



‘The dog-headed demon will come on the wind and wreak vengeance on those who do not believe.’

I read the transcription over again. The words were correct. It was grammatically sound. What was missing was *sense*. The previous cylinder seal said that Labashi the baker still owed eight shekels for seventy-six bushels of wheat he had bought, and that spring would arrive with the *haja* bird. That was a statement as bland as saying that the Westgate Library would close unexpectedly on Tuesday afternoon due to a problem with the drains, and apologies for any inconvenience caused. There had been no mention of *pirig* monsters, invading armies or apocalyptic endings for humanity. Just the stuff of daily life between people in a small town in Mesopotamia 2,500 years before the birth of Christ. The bread and butter fare of a working archaeologist.

I rubbed my eyes, blinked slowly and gazed out the window at Port Meadow. The sun chose that moment to break through the mottled clouds, lighting up a group of cows as if they were about to perform a musical number. *Cows, the Moosical* perhaps, based on an original work by TS Eliot. In my mind’s eye, I saw Busby Berkeley crossed with James Herriot, and just a hint of the darker side of *Chicago*. The costumes and choreography might prove challenging, true, and theatre floors would need strengthening before performances could go ahead. But the idea had potential.

In reality, tails kept swishing, one of the cows took a step forward to bypass an unwanted thistle and the sun went behind the clouds again.

It was an ordinary June day in north Oxford and there wasn’t a dog-headed demon in sight.



Oxford Services were a conundrum. Or perhaps a very minor paradox. Bertrand Russell could have explained which. They were convenient for someone who had to accommodate a pressing biological need or who simply wished to break their journey in the vicinity of the City of Dreaming Spires. But another seven minutes would bring not only cheaper fuel, but also a higher order of sandwich-based snack at Peartree. And the M&S there was simply ... M&S. As a result, most people using Oxford Services either lacked judgment or were in some kind of distress. Matthew Conigsby was shades of both. Last night's football team curry was having an unsettling effect on his lower intestines as he drove west to drop a portable A/C unit off with a friend outside Chipping Norton. He had decided that ten minutes stretching his legs in a carpark would ease the pressure on his troubled bowels. At the very least, any emissions would be released harmlessly into the wild.

He strolled closer to the dense, dark screen of trees at the end of the tarmac and stared into the abyss. Well, if not the abyss, then certainly into the surprisingly black copse that edged the service station. It was soothingly dark, like deep space seen from the middle of a farmer's field. He was momentarily transported back to the aftermath of a rave twenty-five years before which had been, yes, truly ... somewhere in a field in Hampshire. Life had been simpler then. He turned on his heel and walked back to the Skoda Karoq, resting his hands on the still warm bonnet.

He didn't hear the sound behind him and made little noise as he hit the ground. In fact, the only significant acoustic moment of note in what was left of his life was the gentle click as the boot closed with him on the inside.

He had served his purpose, though.

Within five minutes the Skoda was driving west on the A40 and within fifteen it was parked up in a secluded corner of the John Radcliffe Hospital's carpark. The car would acquire a parking ticket the following day and a special 'overparking' notice on day three. By the time the police were made aware of the vehicle, a sensitive nose could discern that something was very wrong with it. By then it was too late for Matthew Conigsby.



Chief Inspector Lovegrove looked into the corridor outside his office. It never seemed to change. Never exactly clean and always slightly shabby. The lino on the floor oddly adhesive. He was, he knew, becoming institutionalised. Or rather not institutionalised, but he had been absorbed into the machine that was St Aldate's police station. As if someone had built a Heath Robinson contraption from Formica, scuffed metal corner posts and turgid green paint around him while he slumbered, and now he was trapped inside it. I feel, he found himself thinking, like I'm living in the imagination of a bad 1970s science fiction novelist.

Tetsuo, the Formica man.

It didn't help that he had stopped enjoying the job years ago. True, he still got a thrill from racing down the Abingdon Road with his siren blaring, simply to get past the traffic and make it to the McDonald's in Botley Road a few minutes faster. And there was the occasional flash of pleasure in policing a football match when a Swindon fan said one word too many and was taken down a shady alley to resist arrest properly. But the paperwork in between, and the unconscious bias training, and the endless videos explaining just what was lawful these days had ground him down. And the constant vigilance needed to avoid a discrimination or abuse charge being levelled was simply wearying.

