

A man with long, dark, wind-blown hair stands in a snowy, mountainous landscape. He is wearing a long, black, double-breasted coat. The background features steep, snow-covered mountains and evergreen trees. The entire scene is framed by an ornate, golden-brown border with intricate scrollwork and floral designs.

DIGGINGS

— ON THE —

HILL

VIOLETTA MOONLIGHT



DIGGINGS
ON THE HILL





Arrival

Over the past seven years, neither exhausted searches nor spent fortunes have yielded any answers. The news of a discovery at a new site with artifacts came so unexpectedly that it left no time for contemplation. Leaving behind all my affairs in Northern Europe, I was already sitting on a plane, actively discussing the plan of action with my friend Chris.

The paperwork in French territory had always been quite tedious, but with the help at hand, it promised to be quick and painless.

It was after midnight when we stepped out from the plane's gangway. The sudden snowstorm caught us off guard. The fine hard snow stung our faces, and the strengthening wind practically blew us off our feet. Hailing a taxi, we immediately rushed to the reserved hotel in the heart of Lower Normandy – in the historical center of Caen.

Rue Montau Puasneri Square that night was extraordinary! The light from the street lamps illuminated millions of snowflakes swirling in the wind, and the frosty air smelled of Eternity...

Stopping at the snowy curb, Chris and I grabbed our suitcases and followed inside the hotel. We were greeted by a





friendly concierge, with whom I kindly exchanged a few phrases in my broken French. After that, taking the keys, we wearily dragged our bodies into the hotel room.

The first thing I noticed was the soft scent of lavender, permeating the entire room. This scent is impossible to forget! Everything was still at the highest level: rich interior in the style of the French Renaissance, exquisite furniture from Louis XVI, gilded finishes, high arched ceilings, designer columns and a multitude of ancient small details. This refinement involuntarily transported me back to bygone centuries, and the cozy atmosphere immediately plunged my mind into a trance. After taking a hot shower, I literally collapsed onto the fresh bed and instantly fell asleep.

On the hill

The next day started in a flurry. Barely opening my eyes, I glanced at the wall clock – it was well past seven in the morning.

"Wake up!" I grumbled, shaking Chris and slowly crawling out of bed.

While he hurried, I brewed a strong coffee and looked thoughtfully out of the wide snow-covered window.





"Hmm, surprisingly, the first rare November snow..."

Time flew by quickly, and half an hour later we were rushing off somewhere again.

As we left the hotel, I noticed a small minibus parked on the side of the road. Next to it stood a short, stout fifty-year-old man vigorously waving at me. It was hard not to recognize my old friend, the archaeologist Didier. Gathering a team of local workers, he promised to help, and his knowledge of the French language was just what we needed. No matter how many years passed, he remained unchanged – just as funny and lively, proudly wearing his worn-out sneakers, tattered jeans and an old gray puffer jacket. I always told him that he looked like a poor mortal who doesn't like to spend money on clothes, to which Didier chuckled quietly.

Greeting each other with warm hugs, we hopped into the minibus and set off on our way. Along the road, I was informed that the excavation permit was ready and everything was going according to plan. I breathed a sigh of relief and, of course, thanked Didier for his invaluable work.

Our journey led to 'Norman Scotland' – the insanely beautiful part of Caen, covered with millennia-old cliffs and dense forests. As soon as we entered the wild countryside, the bustling city behind us ceased to exist. Ahead, a narrow winding road stretched into the uncharted expanses. The cold,





gusty wind audaciously swayed the spruces, and somewhere, high in the sky, a lone broad-winged eagle cried out.

Twenty minutes later we stopped on a flat road at the foot of a rocky hill. By my calculations, hundreds of years ago a castle stood in this very spot, which was eventually plundered and burnt down. This story still holds the secret of a dark past. Unpleasant rumors have long spread throughout every hidden corner of the city, and at that moment superstition prevailed – everyone in the minibus fell silent and froze.

"Clearly, acting like children!" I chuckled, being the first to step outside.

The crisp silence weighed heavily on the scale. Nearby, a sad snowy lavender field stretched for miles, and somewhere not far a restless mountain river gurgled. The morning frosty dampness sent slight shivers down my spine. Popping up the collar of my coat, I began to ascend the wide path. Didier, Chris and others hurried cautiously behind me.

