

The Angel's Curse

By Scarlet Ladder

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A New Table

À Alexei Lawrence was sitting at his kitchen table. It had been a good table; it had served its purpose and had survived many spilt mugs of coffee, or more often than not, whisky. But now he feared its life might be over. One leg was made up of a stump of wood and many of Superintendent Donnelly's lengthy reports. Lawrence pretended to be deeply interested in such reports, but really he just could not be at all bothered to purchase a new table. He supposed this was why he lived alone. No self respecting woman would want to live in a flat with a table that had a crack down the middle, a strange burn mark in the exact shape of Kerry, and one leg propped up with police reports on vandalism. Oh well, there's still time, though Lawrence, I'm only thirty-seven À years old. Not quite a foot in the grave yet. Plenty of time to settle down...and buy a new table. At that moment he was possessed by a sudden burst of inspiration. He would go out and buy a new kitchen table right now. 'Oh God!' he said to himself, 'That shows youÀare À getting old. Excited about getting a new table, whatever next? Watch yourself, or before you know it, Songs of Praise'll be the highlight of your week. You'll turn into Mammy! Mind you, youÀdoÀ need a new table...' He grabbed his coat and keys and was just about to leave the house when his old Bakelite phone rang. He picked up the receiver, only to find a loud voice screaming at him at the other end,À

'YouÀhaveÀ to come down here! It's-'

'Hello Timothy.' Lawrence had had a feeling that the phone call would be from his extremely over enthusiastic colleague, Sergeant Timothy O'Connor. Poor Timothy had a tendency to blather on about nothing in particular, so Lawrence decided to get to the point. Besides, he feared he was liable to snap at O'Connor at any moment as a direct consequence of not having his morning coffee. Better to cut the call short than to have to deal with a very sensitive sergeant.

'Spare me the details O'Connor. What exactly is happening at the station that you seem to find so very amazing? And may I remind you that it is my day off? I will not take kindly to being dragged down to that insufferable place for nothing.'

Lawrence knew he was wasting his breath. O'Connor was obviously determined to make him go to work, probably to show him that an extra truckload of paperclips had been delivered. Timothy spoke again,

'Well-'

'Save me the explanation. I'm sure you'll take great delight in telling me face to face, won't you? Just remember, I may punch you if your story is not interesting enough for my liking.'

'Alright Inspector. All I'm saying for now is that it involves monks.'

The call went dead.

Now that's the scary thing, though Lawrence. He isn't scared of me any more. It was much better when I had him quaking in his over sized boots. Hmm...what to do, what to do? *And* that annoying lad mentioned monks. Which means another case. Oh *joy!*

Lawrence locked up his flat. He lived on the seventh floor, so it was to be expected he was not to happy when the cleaner informed him the lift was broken. He made his way sleepily down the long flights of stairs, and found himself beginning to people-watch. On the sixth floor, there was silence, apart from he could hear a distinct squelching noise coming from one of the rooms. On the flight of stairs between floors three and four, a man positively flew down the steps, smiling broadly. Lawrence muttered to himself 'What are *you* so happy about?' The man heard him, and answered,

'My wife's having a baby today-a boy. It's our first!'

From that instant, Lawrence regretted starting the conversation. All the way down to the car park the man went on and on about his wife and baby. This only reminded Lawrence that he had nobody. He had never known his father, and his mother had died last autumn. When he had just about sank into a deep state of depression, he reached his car. By some intolerable coincidence, the new father's car was parked right next to his own. It was made worse by the fact Lawrence's car was a just about wrecked old Ford, and his cheerful neighbour's was a brand new Porsche. Lawrence hauled himself inside his car and switched on the radio. Not good news. The usual about failed banks and war. Lawrence decided to call O'Connor. That should me up, he thought, *Ar* drive me to absolute distraction.

He dialed the number, and sure enough, Timothy picked up. Lawrence wondered whether that boy was *ever* separated from his mobile. Suddenly he had the horrible realisation that he was sounding like an old man. O'Connor was twenty-two, and Lawrence was referring to him as a 'boy'. That was a very bad sign.

'Hello, Inspector.' said the voice down the phone.

'Oh, come off it, Timothy. I'm not at work yet. In about ten minutes you can call me 'Inspector' but until then I'm Alexei. Stop trying to suck up to me. You and I both know that there is no way I am promoting you for as long as I live. Anyway, who's involved with this new case?'

