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Time's Legacy

Written by Barbara Erskine

Published by HarperCollins

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BARBARA ERSKINE

Time's Legacy



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2010
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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 730227 7

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Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

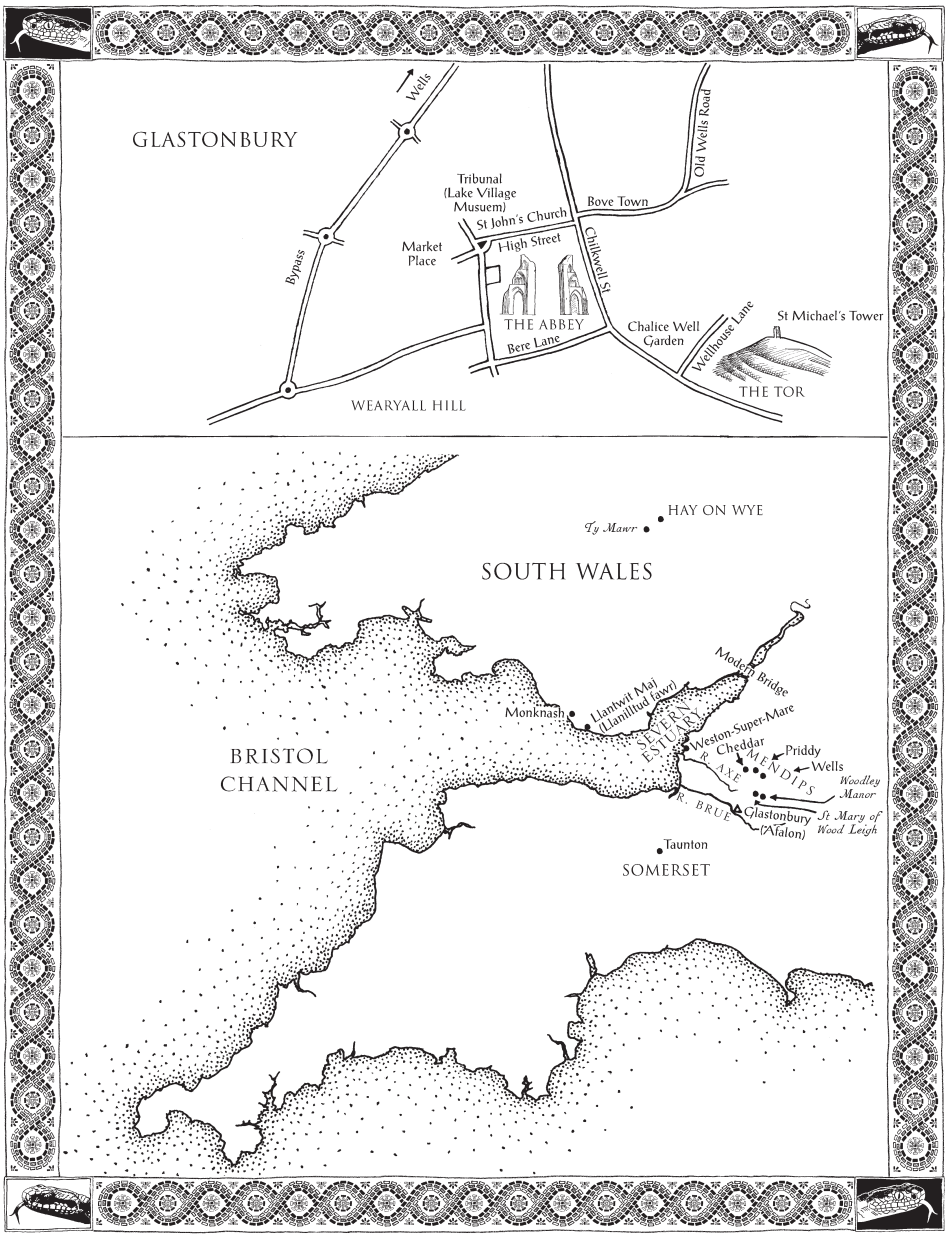
'Jerusalem', William Blake

As Sure as Our Lord came to Priddy

Local Saying

Be ye therefore wise as serpents

Matthew 10.16


GLASTONBURY
Wells
Bypass
Tribunal
(Lake Village
Musuem)
St John's Church
Market
Place
High Street
Chilkwell St
Bove Town
Old Wells Road
THE ABBEY
Bere Lane
Chalice Well
Garden
Wellhouse Lane
St Michael's Tower
THE TOR
WEARYALL HILL
HAY ON WYE
Ty Mawr
SOUTH WALES
Monknash
Llantwit Maj
(Llanilltud fawr)
Severn Estuary
Weston-Super-Mare
Cheddar
Priddy
Wells
Woodley
Manor
R. Axe
Mendips
R. Brue
Glastonbury
(Avalon)
St Mary of
Wood Leigh
Taunton
SOMERSET
BRISTOL
CHANNEL

