

STORM WITCH

Chapter 1

Jenna Henderson sprinted down the steps at the rear of the Maeshowe Visitor's Centre. "Do not let anyone go inside," she said into the walky-talky in her hand. "Get the visitors out of the way. I'm heading over now."

Her colleague, Paul's response was lost in the snarl of a motorbike throttling back. A man in black leathers swung the machine at a dangerous angle through the entrance and cut the engine. He removed his helmet and black hair fell around his distractingly gorgeous face.

"You're late, Dr Grant." Jenna kept moving as she spoke. "Not that it matters. The meeting's cancelled."

"Why? What's going on?" His voice was deep with a pronounced Edinburgh accent.

"Break in. I'm going over to the chamber to sort it out." Jenna glanced back. "I'll email you to re-arrange." She thought he'd take that as a dismissal, get back on his bike and go away. Instead he followed her across the car park.

"I'll come with you."

"I don't need you. Paul's there." Paul was a skinny nineteen-year old student who'd be as much use in an emergency as a wet rag but Winston Grant was the last man she'd turn to for help. He was distracting enough with her office desk between them discussing nothing more interesting than ways of interpreting the Neolithic finds from the Ness of Brodgar archaeological dig. She did not need him acting as the strong man in a crisis.

Jenna strode across the road, Winston a couple of paces behind. She shoved through the gate, letting it swing back against his leather clad chest and kept walking. Ahead of her was the grass covered mound of Maeshowe burial chamber; one of the Neolithic wonders of Orkney, part of the World Heritage Site and a major tourist attraction. Away to her left, on an isthmus between the lochs of Harray and Stenness were the three standing stones of Stenness and beyond them, on the brow of the hill, the much larger stone circle of the Ring of Brodgar. Between the two was a mound of bright blue tarpaulin weighed down with car tyres which covered the Ness of Brodgar site before the excavation began again next month.

"Have you called the police?" Winston said.

Jenna barely spared him a glance. Only a ferrylouper would suggest that. “No.”

“Why not?”

“It’ll just be teenagers messing around. It was the solstice last night. Someone will have thought it’d be a laugh to break in. They go to Skara Brae after hours all the time. Some joker’ll have decided it’d be fun to try here instead.” Any other explanation was too unlikely to contemplate. The islands had one of the lowest crime rates in Scotland. “And we’re fully booked for the whole day. June’s one of our busiest times. I’m not cancelling any tours unless I have to.”

She turned into the enclosure around the mound. Paul had done as she asked. She could hear him expounding on Orcadian history from the rear of the site. She hurried round to the entrance. The gate lay on the grass, its hinges snapped in two.

“Probably not just kids then,” Winston muttered.

Jenna shot him a glance. The idea that all she’d find inside would be half a dozen cans of Special Brew and a whole load of cigarette ends abruptly dissipated. Reaching into the entrance to the tunnel, she flipped the light switch. Nothing happened. Peering inside, she could see the first few feet of the sandstone walls before the daylight lost the battle with the dark and the tunnel became as black as a mine shaft.

Taking a deep breath, she bent to enter. Something grabbed her fleece and pulled her back. “I’m going first,” Winston said.

“Like hell you will!” Jenna spun to face him. “I’m duty manager. It’s my job to deal with this.”

Winston stepped in front of the entrance. “Either let me go first or ring the police.”

Jenna held his gaze. “I am not going to argue with you. Let me past.”

Winston folded his arms. “No.”

She glanced at her watch. Paul’s voice telling the story of the Vikings who’d spent a night in the tomb during a snow storm floated over the mound to her. There were twenty visitors who’d paid for a tour on the other side of the tumulus. Twenty more would be arriving in an hour. The thought of complaints, refunds and having to notify Head Office decided her.

She handed him her torch. “If there’s a serial killer hiding in there I’m not taking responsibility for your death.”

Winston flicked the torch on. “Who says I won’t kill him first?”

“Do all archaeologists have the mistaken belief they’re Indiana Jones or is it only you?”