Lawrence cursed as he went through a red light. If he had to go through another one of those speed awareness courses...

'What was that?' inquired O'Connor.

'Nothing, nothing...' replied Lawrence.

'Did you go through another red light?'

'None of your business. Anyway, my question was, if you remember correctly, which I don't suppose you do, who is on the team for this case?'

'Oh, right. Yes. Let me see...well, there's me and you-'

'Obviously'

'And Donnelly's in on it...'

'Oh God! It's a big case then?'

'Yeah, and it's *overseas*.'

'Whereabouts?' asked Lawrence excitedly. This could be a chance for him to get away from the drag of normal life.

'Don't get too excited. It's only in England. And I have some other information that might interest you...'

'Go on'

'Well, guess who I managed to get on the team? *Beth Doherty*.'

'You didn't! Timothy, I could hug you right now! But, much to your disappointment, I'm not going to, for fear of catching some disease unknown to man. And also for the fact that we are speaking on the telephone.'

'That's quite alright Inspec-Alexei. See you down at the station.'

Lawrence neared the police station. He wondered how in the world O'Connor had managed to get Beth on the case. Beth Doherty was Lawrence's ex-girlfriend from police training. The relationship had not ended well. In fact, it had ended with a toaster and Lawrence's fingers. But now Beth might see she had made a mistake. Not likely, but still possible. Lawrence suddenly felt good about this case. He smiled, for the first time in a while.

St Sebastian's Monastery

Â Lawrence got to his office to find another report on his desk. Since he resolved to buy a new table, this one went straight in the waste paper basket. He made himself a cup of coffee from the machine (it tasted like mud mixed with luke-warm water he thought) and went to try and find O'Connor. This was not going to be hard, as he was usually to be found nearby or with Donnelly, trying to be nice, and get promoted to a detective. Both Donnelly and Lawrence agreed that this was never going to happen, owing to O'Connor's nauseating personality. This was one of the few things the two men did agree on. Besides, Lawrence could never let that blithering idiot become equal to himself in rank. No, Timothy should be grateful he is a Sergeant, thought Lawrence.

Sure enough, O'Connor was found in his office with Superintendent Donnelly and to Lawrence's surprise, Beth Doherty. She blushed and her dark hair fell across her face when Lawrence entered. She had a wedding ring on her finger. Lawrence suddenly felt a burst of anger, then chided himself. Beth was thirty-one. She had as much right to a life as anybody else.Â

'Beth, you've done well for yourself I see! How are you?' said Lawrence, somewhat over enthusiastically.

'I'm pretty good actually. I've just got back from my honeymoon, so a new case is good. Much better than writing reports, eh Superintendent?'

Lawrence cursed under his breath. His hatred for Donnelly's reports was one of the secrets he had shared with Beth.

'Quite, quite' replied Donnelly hastily.

Lawrence clapped his hands together, 'So, how's about you tell me what this case is anyway?'

O'Connor spoke for the first time, breaking the awkward silence, 'Well, the fact is, we're not sure. The police over in England refuse to tell us much about the case until we get there. They seem to be convinced

it has something to do with the *supernatural*. But they send over someone who knows what they're talking about. He should be here any min-'

A phone call from reception interrupted him, and Donnelly answered it.

'Yes?' he said, rather impatiently.

'There's a Dr Hudson to see you, sir. Says he works at St Sebastian's Monastery. Shall I send him up?'

'Certainly. And tell him that I haven't got a lot of time.'

A few minutes later, an old and slightly dishevelled Englishman appeared at the door. They exchanged greetings and introduced each other. Lawrence was the one who decided to take charge, as O'Connor was strange at the best of times, Donnelly tended to be bad tempered (and it looked as if someone shouting 'BOO!' at the old man would kill him) and Beth, well, she tended to blush and had a nervous laugh that could scare people when not used to it. Lawrence knew these were pretty flimsy reasons for not acknowledging her, but he was still in shock at the fact she was married. He wondered what the man who was good enough for Beth to marry him was like. Was he taller than Lawrence? Did he have a sense of humour? Lawrence assumed that he did, as Beth liked to laugh. After entertaining these thoughts for a few seconds he got down to business and asked Dr Hudson why he was in Dublin.

'Well, as you know, we have a case that needs your help. It's...'