Prologue

An icy wind whipped in across the shallow water bringing with it the first breath of autumn. Pulling her cloak around her, the woman shivered as she gazed out across the troubled cats' paws which raced amongst the reeds around the scattering of small islands. In the sunlight the distant Tor stood out, a rich green cone of a hill, against the sky. From here you couldn't see the terraces, the ancient stones, but you could still feel the power; the sanctity. Her son was out there somewhere and he was in danger. She glanced up. A chevron of swans circled in, the beat and hiss of their wings deafening as they swept in low over her head. They were a sign. But of what? She already knew there was danger. Again she shivered. The message had arrived too late to stop him. Her husband had not returned from Axiom. Her daughter lay tossing and turning with fever in the house behind her. She didn't know what to do. She was alone. She had to act and act quickly.

The birds landed into the wind on a patch of clear water and folded their wings, almost at once breaking formation and calmly starting to feed, their beaks gently sifting through the weed. They had thought they were safe. Here at the ends of the earth they had thought they could hide, but it was too late. He was here. Somewhere amongst the lakes and fens and rivers her husband's twin brother was already heading towards their home, bent on the destruction of everything and everyone she loved.



The wind was blowing, dragging his hair back from his face, shredding the cloud, fretting it into wisps like sea-spume, playing with the tree branches, tossing and shaking the leaves below him on the hillside. Turning slowly he could see the faint shadows race across the surface of the water far below, here shading it to leaden grey, here torn asunder to allow the sunlight through, striking glittering reflections into gold and silver shards.

1



'If I stay I will probably kill him next time he tries to touch me!' The Reverend Abi Rutherford put down her cup on the small side table.

'Ah.' David Paxman, Suffragan Bishop of Cambridge, leaned forwards and set his own cup down beside hers, the action somehow conveying a sympathy and a collusion which contradicted the anxious frown which had appeared between his eyes.

When she arrived she had seen at once and with relief that they were not going to sit one on either side of his desk; that would have smacked too much of headmaster and naughty pupil. Instead the bishop had waved her to a small sofa near the French windows which opened onto the terrace. She could smell the roses on the wall around the door of the beautiful stone-built Regency house which served as palace to this relatively new bishopric, created to help cater for the ever-expanding population of Eastern England. He had poured their coffee himself before sitting down across from her, from which position he could watch her, she acknowledged wryly, without seeming to be too intrusive. Fair enough. After all, it wasn't as though he had summoned her. This meeting was at her request and he needed to know what it was about.

'It's all gone terribly wrong. I have to resign.' Her gaze, when she looked up at him, was first pleading, then defiant.

For a moment she thought he hadn't heard. He picked up his teaspoon and thoughtfully he began to stir his coffee. It was several seconds before he responded. 'Are you going to tell me the whole story?'

'It's complicated.'

'All life is complicated, Abi. That is its challenge.' He glanced up at last and smiled as he met her gaze. His eyes, she noticed, were inestimably weary. They were hazel, flecked with green and

very kind and they missed nothing. 'I am sure that you have thought this through with great care, and wouldn't have come to see me without a good deal of heartache, Abi, but I think you are going to have to start at the beginning.'

She sighed. Of course she was. She hadn't expected anything else.

