

The Legend of Caradoc by David Dunham

Chapter One

Cornwall, England

Present Day

‘You going to fight me, Jack, or sneak off again?’

Jack lengthened his stride, trying to ignore the heavy crunching of gravel behind him. A hand came over his shoulder, swinging him around. He was confronted with a finger, dirty and pointed, and so close to his nose it was almost picking it.

‘You made me a promise, son.’

Jack rolled his eyes. He’d heard it all before.

‘Hey! *I said*, you made me a ...’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Jack, swatting away his dad’s finger. ‘That was *ages* ago.’

‘The start of the holidays. That’s when.’

‘Can’t you find someone else to teach?’ said Jack.

‘*No*, I can’t. That’s not how it works.’

Jack pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked the time, wondering if Lucy was already down at the cove. The finger returned, jabbing him hard in the arm.

‘Oi! Do you want a car next year or not?’ said his dad.

Course I do, Jack thought as he nodded. How else will I escape?

‘Which means ...?’

Jack sighed, one of his good ones. ‘I have to learn how to sword fight.’

‘Because ...?’

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Because you're crazy, is what Jack wanted to say. Instead, he answered, 'Coz *your* dad made you.'

'And his dad made him. So show some respect.'

Jack held his tongue and marched towards the back garden, now fearing that being late for his second date with Lucy could destroy his chances of a third. At the bottom of a hedge was the wooden sword he'd tossed away the week before. He curled his fingers around the tough leather grip and faced his dad, who was clamping his own sword between his knees as he rolled his milking overalls down to his waist.

What *did* Mum see in you? Jack wondered, glancing at his dad's t-shirt, ripped under the armpits and with a streak of dried tomato sauce down the centre. She must have been mad.

'Do I smell or something?'

'No more than normal,' said Jack, tucking his hair behind his ears.

'Then don't be so intimidated.'

Jack stepped closer to his dad. 'I'd take this more seriously if we used proper swords.'

'Oh yeah? And who's going to help me on the farm when you lose? Your ghost?'

'Whatever,' said Jack. 'Let's just get this over with.'

In a flash, Jack's shinbone was struck. 'Argh! That hurt!'

'Drop the attitude.'

I'll give you attitude, Jack thought, biting his lip as his shin throbbed. And a big bruise too on your own bastard leg.

'We're not starting till you stand properly,' said his dad.

Jack shifted his weight onto his back foot, bent his knees a little and held his free arm behind him, with his elbow out.

'Suppose that'll do. And ... fight!'

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Jack lunged, going straight for the chest.

‘Predictable,’ said his dad, raising his sword with a flick of the wrist.

Jack lunged again, aiming for the throat.

‘Still easy ... *boy.*’

Jack scowled. ‘I’m not biting ... *old man.*’

‘You’re not doing anything at the moment. Getting bored here.’

Jack stamped the ground with his boot and feinted right.

‘Crap again,’ said his dad, defending the follow-up shot. ‘My turn!’

Slashing side to side, high to low, he forced Jack back, right to the hedge. The speed should have caught Jack out, but he was blocking every shot and before he’d even realised it he’d exploded forward.

Faster! Faster! he told himself as his sword collided with his dad’s; wood smacking against wood.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

Jack was now swinging his sword so fast one way then the other he thought he had two of them and that someone else was in control; someone who knew how to win. Parrying and thrusting, cutting and dodging, Jack could sense something strange happening with his left hand. Heat was spreading across his palm, only it didn’t feel like it was coming from friction with the grip, it felt like it was rising from deep under his skin, seeming to bind his hand and sword together.

And then suddenly, everything slowed for Jack. He watched his sword angling inwards to stop his dad’s counterattack, and in one fluid motion striking back; the blunt tip hitting right where the heart is.

‘Get in!’ said Jack, punching the air. ‘I beat you! I BEAT YOU!’

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His dad froze, not even grimacing from the blow. Finally, he touched his chest and glanced at his fingers, as though expecting to see blood. ‘You’re too young to do that ... it’s too early for you.’

Jack frowned. ‘I’m nearly sixteen.’

‘Yes ... I know.’

Jack heard concern in his dad’s voice, but not enough to stop him from saying, ‘Well, I reckon I deserve a prize. A can should do it.’