'Go on'

'Urm...well, we don't know *what* it is. You see, a few months ago, St Sebastian's Monastery in Kent was due to be demolished. The ruins had not had the best care, and there was a danger to the public. Now, I myself was very upset when this was announced. The monastery dates from the 11th century and has been part of the countryside there ever since, even after it was destroyed by King Henry VIII.'

'And what has this monastery got to do with us here?'

'Glad you asked. A few months ago, they called the bulldozers in. They were demolishing the area behind what would have been the abbott's quarters. In the wall they found the skeletons of four men. We assume they were monks as there were still scraps of material on the bodies. One in particular had a large piece of material on the shoulder. We concluded this could only be a monk's habit. Anyway, the curious thing is these four monks appeared to have been killed in exactly the same way. A broken skull, which we think was caused by a heavy blunt object, such as a lead pipe.'

'Lord, it's just like Cluedo.' muttered O'Connor. Beth laughed.

'As I was saying' said Dr Hudson, somewhat disgruntled, 'It was probably a heaving blunt object. But this in itself was not what killed them. They seemed to have been stabbed; once in the chest, and once in the thigh. What I want to find out is why they died. They were lowly monks, so why should they have died? But I think this is something I will have to find out on my own. You see, when the monks were discovered, they were found to have in their possession a slip of parchment. This parchment contained a curse on whoever moved the bodies. It stated that Judgement Day would be upon the human race if the bodies were taken from the wall. I have a copy of it here, if you would care to take a look?'

'Yes, of course' replied Lawrence. Dr Hudson opened a leather briefcase and took a piece of paper about the size of Lawrence's palm out of a plastic wallet. He put it on the table, and Donnelly, O'Connor and Beth drew in closer to see. The paper read;

He who moves the sinners from their eternal suffering

Will only bring suffering unto himself.

For the day of reckoning will be brought upon the heretics

And hellfire will destroy the earth

Dr Hudson continued, 'Nothing like the so-called 'Judgement Day' has happened yet, but many of the officers involved in the case have reported voices warning them to 'stay away'. Now you and I both know that these claims are nonsense, but now no British police force will touch it, even they are dismissing the case as supernatural.'

Lawrence spoke, 'So now they're recruiting us Irish, eh? They only want us when they can't do a job themselves. Why should we-'

'They want you, because according to them, you are the best, Inspector Lawrence. The absolute elite. All they're asking you to do is to prove this case has nothing to do with spirits or ghosts. Once you've done that, you're free to go.'

'Well, *that* changes everything, doesn't it? Don't expect me to stay in that godforsaken place for any longer than necessary, mind you. Sergeant O'Connor, Superintendent Donnelly and...sorry Beth, I don't know your rank.'

'It's okay, I'm just a lowly PC still.'

'Sergeant O'Connor, Superintendent Donnelly and PC Doherty will accompany me to sort out this mess too.'

'Of course.' Dr Hudson left.

They all departed from the office, down the stairs to a taxi, which would take them to the airport. The fact that Beth was still a PC puzzled Lawrence. She had miles more brains than that idiot Timothy, but he had got to become Sergeant. It was a fact like this that made Lawrence completely lose faith in the police force. And why should they be recruited over anybody else? All they had were a few dead monks with a spell. It wasn't as if anything that would amount to a case had happened. Yet.

Skeletons In The Wall

^ The plane journey to Heathrow did not take long, although Lawrence did not have a pleasant time on the flight, as Timothy was seated next to him and neglected to mention to anyone that he had air-sickness. This resulted in him retching into a paper bag for the best part of an hour and everybody around him being splattered with the remains of last night's shepherd's pie. Lawrence was too preoccupied thinking about the strange new case to pay attention to O'Connor's overreactive gag reflex. Did the entire Kent Police believe the disappearances were the result of a few medieval spirits? Even Donnelly, a devout Catholic, had more sense than that. Oh well, he supposed all would become clear when they reached St Sebastian's, or what was left of it.