She was an attractive woman; she could hardly deny it, though her looks did not actually interest her much. She was thirty-two years old, tall and willowy, with long, naturally wavy dark hair and clear grey eyes. Confident and with, so she had been told, a great deal of charm, she had arrived in the parish of St Hugh's Juxta Mure to take up the position of curate in a large bustling suburb of north Cambridge, full of quiet anticipation. But, in this day and age, when Anglican priests were in such short supply, she had been not a little disappointed when she found that she was to be given a second curacy instead of her own parish. She had served two years of what amounted to apprenticeship in a rural parish near Huntingdon when she was abruptly called in and told that she was being moved elsewhere. Why? Of course, it was obvious it would be easier to move her as an unmarried woman without the complications of a family already settled into an area, but even so, she was a bit upset. She was after all a mature woman with some experience of the world under her belt – she had spent time both as a history lecturer and a journalist before her ordination – but she curbed her impatience, after she was told that her new posting was in a large, complex community that required the services of at least two full-time priests, that the previous curate had been taken ill and the need for a replacement was urgent. She was mollified to find that there were in fact two churches in the parish. One, St John's, was a large Victorian building in an urban area of run-down streets, seventies developments and building sites which existed cheek by jowl with neat residential pockets and sprawling areas of student flats and bedsits. The other, St Hugh's, from which the whole parish took its name, was a small medieval church on the very edge of the countryside, an area, if the plans were to be believed, soon to be covered in its turn with new developments. For now, though, it retained its quiet rural presence. Abi loved this little church from the first

time she visited it and secretly, longingly, almost guiltily, thought of it as, at least potentially, her own.

Kieran Scott, the resident rector and in a sense her new boss, was based at the larger church of St John's. At their first meeting she had liked him immediately. He was a stocky, good-looking man in his early forties, hugely charming, his reddish hair cut to flop attractively across his forehead, his eyes bright and inquisitive, his taste in clothes conservative without being dowdy. He was, she guessed almost at once, a superb administrator, clearly destined for promotion to the upper hierarchy of the church and probably wildly attractive to his female parishioners. He was even attractive, she had to admit, to his new curate, who happened at the moment to be without a man.

On her first day she was greeted at the front door of the Rectory, a three-storey, detached Victorian house next to St John's, by a youngish woman with short fair hair, her slimness accentuated by her close-fitting jeans and a pink floral blouse. 'Hi, Abi. I'm Sandra. Sandra Lang. Kier asked me to be here when you arrived and see you in.' She smiled at Abi with genuine warmth as she helped her up the front steps with her suitcases.

Abandoning the cases in the front hall after tucking away her car, as instructed, in a narrow cul-de-sac round the corner, Abi followed Sandra inside and stared round. The hall was large, lit by an oval skylight high above the well of a wide ornate staircase. A faded floral rug lay in the centre of the floor.

'My goodness, Kieran didn't tell us his new curate was such a stunner!' Sandra said over her shoulder as she closed the front door behind Abi and led her into the spotlessly clean kitchen. She gave her no time to respond to her artless compliment. 'Your flat as you know, is upstairs, but Kieran said to be sure and give you a cup of tea before we go up. He is so sorry not to be here to welcome you himself.'

It wasn't obviously a bachelor's kitchen. On the other hand, how did one know what a bachelor's kitchen would look like? Abi pondered on how to ask Sandra how she fitted into the parish and/or Kieran's life as she pulled up a stool and hauled herself onto it, leaning on her elbows as her hostess produced a plate, arranged biscuits and poured the tea. The woman was obviously

very at home in this kitchen and she had, it seemed, been well primed as to what questions to ask. 'We've been so eager to meet you and find out all about you.' Who was 'we', Abi wondered. 'This is your second curacy, I gather?'

Abi nodded. Before she had a chance to elaborate Sandra had rushed on. 'It must be very scary, and a bit odd too, switching parishes like this, mid-term as it were. It's a huge responsibility, isn't it, looking after other people's lives. Why aren't you wearing a dog collar?'

The non sequitur almost caught Abi out. She was in fact dressed very similarly to Sandra, wearing jeans and in her own case an open-necked shirt, navy blue but with a pattern of discreet little grey and white flowers to alleviate the formality. She was rather relieved that the small gold cross she wore around her neck was probably on full view. Her hair, which she had to admit had a tendency to a life of its own, was today firmly tied back with a dark blue scarf. She grinned and shrugged. 'I don't very often. Especially not when I'm off duty and moving house – I prefer mufti. You don't mind, do you?' She met Sandra's gaze and held it firmly.

'Oh God, no. Of course not!' Sandra had the grace to look a little self-conscious. 'And nor will Kieran. He is all for informality.' She paused and cleared her throat. 'How well do you know Kieran?'

