

A MYSTERY

# ST. OSWALD'S NICHE

ARCHIEPISCOPUS  
GIRARDUS

Beneath an ancient  
Abbey in England  
lie unexpected treasures  
and ugly accusations...



Laura Frankos

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**ST. OSWALD'S**

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藏书章

**Laura Frankos**

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To the memory of my mom, for all the cuppas;  
to Barbara Mertz, for *all* her books;  
and especially to Harry, who always said I could do it.

## Author's Note

The city of York, of course, is real and beautiful. The medieval Abbey of St. Oswald's and the later Church of St. Oswald's which I describe in this book are completely fictitious and bear no resemblance to any actual ecclesiastical establishments which may have the same name. The museum mentioned here is equally imaginary. Certain other landmarks, however, such as York Minster, Clifford's Tower, and the Shambles, do exist and are well worth visiting if your travels take you to York (and I hope they do).

The characters in this novel are also fictitious, with the exception of actual historical figures. Gerard was archbishop of York from 1100 to 1108, was accused of the crimes I described, and was buried under the porch. The events surrounding the appointment, deposition, reappointment and murder of St. William FitzHerbert are also real, and far more convoluted than my pared-down summary. The accounts of Hugh the Chanter, Hugh of Flavigny and William of Malmesbury exist, and it is the historian's task to ferret out the facts from the inaccuracies within them. The chronicle of the Abbey of St. Oswald, like the abbey itself, is invented.

No real archaeologists would behave as recklessly and unprofessionally as mine do, or operate with such small crews, but that is the liberty of the novelist. Actual excavations in York are undertaken by the York Archaeological Trust, 47 Aldwark, York, England, YO1 2BX. They do outstanding work and deserve support.

Finally, any errors are entirely my own, and I take full responsibility for them.

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# I

**M**OST PEOPLE TRAVEL to Canterbury as tourists, twentieth-century versions of medieval pilgrims. Jennet Walker was there ostensibly as a sightseer, but her real reason was to escape the presence of her Ph.D. advisor, Samuel Thomas Preston. Jennet had traveled to England with Preston to participate in a conference on Anglo-Norman studies. Afterward, she planned to spend the summer backpacking around Great Britain. She had passed her doctoral exams at UCLA that spring and felt she deserved a bit of a vacation. She had spent spring quarter practically glued to Preston as the “Golden Shark” propelled her toward her exams and dragged her through his seminar on medieval manuscripts. He occupied the seat next to her on yesterday’s long flight from Los Angeles to London and talked nearly the entire way because he couldn’t sleep on planes. While Jennet looked forward to the conference, she was not happy about three more days in close proximity to her mentor. She liked and admired Preston, but she simply had to get away, if only for the day, so she flashed her BritRail pass and hopped a train to Canterbury.

She sat on a wooden bench in the Old Butter Market, just outside Christ Church Gate, and munched on an egg-salad sandwich. *It wouldn’t do to have a Wimpy burger stand in the middle of the medieval marketplace*, she thought. The sandwich vendor was mercifully unobtrusive.

The bees, however, were not. They seemed extremely interested in her lemon-lime soda and hovered about noisily. "Shoo," Jennet muttered, waving her hand at them. It had no effect. She shifted the other way. The bees followed. "Begone, bees," Jennet said. They ignored her.

Her confrontation drew the interest of an old man who was seated on an opposite bench. "Just stay still, my dear," he said, "or you'll spill your sarsaparilla. That would truly give them something to buzz about. If you sit still, you'll discover the bees won't find you so appealing."

"Easy for you to say!" Jennet replied. "You've finished your lunch!"

The old man chuckled and removed his hat. He mopped at his head with a gaudy handkerchief. He was completely bald, and his scalp reflected the early summer sun.

"We're having quite a hot spell for you visitors to our fair land. It must be close to eighty-five!"

Jennet laughed. "I'm from Los Angeles. I know what hot weather really is."

"Ah, a Californian! I haven't visited there for almost a decade." The old man replaced his hat and looked appraisingly at her. "Tell me," he said with a glance toward Christ Church Gate, "do you know why Becket was murdered?"

