

ST ODA'S BONES

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The *GrailQuest* series of videogames is an invention of the author, and should not be taken to refer to any existing games with similar names.

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She sits by the french windows, where the light is good for reading, but she is not reading now. Ten or twenty years ago she would have flung the book as far away from her as possible, to express the violence of what she feels. But stooping to pick things up is no longer to be undertaken lightly, and she can hardly let it lie there for the help to find in the morning. Of course, someone will have to find it, someday soon. She must make sure it is found, she realises that it is her responsibility now, her reading has made her complicit. But she recoils from the knowledge, she wants to pull away from the meaning of her husband's elliptic account. Does she wish herself back to ignorance? It is an impossible question she wastes no time on. Whatever she feels, she must act on what she knows. She will face the truth, and face its consequences, and she will not flinch. At least, she adds to herself, since she is fundamentally an honest woman, she will flinch only a little.

Until this afternoon, if someone had asked her – which no one has been either astute or impolite enough to do – she would have said that she had no illusions about her late husband. He was not a warm-hearted or compassionate man. He had no patience with the failings of others. But she would also have said he always acted as he believed to be right in the eyes of God. Perhaps even in this case he did? But her mind revolts at that thought. He must have known, however closely he guarded the knowledge from himself or from others, that what he had done was wrong. Not only a crime, but a sin. For decades of uneventful marriage she had been unable to reach the thoughts and feelings behind her husband's coolly respectable exterior. Now, unwelcome and unwanted, she knows him.

What will happen? If she does nothing, will the truth come out? She has made up her mind for herself, but she must think of the repercussions for others. What little amends are possible have

to be made. There must be earthly justice as well as divine judgement. Thoughts swirl through her head: the sense of unfinished business which led her to examine the past, the diaries, her husband's dry account and the gaps in it – she has no particular memory of that night herself, though there must be others who have. She does not like to imagine one of her neighbours living for 30 years with the guilt which now sits so heavily on her, but there must be others who know. And they must be worried rather than horrified. For wheels have already been set in motion – by herself, unwittingly: the letter to the rector, the meetings of the PCC, the excavation, the coming celebrations and the bones, St Oda's bones...

The light is gone now. She gets up stiffly, replaces the book among its fellows. She draws the curtains, goes into the kitchen to heat a bowl of soup for herself, checks that the back door is locked. As she does things she has done a thousand times before, she realises she may be doing them for the last time. The awareness does not disturb her, it is restful. That feeling of things unfinished, incomplete, which has haunted her for months, is gone. There are only a few more things to be done. She will not take her knowledge to the impatient ears of the police, or the shallow concern of the present rector. She will not trouble the sympathy of her friends. There is no hurry, what has waited years can wait a few days more. She just has to make sure that what she knows will still be there when she is not. She will write to Eliot.

'They're not old.'

DI Collins watched in dismay as the archaeologist started to unpack ribs and clavicles onto his empty desk. They certainly looked ancient enough to him. It was his first day back, and he hadn't had time to read his email, let alone clutter the place, before Sally showed in John Davidson and his box of bones.

'Don't worry, I'm not laying out the entire skeleton. But I need to show you – ah, yes, this.'

Each bone, discoloured but clean, came contained in its own plastic zip-up bag, carefully numbered. Davidson held up what he said was a radius. Collins took it on trust.

'See? The epiphysis hasn't joined yet. That means adolescent, and St Oda lived to be 60.'

'I see,' Collins said, wondering who St Oda was, but relieved, 'You mean the *individual* was not old.'

'Well, that's how we first knew something wasn't right. We were expecting to find the relics, some 1200 years old, of a mature female. It's not wise, having too many expectations in my job, you tend to find what you're looking for. I probably don't need to tell you that,' the archaeologist added, with almost a smile.

'But one doesn't discount the probable as an explanation,' Collins said drily, 'So this isn't a mature individual. And?'

'Probably not female, either. And the remains certainly aren't 1200 years old. At most 60, but likely younger, our man in the lab says. He's not very good with dating recent things, but it's definitely murder, not archaeology.'

Collins made a last-ditch attempt at an innocent explanation.

'Mr Davidson, I understand these bones were found in a churchyard. How can you be sure we are dealing with murder?'

'Not in a churchyard,' Davidson specified, 'In the *church*. Buried beneath a heavy shrine that has been moved from its place only

twice in the last century. That should give you something to go on, by the way, there will be records. But what makes me so sure he or she met a violent end is that the ulna has snapped but never healed. That, and the crack in the skull.'

Owen Collins looked at the sorry remains spread out on his desk. They were thin, fragile, *young* bones. Recently dead bones. He picked up the phone.

'Sergeant Holmes? Send that new DC up with some coffee, will you? This may take some time. Thanks. Oh, and see if you can find someone with a free moment to take a body to the pathologist.'

Ignoring his colleague's spluttered question, Collins turned back to his visitor. 'Start at the beginning, please, Mr Davidson. How did you find the body?'

He sat back to listen. This wasn't quite how he had expected his first day back to turn out.

'We were doing a dig at St Oda's church,' Davidson explained, 'A small excavation, just myself and two students. I wasn't supposed to be there at all, Cordelia Walden from the university here was to be in charge, but then they found those Roman remains at the rescue dig for the new parking lot in Rivergate, and she has been busy there. I'm an expert on iron age pottery, so not really what was needed, but there are few enough medieval archaeologists around, and I know how to organise a dig, after all, so there I was. Are you sure you want to know all this?'

'At the moment I don't know anything at all, so I've no idea what might be relevant. Please tell your story.'