"Be careful!" I shouted over my shoulder. "The wind is just insane!"

With my palm outstretched before me, I slowly and determinedly climbed the hill. My breath was taken away by curiosity. Finally, reaching the flat surface, I stood up straight



and looked around. There was nothing here except snow-covered yellowed grass.

"This is magnificent!" I exclaimed in one breath, spreading my arms out to the sides.

Unspeakable beauties unfolded around me: snowy edges of an endless forest, majestic cliffs and a menacing stormy sky. The clouds were gathering more and more, and the morning seemed like evening. My head spun from the sharpness of the fresh air, and for a moment, I forgot about everything.

"What a silence, what a power! Didier! And the ground is completely petrified! Tell your guys to drive in a few iron monsters, while we play in the sandbox for a bit!"

"We'll do it!" the friend nodded affirmatively and walked away.

"You must be joking!" Chris exclaimed, barely holding onto his feet. "Look around! We're in the middle of the mountains in the center of a hurricane! Digging today is madness!"

"Madness is not digging! I won't let anyone outdo me!" I shouted, snatching a shovel from a nearby worker and moving forward through the swirling snowstorm.

Without saying a word, Chris mentally cursed, then asked for another shovel and followed me. Despite the





disagreement, I knew he understood me. Considering the time and the insane financial expenses for the current archaeological research, everything made logical sense, and the weather conditions had no right to have a say. Perhaps, Chris would have taken it all easier if it weren't for the grueling searches and calculations that led us to these windy expanses.

The tips of his slender fingers shrank from the cold, and to warm up, he tightly grasped the shovel in his hands and forcefully dug it deep into the frozen ground. Chris was a slim, smart guy. Our meeting happened completely by chance, although, as I always say: "There are no coincidences." His unruly brown hair fluttered in the wind, and his expressive gray eyes squinted from the bad weather. The black coat, jeans, and wool scarf wrapped around his neck were covered in tiny snowflakes, blending in with the painfully familiar landscape. I watched his every move, and at that moment it seemed like the snow would fall forever.

Three hours flew by as if they had never happened. In the distance, the noise of heavy excavators could be heard. I sighed with relief and tossed the shovel aside. Optimistically digging by hand was killing time, but no more – Chris was right about that.

It took everyone a good hour to haul the pile of iron



machine up the snowy hill, but everything ended successfully.

Soon, Didier began scanning the area with ground-penetrating radar, and immediately pointed out the precise site for the excavations. Technological evolution made our work incredibly easier, so Chris and I were left just to wander around the hustle and the bustle, to avoid turning into ice statues for good.

The engines of the vehicles roared loudly through the whistling gusts of wind, working as diligently as any of us. Everything was going smoothly, when suddenly a dull clank of iron against stone rang out. Didier abruptly cut the engine and jumped out of the cabin.

"Shine the light for me! It's too deep! I need light!"

"What's going on?!" I shouted, running towards the dug-up pit.

"I don't know yet, but based on the scanning, it seems to be some kind of compacted paving! We'll start clearing it, and I think by evening everything will be clear! The weather promises to be terrible, but that won't stop us, will it?" Didier grinned and adjusted his cap.

After spending two tedious hours analyzing the discovery, he straightened his back and yelled, "This is definitely part of a gate! There's also a heap of bricks here! The stone looks very much like the Stones of Cannes, which



was used to build an entire city! Visually, it seems to be from the 14-15th century!"

"So, there's a chance it's the walls of a castle?" I replied

"Exactly! Centuries of wars and looting have not left it unscathed!"

There was a pause. I squatted down and tried to peer into the darkness.

"Do you think we've found it?" whispered Chris, placing his hand on my shoulder.

"I don't know..." I answered thoughtfully.

"Hey, there's something else here! Come down, come down!" Didier shouted at the top of his lungs, pointing to a metal folding ladder next to the excavator's wheels.

I exchanged a worried glance with Chris and without hesitation, descended two meters down. Without saying a word, Didier turned me around by the shoulders, pointing to a massive wooden box protruding from the black earth. Stunned, I joyfully patted him on the back.