I wasn't made to be a police inspector in the age of subservient, *nice* policing, he thought. The job is about law and order, not cuddles and hugs. Gene Hunt, come and get me. I'm waiting.

Even the work was dull these days. He ran the murder squad, yes. But the murder squad in *Oxford*. A city of 150,000 people that managed four murders in a busy year. Midsomer would get through that in a single episode. Inspector Montalbano would think he was having a quiet week. The CSI team wouldn't even bother turning up to work. What could you honestly do with a city that had four murders per year?

Some academic had produced a map of murders in Mediaeval Oxford. Now,

that was interesting. There were corpses strewn left, right and centre, with no end of vitriolic disputes between University staff and townsfolk, misjudged affairs, betrayals and failed business ventures. Back then, Oxford's murder rate was five times higher than that of London. A proper city, filled with people and passion and things that result from those two coming together.

For even one of those murders to be going on with...



'I've been very excited about this latest set of cylinder seals—' I began.

'Cylinder seals?' a Booker Prize-winning novelist asked.

Actually, I'd promised my wife that I would stop describing her friends that way. So I'll rephrase. The words were spoken by a sensitive 52-year old man who had been in therapy for fourteen years to unpick the assorted psychological traumas of childhood, and schooling in particular. He was fundamentally a warm, astute person, and volunteered regularly at his local church, though I personally found the affair he had been having since the start of the year with his son's music teacher distasteful.

Call me old-fashioned.

'Yes, cylinder seals,' I explained, topping up the red wine in his almost empty glass. We were on to a cheeky Barolo from the Waitrose Fine Wine range that had been on promotion last month. It was rather good. 'Cuneiform texts are often recorded on small stone cylinders,' I continued. 'To read them, you roll the face of the cylinder over something soft, like a clay tablet. The British Museum has a rather lovely seal from four thousand years ago which was believed to show Adam and Eve sitting by a tree, complete with serpent lurking in the wings, though we now think that it depicts an Akkadian banquet.'

'Fascinating.'

He was, I realised, genuinely interested. Or perhaps the wine had done its magical work.

'It used to be that we rolled each cylinder out by hand,' I said, 'which was exciting – revealing the contents one cylinder at a time. It was also slow. There is now scanner technology which reads and transcribes a cylinder in seconds, making a digital scan in the process.'

'And is it all Thoth begat child with his cousin and slayed his brother?'

I laughed gently.

'Far more often, it's taxation records and bills due. Like a random selection

of receipts taken from someone's glove compartment and emptied on to a table, with an occasional hand scribbled note dropped in to keep it interesting.'

'The boring minutiae of life before the modern world.'

'Yes, I suppose that's one way of describing my life's work.'

I refilled my own glass and drew down a hefty tug of the ruby coloured wine.



'Let's try this over from the beginning, shall we?' Chief Inspector Lovegrove said with forced patience into the telephone receiver. 'Do you have a dead body or not?'

A noise of assent came down the line.

'And would you normally expect to have a dead body in your possession on a Monday morning?' the Chief Inspector continued.

More complex sounds were audible on the other side. He looked up at the dirty white tile squares that formed the ceiling of his office.

'No, well, you might work in a mortuary, or a hospice, or an undertakers.' A short pause. 'Yes, people do those things. So now we've cleared that point up, let's assume you have come to the right place and this may indeed be a homicide.'

A brief exchange of words followed.

'Yes, I or one of my many colleagues will be coming out to you directly,' Lovegrove said, rubbing his brow with his right hand, eyes closed, as he spoke.

More words.

'No, we won't be bringing the full CSI van out today. Do you have incident tape?'

Words were exchanged.

'Blue and white rolls of tape that says "Police aware" on it, or words to that effect. The tape might also be yellow and black, though blue and white is standard issue.'

An affirmation.

'Good. Wrap the car in incident tape. Make sure it's secure—'

Noise down the line.

'I mean that the doors and boot are closed.' He paused a moment. 'By all means put on your surgical gloves so that any fingerprints aren't disturbed. Good. And I will be out to you after I finish my coffee.'

He listened for a short time.