A pathologist from the Kent Police met them at the airport. He was a jolly sort of character, quite unlike what one would have thought. He almost loaded^ the officers into the back of a minibus and talked his way to the monastery. When the five of them got there, Lawrence ^ could finally see why the ruins were going to be demolished. One of the walls of the once magnificent building was sloping at a dangerous angle, and most of the towers had fallen into the ground. As he stepped out of the minibus, Lawrence was met by a sharp looking rusty metal spike, about as long as his arm, right in front of his face. It stuck out from one of the crumbling walls at an odd angle, which could lead one to believe it had been placed there on purpose. He stooped under it and surveyed the monastery with a sense of awe. Lawrence himself had no religious conviction whatsoever, but he could not help but marvel at the intricate architecture and massive scale of the building itself. Now he was here, he felt rather sad the ruins were going to be demolished. After all, Dr Hudson has said they were part of the landscape and he was not wrong; the decrepid stones looked rather suited to the rolling hills and the grey sky. Maybe there was some way they could save the monastery after the case was over and done with. Probably not, thought Lawrence, but it's worth a try.

At that moment, the landscape changed dramatically. The green hills and grey stone were replaced by cordoned off pieces of ground and areas of sand-like rubble. By one particularly large square of rubble

there was a white plastic tarpaulin with people in white coats scuttling around like ants. So *this* was where the subjects of the enquiry had been found. Had they known when they died that their demise would be subject to international investigation, centuries later? Probably not, Lawrence decided. After all, it wasn't as if they *wanted* to be remembered. If anything, they became monks for a life of solitude, not for their bones to be picked at by a bunch of morbid scientists, and every secret of their lives to be uncovered by forensic analysis. Mind you, contemplated Lawrence, when they became members of the Church, I very much doubt that being buried in the wall of the abbot's quarters entered the equation at all.

The cheery pathologist led the four officers into the tent. As was to be expected, in the middle of the tent, laid on the ground were the four skeletons. Lawrence had no idea how old they were, and made a note to ask when the topic of conversation turned to the investigation. At the moment, O'Connor was having a lengthy conversation with a very bored Superintendent about his pet rats, Pinky and the Brain. Lawrence knew from experience that when Timothy started talking about his beloved rats, nothing short of a plank of wood to the head would stop him. Lawrence coughed, 'Could we perhaps turn to the subjects of our case?' he said in the politest possible way, 'They aren't getting any younger, you know.'

'Quite,' said Donnelly, and addressing the company in the tent, 'And I daresay none of us are either.' This resulted in a few quiet chuckles, but nothing more. Donnelly looked somewhat put out by his lack of success in the humour department, but Lawrence knew he would get over it. The jolly pathologist, who's name was Samuel Richards, led the conversation, 'You see, ' he said with great enthusiasm, 'there is absolutely no way these men could have died a natural death.' He examined the skull of one of the monks and observed, 'You see here, the top of the skull has cracked like an egg. Either this chap was extremely unlucky and managed to fall down the steps from the tower all the way down to the crypt, or he was hit over the head with a candle holder or an object of similar dimensions. The latter theory is confirmed when we look at his thigh bone. It is cracked and part of the bone has been chipped away, which suggests a dagger in the thigh,' he glanced up at his audience, 'I hope I'm not boring you, but unsolved murders never fail to fascinate me.' The company shook their heads and said of course not, they were very interested in such a subject. Richards continued, seemingly failing to notice the frequent yawns coming from above his head, 'Anyway, the curious thing is that all four monks have been killed in the same way. Our knowledge of the 14th century Church is vast, but I can find no record of such a case. This proves this was not a seremony, a sacrifice, if you like, but an intentional killing. And of course, the note that was found with the bodies...' Richards shuddered, 'I myself am not a religious man, but that curse chills me to my bones. I wouldn't like to temp fate, or medieval ghosts, for that matter.'

'Now now Samuel,' scolded Donnelly, 'All of us in this, erm, *room*, know that message is nonsense. It was obviously a Middle Age threat to anyone who found the bodies. An eternity in a firey hell would be enough to stop anybody at that time reporting the crime. The Church had real power back then, power to silence people they saw as a threat to their way of life, and power to sway the local magistrate's way of thinking. No, it was planted there after the murders so that if anybody *did* find our friends here,' he motioned towards the skeletons on the plastic sheeting, 'they would be *too damn scared* to do anything about it. All these notions of 'heretics' are absolute codswallop. At that time, anybody who didn't become a monk was considered 'not honouring their faith'. No, our only concern here is to find out why these bodies were in

the abbott's chamber wall in the first place. We do not need to worry about a stupid medieval 'curse.'

Donnelly spoke the truth, but Lawrence couldn't help thinking something more sinister than some dead monks in a wall was about to happen. At least he knew which century to start researching-the 14th. This was a time of plague, of death, when the Church had enormous power over ordinary people. This case was about to get interesting.