*Hohoho, old man, Jennet thought. You think you've got some air-headed California bimbo who spends all her time on the beach. You're probably planning to give me a little history lesson. Just you wait . . .*

She took a deep breath. "Thomas Becket had been Henry II's chancellor, and served him well. He was an excellent administrator. After Archbishop Theobald died, Henry required a faithful man to succeed him. He chose Thomas. The church had grown strong during Stephen's reign, and Henry hoped Thomas would help him knock it back down, particularly in the area of ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

"But Thomas immediately opposed Henry. Even so, at a council in Clarendon in 1164, Henry required accused clergymen found guilty in an ecclesiastical court to be turned over to the king's justice for punishment. Becket argued, then reluctantly went along. But he soon changed his mind, and sought papal absolution.

"That enraged Henry. Becket fled to France. They quarreled for six years, and a fresh battle broke out when Henry had his son crowned as his successor in 1170. The archbishop of York, Canterbury's longtime rival, performed the ceremony. When Becket published some papal bulls which suspended the archbishop of York, Henry bellowed to his household that they were all traitors because they couldn't rid him of this one man. Four knights took him at his word, slipped off from Normandy to England, and murdered Thomas." Jennet slurped thirstily at her soda and noticed, somewhat to her surprise, that the bees had vanished during her lecture.

The bald gentleman was staring at her with rather a different look in his eyes. "My word! Are you just exceptionally well informed, or have California schools taken to producing geniuses?"

"The former," Jennet said. "You just happened to stumble onto my academic specialty. I'm a graduate student in medieval history, and my forte is the Anglo-Norman period. I'm here for a conference in London."

"Fascinating stuff, history; I've studied a lot of it. What will happen at this conference?"

"I get to give a paper; I'm counting on two years of teaching Western Civilization to help me get over my stage fright. My Ph.D. advisor is also pontificating. I have to sit in the audience and look impressed and applaud loudly. Then I get to run around and listen to lots of tenured profs giving other papers and hope they notice me. And drink awful sherry."



"It sounds like quite a time. I'm sure you'll do well, my dear—you gave a lovely lecture on Becket. And to think I planned to tell you a little bit so you'd enjoy your visit more! Well, you've certainly put me in my place today. My wife will tell me that's what I get for trying to impress charming young ladies." He rose, tipped his hat. "Good luck, my dear." He soon vanished into the crowd; he was hardly taller than Jennet, and she was only five-three.

She wondered how anybody could ever imagine the British as stuffy and reserved. Everyone she'd met on her travels was friendly and helpful. She finished the sandwich, tidied up, and went on a Canterbury pilgrimage of her own to the cathedral. Her visit was a little hurried; she had to return to London on a later afternoon train. *If I get back late enough*, she plotted, *I can avoid seeing Preston until morning, and by then all the festivities will be under way.*

She planned well, and got back to her hotel room unseen. She called room service for a late dinner, and pored over her notes for her paper. When her dinner arrived, she tipped the pimply-faced youth who brought it and settled down to eat. *Such luxury!* she thought. Ordinarily she stayed in youth hostels when she traveled, but she felt she had to bend her budget to stay in the hotel where the conference was held. Seeing her tromping in with her backpack every day would give the wrong impression to all those big-name medievalists. Besides, room service was far more enjoyable than heating a can of soup at a hostel.

She sipped a cup of tea and stared at her much-worn, Xeroxed pages of Roger of Howden's *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi* until she found her eyelids drooping. "Good night, Roger," she said, and she went to bed.

The next morning looked as glorious as the previous day. Although Jennet was genuinely looking forward to hearing some of the speakers and, if fortunate, to meeting them, she still felt it a crime to waste a sunny English day indoors.

With a lingering look at the clear skies, she headed toward the conference room. Most of the people had gathered about the tables loaded with tea, coffee, and pastries. Jennet grabbed a cup of tea and soon found herself in a conversation with two Dutch medievalists. It was enjoyable talk, and they made plans to meet again after the morning panels ended.

Jennet was on her way to Room C, where she would give her paper, when she saw the bulky figure of Dr. Preston. "Jennet! I've been looking everywhere for you! You do know you're on this morning, don't you?" he bellowed.