'No, *after* I finish it. I don't think he's going to get up and leave now, do you?' A Crimestoppers poster stared back at Chief Inspector Lovegrove from the insipidly green wall in front of him. 'I'm glad we can agree on that. Yes, I will be with you shortly. That's right, *after* I finish my coffee.'

For a minute after the line went quiet DCI Lovegrove sat with eyes closed, unmoving. Then he stood up and walked out the door. A polystyrene cup landed in the bin as he went, and the smallest hint of a smile played on his lips.



'You were very patient with him,' Phoebe said.

'He was showing an interest for once,' I replied.

'Still, I appreciate you making the effort.'

Phoebe had enveloped me in her soft, caressing arms. We were gazing out over the garden. A robin landed on the birdbath and drank water watchfully. Her cuddles were still one of the most reassuring things. Real nightmare banishers, even at my age. Sunshine came through the French windows and lit up the floorboards by our feet.

'I was mildly impressed that he mentioned Thoth,' I said. 'Our Booker Prize winner has evidently been reading the captions in the Egyptian section of the Ashmolean Museum.'

'Perhaps he'll even make it to Assyria and Babylon one of these days.'

'Perhaps he will. They're your friends, not mine, Phoebe, but I appreciate that they are important to you.'

'It's just that we only moved here recently—'

'Two years now.'

'Two years is nothing in north Oxford,' Phoebe said. 'Time passes more slowly here. And I feel that they're beginning to accept me now.'

'So they should. Your novel has been the literary standout of the year.'

'Ah, that gets us into the difference between *old fiction* and *new fiction*.'

She kissed my neck softly.

'You don't mean *old money* and *new money*?' I said.

'No, definitely fiction. I may be doing well today, but with every passing year the perceived quality of writing is adjudged to have gone down. Like a currency that's devaluing. In the same way that people say it's easy to have a number one hit in the charts today, but the same thing was monstrously difficult in the Sixties. My novels are like perky new world wines, to be sipped circumspectly at someone else's dinner party, but certainly not to be savoured, or approved of in

any fashion. Anyway, I think they are starting to accept me now.'

'You're maturing into a good vintage.'

'I suppose I am.' She nuzzled my ear gently. 'You do say the sweetest things.'



It was a murder. That was clear. But beyond that, there was very little to say. It was so low key, and undeserving of attention as to almost defy the effort of recording that it had happened. The Primark of homicides.

‘So, tell me, John,’ DCI Lovegrove began, ‘what am I looking at here?’

The forensic pathologist, Dr John Breckinridge, shrugged his shoulders. The pair were sitting in Breckinridge’s office, in the Dunn School of Pathology, where Breckinridge worked. Breckinridge was wearing a smart, charcoal grey woollen suit, with narrow lapels and a russet orange silk knit tie. No lab coats or tatty tweed jackets here. He was sat behind a glass-topped desk, with a window overlooking the University Parks behind him. Lovegrove was positioned opposite Breckinridge and was struggling to find a comfortable position in the metal tube and black leather seat he had selected.

‘Blunt object trauma to the head,’ Breckinridge said. ‘Then perhaps strangulation whilst the victim was still alive. After that I’m speculating.’ He looked wistfully down at the report on his desk. ‘No resistance, no attempt to fight back. As if he was reconciled to his death and was ready for it to happen.’

‘Like some weird suicide pact?’

‘No, nothing like that.’ Breckinridge thought for a moment. ‘As if he simply didn’t have the will to live any more ... or maybe that he had reached the end of his time and he welcomed the person who brought the end to it.’

‘That *is* pretty weird.’

‘Yes, I agree it’s weird. A euthanasia vibe. I’m just puzzled.’

‘Go on,’ Lovegrove said. ‘It sounds quite simple on face value. Someone bopped him on the head and then throttled him. There’s nothing to suggest a motive. No attempted robbery. Nothing vindictive or unpleasant done to the body, the way there might be if it were revenge. No passion directed against the dead man. Simply a termination, in the style of an abattoir.’

‘That is what is confusing me,’ Breckinridge went on. ‘The fellow has more

in common with a cow on the floor of a slaughterhouse after they've used the bolt gun. He doesn't strike me as being particularly ... *human*.'

