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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Island of Bones**

Written by Imogen Robertson

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# Island of Bones

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*Key points of interest in*  
**ISLAND OF BONES**

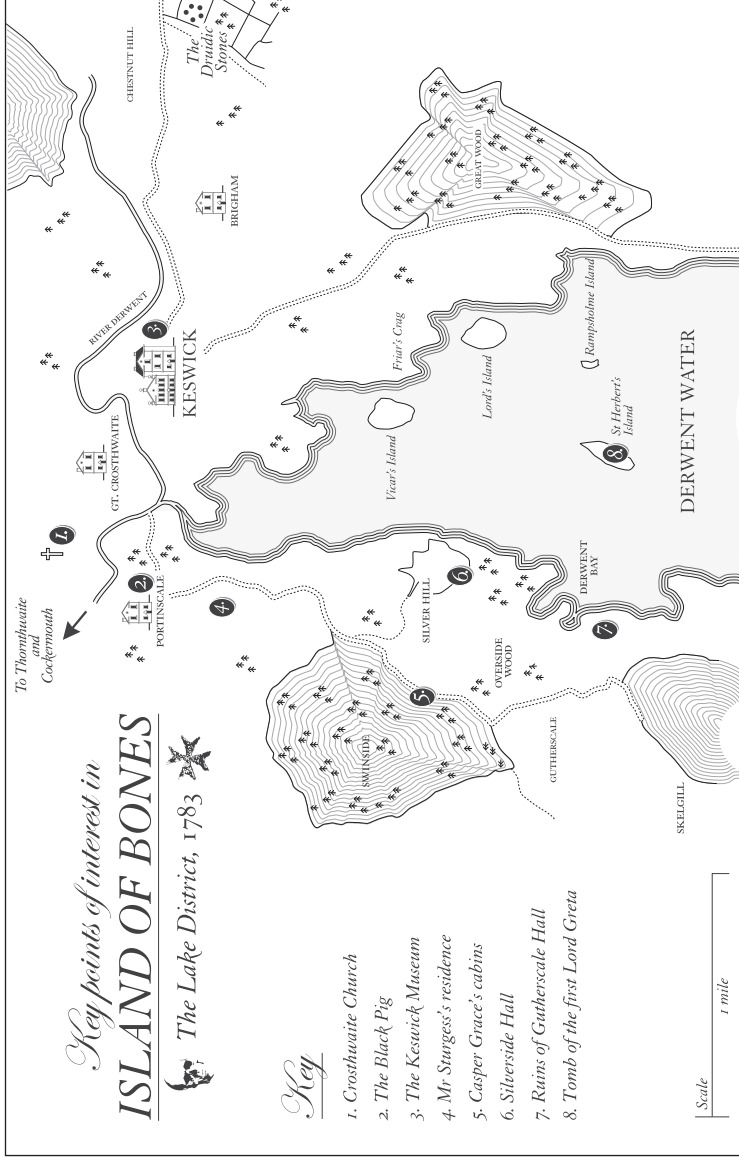


*The Lake District, 1783*

*Key*

1. Crosthwaite Church
2. The Black Pig
3. The Keswick Museum
4. Mr Sturgess's residence
5. Casper Grace's cabins
6. Silverside Hall
7. Ruins of Gatherscale Hall
8. Tomb of the first Lord Greta

Scale 1 mile



# PROLOGUE

*Evening of 3 February 1751, Tower of London*

THERE WAS A PECULIAR HUSH around the Tower the night before an execution. The mist from the river shushed the streets and people moved quietly. The guards nodded to each other, stamped their feet and wished for dawn, then thought of the man in the Tower; they looked at the light showing faintly from his rooms and shivered again.

The fire could do little against the damp air of a February night, and nor could the wine warm the two men keeping vigil in the white-washed cell. They had been silent a long time. It was clear they were brothers – they had the same hooded eyes, the same slender figure – but they were turned away from each other, thinking their own thoughts. The younger of the two, Charles, glanced sideways at his brother without turning his head. Lucius Adair Penhaligon, 2nd Baron Keswick, was shivering and flushed; his silk waistcoat was undone and his hands were working one over the other as if he were trying to wash something from them. Charles looked back into the yellow flames, a little nauseated.

