

# Tourist Trap

'This is where Abbot Cedric died.'

The tour guide points towards the stain on the ancient abbey floor.

'You can still see the blood.'

It's not real. They touch it up every few months with crimson dye.

I won't tell the others. I like this guide. He's enthusiastic about his subject and has a sense of humour that appeals to visitors. I often join the tour. Let's say I seek the company of strangers.

A phalanx of mobiles points at the flagstones. The flashes illuminate the undercroft in a brief spasm of white light. The medieval authorities sought to keep the death a secret—now the evidence travels all over the globe.

A shout from the back: 'They killed him because he opposed the Church, right?'

'That's what many historians think. It was a time of religious strife and his sermons upset the powerful, including the king. The nature of his death—'

'Wasn't it a wolf?' asks a youth.

The guide smiles. 'It's an interesting tale, but certainly fiction. Records suggest his killer ripped open his throat, but there were no reports of wolves in the area and they had to unlock the door to find him.'

'Could be a werewolf,' says the youth, provoking giggles.

'Well, you might joke,' says the guide, 'but you'll hear something in a minute that suggests otherwise.'

Whispers of anticipation echo around the vaulted ceiling. My reaction is amusement. The youth is the guide's nephew and asks this question every week. It adds frisson to the narrative.

'And now we'll visit the Fitzherberts' tomb.'

We follow like a brood of ducklings. Up the narrow stairs, worn concave by a hundred thousand feet, to the carved monument. We'll hear about good Sir John and his wife, how they helped victims of plague in the sixteenth century. Then the couple contracted the disease and died within a few hours of each other.

I step aside to allow a young woman to enter the small chapel before me.

'Thank you.' She smiles, keeps eye contact longer than politeness requires. I don't imagine she realises how old I am. I've kept myself in good condition. She's got an accent—I'm guessing Canadian.

I smile back. 'First visit to the abbey?'

'Yes,' she says. 'It's fascinating. We have nothing this old in the States.'

Wrong again. 'What part of the States?'

'Outside Boston.'

My knowledge of American geography is poor, although I think Boston's close to Canada.

She looks me up and down. 'Nice coat.'

'Thanks. It's different.'

'It's cool,' she says. 'You English are so stylish.'

I've had it for years. But it still looks good.

The guide's following his script. Sir John served with Drake and captured a Spanish galleon before Good Queen Bess bestowed a knighthood on him. He owned a great house outside the village, now an out-of-town shopping centre.

'He and his wife were inseparable in their later years,' states the guide. 'It's fitting they are together in eternity.'

'That's sweet,' she says.

'If it was true,' I tell her.

'How come?'

'He had a mistress. A local girl. He was shacking up with her when he died of a heart attack. His wife died three years after him.'

'Wow. How did you know?'

'It's a family secret,' I lie. 'My grandmother told me.'

She grins. 'Old wife's tale, huh?'

She excites me. I'm about to ask her about Boston when she utters a smiling 'Excuse me' and walks away. She's not alone—she joins four women of a similar age. One looks at me and giggles. I smile back. The other three stare at me with expressions ranging from suspicion to curiosity. My new friend flicks a wave in my direction. All is not lost.

The guide takes us into the Lady's Chapel. A golden cross sits atop an altar. It's a replica, but he won't reveal that. The original is in a museum. He's telling us Lord Fitzherbert's grandson James paid for the chapel's construction in memory of his mother. I'm waiting for the reaction to what he'll say next.

'James Fitzherbert is not buried here. His wife Martha accused him of being a vampire and he fled the country. Some say he put a curse on the family, for they died out shortly after he disappeared.'

Most times the group emits a collective moan, combining shock and horror with a soupçon of fear. Today, they react in silence. I see two American female mouths drop open.

The guide waits for the shock to subside.

'So where is he buried?' asks one of my friend's friends. Another transatlantic accent, but harsher—to my ears from the southern states.

'We've never found out. Legend says he sailed to the American colonies.'

'Jeez, that's awesome.' The harsh drawl again.

A middle-aged lady raises her hand. 'Was he really a vampire?'