Lovegrove raised an eyebrow.

'Less than human?' he said.

'Not that. And I already feel bad about what I just said. But somehow he has managed to die without the dignity, rage or pride that you would expect a human to have.' His lips pursed. 'I've just literally never seen the like of it in my career.'

'Okay. Sounds like an odd one whichever way you slice it. When can I have the full autopsy report?'

'On your desk tomorrow.' Breckinridge pulled a face, presumably running through a mental list of the jobs he had to do and their relative complexities. 'There are still some tests I'd like to run. By eleven o'clock, I should think.'

'You're a good man. Thanks John.'



Long shadows lay across Port Meadow. Each horse was accompanied by a patch of darker green running fully a hundred metres across the turf. Clumps of sedge spilled shadows taller than a man. It was a beautiful hour of the day. Truly the witching time, when it looked like magical things could happen on the meadow. As if the dog walkers would return home blessed in some way by the spirit of the land, destined never to lead ordinary lives again.

I turned away from the window, back to the codex text in front of me and rubbed my eyes for a second time.

‘So the harvest of the innocents began,’ it read. ‘One was a man of taxes | Another was a woman of grain | Then a man of learning and after that a woman of the spirits | With a priest it was done | And Ištar, first of the gods, lady of chaos, was pleased with the dog-headed man | The dog-headed man bared his teeth like an *ūmu* demon, his radiance glowing over the valley, and savoured the taste of blood.’

This was not what the Fallujah cylinder seals should be saying. They were vernacular, mundane pieces of writing. Complaints about neighbour’s animals grazing where they should not. Essential reports on failing canal earthworks. Words to the wise about what to do to ensure that the crops would grow again next year. They were not meant to foretell carnage and destruction, any more than the newsletter of Wolvercote church should be detailing a list of all the people killed in road accidents this year, or how many people had succumbed to rare cancers.

What puzzled me in particular was that the previous box of cylinder seals was exactly what I expected. I looked back at a typical text. ‘Adad made his rain scarce,’ it ran. ‘Blocked below, it did not raise flood-water from the springs | The field decreased its yield | Nissabe turned away her breast | The dark fields became white | The broad countryside bred alkali.’ And that was the dark side of what was written, the real fire and brimstone end of the spectrum. These were

the writings of farmers terrified that next year the waters would not come and they would have no food to feed their families with.

I turned to a different section of the codex. 'When the third year came | Their looks were changed by starvation | Their faces covered with scabs like malt | They went out in public hunched | Their well-set shoulders slouched | Their upstanding bearing bowed.'

The words of practical people concerned with the daily challenge of living and survival. Of keeping their children from dying. Not with homicidal maniacs coming and whittling every second person from their number.

Something in what I was reading did not add up.

It was all, well ... *strange*.



Where better to hide than in plain sight?

That was the first idea that had entered his head and, now that he had turned it over and considered it, it made complete sense to him. He might just be the only person for whom the ridiculous assertion that 'homelessness was a lifestyle choice' was actually true.

He had bought a three season down sleeping bag from the 'upcycled' gear box at Decathlon and a lightweight one man tent. A waterproof rucksack that was reduced to clear in the sale area and a BioFoam sleeping mat completed his kit. Both tent and sleeping bag fitted comfortably inside the rucksack. It was now hanging in the branches of a particularly dense Weeping Blue Atlas cedar tree in the grounds of St Gedz College's spacious grounds. The tent could be easily erected beneath the tree's branches after dark without being visible from the outside. It was perfect for the very discreet tourist.

He could shower at OWNS in St Clements if he was planning to fly under the radar, or walk down the Iffley Road to the university sports club and use the facilities there otherwise. He hadn't made his mind up which the right approach was yet.

Either way, he was now sitting in an oak panelled office that dated back to the sixteenth century, waiting for the Dean to finish an over-running meeting on planning permission for a proposed new student accommodation block. Out the window, he could see the Weeping Blue Atlas cedar tree in the College grounds that he now called home. It made him feel like he was calling on a neighbour ... which in a way he was.