‘Forget it,’ said his dad, lifting his t-shirt to wipe sweat away from his brow. ‘I gave you one last night.’

‘With tea,’ said Jack. ‘And it was low-alcohol. Doesn’t count.’

‘Oh, so you weren’t drinking at Jimmy’s then?’

Jack could feel his cheeks warm. He knew he should have lied about the party. He threw his sword back into the hedge and swaggered off, checking his palm for marks, wondering if he’d imagined the heat as the skin looked and felt normal, unlike his shin which still ached.

‘What’s wrong with your hand?’ shouted his dad.

‘Nothing,’ said Jack, zipping up his hoodie. ‘See you later.’

‘The storm’s not far off.’

‘Calo’s not bothered by storms, Dad.’

‘He will be when he’s struck by lightning.’

Jack turned and smiled. ‘Nah, he’s like me ... too quick.’

‘Too bloody impatient more like.’

Jack collected Calo’s tack from the stable and opened the gate to the back paddock. Calo looked up at once and began to trot over.

‘Good boy,’ said Jack, holding out the last apple from a bucket on the ground.

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Calo locked the apple in his huge mouth and took it away from Jack's hand, leaving blobs of saliva in its place. He crunched the apple apart and stretched his neck, inviting Jack to brush his face against it.

'We're going to the cove,' said Jack, breathing in Calo's smell, one of horsehair and hay, and a little bit of mud; a scent better than any perfume, even Lucy's. 'There's someone who wants to meet you.'

Jack prepared Calo for the ride, taking extra care to be gentle as he looped the bridle over his ears. They left the paddock, went down the side of the stable and started to cross the gravel in front of the house.

Any second now, Jack thought. Any second now I'll hear ...

'You'll get a prize,' said his dad, calling out from the kitchen window. 'Toad-in-the-hole.'

'With gravy?' said Jack.

'A jugful. And mash.'

Jack's stomach rumbled. No one could make gravy like his dad. It was dark brown and laced with Worcestershire Sauce, and thick, but never lumpy, it would slide across the crust of the Yorkshire pudding and over the sides.

'Tie your hair back, son. You won't see a thing.'

'Sorry, Dad,' said Jack, grinning. 'Can't hear you!'

Jack struck out across the front field, riding straight towards the grey clouds of the storm. Ahead of him was a stone wall, a metre high and marking the boundary of the farm. He nudged Calo into a canter and lifted himself out of the saddle, leaning forward as Calo pushed off the ground, soaring over the wall with ease.

Jack sat up, already excited about jumping the wall on his return. For the time being he had to hold Calo back as they'd reached the coastal path. Jack didn't mind though. By

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keeping to a walk he could spend longer with the view of the rolling path, towering cliffs and a jagged coastline dotted with cottages, farmhouses and fishing huts. It was a view of home, of Cornwall, where the never-ending wind whipped fresh off the sea, blowing his hair wildly behind him, as if always on his side.

His pocket vibrated. Bet that's Dad, he thought. Or Lucy, asking where I am?

It was Jimmy. He'd texted: You screwed it up yet?

Almost, Jack thought. He checked the time. Twenty to five. He'd only be a bit late.

He began to descend on the path as Smugglers Cove came into sight. It was almost high tide. Only a thin strip of the secluded beach remained, and it was empty.

Jack's heart sank. 'Stupid sword fighting,' he said to himself. 'Ruined everything.'

Still, he wanted to have a final check, starting with the coastal path. He squinted, blinked, and squinted again. Walking into the distance, alone, tanned and carrying a towel, was Lucy.

Yes! Jack thought. I can catch her up.

Calo twitched his head towards the cove.

'Sorry, mate,' said Jack. 'Change of plan.'

Calo twitched again. Jack peered down at the cove, his attention stolen by a flash of movement away from the beach. At the far end of a stretch of rocks poking out into the sea was a girl. She was facing the horizon, resting on her knees on a mat, clutching the soles of her feet while keeping her head bowed. A plait of copper hair ran halfway down her back and she was wearing a sleeveless top.

Tourist, Jack decided. Or you wouldn't be out there. 'Hey!' he shouted.

The girl didn't turn and neither did Lucy, now almost at the gate to her parents' farm.

Calo flared his nostrils and snorted.