"Great job, buddy! I don't know what it is, but I've got a good feeling about it! Great job!"

Thousands of questions flashed through my head, my eyes went wild... In an instant, everything around me became bustling. Now the main task was to solve the puzzle of how to lift the artifact from the frozen ground. It seemed like





everything was going according to plan, but evening was approaching too quickly. The ground was getting harder, and the work was getting more intense. It was decided to take a break until morning, but I didn't want to leave – I couldn't, I dared not. After long persuasion, I finally managed to convince Chris to return to the hotel and rest, because it was absolutely dangerous to be here at night. Promising to take care of myself, I silently watched as the minibus smoothly disappeared from the view. Tomorrow, everyone will be here again, but today, Didier and I were facing an endless night under the cold November sky.

Discovery

Waking up from the chill, my eyes glanced at my wristwatch – it was almost a quarter to four in the morning. I was sitting in the frozen excavator chair in a strange way, shaking from the cold. It was still dark around. The storm had subsided, but in the depths of the wild forests the mournful howl of wolves continued.

"I should get moving," mumbled to myself, rubbing my frozen hands. "Damn, I could really use a cup of hot coffee right now!" cursed and shook my head.





Struggling to open the frozen cabin door, I jumped down and looked at Didier – he was still dozing in the second monster. I needed to do something to avoid completely freezing to the bones, so I took a shovel and decided to descend to the bottom of the pit myself. The intrigue was consuming me.

"You're just crazy, but isn't that wonderful?!" I smirked to myself.

As I thrust the sharp iron edge of the shovel into the earth's crust, I felt the black chunks sprinkling onto my boots. Swing after swing – and an hour later, I could finally make out the noticeably decayed wooden box.

"Need a hand?" Didier croaked, stretching and rubbing his groggy, crumpled face.

Before he could finish the question, he froze instantly and listened. No, it wasn't his imagination – it was the sound of a minibus. We both knew it was Chris and the workers returning.

It took at least half an hour for everyone to gather together. The sun was rising, and I continued to work below. Suddenly I heard a familiar voice:

"Waiting?" Chris smiled and gestured towards the thermos of hot coffee.

"You know how to lure me out!" I responded and





sluggishly crawled out of the pit.

One sip and I was already fluttering without wings.

"Didier, when your people be able to lift the artifact up?!"

"It looks like the wood has rotted quite a bit, but the frost is in our favor now! Give me until evening!"

"Until evening again? How many of these evenings are ahead?!"

"You know the answer yourself!" he replied, shrugging.

Hour after hour passed, pushing us closer to dusk once again. I was unusually agitated but kept my composure.

Twilight began to fall, and only the sound of the tall, century-old trees calmed my frayed nerves. I found myself switching

between amusement and sadness. What am I doing here?

Undoubtedly, thanks to Chris for taking care of me. Without his support, I would have lost my mind here, at the very least.

Finally, Didier caught everyone's attention and waved his hands. Part of the task was completed. Within a few minutes, everyone had gathered around the recess. It turned out that there wasn't just a simple box at the bottom, but a coffin. In order to lift it from the ancient grave, it was decided to construct a pallet for it, secured with ropes.

Soon, with great effort, the discovery was finally brought to the surface. I nervously stepped forward, turned on a flashlight and began to carefully examine the box. The lid had





a barely readable inscription in Latin, ending with "LAN", and rusty nails protruded from the oak boards. Didier cautiously took a screwdriver and wedged it between the layers of pliable wood. The planks creaked, and his hands trembled.

"Help me!"

Several workers immediately rushed over and set the heavy lid aside. Instant silence overcame everyone. Each person looked with disbelief at what was inside... A worm-eaten shroud covered the decapitated remains of a young man, and the head lay at his feet. I noticed horror on Chris' face but to me it was just a tragic sight. The deceased's broken bones were bound with rusted chains, and two iron spikes protruded from the ribcage. His wrists were cut off, the teeth knocked out, and a rock was savagely driven into the jaw. Only a miraculously preserved bundle of dried nettle leaves sadly lay at the bottom of the decaying box. At that moment, words were powerless.

"What happened to you back then?" I whispered, looking at Chris.

He slowly crouched down and anxiously delved into the echoes of distant haunting memories...