It had been a hard day of teaching, one of the last busy ones before Trinity term ended. There had been two tutorials and three taught lessons – one covering the class of a colleague as a last minute favour when he decided to scurry off to a conference with a very attractive, and brilliant, young lecturer from the Anthropology department. He owed me big time for covering *that*. The tutorials had been surprisingly stressful. Callaghan had not only failed to write his essay, but seemed entirely unfamiliar with the material. When I pressed him with – genuinely gentle – questions, he went to pieces and sat crying in the room. In the end, I sent the other tutees out early. Callaghan seemed to have something going on in his private life, though even after spending fifteen minutes listening to his incoherent comments in between the sobs, I had little idea what it was.

So now I was sitting in the White Horse, decompressing with a glass of Village Idiot beer in my hand. The dark, stained wood interior of the pub was slowly soothing my furrowed brow. Jeanette Michaelson, the Jack Dorsey Professor of Archaeology, came in then. Her wayward, curly blonde hair was being even less well-behaved than normal, in sharp contrast to her brown linen trouser suit, which struck an improbably prudent line between smart and approachable.

‘Hello you,’ she said. ‘Is that table fully occupied by you and your pint,’ she asked breezily, ‘or is there room for one more at it?’

‘Always room for you,’ I said with a smile.

‘Let me apprise myself of a drink and I will be over then. Do you need a drink yourself?’

‘I am fine,’ I said, holding the Village Idiot aloft.

‘So, I saw your message about the dog-headed demon,’ she said, a minute later, once she was seated across the table from me. ‘I agree it sounded most unusual. Not at all what you would expect to find in the Fallujah cylinders.’

‘Unusual, and simply blunt,’ I said. ‘Of course, passages of Gilgamesh are

blood-thirsty and murderous. Literally the kind of thing to give nightmares to the unsuspecting. But all I was expecting from those particular cylinders was a verification and cataloguing task.'

She took a thoughtful sip of her dry white wine.

'Might they have got mixed up with another tray when they left the Iraq Museum, back in 2003?' she said. 'That was a God-awful mess.'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'I was amazed that we managed to retrieve anything at all after the museum was looted. What a tragedy that was.'

'Yes, the Warka Vase disappeared, Bassetki Statue gone, Harp of Ur destroyed for the gold inlay. The sort of day that makes your heart sink.'

She sighed heavily.

'I did talk to Dr Jawad about provenance when we took these particular cylinder seals for safe keeping,' I went on. 'He was adamant that the looters hadn't reached that part of the archive.' I reflected for a moment. 'Which is hardly surprising. The looters knew exactly what the big ticket exhibits in the collection were and cleared those out on the first day. They sold those to foreign collectors over the internet, demonstrating a degree of entrepreneurial skill that I wouldn't have credited them with. A few old cylinders were of no interest to them.'

'So Jawad was confident that no interference had taken place?' Jeanette asked.

'Absolutely,' I said. 'I've sent him an e-mail to double check, but with the regular power outages over there, I'm not holding my breath on a speedy answer.'

'It is bizarre,' she said slowly. 'If I didn't know what the source was, I would say that your cylinder sounds like a curse text from the time of Naram-Sin, when Akkad was over-reaching itself and on the verge of collapsing into hubris and self-destruction.'

'Yes, but that was three hundred years and a hundred kilometres from where these cylinders were found.'

'It's a mystery,' she said simply.

'And it's *cylinders*,' I continued. 'I have a second one now, which scores even higher for blood curdling.'

'How very spooky.'

'The thing it reminds me of is those codexes from Ghent, back in the Sixties,' I said, adding hurriedly, 'although of course that's an absurd thing to say.'

'What, the Nabonidus Codex? The one that was supposed to curse everyone who read it?' Jeanette's eyebrows were up close to the low beams of the pub's ceiling. 'Four people dead inside a week? All shades of Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon? You of all people are the last person I would expect to believe in that mumbo-jumbo.'

'It's just that ... odd things *did* happen to the people in Ghent who read the codex.'

'David, are you serious? You are as level-headed as they come. Nothing happened to the people in Ghent, other than them getting a bit hysterical.'

'People died.'

'People die all the time. People died in Ghent who had no connection to the Nabonidus Codex and some archaeologists who should have known better allowed themselves to get an almighty wind up.'

'More than that happened. *Something* happened. I read about it online.'

