

The Graveyard Murder

A PSO Webster Thriller: Case #1

Roo I MacLeod

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1/The Alter Boy

The old gnarled yew tree in the graveyard beside her Sisters of Mercy church is creaking, its joints bending with the rain and wind. Inside the church an ominous chant reverberates in the high arch of the ceiling. Monks, robed and hooded, glide the perimeter of the old building with their heads bowed. A man, also hooded, his head bent to hide his face moves down the centre aisle at pace. He knocks on the side door and waits. Then knocks again. His effort is firm and loud and echoes in the tall arched roof.

A sob sounded inside.

The chanting moved up an octave, the monotonous sound giving the man chills.

“Vicar,” he whispered.

Another sob sounded. He moved to knock again when a strangulated cry broke the tuneless monologue filling the church. He tried the door, knocking as he pushed inward. The door to the outside closed on a white hooded figure. A child sat huddled on the floor, the sacramental robe lifted to reveal two pale hairless legs and a trickle of blood. The child sobbed, pushing the man away as he tried to comfort him. Breaths catch and choke. The man picked the child from the floor and held him close, clutching him hard to his breast.

“What has he done?”

The boy clung to the man. The child’s body shuddered, as half breaths punctuated a silent plea of despair.

“Oh you, you poor fallen angel. Once so beautiful now spoiled like rotten fruit. Come.”

He helped the boy to straighten his robe.

“I’ll take you home.”

They stepped into a gust of wet wind. The boy shuddered, flinched at the touch of the storm. The boy’s white robe flapped against the dark trousers of the man. His blonde hair is flattened to his head, his robe stuck to his skin.

“Where do you live, child?”

Again, a series of sobs. “The Camps.”

“Bless you, child. You are without hope, home, or help.”

They stopped by a fresh mound of earth. The man held the boy's hands and looked into the black night, his gaze unblinking as the rain drove hard against his face. His hat flew off his head, the buffeting wind whisking it high into the crooked Yew tree.

"I leave the vicar to you, dear lord, but this one I'll deal with."

He turned the child, pulled him into an embrace. One hand touched his forehead, the other his chin, and with a deft twist he snapped the boy's neck, his spinal cord severed. For a few precious seconds the man held the child to his body, squeezing him tight. The wind rocked him. The rain splattered in their faces.

"Take him Lord. He is finished."

And the boy slid to the earth as the man performed the sign of the cross.

"Too beautiful for a weak man of the cloth to repel."

And he left the site, closed the gate, removed his gloves, and entered the Old Poet public house.

2/Morning Call

Ostere substation occupied a dead-end court off Ostere lane. Its nearest neighbours are overgrown vacant plots of land, once home to old government agencies and vandalised beyond use. A parking lot, for one marked car and one unmarked police car, took up one portion of the vacant land. The rear entry door wore reinforced armours, battered by many attempts to break it down. They decorated the windows to the front of the building with steel cages, and replicated smaller caged boxes for the cameras mounted on the roof. The door was entry by buzzer and had a small foyer, with cameras before the inner door allowed entry.

Ostere substation was a fortress. It needed to be. Every night it was attacked, bombed, burnt with constant raids by youth looking to vent their anger at the system.

PSO Webster sat at her desk. She kept to the rear right desk, next to the jail cell keys, the main phone, and the master computer. Her sergeant sat to her left, and the Cock, Seb Naberius, sat left front. Webster worked on a laptop while she had the station to herself. There was an individual of interest and she wasn't keen on going through her own log-in on the stations computer. His image, sandy hair, goatee, and ruddy face was filling her screen. In a box at the bottom left corner was his diary. Mr Cooper, the individual of interest was going to be out tonight. She pulled a cheap generic phone from the lower pocket in her combat trousers, and punched in a mobile number.

"Oi, you," she said. "We good tonight?"

The voice was that of a child. "We's good, Wolf Girl. The Wiseman is short of funds."

"He's always short."