First Blood

After the revelations of that morning, Lawrence felt he deserved a break; away from O'Connor and his fascination with rats. He was sure it was unhealthy for a young man to have such an obsession with rodents. Perhaps it was part of being involved with the murder squad. You had to have an obsession to keep you sane. Lawrence supposed his would have to be wallowing in the misery of his life, which if not exactly keeping him sane, at least gave him something to do. Timothy seemed to have a less morbid, if not bizarre, hobby: collecting rats. He had been most upset when he had been informed he would not be able to bring any of them to Kent. Usually he had at least one on him when they were investigating. This was probably not very hygienic, thought Lawrence, but the team had learned to live with the rats, and rather missed them when they were not around.

They had made no headway with the case. So far, all Lawrence could see was that some monks had been a little bit naughty and somebody had decided to bury them in a wall. Admittedly, they had been stabbed and knocked out while this was happening, but Lawrence (or anyone else for that matter) had no interest in the investigation at all. He was a police officer, not an archaeologist. He lived for the present; the 14th century was no use to him. Lawrence's mind was made up-he would go straight to Donnelly the next morning and tell him he was off the case. Then again, he couldn't help thinking there was something more sinister at work behind that 'curse'. He had no idea what it could be though. Lawrence did not believe for one second that it had anything to do with 'Judgement Day'. How could it? He could not understand why everyone else was so scared. After all, the logic was all wrong. The police had moved the bodies a few days ago, and so far nothing had happened that even gave the slightest hint the world was going to end. If God was going to end the world because of some dead monks, Lawrence thought he would have done it sooner rather than later, or after nine hundred years he must have forgotten. God was fickle like that, though Lawrence, this curse is a win-win situation for Him. If the world does end, while it's happening, people will say, 'You see, God said He would make this happen!' and everyone will be in awe of Him. If it doesn't end, then people forget, or they don't blame God, at any rate. He is pretty much safe, as far as blame goes.

The officers checked into a hotel across the street from the monastery for the night. It was not a particularly nice hotel, but it would have to do. The police purse-strings obviously could not stretch to paying for four rooms, so Lawrence was most put out when he discovered O'Connor was sharing a room with him. Naturally, Beth got her own room, as she was the only female on the team, and Donnelly had managed to secure himself a whole suite. Whoever said the police force wasn't corrupt any more was a *complete liar*, though Lawrence.

Tired from their journey, and spending the day in a muddy field with a highly strung pathologist, the officers decided to relax by playing cards. They started off by playing an innocent game of Rummy, but by the end of the evening Lawrence found himself caught up in a very expensive poker match. The next morning he decided this was all down to Beth's persuasiveness, but everybody else knew it was because he couldn't say no to whiskey. That night he managed to lose his watch, wallet and even his shirt to Beth. Not that he minded-Lawrence knew he was still in love with her, whether she was married or not. But love her as he did, *heneeded* to find a way to get his wallet back. It had his ID in it, for Christ's sake! Lawrence then vowed never to drink again.

But that morning all memory of the poker match went out of Lawrence's mind when he saw Donnelly's face at breakfast. The Superintendent's face looked like he had been up all night. He knew this meant only one thing-a murder. He sidled up to the table, 'So, what have we got, Super?'

Donnelly sighed and gave a relieved grin, 'You know, sometime I reckon you can read minds Alexei.' He produced a heavy file from his briefcase and laid it on the table, '14-year-old girl, from Hick's Lane, just around the corner from St Sebastian's. Found dead in her bedroom at midnight last night. Definitely *not* accidental.' He coughed, 'Sorry, I always get this when I have a case. The doctor says it's a nervous tic. Speaking of which, guess who's coming to meet us today about the monks?'

'Who?' Lawrence replied.

'That Dr Hudson chap.'

'Sorry,' Lawrence shook his head, 'I don't recall-'

'The elderly man, completely obsessed with medieval history. He came to visit the station in Dublin.'

'Oh yes, I remember now! He was absolutely potty about the Middle Ages, wasn't he? So I take it we're still taking on the case of the long-dead monks? If you don't mind me asking, why? Surely this girl's death is the priority now?'

'Well, the fact is, Lawrence, I think the deaths of the four monks and the murder of this girl could have some connection,' Donnelly buttered some toast and bit into it, 'Ow, I ink ee av to inveshtigate.'