The fire cracked and Adair started at the noise; then, as if

woken suddenly, he looked around at the plain walls with an air of disbelief.

‘What a little life I have had, Charles,’ he said. ‘And now I am afraid to lose it.’

Charles picked up the decanter and filled his brother’s glass again. His own was still full. He set it back down on the table between them and returned to his contemplation of the fire without replying.

‘How can it be I shall be dead tomorrow at this time? I cannot imagine it – I cannot.’ Adair then downed the contents of his glass. His voice quivered. ‘Can nothing be done? Can *you* do nothing?’

Charles shook his head and heard his brother begin to snivel.

‘I did not murder him, Charles!’ Adair shook his head slowly from side to side, as if trying to shift some weight across the floor of his mind. ‘No one believes me, but I did not, I swear I did not. Where is Margaret?’

‘You have had her letter. She is in Ireland now.’

Adair looked around the room as if the matter was not settled, as if their sister might appear in the shadows. ‘Yes, of course. And has no one else come, Charles? Have none of my friends come to sit with me tonight?’

‘No.’

The sound of his weeping grew louder, and Charles wished he could block out the noise. The stones around the fire were charred black with the ghosts of other flames. Charles watched, willing the sparks to fly free of the grate and consume it all – his brother, himself, then the whole city – and leave not a trace of them or their history behind them. The flames continued

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feeble and sullen. Very well, if he could not burn away his past, he would abandon it. Once the estate was sold, he would sign himself into the student roll of the University of Wittenberg and lose himself there and in his studies; after that, Padua perhaps. Then he could forget the gothic horrors of his family, the blood and money. Finding himself thinking of his own future, he glanced back at his brother. The sobbing had eased. Adair wiped his face and snuffled into his handkerchief.

‘What will they say of me when I am gone, Charles? Will they say anything, as they lose the money they won from me at the card table? Perhaps they will laugh. They used to laugh at me. I would be so sure of winning, I wore my coat turned inside out for luck, and each night they would ask if I were certain of my success, then laugh at me – but I *was* sure, I was sure every time. I only needed a hundred, and it seemed like such a simple thing. Oh God! Will it hurt, Charles?’

Charles turned away. ‘If the hangman knows his job, it will be quick.’

Adair scrambled suddenly to his feet and ran to the corner of the little room where a jug and ewer waited and bent over it. Charles heard the splatter of his vomit on the porcelain, the dry heavings of his stomach. After some moments Adair returned to the fire to find his glass full again. He could hardly hold it to his lips, so violent was his trembling.

‘Charles, do you think there is a God? The priest tells me I shall be saved if I repent.’

His brother did not answer him.

‘You think I am a coward?’

‘You fear what every man fears.’

Adair suddenly stood again and threw his glass with a

cry. It smashed, and the last of the wine dripped down the wall.

‘For God’s sake! Will you not weep for your brother, Charles? How are you so cold? I was no better a brother to Margaret, yet her letter was so sodden I can hardly read it. Do I not deserve your tears? Can you weep? Are you a man at all?’ Adair dropped back into his seat as if that small act of outrage had exhausted him entirely. When he spoke again, it was as if he was talking to himself. ‘I did not kill him – and yet no one believes me. It was the other man, the man with a hundred pounds. It was not my fault. Why does no one believe me?’

Charles stared at his cuffs and would not look up, willing the time to pass.

‘Oh, leave me to the priest, Charles. He will weep, if only because it is his pleasure to see a man pray.’

Charles stood and turned towards the door.

‘Charles?’ Adair tumbled out of his seat and on to the brick floor at his brother’s feet, grabbing hold of his hand. Charles felt the soft damp flesh on his own and was revolted, but Adair’s grip was too desperate for him to be able to pull free. ‘I swear I am innocent of this! The old man wanted to see him alone, and I needed the money – what was the harm? Father was dead when I found him! I took the knife out of him, but he was gone, then I ran. I was afraid. Oh God! I am innocent and now they are going to kill me, and you shall let them. Why don’t you believe me?’