'It's just that I tend to go on a bit, when it comes to my work,' Davidson shrugged. 'All right. St Oda's church was first built a thousand years ago, and they are planning all kinds of celebrations, an exhibition, a special service, that sort of thing. Someone decided it would be a good idea to find out what was buried beneath the shrine. I don't know who, of course, I came

in long after it was decided. But whoever it was can't have known what we would find, could they? Sorry, doing your job for you.'

'Next time you find some truly medieval remains I'll come and lend a hand,' Collins said. He was beginning to like this man, and beginning to be interested.

There was a muffled knock on the door, and a fresh-faced Detective Constable entered with two cups of coffee, milk and sugar, and a curious expression.

'Thank you. It's Robbins, isn't it? That'll be all.'

'Sir.'

Davidson took the coffee but declined the rest. 'The whereabouts of the relics of St Oda were unknown,' he continued, 'But when the apse was retiled the workmen noticed there was a rubble-filled space under the saint's shrine, and someone suggested that the remains could have been hidden there during the civil war to keep them safe from Cromwell's men. And even if they weren't, it would be interesting to find out what was buried there, and when.'

'When was the apse retiled?'

'In the eighties, I think. Aidan Hollis will be able to tell you that. He's the rector at St Oda's.'

Collins made a note of the name. 'So what did you find beneath the shrine?'

'The rubble covering the crypt was definitely medieval. There were some interesting sherds. Interesting to me, that is. And, with hindsight surprisingly near the surface, we found human remains. It was Laura Fox who dug them out, she's very careful, very thorough. The bones appeared slender enough to belong to an eighth-century woman, and the people at the church were very excited. You may have seen the headlines in the local paper - 'Saint Reappears After Thousand-Year Absence' and the like. But when our man in the lab finally got around to examining the find, the first thing he told us was that it

probably wasn't St Oda we had exhumed.'

'This dig was some time ago then?'

'Over the summer. The students are back in the classroom now. So am I, for that matter.'

'So the shrine will have been moved back into place?' Collins asked, with an inward sigh.

'Yes, I suppose so. Oh, you mean you'd need to examine the place yourself?'

'I have no doubt you have been thorough in your excavation, but scene of crime investigators tend to look at different things than archaeologists. Yes, we'll have to examine the place where the body was found. Usually we prefer to be the first to examine it,' he added ruefully.

'I'll make sure you get every record, every photograph we have.'

'Thank you. You can start by telling me if there was anything strange you noticed during the excavation, anything at all.'

But the archaeologist hadn't found anything which could shed light on the identity of the buried individual, or the circumstances of death. The shrine had been moved from its place for more than a year when the chapel was restored in the twenties – much too early, if the remains were really no more than 60 years old – and for a few months in 1983, when the choir and apse were retiled. So in all likelihood someone, one day between August and October of that year, had decided to bury a body under the saint's shrine. Was that because it just was the nearest convenient hole in the ground, he wondered, or was there a ritual significance to the choice?

DS Holmes had clearly been waiting for Davidson to leave. 'What's all this about a body then?' she demanded, coming in without knocking.

He explained about the excavation and the 'man in the lab'. 'Nothing to do until we have the pathologist's take on it,

though,' he concluded, 'So how are things here? That new DC?' She shrugged. 'Early doors. He started only a month ago, you know. Two years uniformed in Swindon, no black marks against him. Apparently he passed the exams with flying colours, but I've seen no evidence of brilliance yet. He's a nice enough boy, I suppose.'

'You don't sound convinced.'

'It's just that he still has everything to learn. And I mean *everything*. If he'd be any greener you could use him as a traffic light.'

He looked at her. 'Sometimes I think you spend too much time with Bridget, you're beginning to sound like her. What age are you Sally?'

'I know, I know, he's only five years younger than me. Perhaps it's just that I was so used to working with Chandra. But you'll see what I mean about Robbins when you've been around him for a few days.'

'So, anything else going off they don't put in the crime reviews?' 'I'm not sure. Old Biddy's being secretive about something, and she's been away a lot lately. But apart from that, nothing much has changed.'

'Back to work, then. Let's see what we can make of this excavation,' he said, handing Davidson's folder to DS Holmes. Even a glance at the photographs and plans had shown him how detailed they were. If they could find out who their body was, maybe he wouldn't need to ask DCI Flynn to authorise an expensive second excavation.

Just over a year ago, Owen Collins had been transferred to Oxford, where they were always short-staffed, without being given much choice over the move. He'd never been quite sure whether the transfer had been meant as a punishment. His last big case before the move had earned him a lot of praise for solving a whole slew of crimes in one go, but also much

disapproval for the decisions he had made. He wasn't proud of those decisions, they had been potentially very dangerous to people he loved, but he couldn't honestly say he would act more wisely next time. He was impulsive, and he was very much aware that this would hinder more than help him in his police career. Bridget Flynn had always given him the benefit of the doubt, and pressed for his promotion when DI Naismith retired, but his experience with less indulgent superiors in Oxford had taught him that such confidence was rare. Back under her command he hoped to show the DCI that it was also justified. But whatever the reasons behind his removal, he was glad to be back at his own desk. His old enemy Sergeant Walter had been promoted and transferred away, while Sally Holmes was now a Detective Sergeant. It would be good to work with her on this new case. Or old case. There might not be anything to find, with a body that obviously had been in the ground for years. But cold cases did get solved occasionally. Collins recalled another academic coming in here with a tale of a decades-old crime. But better not think of that. He went to see if DCI Flynn was in, so he could tell her about the body in the church.