"Yes, Dr. Preston, I'm on my way," Jennet said, thinking, *Oh, God, now he's going to get all possessive and start showing off.* Sure enough, Preston grabbed her arm. "Louis," he called to another portly man. "This is one of my students, Jennet Walker. Jennet, meet Professor Louis Bizet."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, sir. Perhaps we could talk later? Dr. Preston, I really have to get over to Room C."

Bizet smiled. "But of course! I understand you will be giving a paper? Come then, Samuel, we can all chat later. Let us find some seats and let Miss Walker prepare."

Bizet had some clout, obviously, for Preston was not usually shut up so effectively. He led the way to Room C, which was gradually filling. Jennet went up to the speakers' table and met her fellow panelists, a student from New York and a Japanese professor. The panel's topic was Richard's governorship of Aquitaine under his father Henry II's rule.

The girl from New York went first. Jennet had already read the other panelists' papers while preparing for the session, so she surveyed the crowd while the other girl talked. She doubted she'd recognize very many people; medievalists, unlike best-selling novelists, do not get their pictures plastered on the back covers of their books. Still, there was

Professor Staley from Michigan, Professor Willis from Berkeley, and that charming Professor Benzinger from Cambridge whom she'd met when he gave a guest seminar at her university last year. . . .

Suddenly Jennet spotted another familiar face: the bald gentleman from Canterbury. He caught her bewildered gaze and grinned outrageously at her. What was he doing here? Good God, maybe he was a Somebody. And all those things she'd said yesterday! What must he think of her? He kept on grinning. She had to smile back; the whole situation was just too idiotic.

Soon it was her turn, and she bravely took the podium and discussed Richard's capture of the castle of Arnold of Bouteville at Castillon-sur-Dordogne. Jennet's contention was that it had been a far more difficult task than the chroniclers (including Roger of Howden) described. When her presentation and that of the Japanese medievalist ended, the audience began to ask questions. Jennet, to her relief, fielded hers with ease. She kept glancing over at the bald man, but he was just quietly smiling.

Preston stuck his hand in the air and asked her a leading question that let her show off a bit. He certainly could be bombastic, but he was brilliant and he did look out for his students' welfare, which was more than a lot of profs did these days.

After the questions ended, the crowd broke up into smaller groups. Some people hurried off to catch other panels, others stayed to chat. Preston hovered over Jennet like a mother hen with a chick. "You did great," he whispered, squeezing her shoulder. "That's doing the old man proud!" Jennet nodded her thanks and allowed him to introduce her to several more of his colleagues, but she had her eye on the bald man. Finally Preston noticed him also.

"Edwin! So good to see you! I'm surprised you dragged yourself away from St. Oswald's. Last I'd heard, you were

buried in work. I want you to meet one of my students, Jennet Walker. Jennet, this is Edwin Durrell."

Jennet felt her stomach lurch, her throat tighten, and her jaw drop all at once. Edwin Durrell! She'd given a lecture on Thomas Becket to Edwin Durrell, one of the greatest living medievalists in the world? She wondered if there was a hole somewhere to dive into.

"I'm delighted," said Dr. Durrell, "but then, we've already met. That was an excellent paper you gave, Miss Walker, though I almost prefer the irreverent tone of yesterday's talk." He grinned again. Jennet blushed, mumbled thanks. Preston looked confused.

"What do you mean, you've already met? Jennet, why didn't you tell me?" Preston clearly felt that it was his duty to make connections for his grad students.

"It was a chance encounter, Samuel," Dr. Durrell said. "Tell me, are you free for dinner? I'd love to take you and Miss Walker out to one of my favorite places. And Lillian also, if she's come with you."

Preston nodded. "Can't leave Lillian behind if I go to Europe. She uses it as an excuse to shop. If I can drag her out of Harrod's, we'd love to come. Right, Jennet?"

Jennet felt a momentary irritation at Preston's making all her decisions, but nothing on earth would stop her from going to dinner with Edwin Durrell. She suppressed an urge to rush out and join Mrs. Preston at Harrod's. What, she wondered, does one wear when dining with a legend?

She collected her wits. "Of course. I can't think of anything I'd like better."