Abi grimaced. 'Not at all, really.' Her selection interview had been odd. She had felt as if she were being parachuted in from the quiet countryside to the front line. 'We've met a few times, obviously,' she went on cautiously, 'and I've met most of the PCC – or I thought I had. You weren't there, were you?' She glanced up at the other woman. She had a good memory for faces and she thought she would have remembered this one. The wistful pallor, the large intense eyes, the slight air of something like anxiety. But anxiety about what? Was Sandra just shy or was there something else there? Resentment of another woman on her patch perhaps. It was something she must be ready to recognise and deal with.

As if reading her thoughts, Sandra smiled. 'You must be wondering about me. I've been acting as a sort of parish secretary, coming in a couple of days a week to try and help Kieran keep his head above water. That was why they thought he needed another curate at once. This is a large parish.' She was still smiling. 'Good place for curates to launch their careers.'

Abi nodded. The bishop had warned her she would find it tough. He had warned her it was a busy parish, and had there been a hint of something else? If there had, it hadn't been spelled out for her. She had pushed the thought aside. 'Kieran's not married, is he,' she went on after a minute. 'I suspect wives usually end up doing a lot of the stuff that curates do. Not the getting trained part, obviously, but helping with all the other duties. The vicars' wives I know work terribly hard.'

Sandra nodded. 'They call clergy wives unpaid curates, don't they.' She gave a curiously cynical laugh. 'Well, if Kieran marries his current squeeze I think he will be unlucky in that department.'

Abi waited for a further comment. It did not come. Instead Sandra pushed back her cup and stood up. 'Let me help you haul your cases up to the flat. It's a bit of a climb, I'm afraid. Then I will have to leave you to settle in. I have somewhere to be and Kieran will be back soon.'

Running down the stairs a little later, Sandra let herself out of the Rectory, fished in her pocket for her car keys as she paused on the front steps and, almost without realising she had done it, turned to look up at the top window. There was no sign of Abi. She shook her head sadly. Poor woman. She was going to find it very tough here. Not only was there a hard core of the anti-women-priest brigade in the parish, but she was going to have to work closely with Kieran. She took in a deep breath and exhaled sharply. Well, presumably she had been forewarned why the last curate had left so suddenly. The poor man hadn't been able to cope at all with Kieran's – she hesitated, trying to think of the right word – demons, that was it. Abi certainly looked competent, if a little bit – Sandra paused as she ran down the steps and bent to insert her key into the door of the spotlessly clean black Punto parked at the kerb. Wild. That seemed to cover it. She climbed into the car and sat for a moment, staring ahead of her through the windscreen before she inserted the key into the ignition. Kieran could have cleared his diary to be here this afternoon. Instead he had chosen to go to the far side of the parish and attend a meeting which he would normally have gone to great lengths to avoid. She frowned thoughtfully. Why had he asked her to come in to welcome Abi

instead of being here to do it himself? Was it to reassure his new curate in some way that everything at the Rectory was as it should be?

Turning on the engine she pulled away from the kerb, shot up the street and turned into the main road. In the course of the next day or so she would have to come back and go through all the paperwork with Abi. Now there was someone else to help with organising the parish she was going to hand it over with as much speed as possible and good riddance. She glanced in the mirror and flicked her indicator. Why had Kieran chosen someone like that to work with him? As far as she knew there had been three other candidates for the curacy. At least two, according to Bill Friar, one of the church wardens, had been far more suitable than this woman. For a start they had all been men. She pulled the car into a side street and slowly drove towards the far end, searching for a parking space. Kier knew there was going to be a lot of resistance to a female priest in the parish. He should have told the bishop. Surely he hadn't chosen her because she looked as though she would make a good secretary?

Abi was nothing like she had expected. If she had been an older, less good-looking woman, someone with a good dollop of experience under her belt, she might have been acceptable in the parish, but she was young, modern and, Sandra sucked in her cheeks, she gave the impression that she was pretty uninhibited. She was not going to be easily intimidated. She saw a space, slammed on her brakes, put up a finger to the driver behind her who had hooted wildly having spotted the same place, and shot in backwards, parking neatly with only inches to spare either end of the car. 'There wouldn't have been room for you anyway,' she muttered under her breath as the other driver yelled something rude at her, luckily muffled by his closed window as he accelerated up the street. She hoped he wouldn't come back for revenge if he didn't find somewhere else to park.

Climbing out, she locked the car and headed across the road towards her house. She would give a very great deal to know what Kier's girlfriend, Sue, would say about it when she first clapped eyes on the new curate. Especially if Abi was wearing those jeans when they first met.