"Cockle-Doodle-Doooo," came the cry from the rear door. "Where's my favourite Chicklet?"

"I got to go. I'll meet you at the Camps around ten, right?"

She placed the phone in her pocket, closed her laptop and stored it in her backpack. By the time PC Naberius appeared at the office she was tapping at her keyboard, the printer churning out the morning's reports.

"Shut up, Cock," she said.

He was a tall man, stick thin with a concave chest and bandy legs. His hair was balding, but he kept a thin strip, like a comb running from his prominent forehead to the nape of his

neck. A large beak-like nose led his body, acted like a rudder with his jerky head movements. He sat on the corner of the desk, a scent of desperado humming about his body. It was a cheap metallic deodorant favoured by boys who liked toys, who liked girls. It was no babe magnet.

His cocky charms caused Webster's skin to goosebump whenever he spoke or came close. She pushed her chair away from the overpowering scent, swivelled and stepped around him. He stood, leaning from his rarefied height, his nose twitching.

"Webster, my Chick-E-Dee, I smell subterfuge, secrecy, sedition in this office, I do."

A shout sounded in the jail. Webster pointed at the cell. "You'll find it in there. He tried to rob the Duck of its toilet paper. Apparently, there's another shortage. Spat at a soldier, abused the judge, and has been our only guest overnight. He's all yours."

She left him watching the prisoner, his nose jerking at the scent of homelessness. Webster picked up the printouts from the machine and headed for the kitchen. As she passed the toilet, the door an inch ajar she heard her sergeant trying to defecate. It involved a load of grunting and when the constipated man oozed, or dribbled, or squeezed a poo from his anus there was a victorious shout and the most horrendous stench of shit. She hurried past the door and entered the kitchen. Kettle full, cups in line, a cross through yesterday's date on the calendar with the girl with the big tits, and pinned the agenda to the wall and left copies on the table. She'd bought pastries and sausage rolls and took a cup of tea and a cake out to Mildred on the front desk. She wasn't in, but she wasn't far away. She hit the floor at five minutes past the hour every morning complaining about the homeless, the filth, the traffic, the litter, the convicts, and in no particular order. Mildred was a recent addition and proving absolutely useless at her job. She was the sergeant's mother-in-law and no one was ever going to say a word against her. Not within hearing of Mildred or the Sergeant.

As Webster returned to the kitchen, the sergeant was extricating himself from the toilet. "Spray," she barked. "It smells like you've dug a dead body out of your arse."

"You get the doughnuts?"

"Nup. Pastries."

He stomped into the kitchen, flopped in his chair and dragged the box of delicacies close. His head shook as he perused the cream and chocolate and sweet flakes.

"Why can't you get doughnuts with the icing like we always get."

"You buy, you choose. Look how fat you are? You don't need the doughnut."

The sergeant patted his pregnant stomach. He wore a glum expression. The sergeant owned a bulldog face. It was all jowls, drooping eyes and a grumpy pout. He took a pastry and

pushed it into his mouth. Cream squirted from the corners of his fat lips and dripped to the table.

He took the agenda to his side, scanned it, and pushed it aside. “You got the floor Webster?”

“If you want.”

The Cock’s head bobbed and leaned forward, the beak sniffing and twitching at the treasures in the cardboard tray. His tongue touched at his lips and his long fingers with their polished nails scratched at his thighs. He bent at the waist and peered into the box of pastries. “Mm,” he mused. “Do love a pastry.”

But he took the two sausage rolls, squirted red sauce in two lines and sat on the stool by the kitchen sink.

“We have a lot on today. It is the first Monday, so it is market day. And that is always a big day for thieving. Someone needs to liaise with the army to keep trouble to a minimum.”

The sergeant was picking at a sausage roll. He splodged red sauce on the plate and dipped, and ate.

“That’s always your gig, girlie.”

Webster wrote her name next to the town square and underlined the army and the phone number of the local command.