'Pardon?'

'*I said,*' said Donnelly, swallowing, 'So, I think we'll have to investigate. I didn't tell you how the girl was murdered, did I?'

'No sir, you forgot. We got carried away by Dr Hudson and your nervous cough.'

'No need to be surly, Inspector. Anyway, this girl, Abigail, was found in her bedroom. You would never guess what her injuries were-'

'Blow to the head, then stabbed in the chest and thigh, by any chance?'

Donnelly jumped to his feet, 'By God, Inspector, you're absolutely right! I had my doubts when PC Doherty suggested you for the team, but now I can definitely see why I hired you! Anyway, of course I don't believe in any of this superstitious nonsense, but the other members of this investigation do. '

'They can't believe that Abigail's death was brought about by this 'curse', surely?' said Lawrence in disbelief.

'That's exactly what they *do* think has happened. And another thing that is setting them on edge is the fact that Abigail was an Atheist. Her parents say she had refused to go to church with them for the last three years.'

'And this is relevant for what reason?' asked Lawrence.

'Honestly Inspector, do you remember *anything* at all? The so-called 'curse' states that *Judgment Day will be brought upon the heretics*'. At that time, a heretic could be anyone who didn't believe in God enough for the sovereign's liking. But the 'enemies' of the medieval Church were Atheists, without a doubt. Not that there were many at that time, of course. Which is another reason to suspect not four extremely old ghosts, but someone who is very much alive now.'

'And now the question is, what can we do about them?'

Visiting The Dead

Abigail Dawson's body was still on the bedroom floor, her glazed eyes staring blankly into space. Her parent's desperately wanted it moved, but the officers still hadn't done a post-mortem. Poor Samuel Richards was dragged in to carry it out, because although he specialised in bodies from the 11th to 17th century, he was the only pathologist they had. Besides, he was qualified enough to deal with the body of a slightly younger victim.

Richards grimaced as he checked the body for bruising and internal bleeding. He did not like the idea of a

young girl being murdered. He knew the officers could tell what the injuries were; anybody could see that; but it was a question of the time frame they had been committed in. Richards had a gift for just looking at a body and knowing how the person in question had died, and when. This was something he had developed as a student studying archaeology. Five hundred-year-old injuries were a lot trickier to spot than ones brought about two days ago. This was positively easy compared to the monks. Richards discovered Abigail's head injury almost at once, as the purple-black bruise was not concealed by her fine white-blond hair. The girl was very pretty, thought Richards. Of course, it was hard to tell what she would have been like when she was alive. He had noticed that death tended to thin out the face, and give it a blueish hue. Her lips, even with the pink lipgloss she had been wearing, were a pale purple, almost lilac. Abigail's eyes were sunken heavily into her head, and the black eyeliner and mascara accented their eeriness even more than usual. Her eyes were blank and open. They were a very pale blue, as if she had chosen their colour to match the colour of her face.

But then the china doll image was spoilt when Richards inspected her torso and legs. The stab wound in her chest had stopped bleeding, but the congealed blood had spread and seeped through her jacket. There was a considerable amount of blood on the floor beside her too. Richards had to admire the hand that had stabbed this young girl. The cut to her chest was a clean even one, going straight to the heart. The blow to the head would have already knocked her out, so she would have felt no pain. The knife (and he was pretty sure it was a knife, one with a five inch blade at least) had severed the coronary artery, leaving Abigail to bleed to death, but quickly. There was no question about it-the person who did this knew exactly what they were doing. The thigh stabbing Richards assumed was just a formality. It seemed to have been executed a good five minutes after the initial attack. The killer's signature mark, perhaps? Richards paused for a minute. What if this was not done by anything of this world? The monks' curse had been on his mind lately. There was something familiar about its words, but he could not think what. It was right on the tip of his tongue. He was scared. He had never dealt with anything to do with the supernatural before, and frankly, it scared him. He formed a cross sign across his shoulders.Â

A few seconds later his train of thought was interrupted by Inspector Lawrence tapping him on the back. 'Why did you make the cross sign just now? You were thinking about the possibility of a murderous ghost or two, weren't you?'

Richards thought for a moment. He knew Lawrence did not believe for one second that this murder was caused by ghosts, but he needed a rational excuse for his actions. Finally, after quite a long time, he said, 'Oh no, sir. Not me, sir. It's just that usually I would be in church right now, so I made the cross sign to signify I was thinking about God, and I wanted to be in His house.'