“We do it uni, didn’t you know? Indiana studies. First lesson, how to wear the hat.” Flashing his maddening grin, he ducked into the tunnel.

She watched him shuffle down the passage. Hastily straightened up when she realised all she was doing was staring at his arse. Turning away, she picked up the gate and laid it against the grassy side of the tumulus. Whatever was going on inside she really didn’t need it today.

She’d enough to worry about as Dad was having another of his bad days. Nicky, who worked with him in the tearooms, had rung earlier to tell her that Dad hadn’t come into work. Nicky had found him in his chair by the window staring out over the bay. When she rang, Jenna hadn’t been surprised when the landline went to voicemail and his mobile wasn’t switched on. She’d left messages on both, keeping her voice as light and bright as possible, telling him she’d pop in after work. He’d spent far too many months sat in that chair when depression engulfed him after Mum died but, as he retreated to it less and less often over recent months, she’d started to hope he was finally better. She should have known that was a mistake. Hope was a luxury she’d given up a long time ago.

A dog barked, a short high-pitched yap. Jenna turned to see a West Highland white terrier determinedly towing a small red-headed boy wearing waterproof and wellies. She stepped away from the entrance as the dog approached her and automatically bent to pat him.

“What’s his name?” she asked the boy who looked about five or six.

“Hamish.”

“Nice name.”

A shout echoed along the tunnel.

“What’s that?” The boy looked fascinated rather than scared.

For a second, she hesitated then telling herself it was her job to make history interesting and accessible, she said, “It’s the ghost of a Viking.”

“A *dead* Viking?” There was a pronounced emphasis on the second word.

With some effort, Jenna kept her face straight. “Definitely dead.”

“Can I see?”

She should have seen that coming. “Later. If you’re really quiet. He only comes out when it’s quiet.”

The shout came again. Longer and louder. This time, it sounded something like her name. She patted the dog. “Nice to meet you Hamish and...” She held her hand out to the boy who just stared at it.

A woman with an identical shade of red hair appeared around the side of the burial mound. “Noah, what have I told you about wandering off?” she called.

“That’s my Mum,” Noah said with a slightly embarrassed shake of his head. Then with a determined yank on the dog’s lead, he headed towards her.

Carefully ducking down, Jenna stepped inside the tunnel, moving slowly with one hand pressed against the stone wall. Without a steady light at the end to guide her the ten-metre passage seemed much longer than it did when she brought visitors in for the tour, and she concentrated on putting each foot in front of the other and not banging her head. About half way down the air became colder, the smell of damp earth intensifying.

Two quick flashes went off in the chamber, bringing the walls of the tunnel into sharp definition. “What is it? What’s going on?” Her voice echoed, the high pitch of fear, bouncing back to her.

“What kept you?” Winston’s hand dropped on the crown of her head, guiding her out into the chamber. As she stood she found herself far too close to him. He slipped his mobile into the back pocket of his jeans as his eyes met hers. In the dim light from the torch, his mocha coloured skin looked darker. His teeth showed starkly against it as he grinned.

Hastily she stepped away. “Inquisitive small boy with a dog. I told him you were the ghost of a Viking.”

His laugh echoed around the space. “And he bought that?”

“He was five. Maybe six. Of course, he bought it.” As her eyes adjusted, she looked around the tomb. It was rectangular, less than five metres across, formed from huge slabs of sandstone. She came here at least twice every working day, running tours over lunchtime so her colleagues could take a break. Usually it was full of tourists listening intently as she told them it was older than the Egyptian pyramids and gasping when she put the lights out so that they could see the mock-up of the alignment of the rising sun on the winter solstice.

For a moment, as the torch light moved across the walls, she thought there was nothing amiss. Then the beam focused on the floor. Marked on it in thick white paint was a pentagram. In its centre was a smashed green bowl and around it a puddle of what looked suspiciously like blood. A couple of fat blue candles stood next to it with another two laying on their sides. Leaves, some tied in bundles, other loose were strewn across the floor. Sheets of paper, starkly white against the floor, lay in the corners and against the walls. At each point of the pentagram was a small hole in the earth floor.

