The Monk

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The Monk

A **DS CROSS** THRILLER

TIM SULLIVAN



An Aries Book

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For Brian Worthington
who had confidence in my ability before anyone else
and introduced me to Henry James

Ora et Labora

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George Cross was rarely shocked by anything he came across during his work as a detective sergeant in the Avon and Somerset police. He had quickly come to the conclusion, many years before, that people were capable of inflicting the most grotesque acts of violence upon one another. So, no matter how bloody or gruesome a crime scene was, he managed to view it objectively. The sight of a throat cut with a blade or slashed by a broken bottle, brain matter splattered over the ground near a shattered skull, was simply evidence, and should be thought of as such. As appalling a sight as it may be, it was just the first step in a process that would lead to the identification, arrest, charging and hopefully conviction of the killer. A sense of emotional outrage or disbelief were just obstacles to an investigation, in his view. An emotional reaction to a crime scene was an unnecessary distraction. In a sense this was easy for him to think, as empathy in any given situation was not one of his strong suits.

What confronted the Avon and Somerset murder team that morning in the woodlands of Goblin Combe was, though, without question truly shocking, as well as confounding.

If a murder scene wasn't easily accessible and, as in this case, necessitated a lengthy walk down a wet and puddled footpath, requiring a slow hopscotch to avoid wet feet, the sense of anticipation that built inside the stomachs of the murder team became increasingly palpable. It meant that some of them had to take pause before facing whatever horror awaited them that particular day. It had rained heavily overnight so

the trees were laden with huge bulging berries of rain, which grew in size as other drops joined the party, before the surface tension was too much and they burst, falling intermittently with unerring accuracy on those below. The shoulders of Cross's beige mackintosh had dark, wet epaulettes. As he and Ottey approached the scene, the first thing they saw was the back of a wooden chair protruding from the ditch that ran alongside the path. Many people had walked past this chair in the past few days, doubtless bemoaning the lack of respect others had for the countryside and how fly-tipping had become something of an epidemic in Somerset. They couldn't have ignored the smell, however. That sweet and sour, sickly smell of human decomposition, so familiar to the squad. But, this being the country, they'd probably put it down to an animal carcass lying somewhere nearby. The actual source of it was taped to the chair with industrial duct tape. A man whose face was now dark purple from lividity, having been left facing downwards onto the ditch. Blood had also pooled round his wrists like gruesome dark bracelets. Gravity was pulling the body downwards so that the tape was stretched to breaking point. The man was dressed entirely in black. It appeared that he was wearing a black habit and hooded scapular. He hadn't been to a fancy-dress party or a T20 cricket match, though; he was in fact a Benedictine monk. They knew this because Dom Dominic Augustus of St Eustace's monastery, 15 miles away, had been reported missing two days earlier by the father abbot. It almost certainly had to be him. So, in a sense it wasn't exactly a surprise. Brutal, horrific and unexpected, yes.

Everyone was focused on wondering how anyone could do this to a monk. Cross's attention, however, had been drawn to the fact that the lifeless, chair-bound corpse in the shallow ditch below him had been savagely beaten prior to his death. His bruised eyelids were swollen shut. His lips were bloody and cut. Cross couldn't imagine why such a fate would befall a man who had made the decision to withdraw himself from everyday life

and devote himself to one of contemplation and prayer. What could possibly provoke someone to do this to a monk? Or what could the victim have done to drive someone to such an act? What had been the purpose of the beating? He looked carefully at the monk's body and saw tiny ripples of movement under his cassock. This meant thousands of maggots had already colonised the body. Hundreds more were congregating at various orifices, his ears and nostrils and around his eyes. It also meant he'd been dead for at least twenty-four hours but Cross didn't know exactly how cold or warm it had been in the last few days. The body could have been in situ for two or three days depending on the life cycle stage of the maggots, which he would leave Swift to determine.

'Stag night gone wrong?' a nervous uniformed police constable had joked when he arrived at the scene.

'Are you aware that a monk local to this county has been reported missing?' Cross asked him.

'Of course,' he replied.

'So, presumably you thought your comment was amusing?' Cross went on. Ottey was about to intervene. But it was first thing in the morning and she decided she didn't have the energy for the inevitable lecture about appropriate behaviour at a crime scene.

'Sorry,' the constable replied.

'You should leave,' Cross instructed him.

'What?'

'Your presence is no longer required,' Cross said. So the young constable left. He probably thought he'd done nothing wrong and that Cross was just an uptight, humourless prick. Cross would've been unconcerned. He considered that kind of comment, coming from a policeman at a murder scene, unacceptable. To him it showed not just a lack of respect for the victim, but a lack of professionalism too, which he couldn't tolerate. He also hoped the young man might learn something from his dismissal.

'George, he was probably just trying to ease the tension,' said Ottey quietly.

'Then he might have been better suited to a career as a masseur,' Cross reflected. Ottey laughed. Cross looked at her, surprised.

'That was a joke, George,' she said. But he still looked at her blankly. 'Maybe not.'

Cross's attention was now drawn to the arrival of the forensic pathologist Clare Hawkins and forensic investigator Dr Michael Swift, who at six foot eight towered over her. Both were dressed in their white paper forensic overalls. They signed in with the policeman on the perimeter, then came over. Clare held out two paper suits for Cross and Ottey. He took his and walked away to put it on. Ottey declined hers.

'I won't be needing one,' she said.

'Seen enough?' asked Clare.

'Yep.'

'I've got some coffee in the car. Freshly ground. Piping hot. I can go get it if you want,' Swift said kindly, realising she might need a restorative pick-me-up.

'Maybe after you've done your stuff. Thanks,' she said and walked away towards a clearing in the trees. She walked through it to a view of the beautiful Somerset countryside which couldn't have changed in hundreds of years. That thought comforted her. Grounded her, in a way. Various tractors were working a hillside field opposite her. Probably tilling, destoning and maybe planting potatoes at this time of year. Clouds scurried across the landscape unnaturally quickly like speeded-up film. The fields were relatively small by modern standards, bordered by orderly hedgerows that had survived the wholesale destruction modern farming methods had inflicted on much of the English countryside. It was a beautiful April day. One of those on which it was difficult to decide what to wear. Warm when the sun came out, then suddenly cold as it retreated behind slow-moving clouds. Birds hovered in the wake of the distant tractors,

swooping down to feast on any uncovered worms; the farmer obviously had good biodiversity in his earth. Ottey breathed in deeply in an attempt to remove the stench of death inhabiting her nostrils. It had stuck stubbornly to the tiny hairs inside her nose, like pollen on a bee's back legs. The air smelt of freshly grown grass and drying soil. It was filled with birdsong. They sounded excited, as if they were communicating to whoever was willing to listen that summer was on its way. A couple of hawks soared effortlessly on the thermals high above. A day of perennially renewed promise, except for one unfortunate monk. Ottey was a regular churchgoer, partly out of habit, but also because when she thought about it, she did believe in God. She had to. Despite the fact that her job often presented formidable challenges to maintaining any kind of faith. Like today.

A tent was erected over the monk's body. Hawkins and Swift then entered it to do their grim work undisturbed. Cross and Ottey walked back to her car. They wanted to tell the abbot at St Eustace's the news before he learnt of it third-hand, probably through the media. Their task made all the more urgent by the arrival of a couple of local news vans who parked up and quickly started to unload their equipment.

'They're quicker than blowflies when it comes to finding a corpse,' Cross observed.