3

She was 47 today. She didn't have anything special planned, just her usual Wednesday night with Bridget. She might invite some friends and family later, but today she had set aside entirely for herself. She was up early, glad to have the day stretch calmly in front of her. She had known for a while she would need time to think things through, and why ignore the obvious milestone? So October 8 it was, 47 years from the beginning and God knew how many from the end. She was

realistic enough not to expect to end the day with the solution to all her problems. She knew she would do very little thinking that appeared to be actually to the purpose. And she hadn't gone around telling others of her resolution, just known that from today, she would consider what was going to happen next. She had been content – no, *happy* – in her life and her job for years, but she had become aware of a dissenting voice over the past few months. Yes, she liked her job, but wasn't the department practically running itself now? Did she want to do it for the next twenty years? And beneath that practical question: did she still believe Social Sciences as it was taught now was something she could contribute to? Or wanted to contribute to?

Anyone observing from the outside wouldn't have known that so much was going on in Henrietta's head. She often tried it, looking at herself from the outside, she did it now, eating a simple breakfast of toast and tea while she read the birthday messages on her laptop. What would an onlooker see? A slight smile as she read a friend's email, a slight frown as she deleted one from someone she'd rather forget. A calm, unhurried exterior, a face that had always been pretty enough, and wasn't changing much with age. If asked to describe her, people called her intelligent and friendly. The intelligence she couldn't deny, but sometimes she had her doubts about the friendliness. Well-behaved, certainly, and not quick to anger, but she knew herself to be less kind than her face implied. It had always been like that. Even when little, she had been the good one while her elder sister got into trouble, and had known that it was simply because Karen *looked* guiltier, it had nothing to do with what they actually got up to. At eight, at twelve, at fifteen, Henrietta got away with things by her sweet face and good manners, and it was rare for someone to guess at the thinking that went on behind them. Later she had wondered if it had been this discrepancy between appearance and self-image which had

ultimately determined her choice of career. Certainly her interest in people's motives, plain and hidden, had been born early. Well, now it was time to examine her own, in her own way. She would start with some heavily symbolic cleaning up. She really needed to do something about the garden, but she would have to get someone in for that. Probably she could find some student to help her out, a plentiful supply of casual labour being one of the advantages of university life. Meanwhile, she would start indoors herself. Her desk was untidy, and the untidiness was spreading all over the study. Sorting through the books and paperwork might give her an idea of what was important to her right now, and if that didn't work at least it would make the place look better. And I won't tell anyone how I spent my birthday! she told herself, closing her laptop with a smile that was entirely inward.

By midday she was sitting in her markedly neater study, absorbed in an article about madness and criminality Bridget had sent her months ago. There was a time, a long time ago, when madness had fascinated both of them. Now Bridget pursued her interest in criminality through her career in the police, and Henrietta had long given her attention to the psychology of the everyday. She wondered vaguely how accepted 'madness' was as a concept these days. Her profession had certainly become more mealy-mouthed since they were students, as well as more precise. It was probably quite a bold step of this author to splay the word across a Sunday supplement. She even had her doubts about 'criminality' now she came to think about it. But it was a fascinating article. Wrongheaded, but fascinating. It would give her something to mull over while she took her walk. There was a fine autumn-grey sky today, with a little gusting rain, but that wouldn't hurt her. Lunch first, and then a good long walk into town.

On North Abbey Road she was hailed by Mary Butler, 'Hello, Henrietta, happy birthday!'

She waved her acknowledgement, but didn't stop to chat. She'd see Mary tomorrow anyway. Turning her face into the wind, she set off along Holywell Road towards town.

Although she had always felt the name Henrietta belonged to someone more stern and statuesque than she would ever be, she was used to it now. As a child she had been Etty, but she disliked the diminutive, and when she went to her new school at eleven she had insisted on her full name. She had refused to listen to any attempt to shorten it until, amused by its playfulness, she became Harry to her university friends. Few called her that now. Robert had always called her 'darling', a generic she came to detest heartily, and which presumably had been transferred, together with his affections and lack of spine, to the second wife. And there you had it. She was 47 and single, and she knew there were enough people who would look no further for the cause of her present dissatisfaction. Women her age were expected to feel that way, and she seemed to be right on schedule. She hadn't quite reckoned with the amount of discontent, though, or the impatience of 'is this it?' And it had dismayed her a little to find that one of her married friends, whose husband was some years older, was already looking forward to retirement. She told Bridget this over dinner, knowing her friend would be equally appalled.

'Retirement? Not before I'm Chief Superintendent,' Bridget said decidedly. 'On the subject of which: the Superintendent at county headquarters *is* retiring. I talked it over with my counterpart at Salisbury, and I've applied for the job yesterday. It would normally be a post for someone who has the rank already, but I thought I'd put my name into the hat.'

'That's great Bridget. Do you think you stand a good chance?'

'I've not heard who else has applied. But they can't promote me where I am, the station here's too small. And I flatter myself my

superiors do intend to promote me at some point.'

'Would it mean moving house?'

'Probably. I would prefer to stay here if I could, but I'll move if I have to.'

Henrietta would be glad for her friend if she got her promotion, but hoped she wouldn't have to move far. Wednesday dinner had been such a feature of both their lives for years, it would be strange to have to break the habit.

'At least you always have a chance of promotion, another step forward. There aren't any forward steps in my job. And not having a husband with a generous pension scheme, I have nearly 20 years of working life ahead of me.'

