

The Original's Return by David Watkins

Part One: Devon

Monday

Chapter 1

1

What the hell is that noise?

Jack stopped running and took out one headphone. He looked around, his head torch picking out trees and shrubs around him. The night was beginning to give way to a murky dawn, but it was taking its time. The noise came again: a high pitched whining.

Where's the dog?

Jack looked around. Rain landed on his face, cold and hard. The wind made him shiver; this really wasn't the best start to a day he'd ever had. He bent his leg behind him, stretching his muscles as he stood looking for Ginny. In his left ear, Bruce Springsteen sang about better times with a girl called Mary on the banks of a river. No other sound reached him.

The whining resumed suddenly, followed by lots of barking. Jack swivelled, until he was facing some bushes. Slowly, he walked forward pushing the branches out of the way. He started to call for the dog, but something made him stop: they had been running together in the woods for nearly three years now – surely nothing would spook her?

Light from the head torch appeared weaker now, a tiny white circle in the gloom. The branches swished back into place, covering his tracks. He was in a large clearing, trees dotted around the circumference like soldiers on parade. Jack snorted; he ran alongside this clearing every day and had not paid it any attention. If he had run on another fifty yards, he wouldn't have had to come through the bushes.

There she was, lying on her belly on the other side of the clearing, looking straight at him. She whined again when she saw him, a noise he'd not heard her make before. Even at this distance, he could see the fur raised on the back of her head. He stepped forward and she immediately stood and started barking hysterically at him.

He stopped. She growled.

"Ginny?"

She wagged her tail once then resumed growling.

"Okay, girl, it's alright." The rain came harder then, cold needle pricks on his face. Bruce had moved on to singing about a crush, a song he had always hated.

"Come on, girl."

She growled at him again.

"Gins, come on." He reached into his pocket for her lead, but it wasn't there. *Left it in the car.* "Ginny, come here girl." Jack whistled, two notes, the second longer and lower pitched than the first. Ginny didn't move. Jack looked at his watch.

6:45 a.m.

For God's sake. He had to leave for work in half an hour.

Jack started to run across the clearing. Ginny immediately started barking again, far more aggressively than he had ever heard her before. He ran a little faster, hoping to either force her to move, or to catch her before she did. He wasn't too bothered either way.

He was halfway across the clearing when he saw the hole. *Rabbits?* The thought was half formed in his head when the ground started to sag under his feet. He didn't even have time to swear before the earth gave way and he was falling into darkness.

2

Jack opened his eyes and blinked as rain water hit him. He turned his head slightly and tried to think. He could move his head so that had to be a good sign. High above he could see the hole he had fallen through and he could faintly hear Ginny doing the barking and whining combination. He could also hear the faint strains of music from his mp3 player.

He moved his left hand towards his pocket, surprised at the fact that the movement was not only possible but didn't hurt at all. He slipped his phone out and reached up to dial. The phone case was cracked all down one side, the screen smashed beyond repair and the keypad clung on by just one wire.

What now?

His phone had been an extravagant birthday present to himself just a month ago. It was the latest smartphone with all sorts of bells and whistles but now it was incapable of doing the thing he *really* needed it to do. His considerably cheaper mp3 player – he preferred the sound from that over the sound from the phone - still worked though, which was no comfort whatsoever.

He was contemplating the unfairness of all this when his mind registered the huge spear sticking through the middle of his chest.

3

There was no pain. As he stared at the thing sticking out of his chest, he kept thinking *it doesn't hurt*. He looked more closely at the spear, taking in details: red top with a streak running down it; a small lump of tissue balancing precariously on the tip; lumps of dirt scattered all over it in a way that would make Jackson Pollock proud, and a dull white reflecting the torchlight. He breathed a sigh of relief that the torch still worked – it would be very, very dark in here without it.

Not a spear then.

A bone.

Jack shuddered and retched to the side. *Impaled by a bone, but no pain*. He guessed that the bone had a diameter of around two inches and arched to a height of about a foot above him. If it was arched then it had to be a rib.

He felt his chest where the bone was sticking out and lifted his hands. The torch light showed him what he was beginning to suspect: no blood. He reached underneath him, arching his back and felt the base of the bone. It definitely was sticking through him. *Jesus*.

Whining from above forced him to concentrate. Ginny was up there alone. How much time had gone by? Was he being missed yet? Katie worried if he was five minutes late home from work so she'd be terrified by now. He lifted an earphone and heard Bruce still going strong. *Not that long then*.

He raised his head a little and tried to look around. As he turned his head, faint torchlight bounced off the walls. He could make out mud, rock and what looked like a tunnel running off approximately twenty feet to his left.

He pushed his hand underneath him and lifted tentatively. His torso raised easily and the bone came with him. Jack lay back down, took a deep breath and sat up. His legs fell away from him and he realised he was sitting on a ledge of some kind. The floor lay four, maybe five feet below him. The bone was still sticking through him and without thinking, he pulled it forward. It came through him with a wet squelch.