“Bloody hell!” Jenna whispered. This couldn’t be happening. It was the last thing she’d expected, the very last thing she could deal with.

She took two small steps until she stood on the edge of the pentagram. Who would risk performing magic here? It had to be someone with incredible power. Or did the fact that all of this had been abandoned mean they’d been utterly unprepared for the massive energy Maeshowe could release on the solstice?

“Do you know that’s the first time I’ve heard you swear?” Winston’s voice came from just outside the circle of torchlight.

“You’ve only known me four weeks.” Squatting, she brushed her fingers across one of the holes in the floor. What was it for? There must be a significance when there was one at each point of the pentagram.

“Been counting?”

She didn’t need to see his face to know there’d be a smug grin, a raised eyebrow. To hide her slip, she poured as much disdain as possible into her reply. “Hardly.”

She didn’t want him guessing she remembered exactly the moment he walked into the office and she’d been stunned into monosyllables by his male model good looks. Of course,

that was before he opened his mouth and she discovered what a smug, irritating, arrogant git he was.

“What do you want to do about this?”

Picking up the nearest candle, Jenna frowned. Blue for healing and ideals. What *had* they been trying to do?

“Jenna?”

“Sorry.” Scooping up the candles, she stood. “We need to get rid of it.”

“What about the police? Don’t you want to report the break-in?”

Jenna shook her head. The police couldn’t help with this. “No. Just get it cleared up.”

“Alright.” Winston picked up one of the other candles.

She stepped into the pentagram. There was a slight tingle in the air, a remnant of the power which had been generated by the ritual. She shivered, clasping her arms across her chest. She’d not practised in so long she’d thought it was all gone. Even before Mum died she’d pushed it away. Yet her body remembered, just as her mind knew what blue candles were for.

Sucking in a deep breath, she bent to gather the three shattered pieces of the bowl together, handling them carefully to avoid getting blood on her clothes. Snatching up a sheet of paper with her free hand she moved to one of the side chambers, where Winston had left the candles. As he came up beside her holding the bunches of herbs, the torchlight fell on the white page.

Jenna eyes widened as the world stopped. “Give me the torch.”

“What are you going to hold it with? Your teeth?”

She put the fragments of bowl down and snatched the torch from his hand. Smoothing the paper out, she shone the light on it. Her hand rose to cover her mouth. She put a hand out to steady herself.

“What’s wrong?”

The full weight of six years of loss and grief swirled through her veins. She swallowed hard, biting down on her lip to press it back, to put the lid on before the tears flowed.

“Jenna? Are you alright?”

“I’m...” The word got stuck in her throat. She made herself take a long, slow breath, tried again. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.” As Winston’s gaze dropped from her face to the piece of paper, she snatched it up, pressing it against her chest.

“Well, I am.” Her legs felt unsteady. Slowly, she let go of the wall, stepped away from it.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.” Carefully folding the page, she put it in the inner zip pocket of her fleece.

“It’s obviously not nothing. It’s very much something or you wouldn’t have reacted like that.”

“Nothing that need bother you.” If only he’d damned well go away and just give her a moment to think. To figure out why a page from the book on magic Mum had been writing, which had disappeared on the day she died, had ended up here.

“Okay.” Winston gave her an assessing glance before he turned towards the other corner.

“No!” The word popped out of her mouth before she could stop it. But she was too late. He’d already picked up one of the pages. In two steps she was beside him, snatching the paper from his hands.

“What—?”

Her eyes darted across the page. She blinked. It was from some website about magic. Turning, she saw Winston held two other pages.

“Alright, what is it about these that you don’t want me to see?” There was a moment of silence before he said, “They’re from some magic site. *The Crystal Goddess*. Sounds a bit dodgy to me.”

Pivoting on her heel, Jenna hurried around the chamber grabbing the pages, pressing them against her chest. Winston moved the other way and when they met by the entrance tunnel he held three sheets.

“I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours.”

“It’s not some playground game. This is…” She couldn’t tell him what it was. Even with Mum gone and The Order destroyed the secret was too engrained. “Just give me the damned pages.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want to know what you’re hiding first.”