'You could always *find* a husband with a generous pension scheme,' Bridget suggested. DCI Flynn's own husband was rarely in evidence. Henrietta knew they got along splendidly by seeing each other no more than twice a week.

'Oh, I don't want to stop working, even if husbands were so easily caught as you suggest. I just wonder whether I want to go on doing this job.'

'Of course you don't, you'd hardly be wondering otherwise, would you?'

'Very sharp, detective.'

Bridget topped up their wine. 'But is there trouble? Or just a general feeling?'

'Oh, just general. I'm beginning to feel every year is like the other, and that is not a good sign. But I'm nowhere near a crisis yet. And you? Everything working out at the station?'

'We've had a little shake-up, as a matter of fact. You recall I told you DI Walter left? Well, they've posted Owen Collins back.'

Bridget and Henrietta, friends since their student days, had determined early on in their respective careers that they would both need someone to talk to about all the confidential, professional stuff they weren't supposed to outside work, and that everything that passed between them about this would go

no further. The agreement had held for more than twenty years, and Henrietta knew all about her friend's CID colleagues. This sounded like an interesting development.

'But that's good, isn't it?' she said, 'I know you liked him.'

'Sure and I do. But he's also, I don't know, to call him a liability is too strong. Perhaps 'unpredictable' is better. I'm never quite sure how to handle him.'

'Explain, explain.'

'There's always something strange about his cases. I mean, he works by the book, when you check, and he gets results, and still I can't put my finger on how he does it. Last year he spent half his time during a murder enquiry chasing a cold case that had nothing to do with it, and just when I thought I would have to pull him off the case he turned around and caught the killer red-handed. Putting him on a case is like putting him and it both in a room, closing the door, and waiting to see what comes out alive. It might work,' she added with a wry smile, 'But it looks bloody odd writing it up for the Chief Constable.'

'Maybe,' Henrietta told her friend, 'But I envy you nonetheless. I could do with some unpredictability right now.'

As she saw Bridget out, Elly Hollis, the rector's wife, came out of the garden gate of number 14 opposite. To Henrietta's surprise she came over to talk.

'Have you heard? Valerie Harwood has passed away yesterday.'

So that was what Mary had wanted to tell her that afternoon.

'No, I didn't hear. Was it very sudden?'

Elly nodded. 'Very. In fact – don't say this to anyone else – but the doctor has called in the police, they think it may not have been natural.'

'You mean...?'

Elly lowered her voice even further. 'Suicide. Shocking, I know.'

Henrietta had known Valerie slightly, as a sanguine old lady. Taking her own life did seem shocking. While Henrietta in

theory would uphold everyone's right to do with their life what they wanted, real instances of suicide made her shy away. How desperate, how forsaken must one feel, to come to that? But perhaps it hadn't been like that, perhaps Mrs Harwood, at 76, had learned she was ill, and had decided not to prolong her suffering. Of course, Elly would regard that as even worse. Suicide was still a sin, although the church would probably not be callous enough to refuse her burial in holy ground. Valerie had been a rector's wife as well, she would have hoped for salvation. Henrietta went back inside, all the optimism of the morning gone.

4

Jake loved GrailQuest. Ever since he had discovered the game two years ago he'd been playing it almost daily. There was something about its slightly out of true fantasy world that appealed to him more than any other game. He didn't know how faithful the makers had been to the legend it was based on, but he liked what they had done with it. He usually preferred video games that were about the story more than the battles – although GrailQuest had plenty of those – and sometimes he would just wander about exploring the virtual world instead of going on a quest. That was why he had chosen a Knight Errant as his avatar, even though this did oblige him to rescue the occasional damsel in distress, which he always felt wasn't quite him. As a newbie he had assumed the damsels were just there for decoration, like the Black and Red Knights who periodically popped up to challenge you, but they actually provided clues to the quest you were on, or useful magic tricks you could learn. And, just sometimes, they turned out to be some other gamer's avatar, whose sole purpose it was to thwart your progress. Last

year, after he had been shot, after his grandfather died and his aunts were arrested, he had spent days and days just wandering about the game-world, responding to every challenge, picking up every gauntlet. He had been refusing to deal with the real world, he knew that well enough, it was escapism in its purest form. But it had been good, too. He sometimes thought about those days of total immersion as something he would like to do again someday. And it was good to have a place – even virtual – to escape to. When he thought about it, it was actually quite wonderful that that worked. The human brain was a strange thing. And he had badly needed to escape. Although he had run away from home at seventeen, and hadn't kept in touch with most of his large family for years, he still became entangled in the aftermath of the police enquiry. Now his great-uncle, two of his aunts, and the uncle who had shot him had been convicted, his father had moved to France with his new wife, his mother had taken his youngest brother to live in Scotland, and the house he had grown up in had been put up for sale. There was nothing to stop him resuming his old life, partying and making his money by selling sex and drugs. But he had always known that he couldn't go on doing that forever, and his own brush with violent death had made him think it might be better to get out while he could. When his father had offered to sub him and his two sisters through university he had accepted the offer gratefully. So here he was, a psychology first-year with an allowance, a bedsit and a job stacking shelves in Waitrose, rather than a rent-boy who always knew where to lay hands on the latest party drug. He had thought it would be easy. He had no trouble keeping up academically, he made an effort to get along with his fellow students, the job was a useful addition to his income. But if he were honest, most of the time he felt as if he was watching another Jake acting in a play. It wasn't quite convincing. Now, a few weeks into his first term, the actor was starting to argue

about his lines. The coursework was laughably simple, this rebellious voice said, his fellow students were predictable and – what was the word? – callow, and since he was careful with money, he didn't really need the job. But what else could he do? Sometimes Jake feared that if he didn't have to get up to go to a lecture or to work, he would never bother to get up again. Then, telling himself not to be so dramatic, he would get his stuff together and go out in search of something to learn or something to laugh about.