Lawrence eyed him suspiciously, 'Are you sure, Richards? Because if I catch you dragging religion into this case again, I'll have you thrown out. If this were in an inner-city council estate, and the victim had been a drug addicted single mother, you wouldn't think twice about trying to unravel the story behind it. Just because we happened to find some dead monks before this killing, it doesn't mean it is anything to do with 'the wrath of God'. It that understood?'

'Yes, sir. Very much sir.'

'Speaking of those dratted monks, I'd better get back to St Sebastian's. Dr Hudson arrived yesterday, and I haven't had chance to speak to him. When I return, I expect this post-mortem to be wrapped up. Can you manage that, or will I have to do it myself?'

'No, sir. Definitely not, sir.'

'And stop calling me 'sir'. It's Inspector. I've had quite enough of 'sir' since I visited Our Lady Primary School to give a talk on life in the police force - Â excuse me, I've got to go. Hudson wants me, apparently...Honest to God, they sounded like sheep...' And with that final remark, Lawrence departed from the room, and set off for St Sebastian's.

Philosophy

Â Lawrence got into his car. He sighed. This case was getting more complicated every minute. At first he had thought it would be a routine job; the victims had been dead for 700 years for God's sake! Now, just two days later, he had another, much younger victim, and half his team dismissing it all as a curse. He had never seen such a lack of professional attitude. But he had to get back to his original charges. After all, Richards was well capable of carrying a routine post-mortem examination, wasn't he? When Lawrence reached the path to the monastery, he parked his car and walked across the large field. He could see why Dr Hudson, though slightly insane, was so passionate about this place. The ruins reminded him of a picture postcard; everything was so perfect. The bulldozers that had been so keen to demolish this magnificent place were long gone, and Lawrence could now see St Sebastian's clearly from a distance. No wonder the monastery had no shortage of monks in its heyday. A sight like this would be enough to turn almost any person to God. But not Lawrence. He was rather sad at the fact, but he had lost his faith a while back. It was a gradual change; from not going to church as often as usual, to stopping confession, and finally losing what was left of his belief in God. Being a member of the serious crime squad did that to you. Many of the officers took early retirement, and most had some degree of depression. It was a job that just wore you down. The change was small, but it was there. The older officers were normally cynical about so-called 'morality' and were Atheists, or at the very least, Agnostic. In fact, now he thought about it, Lawrence supposed the only senior officer who openly declared his religion was Superintendent Donnelly. However, although he was a Catholic, Lawrence knew Donnelly would not stand for any of this supernatural nonsense. Donnelly lived for The Force. He had no wife or children, and as far as Lawrence knew, no siblings. It was all rather sad. Then, as he reached the monastery, Lawrence made a realisation that shocked him to his very core. He was exactly like Donnelly. Of course he had O'Connor to keep him company, but could he really call him a friend? He was really no more than a colleague who happened to keep the job more interesting by being extraordinarily stupid. His only serious relationship in the last ten years had failed, the main cause being his dedication to his work. And now Beth had gone and gotten married, of all things. Lawrence wondered what her husband was like. Fair? Dark? Funny? Serious? He realised he knew nothing of Beth's tastes. Well, she had obviously been mad enough to go out with him in

the first place. This case would be one of self discovery, he thought. Lawrence had a habit of making up summaries for cases he was involved in. He had one for this one alright:

It's not just the skeletons being dug up. It's the past, present and future.

About a hundred metres from the tent holding the monks, O'Connor appeared from behind a tree and jogged up to Lawrence's side.

'You shouldn't do that Timothy,' said Lawrence, not surprised at his colleague's childish nature, 'People will start to think you're a bit neurologically damaged. Or is that what they think already?'

O'Connor made a face, 'I'll ignore that remark, thank you very much. Hudson said you'd be coming down here soon. He's got a real sense of knowing about him, you know...' he trailed off, and wistfully looked at the sky, as if he expected to find something up there.

'His so-called 'sense of knowing' could be to do with the fact that he was the one who called me here in the first place. What does the old man want anyway? Is he still banging on about his medieval mystery?' Lawrence tutted, 'I mean, who gives a damn about these monks? Honestly, who does he think he is?'

'Well, I for one find the case very interesting. I want to know who would do this type of thing to someone so innocent in the first place...'