“I’m not hiding anything.”

“Oh, come on, Jenna! I’m not an idiot. I saw how you reacted when you picked up the first page. What was it?”

“I’ve told you. Nothing that need bother you. Now give me the pages?”

He folded his arms. “No.” There was a ghost of a grin around his lips. This was just a bit of fun to him.

“Oh, this is impossible!” Jenna hands moved to her hips. “I’m duty manager. What I say here goes. Now hand them over.”

“No. The deal stands. You show me yours and I’ll show you mine.”

Jenna looked at the pages she held. All from the same magic website; instructions on how to call the elements, how to cast spells, how to raise energy. It was hardly a secret that someone had been practising magic here last night. Letting him see these would reveal only that the person who’d attempted it was dangerously inexperienced and the implications of that wouldn’t mean anything to him.

“Fine.” She held her five sheets of paper out to him.

“Done.” Three pages were offered to her. Chin raised, she met his glance.

Turning away from him, she flipped through the pages. The middle one was covered in Mum’s messy, erratic handwriting setting out the basic principles of casting a circle, one of

the first things any spellworker learns. Her finger circled the holes in the margin. It was ripped as it'd been torn from the folder that'd held it. She could visualise the folder as clearly as if she'd seen it yesterday. Black with a picture of a rearing unicorn with a flowing silver mane on the front. More suited, most people would think, to a teenage girl than a woman in her fifties. She'd given it Mum when she started writing the book, intending it as a joke about magic and the secret they'd shared.

“Who’s writing is it, Jenna?”

Oh God, he still asking questions. Could he not see how hard this was for her? “No one you know’s.”

“But you recognise it?”

“Yes.” Sucking in a deep breath, she folded it carefully, unzipped her pocket and slid it inside.

“Then who are you protecting?”

She spun to face him. “Protecting? I’m not protecting anyone.”

“Then why will you not tell me who wrote it.”

“Because it’s none of your damned business.”

“It is if it’s got something to do with what happened here last night.”

Her eyes narrowed. Why was he asking all these questions? He’d only been here a few weeks and people suddenly started doing dangerous magic. She tried to keep her voice steady, to play him at his own game. “Why are you so very interested, Dr Grant?”

A tiny shrug moved the shoulders of his leather jacket. “I want to know what’s going on.”

“Why?”

His gaze shifted from hers. “Because it’s dangerous.”

She stepped closer. There was definitely something he didn’t want her to know. “How do you figure that out?”

His gaze returned to hers as if he heard the challenge in her voice and recognised it. “I read.”

“Read what?”

He folded his arms. “*The Golden Bough*.”

The Golden Bough was a deadly dry tome on comparative religion and mythology. It was the kind of thing an archaeologist might find interesting. There was a copy of it on Mum’s bookshelf and if she’d ever opened it she’d know if it covered things like this or if he’d just told her a really clever lie. His face gave absolutely nothing away.

Deciding to deal with one problem at a time, she said, “Good for you. Now can we get this place cleared up? I’ve got visitors waiting.” Moving across the chamber, she stepped around the pentagram.

“So, that’s how I figured it out. But the question is, Jenna, how did you?”

Damn! He was far too quick. How could she have missed that trap, not realised that by challenging him she’d revealed too much about herself? She folded her arms. “I watched *Buff*.”

“You’re a lousy liar, you know. There was...”

“I’m not.” Her chin came up. “I did watch *Buff*.”

“So did I.”

“Oh.” She should have thought of something else. Something more obscure that he’d never heard of. Only she could never think fast enough when she was put on the spot.

“Come on. There’s definitely something you’re not telling me and...”

She pulled herself up to her full height. As that was only five foot five she still had to look up at him. “There are many things I’m not telling you, Dr Grant. Where do you propose we start?”

“Alright, if you want to be like that.” Folding his arms, he tilted his head to one side. “Do you know who was here last night?”

“No.”

“But you know who wrote those pages?”

“Yes.”

“So you know someone who writes about magic?”