Wednesday morning. Satchel, iPad, books. Bus in ten minutes. Lecture with Miss Dacre. Lunch in the student union. Seminar with Mr Lyall. Stacking shelves till six. Spend the evening gaming or reading. Eat. Sleep. Repeat. Just your normal student really. He was sure a better actor would have brought it off.

5

As far as Bridget Flynn was concerned, the only legitimate reasons for not showing up for a CID meeting were being in hot pursuit or at death's door. It was therefore strange to find that she wasn't there herself on Thursday morning to talk them through their current cases. When she hadn't arrived by ten past nine Collins got the meeting going himself. The DCI turned up halfway through his explanation about the excavations at St Oda's. 'Sorry, important phone call,' she said, 'Do go on.'

After Collins had brought his colleagues up to speed about the body in the church, Sergeant Pardoe rose and stuck a photo of a white-haired lady on the board.

'Valerie Harwood, widow living in Abbey Hill, 76, suicide. Or made to look like suicide,' he said briskly. 'She died from an overdose, which was most likely self-administered.'

'Why aren't you sure?' Bridget asked.

'Liquid left in the glass was full of barbiturates, some of them no longer on the market. She probably had them in the house, the medicine cabinet was full of old bottles and packets, she evidently wasn't the type that threw things away. Prints on the glass were hers, no others, but the bottle had been rinsed and placed with the other stuff meant for recycling, and the foil from the pills had been shredded and put in the bin, impossible to tell if there were prints and whose.'

'The tablets were definitely dissolved in the drink?' DS Holmes wanted to know.

'Yes, that's one of the things that made me suspicious. You can't force someone to swallow, but you can trick them into swallowing.'

'But with that amount, she must have noticed something funny about the taste, even with whisky,' Sally said.

Pardoe looked unconvinced. 'There was a lot of whisky. She may not have noticed until it was too late.'

'Was she a habitual drinker?' Owen asked him.

'No. She'd been given the bottle at Christmas, and only opened it when her daughter visited in the summer. I've spoken to the daughter. And there were no other whisky bottles in the recycling.'

'Still...' Sally began.

'I know, I don't need you to tell me it's not enough to build a case on. But the old lady owned the house, apparently, it would fetch a tidy sum, and her son's business isn't doing that well. This probably saved him. And he's far too cheerful for a man who's old ma has just died.'

'Lucky.'

'Or not. But what really bothers me is that she didn't leave a note. She seemed a careful type, methodical, did things properly. I'm sure she would have left a note, if she really killed herself.'

'Could have been impulsive, some suicides are,' Sally said.

'Impulsive? Washing up the bottle beforehand?'

He had a point there, Collins thought. 'Was she upset about anything? Was there a reason?'

'We did look at that, of course. Her grandson said she seemed thoughtful, but none of her friends from the village noticed a thing.'

'Not much to go one either way, then.'

Pardoe shook his head ponderously. 'I know it comes to little, but I can't get rid of the feeling that there's something wrong about this.'

'Well, I'll be investigating in Abbey Hill soon enough. I could slip in the odd question,' Collins said. If even the stolid Pardoe was having hunches, they probably were worth paying attention to.

After the CID meeting, DCI Flynn followed him into his office. 'Collins, there's one more thing. This isn't official yet, but we have a blackmail case, marital infidelity, rather high profile.' She closed the door behind her. 'I spoke to the victim socially, he doesn't want the blackmailer to know he's gone to the police, thought they'd be easier to catch if they believed he was going to pay up – clear thinking for someone in that situation. So he just handed me this phone with the information on it. I'm now handing it to you.'

He must have looked a question about this odd procedure, for she smiled and said, 'I thought it was the least I could do, given the risk he's taking, not to share it with the whole station.'

'Who's the victim?'

'Councillor Delamere.'

Ah. The popular Lib Dem councillor who, despite the best efforts of the press, so far had managed to avoid being tainted with scandal. Blessed with good looks, engaging manners, and an intelligent wife, he purposely presented himself as a politician with a conscience. The downside of that was of

course that his voters would not easily forgive him if he was caught screwing his secretary.

'He's giving a dinner party on Sunday,' Bridget continued, 'He has invited me and my husband, since we know each other slightly, with the idea that we could talk over the case and see what's to be done. Only I'll be at that conference in Brighton over the weekend, so I want you and Sally to go. Just see what he has to say, and then we'll decide how to proceed. I've already briefed Holmes. Here you are.' She put the phone on his desk and made for the door. 'And watch that clip only once!'

With his superior's injunction ringing in his ears, Collins sat down to examine the evidence. Will Delamere was the man of the moment in local politics, and he was widely expected to stand for parliament in the next election. He had made himself very popular in town by pushing for more affordable housing where his colleagues preferred to build villas for rich out-of-towners. The son of a West-Indian father and a mother who was pure county, a large and diverse set of voters claimed Delamere as their own, and he was careful not to antagonise those who did not. That someone was trying to fracture the perfect image was not surprising, that they had found something where years of digging by the press had not was perhaps more so.

The information on the phone consisted of a short covering note to DCI Flynn and an email message with a video attached, saying Delamere would be contacted again soon. The video was a soundless fragment of a few minutes, filmed from a stationary camera. It showed what looked like a hotel bed, on which the very naked and clearly recognisable Delamere was going at it hammer and tongs with an equally enthusiastic youth.