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‘Okay, okay,’ said Jack. ‘I’ll try again.’ He positioned his hands at the sides of his mouth and boomed, ‘Move!’

The girl still didn’t react, but Calo did, beginning to take the narrow path down to the cove.

‘No way,’ said Jack, pulling Calo’s reins. ‘We haven’t got time.’

But Calo kept going, stepping onto the beach, sinking ever so slightly into the pristine white sand.

‘Behind you!’ said Jack.

At last, the girl turned. Jack put her age at about fifteen, possibly older.

‘What do you want?’ she said.

Yep, definitely a tourist, Jack thought. Posh one too. ‘I wanted to warn you.’

‘About what?’

‘About that,’ said Jack, pointing to the sea rushing over the rocks, cutting off the girl’s route back to the beach.

The girl glanced at the water as if she had all the time in the world, and then jumped up and yelled, ‘I’m stuck!’

‘Just wade through it,’ said Jack.

‘That’s a terrible idea,’ said the girl. ‘I’ll break something.’

I’ll give you a terrible idea, Jack thought. Me coming down here. ‘Dive off and swim then.’

‘I can’t!’

‘Course you can,’ said Jack. ‘It’s easily deep enough.’

‘No,’ said the girl, bringing her arms into her body. ‘I can’t swim!’

‘You’re joking?’

‘No, *I’m not*. You’ll have to come out here and carry me.’

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‘And then *I’ll* break something,’ said Jack.

The girl looked all around her, as though there was someone else who could help. She put her thumb and forefinger in her mouth and whistled. Loudly. Calo started to walk towards the noise.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ said Jack, trying to turn Calo. ‘We’re *not* going in there.’

The girl whistled again, drawing Calo into the water.

‘Hey!’ said Jack. ‘Stop whistling!’

‘Your horse wants to save me,’ said the girl. ‘Which is more than I can say for you.’

‘Are you for real?’

‘*Yes, I am.* Now hurry up.’

Jack was too stunned to reply. He slid down the saddle, placed his phone on a high rock to keep it dry and ran into the sea.

‘You’re dawdling,’ said the girl.

‘And you’re pissing me off,’ said Jack, getting back on Calo.

The girl pulled a face as moody as the darkening clouds closing in. Jack glanced at the water. It would soon be over Calo’s knees. ‘You can do it, mate. You can ...’

Suddenly, Calo’s front legs buckled as the seabed dropped sharply and he squealed in distress.

‘Whoa!’ said Jack, tipping to one side. ‘Easy now ... *easy.*’

Calo stopped squealing, but he’d also stopped moving, with the water now at Jack’s waist.

‘I’ll whistle if you don’t command your horse to get closer,’ said the girl.

‘You whistle and you’re on your own,’ said Jack. ‘You’ll have to jump and grab my hand.’

‘Can I trust you?’

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‘I don’t care if you do or don’t. You’ve got ten seconds to make up your mind and then I’m going.’

‘You wouldn’t dare.’

Jack shivered. He felt naked without his wetsuit on. ‘Ten ... nine ...’

‘You, you ...’

‘Eight ... seven ... six ...’

‘I won’t forget this!’

‘Five ... four ...’

The girl groaned in anger and picked up her mat.

‘Leave it!’ said Jack.

The girl let the mat go, but not her scowl. She bent her knees.

‘Three ...’

She closed her eyes.

‘Two ...’

Bit her lip.

‘One!’

The girl opened her eyes and sprung off a rock, going too far out.

‘Shit!’ said Jack, ripping off his boots. ‘HOLD ON!’

The girl was flapping her arms up and down, getting no closer to Calo. Jack plunged into the sea, grabbing the girl’s nearest arm, swinging it round his neck.

‘Keep your grip,’ he spluttered, kicking furiously to keep them afloat.

The girl locked her hands; her fingernails digging hard into Jack’s skin. Jack brought his arm up to start swimming, accidentally breaking the girl’s hold, knocking her backwards, under the surface and out of sight. Jack scrambled for her, shooting out his hands, expecting

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to touch the girl, but touching only water. He came up for a quick breath and went back down again.

Where is she? he thought, changing direction. WHERE IS SHE?

Then he felt a tug on the back of his hoodie and twisted.