Dr. Durrell grinned again. "Shall we get you some tea, my dear? I know how dry one gets lecturing. And then there's a good panel at eleven on Stephen and the church."

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Somehow Jennet found herself smack in the middle of an international ensemble of renowned medievalists. Various professors, rec-

ognizing Dr. Durrell, came up to greet him, and the cherubic Englishman promptly introduced them all to Jennet.

She felt rather uncomfortable about the whole thing. Dr. Durrell himself was a sweetheart, and all the medievalists she was meeting were quite polite, but she kept having that what-am-I-doing-here feeling. These men and women had filled library shelves with their works; she'd had three articles published. She tried to slip away several times, but Dr. Durrell caught her and dragged her back.

By the end of the afternoon, Jennet was annoyed. She was used to Preston's methods. He occasionally monopolized her, usually when some important person was in town. She'd work as his flunky and be put on display as his prize student. But Dr. Durrell, although he kept her constantly in his presence, never once treated her as anything less than an equal. Which was ridiculous, Jennet thought. What was the old man up to?

Finally, the afternoon panels ended. By that time Dr. Durrell had a group of around a dozen medievalists with him. He addressed them all. "I've made reservations for eight o'clock for a large table at the Mason's Arms for those of you who would like to come. The address is 36 Fortnam Street. Right now, though, I imagine we'd all like to freshen up a bit. I'll see you there." He nodded to the group, then walked toward the hotel elevators.

Jennet wanted to go up to her room also, but decided she'd rather stay away from Dr. Durrell until she knew what was going on. She hoped his interest in her was not of a sexual nature. He seemed a courtly, polite gentleman, but sometimes appearances were deceiving.

She thought she'd go to Charing Cross and poke around in bookstores for a while, but as she headed out of the hotel lobby she saw Lillian Preston, arms full of packages, trying to open the door. Jennet's Girl Scout training surfaced, and she ran to help.

"Thanks so much, Jennet," Mrs. Preston gasped. "I'm forever grateful. I'd be even more grateful if you'd carry me to my room."

"That's asking a bit much, Mrs. Preston, but I'll help with the bundles." They squeezed into the elevator.

Jennet glanced at her mentor's wife. Lillian Preston, for all her love of shopping, was no dummy. She was a highly respected scholar of Chinese history and had recently been named vice chair of the history department. She also was expert at caring for her husband, who frequently became so wrapped up in his work that he tuned out the real world. She had—and needed—real brains and plenty of common sense and patience. Jennet decided to chance a question.

"Mrs. Preston, how well do you know Edwin Durrell?"

"Edwin? I've known him for close to twenty years now. He's one of the loveliest people I know, and of course he's quite a genius. Why do you ask?"

The elevator door opened. Jennet hoped that the conversation would end before they reached the Prestons' room, or that Dr. Preston was still downstairs. She really didn't feel like having this discussion with him. Briefly, she explained how she'd met Dr. Durrell yesterday and his interest in her today. Mrs. Preston seemed more amused than anything but didn't answer until she unlocked her door and threw her bags on the bed. She sank into a chair.

"Oh, my feet! I should exercise more," she said. Jennet set down her load and waited. Then Mrs. Preston looked up at the grad student. "Jennet, I could tell you a lot of gossip about a lot of people at this conference. Samuel could probably tell you even more. But the only thing I can tell you about Edwin Durrell is that he's been happily married to a delightful lady for fifty-one years now. They have three grown children and a tribe of grandchildren. Probably great-grandchildren by now! Anyway, I think he's a dear, and I would eat my hat—or even my shoes—if he tried to make

a move on you. I admit I don't know why he's kept you in his circle of buddies today, but my advice is just to enjoy the company. It certainly isn't lacking for brains. But then neither are you, Jennet. I don't think Samuel has ever been prouder of any student than you. Just feast yourself on good food, good drink, and good talk. Believe me, with that crowd there'll be plenty of everything."

"Thanks, Mrs. P. You've put my mind at rest," said Jennet. "I thought he was a love, but he kept hanging around me like a bodyguard. Also, I'm not used to being in such fast company, if you know what I mean."