All right, so maybe not his secretary.

6

The village of Abbey Hill, owing its name to a large church set on a modest elevation, had imperceptibly changed into a suburb over the last two decades, housing professionals from town and lecturers from the university. But it still had a green, a pub and a primary school, and a secondary school once private, now comprehensive. The university campus, built in the nineties, abutted the village on the north-east. St Oda's church was its greatest, perhaps only, claim to distinction. Much too large for the parish, its solid presence spoke of a grander past. Collins' professional eye took in the old fabric of the building as well as the bright signs of recent activity, the modern parish rooms on the Rood Street corner, the children's drawings adorning the white-washed walls inside. John Davidson was waiting for him in the nave.

'The shrine is in the apse, you said?' Collins asked, as they shook hands.

'You're well-informed,' Davidson said, finding he didn't need to explain the lay-out of the church.

'I can tell an apse from a transept,' Collins replied, leading the way to the former. He didn't really want to think about how he came by that knowledge, and stuck to policemanlike questions.

'Had the shrine been moved before your arrival here?'

'Yes, it had been placed some way to the south, and the layer of tiles beneath it removed. Directly under that was rubble packed with sand, on top of a supporting arch from the previous building.'

'That shrine must weigh a ton, are rubble and sand strong enough to support it?'

'No, you could see where the floor had subsided a bit. But of course it was filled in again after we finished.'

'I was afraid of that. Poured concrete into the hole, did they?'

'Probably. I'm afraid so.'

'Lovely. I've never seen what concrete does to evidence before. To get back to my original question, you say the floor subsided. In your professional opinion, did this subsiding occur when the space was first filled in, or after the retiling 30 years ago?'

'I'd say it was recent. I don't think the shrine was placed over the rubble right away, it may have had a hundred years or more to set. Whereas it was placed back immediately after the disturbance 30 years ago.'

'Sounds logical. So this is it?'

St Oda's memorial was a heavy limestone coffin on an equally heavy base, with ornamentation Collins reluctantly identified as Perpendicular.

'The artefacts you found in the – shall we call it the crypt? – have you dated them?'

'Not precisely, but fourteenth-century at the latest, we believe.' So the archaeologist was right, and the shrine post-dated the filling in of the crypt. But that didn't get him anywhere with the more recent find.

'So there was nothing later? There must have been something to indicate the bones were buried in the twentieth century, not the twelfth.'

'We would have noticed if there was, I promise you. Maybe not single hairs or fibres like your CSI team would, but we'd have bagged anything larger. There were no fabric remains, no metal – coins or denim studs or the like – just the tatters of a winding sheet.'

'A winding sheet?'

'That's what we assumed, naturally. Plain linen. It will probably turn out to be a modern bedsheet now.'

'So they buried him wrapped in nothing but a sheet? That's strange.'

'They?' the archaeologist asked shrewdly.

'It would take a lot of nerve and organisation, not to mention hard work, to bury a murder victim in a church on your own.'

There may have been only one killer, but I wouldn't be surprised to find that there was an accomplice. We may know more after the autopsy. Oh, and we'll need that winding sheet.'

'They're only small fragments, but I'll make sure you get them.'

'And I would like to speak to the person who actually uncovered the bones – Laura Fox, you said? – to hear what her impressions were. Can you give me her contact details?'

'Of course. Incidentally, I did inform the rector when we found out that the remains were recent, and told him what I intended to do with them. So people here may already know about the find.'

'I suppose that was inevitable. After several decades I was hardly going to have surprise on my side anyway. Thank you Mr Davidson. I'll look around here some more.'

He hoped he hadn't given the archaeologist the impression that he had a special sixth sense which could sniff out information from a crime scene just by walking around it. He just thought that this would be as good a place as any to think about how to get on with this enquiry. There was nothing much he could do when he didn't know yet who the victim was, besides interviewing the people who had found the remains. And he supposed he should speak to the vicar, before strange stories started to circulate around the parish.

It was quiet in the church, there was just a middle-aged woman Hoovering the choir and a murmur of voices from the vestry. Collins turned around from contemplating the shrine when the voices got closer, ready to explain his presence if necessary. But what he saw stopped him from coming forward with a professional smile and enquiries after the vicar's whereabouts. He hurriedly pretended to be interested in the stained glass window in the next chapel along – which was quite a horror – and checked from the corner of his eye to see if they had noticed him. But the two men who had come from the vestry were too deep in conversation, leaving Collins time to regain

his composure. He strolled on through the ambulatory, all thoughts of murder gone from his mind. *What the hell was Dominic doing here?* From the shadow of a pillar, he eavesdropped unashamedly.

'We may have a problem,' a thin, severely suited man was telling Dominic, 'I think I had better tell you, the rector got a call from that archaeologist – what was his name? – Davidson. Apparently the skeleton they found cannot possibly be St Oda's. Of course I have informed the bishop at once.'

'So that means no relics for the exhibition. How do they know?' Dominic asked.

'Apparently they are too young. In fact, they have handed the remains over to the police.'

'As recent as that? But then how did they get under the shrine?' 'They may be as much as 30 years old, Davidson said, the shrine was last moved back then. Well, I don't see how else a body would have got under it. But I really don't know anything about it. What I mean to say is, if you are not to have the relics in your exhibition, that changes things.'

'Yes, yes, I suppose.'

'Of course, I have never found the idea of showing the relics quite comfortable. It reeks too much of Rome. But in an historical context, one must admit, they were just the thing.'