No pain.

He looked at it for a second and threw it to one side. Bile rose in his throat and he threw up over the cave floor. Still perched on the ledge he looked down at the hole in his chest. His clothes were ripped in an almost perfect circle and they were stained with blood, but his skin shone pale in the torchlight.

Skin.

No cut in his chest, no hole, no wound.

No pain.

Jack was sick again: shock was beginning to make it through his weird calm. He looked up at the hole in the cave roof. Ginny was still there, still barking, still whining. *What could she smell? What the hell was this place?*

Jack jumped off the ledge and landed lightly on his feet beside a slab of stone roughly eight foot long by five wide. It was in the exact centre of the cave. On the top were more bones, most crushed where Jack had fallen on them. If he had run a little further before the floor gave way, he would have missed it completely.

And I would be dead.

Jack knew that with utter certainty: something weird was going on in this cave, but it was good weird because he was still alive. *Alive doesn't quite cover it though – I'm not hurt.*

At all.

He shuddered, a cold chill running down his back. He looked at the bones again, but could tell nothing from them. What sort of creature had it once been? He had no idea, beyond that it had been enormous. There didn't appear to be a skull, unless he had crushed it when he landed. The other ribs had fallen away from the spine when he landed, saving him from multiple piercings. He could feel bile rising again and swallowed it down. He couldn't process what had happened, couldn't dwell on *how* he was still alive. *There are more pressing problems here Jack, like how the hell am I going to get out of here?*

He explored the cave further. It was a large round space with a smooth stone floor. The walls were also stone up to a few feet but it varied around the room and ran to mud the rest of the way to the ceiling. Piles of rubble lined the perimeter of the room.

Something was bugging Jack, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He looked around the walls again, but it kept eluding him. He stopped, facing the black hole of the tunnel again. *One more step closer, go on, I dare you.* The torchlight didn't make a dent in the dark. Another shiver went down his spine.

Jack turned back towards the stone slab. Something in his peripheral vision caught his attention and he walked closer. Hunching down, he scraped some mud away from the base of the slab and saw carvings in the stone. He scraped more vigorously and then fell back quickly.

The carving in front of him was of a man sitting cross-legged. In one hand he was brandishing a horned snake and in the other, he held a large ornate ring with a similar ring around his neck. Huge horns protruded from each side of his head.

4

Jack stood staring at the carving, shaking. He was struggling with what he was looking at, every rational fibre of his being screaming to get away. Was Ginny barking and so nervous because he had found an underground lair of someone who worshipped the Devil? The very idea was nonsense, wasn't it?

But you are alive when you should be dead.

"Hello, anyone there? You alright?"

The shout made him jump, literally, in the air. He looked up. A figure was silhouetted against the brightening sky.

"Hello?" Jack shouted back, adding an unnecessary: "I'm down here!"

"You alright?" The voice shouted again. *Who is this idiot?* Something in the timbre sounded familiar though.

"Terry? Is that you?"

"Yep. Who's that?"

Terry was an old man who ran his four dogs round the woods at least three times a day. Jack had no idea how old he was, but the rumour in the village was that he was in his seventies despite looking far younger.

"It's Jack, Terry. I'm stuck." *Understatement of the year.*

“How did you get down there?”

“I fell, but I think I’m alright – I can’t get out though. Can you help? Ring someone on your mobile.”

Even as he said it, Jack knew he was being optimistic.

“I ain’t got one of they, Jack. I’ll go get someone for you though. I’ll take your dog wi’ me.”

Without another word, he was gone. *Jesus, don’t leave me.* He looked at the altar again. The grinning horned figure smiled directly at him and Jack felt goose bumps rise on his arms. He backed away slowly, keeping the figure in sight all the way.

The room suddenly got darker and Jack realised that he was walking into the tunnel backwards. He spun quickly and light finally penetrated the gloom. Cobwebs hung from every conceivable angle and wall and stretched back as far as he could see.

The walls were pockmarked with tiny holes and from one of these Jack saw a thick black leg come out. Then another and another, until the biggest spider he’d ever seen sat on the wall looking at him. The spider was at least six inches across without counting its legs. Out of the other holes came more spiders until the wall was a seething dark mass, like a wave in a storm.

Jack screamed and fled back into the cave. He brushed at his clothes and rubbed his hair, feeling a million legs walk on him though none did. The spiders stayed in the corridor but he felt like they were watching him. He realised what was bugging him about the main cave. There were no cobwebs anywhere in it.

Not one.

5

Jack stood half way between the altar and the entrance to the spider infested passage. He wasn’t comfortable with having his back to the engraved slab of stone, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to have his back to all those spiders. He could see the black mass of them every time his torch played over the entrance.

