TOO CLEVER BY HALF

A Davies & West Mystery

An excerpt from Book 2 in the Davies & West Mystery Series

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One

One minute Archie Hansen was jouncing across the stony field in his aging, rust-red Massey Ferguson tractor, doing a shallow weeding of his Maris Peer potatoes. The next minute he was airborne. Like a stumbling horse, the lurching tractor pitched him right out of its cab.

“Son of a bitch!”

Right shoulder wrenched, his side bruised by the jagged granite shards that studded his ancient field on Cornwall’s Lizard Peninsula like a crop of their own, he struggled to his feet. The tractor, still in gear, labored helplessly to move forward, its big rear power wheel turning uselessly because the right front wheel was deep in a hole.

Archie Hansen, on the wrong side of fifty and beginning to show it, was rawboned as a goat but for a developing paunch that spoke of too many nights spent downing pints of Doom Bar ale at his local, the New Inn at Manaccan. He fetched his cap from the ground and slapped it on a skull that was as bald to its crest as a half-peeled orange. He offset this tonsorial desert with a graying beard which, fastidiously trimmed to a sharp point at the chin, gave him a vaguely Mephistophelian air. The leader of a local group of Druids, he’d lately been straying from the faith and experimenting with spell-casting and darker magic. The devilish beard was, he thought, only appropriate.

Hansen climbed up to the cab, shut off the motor, and cursed himself for not owning a four-wheeler that could have pulled itself out of this dilemma—not that he’d ever spring for something that pricy. Depending on the year and the field he was rotating during Cornwall’s mild winter months, Hansen cultivated daffodils, cauliflower, early potatoes, and followed with grains—barley or wheat—in the spring. He was as successful as any farmer in Cornwall could say he was these days, but he was tight as a Shylock, and therefore better off than his neighbors.

Now he knelt beside the sunken wheel. The ground he’d farmed for years here on the Lizard Peninsula, and that generations of Norwegian immigrant Hansens had farmed before him, had inexplicably given way beneath the tractor. Looking down on either side of the knobby black front tire, he saw only darkness. He climbed back into the cab, started the engine and gunned it, only to have the front wheel dive even deeper.

“Son of a bitch.”

Archie Hansen’s verbal expressions of both disgust and surprise were limited. He yanked his mobile from the pocket of his dirt-encrusted navy blue coveralls and rang up his young neighbor, Bobby Tregareth. The two of them farmed adjacent fields just inland from Nare Head, on the soft, undulating hills above the pastoral reaches of the Helford River on Cornwall’s English Channel coast.

A half hour later, Hansen had a chain hooked between the front axle of the tractor and Bobby’s beat-up tan Land Rover Defender. Burning up the four-wheel-drive’s clutch in low gear, Bobby managed to pop the tractor’s wheel from its trap and pull it away. Archie grabbed a flashlight from the cab and, like a terrier after a fox gone to earth, tore away turf and stone until he managed to get both his head and shoulders and the light into the hole. What he saw, to his astonishment, was a rectangular stone-walled chamber. At the eastern end, two roughly five-foot granite pillars suggested an entrance tunnel, long since collapsed and filled with rubble. Directly opposite to the west, a six inch thick slab of granite the size of a small, misshapen door lay flat on the earthen floor, its surface studded with white quartz crystals that glittered like diamond chips as his flashlight beam swept over it.

“One of them ancient chambers, Bobby. Fetch a ladder; I’m going down an’ll need a way back up.”

“But Mr. Hansen, surely this is a matter for the archaeologists at the county council…”

“Don’t be wet, Bobby; nothing comes to ditherers.”

Bobby did it. He’d little choice; he leased much of his farmland from Archie Hansen and depended upon his good will.

After Bobby left, Hansen shoved the flashlight into a pocket, swung his legs into the ragged mouth of the hole, held himself suspended above the gap on wobbly arms for a moment, then dropped in, his arms extended above his head.

He fell farther and hit harder than he expected; the roof of the chamber was a good six feet high. Groaning, he rolled to his knees, stood, and looked around. The four walls of the chamber edged inward ever so slightly until they met three granite roofing slabs, roughly four feet wide, a foot thick, and five feet long. The tractor wheel had dropped through a weak spot on the edge of one of those slabs.

The day was clear and a shaft of light sliced into the musty chamber from the hole above like sun through a cloud. Hansen sat on the edge of the slab on the floor for some time, scanning the perfect walls, looking for anything of interest—not that he had a clue what “interest” might look like. It was like being inside the belly of a beast.

A restless, impatient man, as he studied the walls and waited for the ladder, he thumped the rubberized butt of his flashlight absently on his stone seat, as if keeping time with his pulse. It took a few moments before he noticed a tonal difference toward the center of the stone that didn’t exist around its periphery. He stood up and tapped again. No question: hollow.

“You down there, Mr. Hansen?”

“You see me anywhere else, Bobby?”

“Right, right; I’ve got the ladder. You need help down there?”

Hansen thought for a bit, then yelled, “Send it down, I’m done here.”

“What’d you see, Archie?” Bobby asked, his enthusiasm almost childlike as Hansen squeezed to the surface.

“Not a damned thing. Just another of them Iron Age holes. Bloody nuisance, they are, just like them big standing stones we got to plow around. Not to mention that Roman mosaic floor poor Johnny Sayer found in his field over Porthallow way. English Heritage were all over that and they’ll be all over this, too, wanting to protect it for God only knows what reason, which means I lose one of my best fields.”

“That’s just not right, Mr. Hansen.”

“Too true, Bobby, because it’ll mean I’ll need one of the fields you’re leasing from me back again.”

“Straight up? But I can’t get by…”

“Hush now, lad; I know. I’ve a simple solution. We don’t report this; we just carry on as per usual and no one’s the wiser, yeah?” Hansen said, tapping a knowing forefinger to the right side of his nose.

“You won’t report it?”

“Dime a dozen these underground chambers are hereabouts. What they don’t know about they won’t miss, am I right?”

“Sure. I guess. What about the hole?”

“Steel plate to cover it and then dirt so’s it looks like everything else, only I don’t plow near it again. Take me a couple of days and then—hey, presto!—it’s just our little secret. Few weeks, it’s grassed over. Invisible. Right, Bobby?” Archie looked hard at the young man.

“Right, right. Invisible.”

Later that afternoon, Archie Hansen was back in the chamber, alone. He’d slipped webbed strapping around one corner of the stone slab and was cranking a come-along winch anchored with spikes he’d driven into the hard pan of the chamber floor. It was brutal, hot work, even for late March. The sweat from his forehead left small black craters in the dim dust. Several times he’d had to re-anchor the come-along as the slab inched away from its resting place in a slow, rasping arc. His back and arm muscles burned. He could have got Bobby to help, but he didn’t want the company.

 Having moved the slab some sixty degrees off center, Hansen shone the flashlight into the hole he knew would be there. It was roughly two feet square and the same deep. Nestled in its center was a lidded clay vessel. Belly down on the slab, he reached in and, lifting the lid, shone the light on its contents.

“Son of a bitch,” he whispered.