

# THE BODY UNDER THE BRIDGE

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## CHAPTER 1

The feeling had come upon Father Louis Gilbert suddenly. Cold slimy fingers caressed the back of his neck. His eyes burned and a taste like old nicotine filled his mouth and the back of his throat. An acrid smell of ammonia assailed his nostrils.

He sat perfectly still at his desk. The pen in his hand held steady two inches above the notepaper. He waited for the feeling to pass. It didn't. He carefully lowered the pen and took off his round, gold-rimmed reading glasses. His eyes turned to the closed door.

Something had changed just outside of his office. Mrs Mayhew, the secretary for St Mark's since time began, had stopped typing on her computer keyboard. Her chair scraped across the hardwood floor as she pushed back from her desk. In his mind's eye, Father Gilbert saw her stand up, responding to the rapidly approaching footsteps.

He braced himself. The feeling meant his adversary was nearby – one he'd known as a Scotland Yard detective. It had often sneered at him from the shadows and taunted him out of the corner of his eye. It was Death.

Father Gilbert rose to greet it.

Mr Urquhart, the church sexton, burst in. His face was red, his bald head dripping with sweat. "Father," he spoke in a deep Scottish accent. "Come quickly. There's a man on the tower. He says he's going to jump."

\* \* \*

"Please phone the police, Mrs Mayhew," Father Gilbert said as he rushed past her desk.

"Of course, Father."

Father Gilbert hurried after Mr Urquhart down the hall leading to the nave of St Mark's. "How did he get up to the tower?" The door was usually locked.

“I was cleaning the vestibule,” Mr Urquhart called over his shoulder. His voice came in gasps. “I had moved some hymnals into the closet just inside the staircase. He must have slipped in when my back was turned.”

Reaching the nave, the two men broke into a run – a straight race between the neat rows of polished pews. They reached the vestibule where the door to the church tower stood open.

“I saw him just as he rounded the first turn in the stairs,” Mr Urquhart said. “I chased him up to the belfry. He told me to stay away or he’d jump.”

At the bottom stair, Father Gilbert paused, remembering what a long climb it would be. “Please wait here for the police.”

“Yes, Father.”

A large man, barrel-chested and broad-shouldered, Father Gilbert reached out and grabbed at the railing – a rope, actually, that had been threaded through strategically-placed eyelets. He propelled himself upwards.

The stairs circled up and up, winding like a coiled spring inside a square box. He couldn’t remember the measurements – how many stairs, how tall the Normanesque tower was. What he *did* remember was that he hadn’t been to the gym in weeks.

He could feel the sweat on the scalp under his thick and dishevelled hair. Damp formed at the back of his grey clerical shirt. His stiff white dog collar was cutting into his throat.

Reaching the door to the belfry, he hesitated. The air was thick and musty, relieved only by a ribbon of fresh air coming from the open hatch above. The formidable iron bell hung still and alone, the ropes dangling down all the way to the bottom of the tower. He followed the planking along the wall to the opposite side where an iron ladder stretched up. Grabbing the ladder, he climbed upwards towards the square patch of blue sky above. The ladder shivered under his weight.

He reached the top rung and grabbed the two handles that allowed him to heave his body onto the sun-baked tar. The cool breeze of a beautiful late spring day chilled the hot moisture on his face. Fumbling to his feet, he squinted against the bright sun.

The church tower was square and framed on all four sides by waist-high parapets. Directly opposite from the hatch, a man stood with his back to the priest. Shaggy sun-bleached hair felt onto broad shoulders, the top of a Y-shaped torso – a lean and muscular body shown off by a tight T-shirt. The man wore faded denims, the back pockets torn. His well-worn boots were splattered with mud, cement and plaster. Presumably he was a builder.

The man reached over and placed a hand on one of the parapets. He seemed to be admiring the view of the town of Stonebridge below.

Father Gilbert took a step forward. His shoe scuffed the gravel. The man spun around to face him.

Father Gilbert held up his hands in a gesture of submission. “This is my church. I’m Father Gilbert.”

The man’s face was prematurely aged from too much time in the sun. There were deep lines on his forehead and around his eyes, blond stubble on his cheeks and chin. He might have been in his thirties but looked older. Rivulets of tears had smeared the dust on the man’s cheeks. Father Gilbert saw something dark in his eyes, a terrible despair. This man would not come quietly down the stairs.

Somewhere behind the normal sounds of Stonebridge’s traffic, a police siren wailed.

The man’s eyes darted in the direction of the sound. He looked at the priest in accusation.