'And Elvis is alive and the Moon landings never took place.' She looked at me as if I had gone simple. 'David, is this for real?'

'I don't know what it is,' I said. 'Something about these texts has got right under my skin.'

'Wonders never cease. The sober and stolid Professor David Crossland believing in the kind of fairy stories I would ridicule my undergraduates for retelling! I'm astonished.'

'You and me both.'

'Well, if that's where you are, you and I have more important matters to discuss. Now, pressing questions first. What beer are you drinking? This is going to take several pints to set right.'



'Oh, so you *are* working today,' DS Fionnuala McGrath said to Chief Inspector Lovegrove.

She was in uniform, with the full tactical belt and a vest woven from Kevlar and packed with useful pockets for carrying torches, plasticuffs, first aid kits, a camera, paracetamol, Juicy Fruit chewing gum and all the other paraphernalia of the modern policewoman. Despite the paramilitary attire, she still exuded healthfulness and an air of femininity. Her wiry black hair was tied back, her cheeks were dappled with light brown freckles and her eyes twinkled under the LED lights. Her Irish brogue also gave her what she thought was – and sometimes actually was – a Get Out of Jail Free card for times when she misread the room and made a comment that was just a *little* too pointed for present company.

'Sarcasm will get you precisely nowhere, Sergeant,' Lovegrove said, suppressing a smile.

'Point noted chief.'

'In fact I take that back. Sarcasm will get you seconded to Section 2 for the week, where they are crying out for volunteers to help them inventory and index their paper filing cabinets after the Thames Valley mainframe inadvertently deleted all their records over the weekend.'

'Naturally, I am the volunteering kind, sir,' Fionnuala continued, 'but regrettably I have pressing and essential work to do here for the department, right here in the homicide squad.'

'It's the murder squad,' Lovegrove said automatically. 'And that statement may be less true than you think.'

'No, really I do, sir.'

DS McGrath's hand appeared from behind her back and she held out a brown A4 envelope.

'That appears to be addressed to me,' Lovegrove said dryly.

'So it is, sir,' she said, looking at the printed letters on the envelope's front. 'Unless of course you want me to take it down to Section 2 instead when I go to help them?'

'Much as I would like to send you down to the dank, forgotten dungeon that is Section 2, hand it over.'

He took the envelope without further comment, shaking his head, and tore it open. Lovegrove spent two minutes silently reading the contents.

'Are you still here?' he said, his eyes rising back up to meet those of DS McGrath.

'I am, sir. I was wondering if that was the pathologist's report.'

'It is,' Lovegrove said, glancing down at the report in his hand. 'The whole gruesome story of the John Radcliffe Hospital carpark murder.'

'Of course, he may not *actually* have been murdered in the carpark.'

'Needn't he?'

'No. I'm just saying that he could have been killed somewhere else and driven to the carpark.'

'Well, ten out of ten for intuition. The pathologist agrees with you. He thinks the victim was murdered offsite, perhaps in a busy carpark or a layby with woodland nearby, and moved *post mortem*.'

'Bingo.'

'He also says that the initial blow didn't kill the victim. It merely stunned our Mr Conigsby. Neither did the strangulation. The cause of death was—'

Lovegrove's eyes were suddenly looking beyond DS McGrath, over her shoulder and at the figure standing in the doorway behind her.

'What is it, Jones?' he said.

'The Chief Constable on the phone, sir. Line 2.'

'Put her through then.'

After a few pleasantries, Lovegrove listened for a minute and a half. He then said the single word, 'Right,' and hung up. He gazed absently out into the corridor, seemingly absorbed by the turgid green paint.

'What was, sir, if you don't mind me asking?' DS McGrath said.

'What was what?'

Lovegrove blinked at DS McGrath.

'The cause of death, sir?'

'He had a knitting needle inserted into the base of his skull. Not just once, but six times. Somebody wasn't taking any chances.'

Silence filled the air momentarily.

'It was definitely a murder, then,' Fionnuala added flatly. 'Killing someone with a knitting needle in a carpark or a lay-by – that's next level.'

'I should say so,' Lovegrove agreed, rising out of his chair. 'Come on,' he continued. 'You and I are going for a car ride.'

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Visit www.rodcookson.com to learn more.