Charles looked down for a moment, then crouched beside him. ‘I don’t believe you, Addie, because you have always been a bully and a liar. I don’t believe you because you were found with the knife in your hand, and confessed the crime . . .’



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'I only meant I had *caused* it by arranging for the man to meet him! Please, Charles, I am begging you . . .'

Charles felt Adair's fingers kneading his own.

'I don't believe you because you had the money you stole from our father's notecase in your coat. It was bloody, Addie, our father's blood was on the bills.'

'I found him, and I pulled the knife out and then I meant to throw the money away so it got bloody from my hand . . .'

his voice was whining, 'but I needed it, Charles! I could not throw it away. It was the other man, the—'

'The man whom no one has seen.' Charles's voice was hard. 'No one, Addie! The man you only conjured in your mind when you found you had neither the courage to take your own life, nor stand trial for the crime. If you had not retracted your confession, there might have been some mercy for you.'

'But I didn't do it!'

His grip relaxed. Charles pulled one hand free and put it around his brother's neck, then with his thumb lifted Adair's face till they could look each other in the eye. Adair's face was soaked with tears and his nose dripped; his eyes were bloodshot and a thread of bile hung from his lip.

'Yes, you did, Addie. May God forgive you, and I shall forgive you for it if I can.'

He let Adair's head drop again then stood, reached into his pocket and drew out two gold guineas. These he placed carefully before his brother on the cold floor. 'Give these to the hangman when you reach the scaffold. Goodbye, Addie.'

He opened the door to the outer room where two guards looked up from their cards, then turned back. Adair remained kneeling on the floor, the fire making silver on the silk of his

embroidered waistcoat, gold in the expensive weave of his britches, jewels across his close-cut coat with its porcelain buttons. He was staring at the coins in front of him. The only thing left in the world he could buy was a quick death. Charles closed the door and was escorted out into the dark and stench of the city.

*The following day, Tyburn on the edges of London*

**T**HOMAS GOFFE, a rather nervous gentleman in a bad wig, shot to his feet.

‘Carmichael! Over here, man!’

Such was the crush on the stands that Goffe had to resort to standing on the rickety bench and waving his hat to attract the attention of his friend.

He was spotted, acknowledged, and soon joined by an extremely handsome man who carried himself with such an air of superiority that his neighbours almost climbed on top of each other to give him all the room they could.

The open fields below them were thronged with a great mass of people. Here in the stands a considerable number of gentlemen sat tightly together and chattered with a slightly feverish excitement, but those who could not afford this elevated view joined the swarm of people below, churning the field to a mud bath. Hawkers wandered through the crowd selling chap-books of the most popular last confessions for a penny, others offered filled pastries from covered baskets. All around, a competing chorus of street singers declared their territory with their damp lungs like cockerels and stamped their feet

against the cold as they sang. Jugglers and fire-eaters sweated for pennies at the edges of the crowd and a little army of pickpockets danced among the unwary for handkerchieves and shillings.

It was carnival.

‘Where did you get that monstrosity?’ Carmichael asked. Goffe was confused. He touched his hat; Carmichael gave a tiny shake of his head. Goffe then touched the white curls of his wig, and with his face falling into childlike dismay, watched Carmichael raise an eyebrow.

‘Thompsons on the Strand, Carmichael. You recommended them yourself.’

‘Did I? Their standards have declined considerably.’ Goffe dropped his chin into his collar. ‘How long have you been here?’

‘Lord, an hour at least, or I should never have found a place.’ The pride of having done so brightened Goffe. He dragged out from between his feet a basket, which he uncovered with a flourish to show three promising-looking bottles and a number of cold pies. Carmichael smiled, and Goffe went a little pink as he handed one of each to his friend. Carmichael was an easy man to disappoint. ‘So, did you see him?’