“Our next problem, courtesy of Ostere Central, is the body found in the graveyard this morning. Ostere central asked if we could look into it. They want us to attend the post-mortem and interview the vicar and the drunks in the pub. A vagrant, they said, but they found him in a church vestry, so they want us to make sure there wasn’t a theft of clothing involved.”

“I’ll be happy to talk with the vicar, but not the drunks.” The Cock smiled at Webster. “You like the drunks, don’t you, my little Chick-E-Dee.”

“You call me that one more time and I’m going to pull your balls off and shove ‘em down your throat.” She glared at the Cock.

The Cock turned to the sergeant. “She’s got no respect.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Webster was writing on her sheet. *Cock to vicar Webster to pub.*

“What about the post-mortem?”

The Cock made a face and held his hands out in protest.

“Jesus, you are such a Cock.”

He smiled at her remark. “She tries to insult me, but it’s me name, right.”

She scribbled her name next to the post-mortem. Webster looked at her sergeant. “Your friend is a senior bod in the church, isn’t he?” she asked.

“Cooper frequents the church. We’re playing golf today. I’ll ask if he’s heard anything.”

“Maybe you could ask about why a homeless lad got found dead on a grave in the church’s clobber, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah, all right. I said I’d ask. It’s a game of golf, not an interrogation. What else?”

“That’s it. You’re playing golf, he’s off to have tea with the vicar and I’m on point at the market, interviewing the punters at the Poet, and attending the post-mortem. And I’m the office girl, aren’t I? Here to do your filing. Organise the rota, allocate the jobs.”

A loud banging sounded on the back door.

“Whatever Webster,” the sergeant said. “You love the work. You love running us about. And you think you’re the ace detective. I got to go.”

“Can I ask the army for the truck. If there’s going to be a load of thieving in the square, I’m going to need somewhere to cage them. I can’t be coming back and forth to hear. I could use some help in processing the arrests, maybe...” She looked to the Cock, then to the sergeant. “Set up a truck on Church Lane and I can chuck them into the back cage. Or we can let them run free.”

“You can have the truck.”

The sergeant looked at the Cock. “You get the vicar done this morning and you can get to the square and help her process the thieving shites. Maybe you could make a trip to the Camps, stir them up a little and see what they know about the child.” He took another pastry and forced it into his mouth. He licked his fingers and wiped them on his trousers.

“That’s it?” Webster asked. “I’ve spoken to the Camps and they believe he’s a runaway. He was being abused at home. He had a bad time during the virus with his father beating his mother and abusing him and his sister. That’s what I’ve heard.”

Webster reached for the box of pastries with a knife. She cut one piece in thirds, and ate a piece.

“What we going to do with Mr Calveoni?” Webster asked.

The sergeant looked at the Cock, and they shrugged in unison.

“He’s the incarcerated chap, now sober, and full of remiss. He didn’t know what he was doing, had one too many, his wife has cancer and his children have rickets. And he has a cough. It is a dry hacking cough.”

“Set him free, Webster, and slop the cell with disinfectant. Make sure he touches nothing on the way out.”

The sergeant stood and took another pastry. “Hey,” he smiled as Webster and the Cock stood to leave. “Let’s be safe out there.”

As Webster approached the desk another loud rap sounded on the door. She watched her sergeant attend the caller. It was her man with the sandy hair, goatee beard, dressed casual but smart. She sat at her desk as the sergeant stepped to his desk and grabbed the keys for the evidence room.

“Someone’s going to ask for those clubs one day,” Webster said. She stared at her computer, tapping at keys. “Don’t forget to ask about the graveyard murder, serge.” she said.

“We’ve spoken,” he said. He turned on Webster. “Cooper said the vicar mentioned him. The child was a vagrant, haunting the cardboard city, looking for tricks. He’s pissed of a punter, I’d say, but the Cock will get to the bottom of the vicar’s story.”

Webster followed the sergeant. Cooper stood at the doorway with his eyes fixed on Webster. She smiled and touched her cap, but the look she received was that of a snake. She understood poking him might be dangerous.