

THE LEGEND OF MONKSREST

Five monks set forth upon a pilgrimage,
To make their way to Canterbury town.
Five monks in all, each one a sage,
Well dressed in monkish hood and monkish gown.
They stopped to rest beside a flowing spring,
And drank their fill of bubbling water pure,
And as they sat they fell to arguing
On point of scripture that each one was sure
He owned the truth, and heated was their talk.
From neath his cloak one pulled an evil knife,
And flashed the blade, nor did he even balk
Until he'd ended every monkish life
Of four companions. Seeing what he'd done
He felt remorse and dug in rain-soft earth
A grave, and placed the bodies, one by one
Beneath the ground, despite their generous girth.
He covered them with dirt and sticks and stones,
And scratched these warning words upon a rock:
"A curse on you who move these holy bones,
As sure as just at sunrise crows the cock."

I read the poem a second time and wonder why Charlie Ebersole faxed it all the way from somewhere in England to Los Angeles, which must have cost a fortune. My name is Elizabeth Reid and I am sitting in my office at International Investments in LA. We have just acquired a fax machine, which is a new technology in the 1960s.

The fax is somewhat blurry and hard to read. There are smudges and lines on the paper. The original that Charlie used to send the fax from must be in bad shape. I wonder again why in the world he has sent this to me? Is it some kind of a joke?

Charlie and I have worked together for several years. He is smart and level-headed, and I have never known him to take an interest in poetry. However, what he is doing at the moment, taking a leave of absence from his job to walk something called the End-to-end in Great Britain, doesn't exactly fit in with the character of the Charlie I know, either—someone who throws quarters around as if they are manhole covers. Maybe all the walking is affecting his brain.

My telephone rings. I pick up the receiver and say, "Good morning; this is Liz Reid."

"Hi Liz, it's Charlie."

This is a bigger surprise. I haven't spoken to Charlie since he left on his trip. The time difference is what? Eight hours? So, it must be late afternoon wherever he is.

"Charlie, where are you?"

"I'm at the ancestral home of my friend, Reggie."

I know the story. Charlie and Reggie were classmates at UCLA when they were studying for their MBA degrees. Before I can say anything, Charlie speaks again.

"Did you get my fax?"

"The poem? Yes, I just read it."

Charlie speaks before I can say anything more. “Monksrest is the name of Reggie’s family’s estate. The legend is about something that supposedly happened in Chaucer’s time. Some people think the curse is real.”

I’m not sure what to say. I don’t believe in curses.

“Liz, Reggie’s sister, Emma, has just been murdered.”

That sucks the air out of the room. I still don’t know what to say. I manage, “That’s terrible.”

Charlie says, “The police are baffled. Reggie and his father are heart broken. That’s why I’m here at their house. I thought of you because I know you studied Chaucer and poets like him in college. You might be able to shed some light on the legend. You said you were looking for a place to go for a vacation. I talked to Reggie’s father and he said you can stay here at Monksrest as long as you want.”

“Whoa. Slow down. You’re going too fast. You want me to go to England?”

“You told me you’d like to go to England and you have ancestors who came from here. You can visit places where they lived.”

Yes, I have a vacation coming, and yes, I want to go to England, and I would love to see big old English houses and castles, but I don’t see how I can help with a murder investigation.

“I would be intruding.”

“No, you wouldn’t. I told them all about you. They need someone to cheer them up, and I know you could do it.”