* * *

Once upstairs, Sandra gone and her own front door safely closed behind her, Abi stood still, looking round with a sense of enormous pleasure. Her domain consisted of a small bedroom, slightly masculine in its furnishings, but neat and still smelling faintly of carpet shampoo, a fairly modern bathroom, a kitchenette and an attractive little sitting room with a view across and between the roofs towards the distant spires of the centre of Cambridge itself. There was a comfortable two-seater sofa, Ikea, she suspected, a small easy chair and a desk which she immediately dragged up to the window so she could stare out at the rooftops of the city as she sat in front of her laptop. It probably wasn't a good idea to have such built-in distraction in her work space but the thought of sitting there gave her a huge amount of pleasure. There was only one problem that she could immediately identify: the flat felt melancholy. She paused and looked round. Yes, it was overwhelmingly sad. A definite presence seemed to hang about the rooms. She sighed. Being sensitive to atmosphere was not always a blessing, but at least she knew what to do about it.

She focused on it for a moment and shook her head. Not a ghost. A residue. Someone had spent a lot of time here filling the room with unhappy thoughts. She could sense misery, loneliness and resignation and maybe, fear. She sent up a quick prayer of comfort for her predecessor, if it was indeed him, resolving to hold a healing ceremony that very evening to cleanse and bless the place, then over the coming weeks and months, to fill the flat with flowers and music and, hopefully, laughter.

Kieran arrived about an hour later full of apologies for not being there to meet her. He was formally dressed, including the dog collar, and looked exhausted as, having shaken hands and welcomed her again, he followed her into the sitting room and threw himself down on the sofa. 'This is the trouble with a twenty-four hour job,' he said wearily. He smiled. 'So, Sandra looked after you?'

Abi nodded.

'And you are ready to start work tomorrow?'

Abi sat down opposite him. 'I'm looking forward to meeting everyone.'

'And they are all looking forward to meeting you.' The easy warmth which she had remembered from their first meeting was immediately reassuring. 'If you shadow me for a few days, just to

find out who is who and what is what, then we can decide what part of the load you can take over.' He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and held her gaze for a moment. 'I'm going to throw you in at the deep end, Abi.'

Walking into his study on the ground floor of the Rectory half an hour later, Kier sighed, throwing himself down at his desk. He glanced at the answerphone, saw the number six flashing reproachfully and reluctantly he reached forward to press the play button.

'Kier? Where are you?' The woman's voice, exaggeratedly patient, was punctuated with a theatrical sigh. 'Why don't you answer my calls?'

Sue.

She knew why. He had been out all day, that was why.

Two calls from parishioners followed, both distressed, both needy, then a second from Sue. The last two were silent.

He put his head in his hands, running his fingers through his hair. For a moment he was tempted to ignore her. Let it go for tonight. She knew what he did, she knew the pressures, the hours, the battles he was fighting with work, the two parishes, the mess left behind by Luke. But looking on the bright side, that was about to change. His thoughts strayed to his new curate, upstairs in her flat, the smile of welcome she had given him, the suitcases and boxes and bags strewn around the room, as yet unpacked. The glass of wine she had offered him, the way she had thrown herself down on the chair, crossing her legs in the slim-fitting jeans, and casually pulled off the scarf, shaking the long wild hair free on her shoulders.

He frowned. She was new to the job and obviously still a bit of a free spirit. Time and hard work would cure both character traits and put her on track to being a useful member of the team. He thought back to the interviews before they offered her the position. Enquiries about partners, children, commitments. She was an only child; parents alive and active, so not needing extra help. No partner, no children. One fairly long-term relationship, with a man – he remembered her mischievous smile as she recognised their delicate probing as to her sexuality – no girlfriends in the wings, then, though one glance at her could have told anyone who was interested she was no closet lesbian. It appeared that she

had had just the one long and loving relationship which had been brought with mutual agreement to an end when the guy had been offered a job in Australia which he found he couldn't, hadn't wanted to, refuse. If she had gone with him it would have put an end to her plans and dreams. They had talked endlessly apparently, and discovered at last that the relationship wasn't strong enough or deep enough to hold them together. They parted sadly but amicably. Since then, no-one. He pondered the point again and decided that this was probably true, for, as far as he could gather, no-one had accompanied her this afternoon to help her move in. Please God she was as uncomplicated and competent as she seemed.

Slowly his hand strayed to the phone. Parishioners first. Then Sue.