'Oh, I agree. Excuse me, I think that is someone I know.'

'I'll see you at the meeting on Tuesday then?' the other man asked, sounding a little put out at what must have come across as a feeble excuse.

'Of course. Until Tuesday.' Dominic turned around, and waited until the ecclesiastical type was out of earshot. 'I can see you, you know.'

'Dominic. What are you doing here?' Collins said ungraciously, stepping out of the shadow.

'And hello to you, too. I'm the consultant historian on this rigmarole. St Oda's Millennium. They turned up at the

university asking for a medieval historian, so James shook his head fastidiously and cited his imminent retirement, and here I am, on the committee.'

'I see. I'm afraid I'm going to have to talk to the lot of you.'

'So you're here about the body they found under the shrine?'

'Yes, I might as well tell you, it is probably a murder case.'

'So I was just told. That was the diocesan representative you saw over there, Mark Ecclestone. But the bones were old, weren't they? 30 years, he said. So what's it to do with us?'

'I hope nothing. But I have to start somewhere,' Collins said.

'I suppose so. Why you, though? Last I knew, you were in Oxford.'

'I got transferred back to my old job. I've only been back since yesterday.'

He felt a need to reassure Dominic that he hadn't been back for ages without letting him know. But would he have let Dominic know if he hadn't bumped into him here?

'Do you like being back?'

'Oxford was all right. But this, yes, it feels more like home. To get back to the case, can you give me some background? I talked to the archaeologist in charge of the dig, but he couldn't help me with what it was all for.'

'Sure. Come into the vestry, and I'll tell you what I know.'

Collins followed him into the untidy room off the south transept. 'So what's your job here, exactly?' he asked.

'I'm the historical conscience of the outfit. The exhibition is supposed to show the history of the abbey as a religious centre – convent, pilgrimage site, parish church – and I'm there to make sure anachronisms like 'religious centre' don't obtrude too much, and explain the aspects of medieval religion which sound plain weird today.'

'Such as?'

'Oh, the habit of digging up saintly men and women from their graves to see if they were holy enough to make relics. By the

time someone mislaid St Oda's bones half a millennium ago she had been buried three times already.'

'There's a thought. If the bones they found here weren't St Oda's, where is she?'

'We really don't know. And that's not so strange after 1200 years. Anyway, I joined the project and I got interested despite myself. But that's not why you are here. Do you want me to do a rundown of the committee?'

'Go ahead.'

'First there's Reverend Hollis and his wife. They are a no nonsense kind of couple. He's mostly concerned with maintaining the church as a vital function of village life, and St Oda's Millennium is part of that. Elly does the PR for the project, the leaflets and posters you see are her work. Wait, let me give you one. She normally works at the library in town, but she'll be on maternity leave soon. Then there's Ecclestone, who you just saw, officially he's something to do with the use of church buildings in the diocese. I think the bishop dispatched him here mainly to see that we don't turn St Oda's into a secular show. Ecclestone is more Anglican than the queen, and he and Aidan Hollis don't always see eye to eye on matters liturgical. He's also handy with computers, which is just as well. The parish website is an amateur affair, and he set up a new one for us just for the Millennium, which looks much better.'

'I'll have a look at that.'

'Then there's Gabriel Butler from the PCC, he's an old hand at this kind of committee. He has lived in the parish all his life, and *his* great enemy is Miranda Weir, the lay reader. She's a newcomer to him, been here only ten years or so, and what's worse, she has rather new-age tendencies. Organises moon circles in the parish rooms, that sort of thing. Oh, and there's Jessamy of course, Jessamy Baker who conducts the choir. She is an atheist.'

'You do realise you've described them all in church terms?'

'I'm sorry, if you wanted a summary of their criminal tendencies, you should have said.'

Collins smiled. He'd almost forgotten that teasing way they used to talk to each other.

'Seriously, though,' Dominic added, 'I know them through the church, and naturally we're all a bit preoccupied with the work of the committee. What else can I tell you? 30 years ago I was a six-year-old in Canterbury.'

'For a start, I would like to know whose idea it was to go digging in the first place. The vicar, was it?'

'The *rector*. I think so. But all that had been organised before I became involved.'

'I'll ask him. Right. Well, thanks for the explanations. I'd better go and get my enquiry under way.'

He should, he realised as he walked out of the church, have added something like 'I'll see you around' or 'let's keep in touch'. But then, Dominic hadn't said anything like that either.

Before going to the Rectory he looked at the leaflet. Building work on the replacement of the Anglo-Saxon church of St Oda had started in 1014. The new church had been enlarged in later centuries when its attractions as a site of pilgrimage demanded a more impressive Gothic edifice, but the Romanesque foundations survived, and now celebrations were afoot for St Oda's Millennium. A special service would be held on the saint's feast day, and the diocese had authorised an exhibition in the chapels and ambulatory to celebrate the life of St Oda. Artefacts unearthed during the recent excavations would be shown, together with mementoes of Abbey Hill as a pilgrimage site. For the first time in many years, the public would have access to the crypt, where St Oda's holy spring still welled up. It all looked completely innocent and quite professionally done. At least, he thought, no one who had argued in favour of the excavation could have known what was buried in the church.

Aidan Hollis looked only a few years older than Collins himself, which shouldn't have been surprising since Dominic had told him the rector's wife was expecting. But somehow his mind insisted on assuming all Anglican priests had to be middle-aged to elderly. Ridiculous really, they must come from somewhere. And Hollis was clearly the Church of England's young hope, enthusiastic, practical and sincere.

'Tell me, Reverend Hollis—'

'Aidan, please.'