“It’s standard procedure when a man threatens to jump from my tower.” Father Gilbert attempted a casual step forward.

The man took a step back, pressing himself against the parapet. With a grace that matched his body, he pulled himself upwards onto one of the embrasures.

“Don’t!” Father Gilbert said sharply. He raised his hand, as if he could pull the man back with sheer force of will.

“There’s nothing you can do,” the man said.

“Then you have nothing to lose by telling me who you are and why you’re up here.”

The man shook his head.

“Don’t I have a right to know why you want to throw yourself off of my tower?” Father Gilbert kept his hand outstretched.

The sirens were below them now. Father Gilbert wished the police had shown better sense. Then came the slamming car doors and urgent shouts. The man glanced over the side. Wiping the back of his hand across his eyes, he let out a small whimper.

“What’s your name?” Father Gilbert asked. “I’ve told you mine. It’s common courtesy to give me yours.” And it was police procedure to establish a rapport as soon as possible. Something as simple as an exchange of names sometimes brought a would-be suicide back to humanity.

“It’s all in my wallet. The police will find it when they collect my body.” His voice was a painful rasp.

“Then tell me why you’re here.”

With a sudden sob, the man lowered his head. “I don’t have a choice.”

“Of course you do.”

He shook his head. “It’s the only way to stop them.”

“Them?”

“Before they make me do things.” His tears fell freely. “It’s not fair.” He faltered, his words lost in his sobs. He muttered to himself. Father Gilbert couldn’t make out what he was saying.

“Look at me,” Father Gilbert said. “Keep your eyes on mine. Whatever you’re thinking and feeling right now will pass. But, go over that wall and your situation will become permanent.”

The man tilted his head as if listening to something. Then he said, “It shouldn’t have been found.”

“What?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold chain. He held it up. A large medallion, the size of a drinks coaster, dangled in the light.

“What is it?” Father Gilbert wanted to get the man’s focus on something other than dying.

“A curse.”

“What does that mean?” Father Gilbert moved a step closer.

“Are you a holy man? Maybe if I leave it with you...”

Voices and footfalls echoed up from the hatch to the belfry.

The man’s eyes darted towards the sound. “Before this is over, there are a few people who’ll wish they did what I’m doing now.”

“Whatever the trouble is—” Father Gilbert began to say.

The man cut him off. “Staying alive is too painful.” He spoke with a voice choked by a deep anguish.

“Tell me what you mean,” Father Gilbert said. “We’ll talk it through.”

The man shook his head. His face contorted as he fought back more tears. “I don’t want to be an angel.”

“An angel? What kind of angel?” Father Gilbert hoped the questions might keep the man engaged.

The capped head of a police officer appeared at the hatchway.

The man looked at the medallion, still dangling from his hand. “I’ll leave this with you.”

Father Gilbert took another step forward. “Listen to me, you don’t—”

“*Take it,*” the man snapped and tossed the medallion at the priest, the disc spinning and the chain spiralling in the air.

Father Gilbert instinctively reached out to catch the medallion and knew he’d been duped. The man brought up his free arm. In his hand was a Stanley knife. The blade was out.

“Stop!” Father Gilbert shouted and threw himself at the man.

With a firm stroke, the man slashed the blade right across his throat. Blood pumped out of the gash, a warm spray in the wind that hit Father Gilbert’s face.

Like a diver pushing off from the side of a boat, the man thrust himself backwards and disappeared over the edge of the tower.

Father Gilbert cried out as he rushed to the parapet.

He leaned over the edge, harbouring the unlikely hope that the man was clinging to the side of the tower. The man was not there. Nor was he lying on the bed of flowers that bloomed directly below.

Mr Urquhart stood next to a wheelbarrow filled with pulled weeds. He looked up at the priest, shielding his eyes with a dirty hand. “Father? What are you doing up there?”

“Where did he go?” Father Gilbert shouted. His voice was a strangled croak. “Did you see him?”

The old Scot looked around, then up again. “See who?”

“The man! He was up here in the tower and...” Father Gilbert’s

voice trailed off. There were no police cars in the car park, nor any sirens. He glanced over at the hatch to the belfry. No one was there. Everything was perfectly normal.

He felt sick.

“I’m sorry, Father, but I don’t know what you are talking about!” Mr Urquhart shouted up.

“Never mind.” Father Gilbert stepped back. Leaning heavily against the stone, he gazed at the roof and replayed the scene in his mind. It was as vivid as anything he’d ever experienced.

He looked down at his shaking hands. He was clutching the gold medallion.