

THE BODY UNDER THE BRIDGE

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LION FICTION

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CHAPTER 2

Father Gilbert wasn't on mind-altering medication. He didn't suffer from delusions. He wasn't prone to hallucinations, trances or visions, in the ecstatic religious sense of Jesus or Mary appearing before him. He was cautious about those kinds of experiences.

From time to time, however, he had unexplainable encounters that were similar to those chronicled by saints and mystics: vivid scenes that he perceived as real, as real as anything his senses could perceive. Usually these encounters were relevant to events that were about to unfold. He wouldn't call them premonitions, since they didn't directly foretell anything. They offered no instructions.

Among the many certainties of his faith, he allowed for a candid *I don't know*. He was never afraid of not knowing. Mystery was an inherent part of faith; it filled the gap between the limited understanding of Man and the limitless knowledge of God. The spiritual world had many dark corners that were filled with its own secrets and rules. He was often drawn to those places. *Why?* That seemed to be God's business. Mostly he was left feeling like an actor in a play he hadn't rehearsed for, working from a script he'd never seen.

He rarely spoke of these encounters to others. He knew people would think he was mad. And he feared he would be branded as the sort of American hyper-televangelist showman he disdained.

Mr Urquhart deserved an explanation. Mrs Mayhew, too – though she was a dyed-in-the-wool traditional Anglican who looked askance at anything unduly sensational. He couldn't miss the way they looked at each other – and at him – as he detailed what he'd experienced. They accepted it in silence. No questions, no suggestions that he should go immediately to the nearest mental hospital. A nod, and it was back to work.

Did he know what the encounter in the tower meant? No. He didn't recognize the man. He couldn't explain the gold medallion.

Nausea welled up within him. The encounter wasn't real, apart from the extraordinary physical evidence he now clasped in his hand. And he couldn't shake the harsh sting of failure. He hadn't stopped the man from throwing himself over the side.

Father Gilbert now paced the grounds around the church, his eyes moving back and forth from the well-tended grass and brick pavements to St Mark's Church itself – its large, rough, grey stones and arches, the stained-glass windows. He occasionally glanced up at the tower. It was a formidable-looking Norman structure. Strong and beautiful, but not elegant. Local legend asserted that when the tower was added to the original church, its design was based on the Magdalen College Tower in Oxford.

He wondered how many people had used that tower for the purpose of suicide in the church's thousand-year history.

He drifted into "The Garden of Peace" – an area enclosed on three sides by tall hedges. It contained a stone statue of St Mark standing in a small bed of flowers, and a couple of benches meant for sitting and reflecting. The garden was meant to suggest seclusion, though how secluded a person might feel when surrounded by the traffic and shops and offices no more than fifty yards away, was a good question.

St Mark's was an anomaly, a funny little island in the middle of Stonebridge. The grounds had once spread out on all sides for a full six acres. Then came the inevitable sell-off of land as the church needed money to pay its bills. The bustling High Street of modern shops stretched past the front of the church, on the west side. A shopping centre with its vast car park appeared within a stone's throw on the north side. A two-storey office building loomed on the east side. The only patch of land held back from commercial use was the graveyard on the south side, enclosed by a tall wrought-iron fence with spear-tipped posts evocative of many classic horror films. Father Gilbert once asked in a homily if the fence was meant to keep people out or keep them in. For that he received a polite chuckle publicly and a few complaints about bad taste privately.

Father Gilbert sat down on one of the benches. Hunched over, and rested his arms on his knees, the medallion still held tightly in his

hand. Through the entrance to the Garden of Peace, he could see the flowerbed at the base of the tower. That's where the man would have fallen. He imagined the body jammed between the rough grey stones of the church wall and Mr Urquhart's daffodils.

Father Gilbert lifted the medallion for a better look. The gold was tarnished and flecked with mud. A lozenge-shaped red jewel sat in the centre. On the bottom, near the edge, was the head of a bird – at least, Father Gilbert assumed it was a bird – with branches moving up from the head to encircle the gem. The shoots of the branches sprouted round leaves. There were specks of white within the gold and he wondered if they might be small diamonds.

He turned the medallion over. The image on the back was upside down from the image on the front. To the left of the jewel was a man hanging on a cross – presumably Jesus – and to the right was an inscription that was too worn to make out. He frowned and turned the medallion around, then back and forth.

A voice called from the other side of the hedge. "Father?"

"I'm here," he said to the voice.

Father Hugh Benson, St Mark's new curate, rounded the wall of green. The young priest wore an anxious expression on his normally cheerful face. Clearly he had spoken to Mr Urquhart or Mrs Mayhew. Father Gilbert had forgotten that the young priest would also need an explanation.

Benson stopped in front of Father Gilbert. "Are you all right?"

"Who did you talk to – Mr Urquhart or Mrs Mayhew?" he asked.

"Both, actually." He sat down on the opposite end of the bench. "Mrs Mayhew said you had walked out of your office looking terribly worried. She asked you a question, but you didn't answer. You went up to the tower, for no apparent reason, and then shouted down at Mr Urquhart. Something about a man killing himself."

Father Gilbert shook his head. It certainly sounded absurd.

