaved and in shock, or trying to hide a crime. Everything begins and ends with the forensics. Does Guernsey have a paediatric pathologist? Have they the facilities to do a full skeletal survey and MRI scan? What about a toxicology report? Much depends on the nature of the mummification. The brain and organs are often removed (or so he read somewhere), limiting what can be discovered. Bleeding on the surface of the brain and brain swelling are clear indications of shaken baby syndrome.

There he goes again. Taking control, as if he were still a D.I., planning what to do next. To say he is curious is an understatement — he's fascinated, totally intrigued. Questions, questions. Who? What? Why? When? and How? How did someone leave a baby on a public footpath and no one notice them doing it?



"YOU HEARD ABOUT THE BABY? Terrible, eh? What's the world coming to. Leaving the poor little thing there in the cold."

The old lady taps the Gran'Mère with her stick, its metal point chiming against the granite. "Wouldn't have happened in my day, that's for sure."

"What wouldn't have happened?" Mark rubs the corner of his eye. "The dying or the leaving? It was mummified."

She squints through her glasses. "You trying to be clever, eh?"

Mark shakes his head. "Just making conversation. Do you live nearby?"

The woman lifts her chin. Whiskers are sprouting out of it, like hairs on a cactus plant.

"I live down the road." She waves her stick in a circle. "And don't go thinking I know anything about it, eh. I've told the police my bit."

With that, she toddles off, listing a little as her stick hits the tarmac.

Alone, he rests his hand on the statue. It stands outside consecrated ground, at the entrance gate and though he's never taken much notice of it before (let alone stood beside it), he understands why people are impressed. It is about one and half metres high and its head is angled a little to the left as if it is trying to listen; its eyes are closed and its mouth has a sad downward bent. A tight headdress encases its face, and a pleated cloak falls from its chin. Its breasts, he decides, are decidedly odd, like two half melons stuck onto its front and squashed up against each other.

The question is whether the mummified baby was left at its 'feet' (which would have meant it was on the pavement) or to the side which would have kept it safely on a slab of granite away from passing traffic. The details seem important: at its feet feels religious; to its side feels protective. One is an offering, the other an act of care. He hopes it's the latter.

With a pat on its head — look after yourself, old girl — he

walks through the gates and up the incline to the church beyond.

Inside, low arches divide the building down the middle and rows of boxed pews run one behind the other. The altar is tucked away at the far end and as he looks towards it, the Vicar walks in, talking with a young man. They stop at the choir stalls.

"Excuse me." He strides towards them. "Can I bother you a moment?"

"Be my guest," the Vicar says. "We're discussing organ music and disagreeing over the Three Bs. You don't happen to have an opinion on it, do you?"

Mark has no idea what he's going on about.

"Bach, Beethoven and Brahms," the Vicar explains with a smile. "I say Brahms, he says Bach. That's our disagreement, for what it's worth. How can I help you?"

He shows his warrant card. He shouldn't of course; it's no longer valid but he suspects the Vicar won't notice, and he doesn't.

"You're here about the body? Your lot have been around already. They cordoned off the entrance and did their forensics. All rather quick I must say, but who am I to question the police?"

He nods. "I'm just doing the follow-up work. Asking the questions, that sort of thing."

"I've told them everything I know. I didn't see the body, so there isn't much I can add."

"I'm interested in where it was laid."

The young man jumps in. "It wasn't at her feet, if that's what you mean."

"It was to the side, then?"

"The right side, yes."

"So, it wasn't left an offering?"

The Vicar cocks his head. "You're thinking neo-paganism?"

"It's a possibility, though I doubt it."

"I wouldn't dismiss it so quickly." The young man is keen to speak. "Don't forget that Pierre guy, the one who did all the witchcraft. The island's rife with it."

He shakes his head. "Pierre was a mixed up lad. He was no more a witch than I am. He killed himself because he couldn't find ..." he stops. 'Justice' is dangling at the end of his tongue.

There's a moment's silence.

"You don't leave a mummified child at the foot of a menhir, carved to look like a woman and find no meaning in that."

"I'm not saying there isn't meaning in it," Mark tells the young man. The Vicar smiles. "You don't believe in the supernatural?"

"No."

"You don't believe in God then," the young man points out.

"The jury's out on that one. Having one god is neater than having a whole load of them, I'll admit to that, but I'm not into metaphysics."

"Alexander Pope said that humans go from the parts to the whole, while God goes from the whole to the part. I find that comforting somehow."

He likes the Vicar. So reasonable, so Anglican.

"But if you want to look into the Gran'Mère's connection," the Vicar continues, "there's spring near here, La Fontaine de la Bellows. It was said to have healing properties. The site was holy before Christianity came along. That might be worth considering."

He nods. "Mummification. Healing waters. Yes, there could be a link."

"And don't forget," the young man adds, "it's Halloween in a week's time. I'd look for a connection there too."

"May be but I'd be more impressed if they got the date right."

The Vicar laughs. "I'd go with a sad story of loss and pain, if I were you. If anything comes my way, I'll let you know but if you don't mind, I've got a meeting in a few minutes and I need to head home."

The Vicar hurries down the aisle and disappears out into the graveyard.

"He's quite upset about it," the young man says. "I think he'd rather it was left on the doorstep of the church than out on the pavement by a lump of granite."

Interesting way to talk. A lump of granite is factually accurate but it lacks the aesthetic sense he'd expect from a man who prefers Bach to Brahms.

"It's the idea of it being left outside the circle of grace."

Again, the words. Circle of grace. Sort of Christian, but not quite. Circles are more associated with the occult than theism. The man's confusing him.

"You're saying the person who left it wasn't Christian."

"Exactly. A Christian would have left it inside the church or at the very least, in the porch."

"True." He thinks a moment. "Of course, they might have been in a hurry, or they were worried about being seen." He smiles. "They might just not like graveyards."

The young man takes his coat off the back of a pew and puts it on.

"I don't like graveyards either, but you're hardly going to be afraid of the dead if you've got a mummy in your arms, are you?"

Touché.

"And as I say, it's Halloween soon."

"All Souls for you Christians, isn't it?"

"If they had left the baby in the church, yes. It's Halloween otherwise. Ghoulies and ghosties..."

"... and long-legged beasties. It's just a bit far-fetched though, isn't it? I'd buy the Halloween story if we had found the baby next week. This week, it feels like coincidence."

"Suit yourself."

After the young man leaves, he walks about the church, trying to decide what he thinks about the place. Churches aren't his usual haunt. He doesn't have the cultural currency to feel comfortable in them. It's the mix of cold stone and the buried dead, and he understands why someone would leave a child outside, in the open air. It makes sense to him.

Walking towards the gate, he takes out his phone and dials 222222.

"Guernsey Police, who would like to speak to?"

"The Chief's secretary. It's Mark Roussel calling."