Carmichael drank deeply from the bottle before replying. ‘A glimpse, no more. What’s to see? A landau getting more and more covered with the muck the people throw at it, a dozen men-in-arms, and a coffin. I came the back way. The crowd is pressing all along the route from the Tower. He’ll be here in half an hour.’

Goffe gave a little high-pitched giggle and bit into his pie. ‘How will he take it, you think, Carmichael? You must be willing to guess, having been his friend so long.’

Carmichael brushed flakes of pastry from his sleeve. ‘Yes, poor Lucius Adair. I once met his father, you know. Lord Keswick was a clever man with money perhaps, but brutalised by all those years spent beyond the reach of civilisation. If he had been *my* father, I might have killed him.’

Goffe slapped his thigh so hard, gentlemen on the bench above heard the vibration. ‘Oh, oh Carmichael! You could teach the Devil himself new tricks!’ He slid his eyes over Carmichael’s fine blue coat and wished he had one like it. ‘You’ll miss Adair’s pockets though,’ he added quietly.

Carmichael shrugged and sucked at the bottle again before looking up and becoming suddenly still. Goffe noticed the fixity of his attention. He craned his neck to look the same way, swallowing once or twice. ‘What is it? Are they coming?’

‘No, not yet. See that man on the end of the bench, three below with his back to us?’

Goffe wiped his mouth and peered. ‘What, thin fella? Looks like a parson? He’ll get no kind of view from there.’

‘That man, my dear Goffe,’ drawled Carmichael, ‘is Charles Penhaligon now, and will be the new Lord Keswick before I have finished this pie.’

‘No!’ Goffe said in delight. ‘The brother! Did you ever meet him then?’

‘Once or twice. An odd sort of creature. He can play the gentleman, but always seemed a little touched to me. Cuts up dead animals and calls it natural philosophy.’

Goffe shuddered. ‘Disgusting – the whole bunch of them. Oh look! They’ve spotted the carriage. Not long now till we see how nicely Adair dances the Tyburn jig.’

The excitement of the crowd had deepened, and as the first

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of the spectators caught sight of the soldiers leading the procession from the Tower a wave of jeers and whistles broke and rolled over them. The jugglers and singers paused in their work and struggled for a view with the rest. Goffe noticed a pretty, hard-eyed woman near the bottom of the stands, her skirts tucked up. Her hands were clenched into fists and her red mouth was open and snarling. Goffe licked his lips.

‘It does bring out the whores, doesn’t it?’

Carmichael nodded. ‘The hanging of a nobleman? Why, of course. High holiday for us all.’

Charles did have something of the parson in his manner. It was his dark-coloured clothing and the severe planes of his face, his cold eyes that made even those passing him in the street feel examined, judged, and keen to pass on. A woman, swinging her fat hips down from the highest benches, also noticed him, his hands lying empty on his lap before him, and took the chance, as she reached the lower level on which he sat, to thrust one of her pamphlets between them.

‘That’s a penny, lover.’ He looked up at her, and she was struck by the bright blue of his eyes in his pale face. A firm chin, dusted with dark stubble. Sharp bones in his cheeks, a young man. ‘Every word gospel – all writ down at the trial. Horrid murder! He sliced up the maid too, you know. Near killed her.’ She tried a wink.

‘I do not want it,’ he said.

‘Come on, sweetheart. Only a penny.’ She touched her hair.

He turned his eyes towards her again and something in them made her step back; they had a violent glitter to them. ‘I do not want it.’

'All right, lover,' she said, plucking it from between his fingertips and hurrying over to a red-faced countryman who held his coin in the air as summons. She couldn't help looking back at him though. His stillness was so strange in the fevered flurry of the crowd.

The thin man folded his hands on his lap again and studied his cuffs. The roar of the crowd told him that the coach was approaching. There were jeers and laughter flowing from every side. Then a hush fell, spreading out from the gallows like a wind. Charles lifted his chin.

His brother Lucius Adair stood on the back of the hangman's cart, looking small at this distance. In front of him stood the priest from the jail. Addie's lips were moving as if in continual prayer, then he lifted his voice.