"Was it a dream? You fell asleep at your desk?" Benson frowned, his jet-black eyebrows forming a straight line over his grey eyes. "Were you sleep-walking? It's a bit frightening to think of you in a somnambulistic state on the church tower. You could have fallen."

“I’ve never been a sleep-walker,” Father Gilbert said.

Benson scrutinized him. “Mrs Mayhew is afraid that you haven’t fully recovered,” he said – a reference to Father Gilbert’s recent extended time away in a monastery.

“I was away on a *sabbatical*, not rehab.”

“They said the Bishop sent you away to the monastery because of burn-out.” Benson hesitated. “You were dealing with the death of your mother – and other things.”

“This has nothing to do with that.”

Benson fell silent as if to concede that the argument wasn’t his to have. Then he said, “There is one thing, though. Mr Urquhart was wondering how you got through the door. He said the tower door is always locked and you didn’t use your key.”

“He puts the extra hymnals away in the closet there after every service. There’s every chance he’d left it unlocked.” As he spoke, Father Gilbert also realized that it was then possible for someone – anyone – to access the tower without being noticed. That might explain how the medallion got there.

Benson nodded towards the gold disc in Father Gilbert’s hand. “Is that it? The one from the roof?”

Father Gilbert nodded.

“May I see?” Benson asked.

Father Gilbert handed it over. Benson studied each side for a moment, then turned it back and forth. “When the front image is right-side up, the back is upside-down. Do you think it’s a mistake?”

“It’s a terrible mistake if it is,” Father Gilbert said. “To put Jesus and the cross upside-down is extremely sacrilegious.”

“Maybe it was meant to be flipped, like a coin.”

“A medallion this size?” Father Gilbert countered. “The chain suggests that it’s meant to be worn around the neck.”

“Or hung somewhere as a decoration.” Benson examined the chain. “Are these bits of cloth?”

Father Gilbert took back the medallion and put on his glasses to look more closely. Fragments of brown cloth were stuck to the gold chain, easily mistaken for dirt.

“What do you make of the symbols?” Benson asked.

Father Gilbert lifted the medallion to catch the daylight better. “Well, the image of Jesus on the cross is ordinary enough – unless it was meant to be upside-down. I can’t make out the inscription.”

The younger priest pointed. “What’s that thing on the other side? The head of a bird? Are those branches and leaves? Do they mean anything?”

Father Gilbert held the medallion at one angle and then another, a realization dawning on him. “Those aren’t branches and leaves. They’re tail-feathers. We’re looking at a peacock and its plumage.”

“Symbolizing what?”

Father Gilbert thought for a moment. “Peacocks have a variety of meanings in English history. Renewal, status, wealth. Early Christians thought they symbolized eternal life. Others considered them bad luck – because the ends of the feathers looked like eyes. Some called them ‘evil eyes’.”

“So you had some kind of dream or a vision that manifested itself in a solid object.” Benson’s tone wasn’t sarcastic or even sceptical. It was just a statement.

“The man in the tower said it wasn’t meant to be found,” Father Gilbert said. “He called it a curse. He seemed to think that leaving it with a priest might undo the curse.”

Benson shook his head. “Whatever you experienced up there was certainly vivid. Are you sure you’re not on medication?” He eyed Father Gilbert with a playful smile.

Mrs Mayhew stepped through the entrance to the garden. “Father? Bill Drake is on the phone for you,” she said.

Father Gilbert looked at his watch.

“No, you’re not late for lunch,” she said, anticipating his thought. “But he says it’s urgent.”

* * *

Father Gilbert went into his office and picked up the receiver. “Good morning, Bill.”

“I’m phoning as a fellow-member of the Stonebridge Historical Trust and a friend of the current Lord Haysham. Your presence is required at the Haysham Estate immediately.” Father Gilbert thought

that if a voice could sound as if it was winking playfully, Bill Drake's did. He wondered if Drake was setting him up for a prank.

"Why?" Father Gilbert asked.

"They found *something*," Drake said.

"Don't be so cryptic, Bill. Who are *they* and what's the *something*?"

"*They* would be the workers who've been crawling all over the Estate for the past few weeks – the ones who found the bridge," he said.

"Oh. *Them*." Lord Haysham had come up with a controversial plan to turn a section of his Estate into commercial property. He'd had workers in to drain a marsh as part of his extensive landscaping efforts. In the marsh they had unearthed an old stone bridge, possibly the original bridge after which the town had been named.

"And they found what?" Father Gilbert asked. "The original village that went with the bridge?"

"No. They found a body."

Father Gilbert tensed. "A body?"

Benson, who had been lingering outside by Mrs Mayhew's desk, now stepped to the door.

"Actually, they found a *foot*," Drake said. "They assume the foot is attached to a body. It's under the peat and they don't want to touch it until the police arrive. Lord Haysham wants you to come right away. Maybe your presence will calm the hordes. We've got the makings of a riot here."

"A riot?" Father Gilbert asked, then groaned. "Is David Todd there?"

"Of course."

Father Gilbert sighed.

"Hurry. You don't want to miss the fun." Drake hung up.

Father Gilbert put the receiver down. He placed the gold medallion on the desk.

Benson remained in the doorway, watching him.

Father Gilbert came around his desk. "You drive."