'I doubt it,' replies the guide. 'Witch-hunting was rife in those days. If you wanted to get rid of an unwanted spouse, it was far cheaper than a divorce.'

Cue for laughter. He's fielded that query before.

He waits for the mirth to die down. 'That's not the end of the story. Antagonising the richest family in the village is a risky business, and it's said Martha followed him across the Atlantic when they set fire to her house. However...'

The guide has perfected the timing of this pause. Long enough to build tension, short enough to cut off any conversation.

'Abbot Cedric suffered his horrific death a week after James vanished. James, the man accused of being a vampire.'

I fall back as we shuffle out of the dusty gloom of the interior into the glare of the graveyard. The guide is insistent on showing us the tomb of the village's heaviest man, as wide as it is long. I'm certain the corpse's waistline grows by an inch with every telling. He used to use the term "fattest" but a demand for political correctness forced him into more convoluted descriptions.

A melee forms as the visitors force themselves to the front to take a photo, only to realise they can't fit the whole slab in their shot. I seize the opportunity to sidle up to my intended conquest.

'Why does everyone want the same picture?' I ask. 'You could take one and share it.'

Two people have turned and are pointing their phones at me. My eccentric fashion tastes intrigue them. I flash a smile. Embarrassed, they look away.

'They need to prove they've been here,' she says. 'They'll be posting them online as soon as they can access wi-fi.'

'Where are you staying?'

'We're here for the day. Gotta visit this place 'cause my family lived here way back. We're heading to Scotland late tonight. Edinburgh.' She pronounces the second syllable "burg". 'Say, you seem to know all the local chatter. Is that stuff about him being a vampire true?'

'Come with me,' I say.

She looks doubtful.

'Not too far away. They'll be too busy with Mister Tubby to notice we've gone.'

I lead her out of the abbey grounds and along a stone wall that borders the graveyard. I kneel and point at scratches on one of the lower blocks.

'JfH,' she reads. '1631. Is that—?'

'It's where they buried him. He never made it to America.'

'Jeez. I mean, how come it's a secret?'

'A few people know.' I don't tell her I watched as it was carved. 'We keep it quiet. Otherwise, you'd get ghouls trying to dig him up.'

'Sure, but if you called in archaeologists, they'd do a proper excavation and then nobody would bother you.'

I stand up and stare into her beautiful eyes. 'They wouldn't find him. He's not here anymore.'

Her eyes open wide. 'How come?'

'Legend claims Abbot Cedric didn't want him anywhere near the abbey, but when his priests searched, the body had disappeared.'

'He's a vampire, right? So if they don't stick a stake in his heart, or put him in the sunlight, or—'

'I often wonder if that's nonsense,' I say. 'The sunshine thing. There could be vampires here and you'd never know.'

She trembles. 'I can believe that. This abbey—it's real spooky.' She glances behind us. 'I mean—check out that forest. Could be anything in there.'

I grin at her, calling it a forest. 'It's not that big. It wasn't even here before the big house burned down.'

'Wow. So the big house wasn't far away?'

'No. The pillars of the old front gate still stand in the centre of the wood.'

She looks at the crowd still jostling for the best camera angles. 'Come on. Show me.'

I can't believe my luck. She's willing to let me lead her into the silence of the trees. I can feel the old desire flowing through my veins.

She walks close beside me as we enter the wood.

'This James guy...' she says. 'Did they ever wonder if his wife made it all up?' She doesn't give me a chance to reply but turns with wide eyes. 'If his body isn't there anymore, then...'

I'm guessing what she's thinking. James Fitzherbert rose from the grave and is watching, waiting to taste blood again, the younger the better. She seems agitated. I need to soothe her before I make my move.

'This must be a lot different from Boston. Have you lived there all your life?'

We've reached a fork in the path. She doesn't reply before turning left without hesitation. I should have questioned how she guessed where to go. Her pace increases until she reaches a stone column scarred by time and ivy.

It's then she turns to face me.

'I actually live in a town called Salem. Have done since 1632.'

She smiles, her long sharp canines glinting as her arms seize me in a fatal embrace.

'We haven't been introduced,' she whispers in my ear. 'My name's Martha Fitzherbert.'