She'd backed herself into a corner with that one. Feeling unaccountably warm, she unzipped her fleece. “Did.”

“What?”

It was a risk. A big one. A fluttery sensation cascaded through her stomach as she said, “Did know. They're dead.”

“Oh.” As much surprise as she'd hoped flitted across his face. Would it be enough to make him behave like a half decent human being and stop asking questions? “I'm sorry.”

There was a long moment of silence. She bent to pick up the herbs strewn across the floor, rubbed her hand over the white outline of the pentagram. How the hell was she going to get that off before the visitors for the eleven o'clock tour arrived? “Do you think this is paint? Would turps shift it? I could run back to the visitor's centre, see if we've got any.”

Winston squatted next to her. His voice, when he spoke again, was soft. “I see now why it was a shock for you, finding the pages like that, why you didn't want me to see them.”

Swallowing hard, she glanced at him. His dark eyes were intent on her face. “Yes.”

“You must have been close.”

“We were.”

“Was it a friend? Someone you were at school with?”

“No.”

He pushed his hair away from his face. “I'm sorry. I've been an insensitive bastard.”

Shoving the herbs she held at him, she stood. “If you're hoping I'm going to disagree, you've got a long wait coming.”

“I can get a bit focused sometimes.” Winston rose to standing. “Forget about people's feelings.”

“You don't say!”

“Aye, well, I'm sorry. I was out of order.”

He was standing too close to her again, those dark eyes watching her far too intently. “You were but I’ve got bigger problems.” She took a step back, trying to put some distance between them again. “I’ve got to find a way to shift this damned thing. I can’t bring visitors in here with a bloody pentagram on the floor.”

Winston shone the torch on the white lines. “It looks like gloss paint to me. You’re going to need a lot of turps to get it off.”

“I’m not sure we’ve got a lot.” Jenna sighed. “Maybe I could find something to cover it up for the rest of the day.”

“That might work. A bag of sawdust maybe?” He walked towards the side chamber, dropped the bundle of herbs with the candles and pieces of bowl. “How long have you worked here?”

“Nearly two years.”

“You’re from Orkney?” Stripping off his jacket, he started to pile the items from the circle into it.

“Yes.”

“Born here?”

She wasn’t sure why he was asking but the sound of his voice was strangely reassuring, a tether in the darkness, as they moved back and forth across the chamber picking up the last few things. “Yes.”

“A true Orcadian then? There’s not many of them around as far as I can tell. The place is over run with English. I don’t know how you stand it.”

“Ferryloupers. They’re not all bad. But I’m not really an Orcadian. You need seven generations in the kirkyard for that.”

“Your family were ferryloupers too then?”

She smiled at the sound of the Orcadian word in his crisp Edinburgh accent. “My Granddad taught at Kirkwall Grammar. Mum was just a peedie girl when they moved here. Dad came because of Mum. He’s originally from Galashiels.”

“Your parents are still here?”

“Just Dad.”

“Not your Mum?”

“No, she’s dead.” Blood heated her face. She spun to face him. “You bastard!”

“I didn’t know it was your Mum.” His hands rose, palms up. “Christ, I’m not that heartless.”

“Really? You could have fooled me.” There was a wobble in her voice. She clamped her hand over her mouth as if that would steady it.

“Look, I’m sorry. I just wanted to know what you weren’t telling me.”

“You want to know that?” She took two quick steps until she was standing in front of him. “She was murdered. Is that what you wanted to know? And they’ve never found her killer. She’s an unsolved case, a note on a police file somewhere. That’s why I don’t talk about it.”

“Murdered?”

“Yes.” Her voice mutated into something horribly like a shriek as it echoed off the stone walls and high ceiling. Dear God, had she produced that sound? She never got angry. And now the bloody man had driven her to this. Screaming in the chamber of Maeshowe, her entire body shaking. She couldn’t let him see that. Heading for the tunnel she strode out of the circle of light and bent to duck down into the entrance. Then torchlight swept across her face.

“Christ, you’re Nina Stewart’s daughter!”