He had never heard of so many spiders in one place before. There was that two hundred foot web they’d found in Texas (teaching a bunch of fourteen year olds did have some uses after all) but this was something else. He resisted the urge to scratch, knowing if he did he might never stop. The spiders were not coming into the cave, so he was clear of them, but God...

The silence was oppressive, lying on him like a heavy blanket. He plugged Bruce back in, only to find that the album had finished. As mighty an album as it was he needed something more cheerful and uplifting. He looked through the albums and settled on Led Zeppelin. Crunching guitars and power chords filled the space between his ears. *Perfect!*

He kept glancing up, but could see nothing but the opening up to the sky. Every couple of seconds or so he looked over his shoulder at the altar, but it remained solidly in place. *Of course it would – it’s made of stone. Something might have been sacrificed on it, but it was still stone. Stone doesn’t move of its own accord.*

And men don’t survive a thirty foot fall onto a large bone either.

Jack decided to stop thinking: it was just better that way. He started to sing loudly and badly to the music instead. *Help was on the way*, he told himself. Terry would come through for him: he would soon be home with a cup of tea and be able to laugh at this whole situation.

That bone didn’t go through me, it was the angle I was looking at it. It just helped break my fall and saved me.

He was beginning to feel better. He felt strong and could feel his panic about the spiders slipping away to be replaced with boredom. He could smell the flowers from outside, the trees and the pungent aroma of fox droppings. It smelt like a beautiful day out there and it seemed to have stopped raining. *Yep, things were going to be just fine.*

That thought formed whole in his mind as the torch died, plunging him into darkness.

6

His eyes became used to the dark very quickly. The ray of light from above helped, but he could still see the two focal points of the room. He breathed a sigh of relief as he could make out the opening to the passage, which seemed to undulate like the sea at night. Yesterday he would not have believed that he would be pleased to see such a horrible sight, but yesterday was a lifetime ago.

Over the music he heard a soft thump, thump. He grinned: the air ambulance was coming. Underneath the sound of the rotors he could make out sirens getting closer. He pictured them stopping at the gates to the woods, opening them and driving the fire engines through. It would be exciting for people watching, and even though the woods were a mile away from the village, a crowd would have gathered by now. This was a popular walking spot and news of his predicament would have spread.

Switching the music off, he glanced back at the altar. The horned man glared at him as he came to a decision. He ripped his jacket and t-shirt from the hole down and worked a few of the smaller holes bigger. *Nothing went through there, nope, it just ripped as I fell.*

“Mr Stadler?”

A voice from above, loud and authoritative.

“I’m here.”

“Hi, I’m John, I’m from the fire service and we’re going to get you out. Are you hurt?”

“No. Just a few bruises I think. I can walk.”

“Excellent. Give us a few minutes and we’ll have a harness rigged up to get you out.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

7

Jack wasn’t sure how long it took, but it was more than a couple of minutes before a man winched down.

“John?”

“No, I’m Bill. John’s up top. Doesn’t like to get his hands dirty. Bloody dark down here isn’t it?”

Jack looked around the cave, taking in the corridor, mounds of rubble and the creepy altar. “Yeah. My torch died a while back.”

“OK, no worries Jack, we’ll soon have you out of here. I’m going to tie you onto this harness and then we get lifted out, OK?”

Jack nodded and stood closer to Bill than he had been to his wife in weeks. Bill strapped him onto the harness and then said “Hold on!”

He pressed a button on the radio strapped into his jacket and said “OK, lift away.”

The rope tightened and they were in the air. Jack took one last look at the passageway, but couldn’t see any spiders there. Before he could really think about that, fresh air blasted through his hair and he had to squint against the bright sunshine.

“It was raining when I left the house,” Jack said.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The harness was lowered to the ground and two men ran over to unstrap them both. Another man in a green paramedic’s uniform started bombarding Jack with questions and he answered them. No, he wasn’t hurt. No, he wasn’t taking any medication. Yes, he was in a reasonably healthy state.

The clearing had a fire engine in it, sitting a good thirty yards away from the hole. The air ambulance had landed back on the path.

“You might want to move the fire engine,” Jack said.

“Ground’s solid,” Bill said. “It doesn’t even get remotely dodgy until by the hole. You were dead unlucky to fall through that.”

Dead unlucky. *That would be about right.* But he felt great. The freshness of the air was almost overpowering: he could smell everything from the wild garlic growing along the path through to the fox and deer scent markings back in the tree lines. A crowd of people were at the top of the hill watching: some waved when they saw him looking. A TV crew filmed the general scene whilst a reporter spoke about the lucky escape. Someone was missing and Jack felt panic rise.

“Where’s my wife? Where’s Katie?”

Bill looked at Jack in surprise. “Sorry, Mr Stadler, I thought you’d been told.”

“Told what?”

“When she heard that you’d had an accident her waters broke. She’s gone into labour.”