"Have no fear, it won't be long before you're as fast as any of them. Then you'll have grad students trailing behind you!" Mrs. Preston sounded supremely confident. Jennet, all too aware of the job market for experts in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman military history, simply smiled and went to her room for a much-needed shower.

Clean and refreshed, she towed and brushed her short, curly brown hair until it shone, then slipped into the one good dress she had brought from the States. It was dark green and played up the color of her hazel eyes.

She studied a map of London until she found the tiny side street where the Mason's Arms was located. It was in the old city, not too far from St. Paul's but some distance from the hotel. Jennet expected most of the party would go by taxi, but on her student's budget she tried to avoid unnecessary expenses. She was not adverse to taking the tube, however plebeian it might seem to her fellow guests.

She got off at Barbican Station and wandered about in the evening rush. She passed by the twelfth-century church of St. Bartholomew the Great, but it was locked for the evening. Jennet poked around the rather charming cemetery, reading Victorian tombstones until the light became too dim. Then she hurried over to find the Mason's Arms. She had no qualms about spirits of the dead haunting the

grave sites; on the other hand, spirits of the living might find a solitary female in a poorly lit area tempting prey.

As she walked up the block, she saw Dr. Bizet and the Prestons emerge from a taxi. For a moment, silhouetted in the twilight, slender Lillian Preston looked like a bowling pin between two enormous balls. Jennet paused and let them enter the restaurant as a group. *I'm an individual*, she thought, *not just some adjunct to Sammy Boy*. She saw Dr. Takahashi arrive next, along with Professor Staley of Michigan. She waited several moments after they entered, then followed.

The Mason's Arms was an unassuming brick building, dark with decades of soot and dirt. The heavy oak door had a lovely stained-glass window in it, but that and the restaurant's sign were the only outside decoration. Inside was altogether different. It was far more brightly lit than most eating establishments, Greek music blared on a stereo, and the aroma of roasted lamb with plenty of garlic dominated everything. Over on one side of the room was a long bar, crowded with patrons being served by a gray-haired Greek woman. The rest of the room was filled with small tables, which obviously could be jammed together for large parties. Jennet saw a number of Dr. Durrell's party already seated at the largest group of them.

She was admiring the posters of Greek statues and reliefs that decorated the room when a short dark man approached her. It was hard not to stare at him. He had the most incredibly bushy mustache Jennet had ever seen.

He bowed slightly. "You are one of Edwin's people? Please come this way." He elegantly took her by the hand and led her to the assembled tables. Dr. Durrell was seated at their head. He rose to greet her.

"Jennet, my dear, I'm so glad you could come. Michael, this is Jennet Walker of California. You must be certain to keep her glass and her plate filled, so she will know how



hospitable we English can be. Jennet, this is Michael Stephanos, now owner and manager of this establishment. And doing as excellent a job as his father before him, I might add."

Stephanos smiled. "If all our patrons were as devoted as you, Edwin, we'd be opening a second restaurant. Do let me know if I can get you anything, Miss Walker. Some wine, perhaps?"

His accent was as thoroughly English as Dr. Durrell's, with no hint of anything foreign. It seemed odd, coming out of a face that looked as Greek as Pericles's—with mustaches. "Some wine would be lovely," she answered, "and I must compliment you on your decor."

"Papa always said that his grandfather was so enraged when Lord Elgin brought the Parthenon reliefs to Britain that he followed them there. Actually, his motives were purely economic, but it's a good story. Let me get you your wine."

The rest of the guests soon arrived and were seated. Stephanos clearly had high regard for Dr. Durrell; although he left the actual serving to the waiters, he hovered about and several times pulled up a chair to chat with the old man.

Jennet found herself between Professor Bizet and Mrs. Preston, and opposite an attractive young professor from Durham, Miles Beckwith. The conversation was lively, ranging from shop talk to the inevitable gossip, much of which centered on scholars Jennet knew purely by reputation. Miles Beckwith, clearly only a few years removed from his own university days, regaled them all with a story of one obstinate don.

"He got a divorce from his wife, you see, and he won custody of their cat. Was more devoted to it than to her, if you know what I mean. Anyway, he kept bringing it with him to his office, brought the cat pan and all. Smelled up the entire building; one secretary threatened to quit. Everyone