'Aidan, I understand you have already been told by Mr Davidson that the remains found in your church are not objects of archaeological interest, but much more recent. In fact, it looks like we shall be treating this as a murder enquiry.'

'Murder!'

'We cannot be sure until the bones have been examined by an expert, but it seems likely that they were buried when the shrine was moved for the retiling in 1983.'

Hollis appeared relieved that the unpleasant event was so far in the past, but of course for many of his parishioners it must be well within living memory.

'You haven't been here long?'

'Since Martha Danvers left. Before that I was a curate in Basingstoke.'

Collins had quite forgotten that Jake's aunt had this living until recently. But never mind, nothing untoward had happened during *her* tenure. 'And you look after other churches as well as St Oda's?'

'Yes. Normally, a parish like Abbey Hill would have been merged with the urban one, but because we have such a large old church it was decided to centre a parish of several different villages here. There are services in Bishopfield and Kingfield alternating with Sunday mass at St Oda's, and all other church activities take place here.'

'And you've been here about a year, you say. When you arrived,

had the plans for St Oda's Millennium already been made?'

'No, the liturgical committee had discussed a special service, but nothing more. But I felt it was a good chance to put the church at the centre of the community again, so setting up the Millennium project was one of the first things I did. Fortunately we have a very competent musical side in Jessamy Baker, and there were plenty of ideas once the decision had been made.'

'Whose idea was it to excavate in the church?'

'Mine, actually. Well, not my idea, but I made the proposal. It was in response to a letter from a parishioner, Valerie Harwood.'

For a moment the name didn't mean anything. Then he recalled the picture of the white-haired woman in the CID room.

'Mrs Harwood wrote to you about what could be found in the church?'

'That sounds unpleasant, put like that. And the poor woman has died in such sad circumstances only last week. But yes, she pointed out that it might be worth investigating.'

That was strange. Valerie Harwood had known something was buried beneath the shrine, but committed suicide when it became apparent what it was. But he hadn't got the sequence of events right, had he? Unless Davidson had told her, she would have believed the bones to be St Oda's when she died.

'Can you find me Mrs Harwood's letter?'

'Certainly, if you think it may be important.'

'And any others documents you may have on the excavation? Did anyone object?'

'Some of our older parishioners didn't like the idea of St Oda's resting place being disturbed, even if only symbolically. They were reasonable objections, of their kind. I don't quite see-' the rector fell silent, apparently seeing all too well.

'The person who buried the body in the church would certainly not have wanted it to be found.'

'Surely you can't think-' again, he didn't complete the thought.

'At the moment I am keeping my options open. Could you find Mrs Harwood's letter?'

'Of course, but I don't have it to hand. When are you likely to be in Abbey Hill again?'

'Sergeant Holmes and I will be conducting interviews here next week. I'll drop in again.'

He noted that Aidan Hollis' goodbye was decidedly more frosty than his welcome. Is that because I have been throwing aspersions on his parishioners, he wondered, or is there something else? He was used to innocent members of the public becoming a little nervous by being questioned, but acting guilty looked odd in a parson.

He was still thinking of this when he met Sergeant Pardoe on the corner of Rood Street and Lyke Lane.

'Afternoon, sir. Are you here after those bones they dug up?'

'Hello, Pardoe. Yes, I've just been talking to the vicar. And you, still on the Harwood case?'

'The *rector*. Yes, I just saw Mrs Harwood's daughter, she flew in from Australia for the funeral. Said her mother had been mulling over the past in recent months, reckoned that's what tipped her over the edge.'

'And you agree?'

'I think so. Her account of the old lady rings true. And there's no getting around the fact that she did it herself. Suicide, and no more concern of ours.'

'Mulling over the past, you say? Hollis mentioned something like that. It was Mrs Harwood who suggested they have a dig in the church. Do you know if she'd been in the parish long?'

'Her husband became rector here in '78.'

That would mean she had been here when the shrine was moved in 1983. But he was getting ahead of himself. Better wait to hear what the pathologist had to say about the age of the remains.

When Henrietta arrived at the parish rooms for choir practice she found the atmosphere strangely subdued. For some reason the rector was there, and instead of Jessamy, their conductor, it was Elly Hollis who got up and called them to order.

‘Good evening. You may wonder why Aidan has joined us tonight. It won’t be for long, but there is something we thought would be best if you heard from us. Um. Aidan?’

Henrietta smiled to herself. Elly was never as sure speaking in public as she was face to face.

‘Thank you, Elly,’ Hollis said, getting to his feet, ‘Yes, I’m afraid I have two rather sad announcements to make. As you have no doubt heard, Valerie Harwood has died on Tuesday. I know a lot of rumours are doing the rounds about that, and I sadly must confirm that it does look like she took her own life. The funeral will be next Saturday, but the family have asked that it remain private. No flowers. Our thoughts are with Peter and Ruth and their families.’

They don’t want anyone prying, Henrietta concluded, and it was their good right. But it seemed harsh that Valerie’s neighbours of many years wouldn’t get a chance to say their goodbyes.

‘Is that why the police have been here asking questions?’ Sylvia Erskine wanted to know.

‘Yes, I believe they are looking into the circumstances of Mrs Harwood’s demise. Please, I do not know more of this than you do. We must wait for news, and hope it is not sadder than what we already know. But that brings me to my other point. This summer, what we believed to be the relics of St Oda were discovered beneath her shrine. The archaeologist in charge of the excavation has informed me, however, that he believes the bones to be no more than 60 years old, and maybe much younger. He has therefore handed the remains over to the