'Good people . . .' he began. Charles wondered if Addie had spotted him in the crowd. No matter. He had said he would attend and he had kept his promise. His eyes were fixed on the little figure. Addie had always liked to be looked at. Well, he had his wish now. 'I go to my death a guilty man.' There was a great roar, and Adair had to strain to make himself heard again. 'But not of the crime of which I am accused.' Stamping and swearing from all quarters. Charles had not expected him to admit it now. The crowd hallooed and mocked. Charles's contempt for his brother was absolute. He had made their family an entertainment, like a chained bear. There had been a woman playing a hurdy-gurdy in the crowd as Charles found his seat. He thought now that fairground music would follow him for his whole life.

His brother continued: 'I have sinned. I blame no man but myself, and so may God have mercy on my soul!'

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Only at the last did his voice quaver and rise. The crowd was divided between cheers and curses. Loud laughter rocked and swayed over the people in places. Addie offered his hands to be tied and seemed to stumble a little. Charles swallowed. There was a man in the crowd who kept looking at him. Escape was impossible for Adair now, but might it be possible for Charles to flee? He could abandon the title that would fall on him when the hangman had done his work, and choose another name. Yes, it was possible.

The hangman had to hold Adair steady and whispered something to him as he slipped first the hood and then the rope around over his head. To Charles, it seemed at once as if the hood had covered his own face. He saw the fierce triangle of the gallows, the thousands around him, but at the same time it seemed that everything had disappeared – that he saw only black cloth, felt the pinch of the ropes on his wrists behind him, the weight of the slack noose round his neck, his own panting breath drawing the weave to his lips. Its stink that of the sweat of other frightened men.

The rope snapped tight and Charles felt his own breath choked out of his throat as his brother's legs began kicking free in the air. He put his hand to his collar and struggled to breathe. All around him was this impossible noise, the elation of the crowd. Its roar became one with the rushing of his blood in his ears. His mouth tasted bitter. The hangman grabbed onto Adair's legs and pulled hard. Charles felt his throat constrict still further; it was as if some invisible beast had its thumbs pressing down on the hyoid bone of his neck and was waiting for the snap. Two minutes, perhaps three. All eternity.

The struggling ceased, the people cheered and whistled, and

Charles gasped in air again. He lowered his face, waiting for his heart to slow. The body was cut down, and at once the hangman began to divide the rope into portions and sell them to those in the crowd who had managed to push close enough to reach him.

When Charles could look up again, he saw the body being rolled into the coffin. A man he knew vaguely from the College of Anatomy took a seat on its lid like a dog guarding a bone. Would the men he knew feel troubled about dissecting the body of his brother? Perhaps a little, briefly. But bodies were valuable. He had taken no steps to prevent their taking it. Adair had been wearing the same buff coat and silk waistcoat he had worn the previous evening; they would belong to the hangman now.

Charles took a deep breath and stood. Already the crowd was thinning out. The spectacle was over, so the usual day-to-day business resumed.

A man tapped him on the shoulder. 'So that makes you Lord Keswick now, sir?'

Charles turned his blue eyes on him. 'What?'

The man looked unsure and glanced over his shoulder to the place where Carmichael and Goffe had been sitting. 'Fellow up there said you were the brother – the heir to all that money. It's an ill wind, your lordship.' He shook his head. 'Still, that's some bad blood to inherit.' There was a gleam in his eye, a certain wet hunger in his lips.

Charles drew on his gloves, his hands shaking only very slightly. Interesting, the strange effects on the physical body the emotions could have. If he could draw his own blood now, at this moment, what would he find in it, he wondered.



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‘They were mistaken,’ he said, looking at the man very steadily. The man’s smile faltered and he began under that gaze to look almost afraid.

‘My apologies, sir. And forgive my asking. Only natural to be curious, I’m sure you’ll agree. Such a tale.’

‘Indeed, and I pity Lord Keswick that he must be associated with it.’

‘Of course, sir. My apologies again, sir.’ Charles took a step away, but the man raised his voice. ‘Your name then, sir?’

Charles paused for a second. ‘My name is Gabriel Crowther,’ he said, and disappeared into the crowd.