'From what I've heard from her parents, Abigail was far from innocent, by any standards.' said Lawrence.

'Abigail? Who's Abigail? You finally got a woman in your life?'

'Well if 'having a woman in my life' is investigating a 14-year-old girl's gruesome death, then I suppose I have.' Lawrence grinned cheekily at O'Connor's shocked face.

'But...how do you have another case? This isn't even our patch!'

'Oh, my dear dimwitted friend, you have a lot to learn yet. You see, I have reason to believe her death was no accident and- wait a minute, how could you not know about this? Donnelly explained it all breakfast. Hang on, you weren't there, were you? *Where were you?*'

'I happened to be down here, taking an interest in this case. *The one we're supposed to be investigating.* Anyway, tell me about your Abigail, then. How did she die? And how can you be sure these cases are

linked?' asked O'Connor eagerly.

They were at the tent, but Lawrence was in no hurry. After all, he was far more interested in Abigail's murder than he was in an archaeologist explaining how some monks ended up in a wall. He told O'Connor the extent of her injuries, and before his colleague could get a word in edgeways, clarified that this murder had absolutely nothing to do with the 'curse' of the monks. He hastened to make that fact clear to everybody. But if they were all like Timothy, the chances were they had no knowledge of the murder anyway. But, he supposed, Timothy really was a special case. No being could ever be around to annoy him so much, but never take anything in. Hmm...

Lawrence knew he couldn't avoid it for much longer, he had to go inside that tent and brave the overzealous archaeologists. He could never understand why some people set about troubling themselves with what happened hundreds of years ago. The arguments they must have! Lawrence had a hard enough time figuring out events that had taken place only a few days before. Everyone had different theories about every single detail. What would it be like to argue over hundred-year-old evidence? Lawrence didn't think about this for long though. As far as he was concerned, all archaeologists were mad anyway.

Hudson spotted him from the other side of the tent, 'Ah, Lawrence! Come and see this. It's absolutely fascinating! We've discovered one of the monks still has some hair on his skull!'

'Wow! Amazing!' said Lawrence through gritted teeth. Yes, archaeologists were definitely, unmistakably, positively mad.

Revelations

Dr Hudson looked intently at one of the skeletons. This was the one with hair; which was peculiar as Lawrence had always thought monks shaved their heads so they were almost completely bald. This one, however, seemed to have a full head of strawberry blond curls. They had nicknamed this particular specimen 'Goldilocks' despite Hudson's objections. He considered it not a proper name for a religious man.

Lawrence broke the silence by coughing. Hudson turned around, almost surprised that the police officer was there, even though he had spoken to him only a few seconds earlier. 'Ah, Lawrence! There you are!' exclaimed Hudson, 'I need to show you something.' He rummaged in his coat pockets for the best part of five minutes, and finally pulled out a piece of paper. Lawrence knew what it was before the professor spoke. The curse. There was no doubt that Hudson had succumbed to the belief that it was the cause of all the strange happenings in the area.

'Look,' sighed Lawrence, 'I know what you're going to say, and I don't buy it. The very idea that a piece of paper could be the thing behind the murder of Abigail Dawson is ludicrous. Believe me, I've seen the

body. There is no way a piece of paper could do that much damage. And if you believe it-

'That's the thing; I *don't* believe it. The girl was obviously murdered by something of this world.'

'*Finally!* Someone who takes my side in this affair. But, if you don't mind me asking, *how did you know?* I don't mean to say that I actually believed this nonsense of 'curses', but I don't see how you could find it all out from this paper.'

'On the contrary, Inspector. The language of the text proves that it simply *can't* date from the 14th century. I consider myself a bit of an expert in analysing historical writing, and the way the words flow tell me that this 'curse' is definitely not from anywhere near the time of this monastery. If anything, I would say it was written in the mid 1990's. What do you make of this?' Hudson asked.

'Well, it's put a stop to all this talk of ghosts, that's for sure. Though the timing of the message still puzzles me. Why would the killer wait almost twenty years to spring into action? And what's the deal with the monks? They are definitely from the 1300's, so how did this murderer know about them in the first place?'

'That was confusing me too. Until five years ago, this land was protected property. Not to mention the fact that the abbot's chamber was closed to the public.' said Hudson.

'One thing's for sure,' said Lawrence wistfully, 'we are dealing with someone who's not exactly in their right mind. If my profiling skills are correct, this killer is going to strike again. And soon.'

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