

# THE BODY UNDER THE BRIDGE

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## CHAPTER 3

Father Gilbert squeezed his large frame into the passenger seat of Benson's Mini Cooper. "I don't know how you can drive something the size of a pencil sharpener."

"Then let's take your car."

"It's in the garage."

"It's *always* in the garage. In the two weeks I've been here I've never actually seen your car."

They drove out of the church car park and took the one-way system down the High Street of Stonebridge. The town was quintessentially English, with a mix of tea, pastry and gift shops tucked between the more modern grocery, hardware and clothes stores. Past and present, vintage and contemporary – England to its very core.

Father Gilbert gazed out of the passenger window and considered how much Stonebridge had changed in the few years since he'd arrived. The outward spread of London commuters had reached this far south. The train from nearby Polegate made it a fairly easy ninety-minute journey to Victoria Station. Those commuters needed homes to live in. And with those homes came the demand for shopping centres, cinemas and all the other modern amenities. What was the town to do? Some people were all for development, others vehemently against it.

"Anything I should know before we get there?" Benson asked.

Father Gilbert adjusted his position in the seat. He looked at the younger priest. A handsome face, wavy black hair – he could have been an actor or a model. The girls in the parish had done nothing but swoon since his arrival. The church youth group had doubled in a fortnight.

"The town council is in a civil war over the issue of land development. And Lord Haysham is at the centre of the current battle. He's rather progressive in his views about how to manage his property."

“Progressive – how?”

“Hundreds of acres of land to the south of Stonebridge belong to him,” said Father Gilbert. “Last summer rumours sprang up that he was going to sell off parcels to developers. The environmentalists complained. Haysham was coy, neither confirming nor denying their suspicions. People took sides. To those who want jobs and commerce in the area, Lord Haysham is a visionary. To those who want the land unspoiled, he is a villain.”

“Which side are you on?”

Father Gilbert ignored the question. He wasn’t interested in taking sides. “A few weeks ago landscapers and workers showed up at the Estate, allegedly to drain a marsh. The environmentalists protested. Then the workers unearthed an old bridge.”

“An entire bridge was in the marsh – and no one knew?” said Benson.

Father Gilbert rested a hand on the dashboard. “Time and tide covered it well. And it was a *stone* bridge and perfectly positioned to be the original stone bridge the town was named after.”

“That’s an incredible find,” Benson said.

“The environmentalists went apoplectic,” Father Gilbert continued. “The area had to be preserved for environmental *and* historical reasons. They demanded the work should stop.”

“And now they’ve discovered a body,” Benson said.

“Actually, they found a foot.”

“Oh.” A pause. “Whose foot? Lord Haysham’s? Had he lost one?”

“We’ll find out together,” said Father Gilbert.

A silence. Then Benson said, “Do you think this is connected to your vision?”

“We’ll find that out together, too.” But Father Gilbert had a nagging feeling the events were linked somehow.

\* \* \*

They drove out of Stonebridge proper and took a stretch of straight road that cut south between rolling green hills of farmland and forest. The late-morning sun washed the view in a white haze.

Father Gilbert pointed. “The driveway for the Manor is just ahead, on the left. But go past that to the Old Stonebridge Road.”

As they passed the turn-in for Haysham Manor, Father Gilbert could see the driveway stretch a hundred yards or so along an open lawn to the front of a Georgian-style mansion.

Benson gave a low whistle. “That’s impressive. It must cost a mint to maintain.”

“I would imagine so.”

“Does Lord Haysham *need* to sell his land?” Benson asked.

Father Gilbert shrugged. “We’ve never discussed his finances.” Old Stonebridge Road came up. He gestured. “There.”

Benson signalled and turned onto a one-lane country road, lined with hedgerows on one side and a forest on the other. Then it angled to the left and snaked deeper into the forest. The sun all but disappeared beneath a thick canopy of trees, the speckled light turning a murky grey with green hues.

“Where the road ends there’s a clearing where you can park.”

The clearing was hardly clear. Benson wove the Mini through a dozen cars that weren’t really parked so much as haphazardly abandoned.

“What’s going on here?” Benson asked. “This can’t be about the body. Not already.”

He found a spot between an elm tree and a rusted Range Rover covered with environmentalist stickers. Father Gilbert suspected the stickers were holding the car together.

The two priests got out and walked beyond the clutter of cars to a path.

A fresh-faced police constable with a wisp of post-adolescent moustache stepped from behind a tree. He was dressed in the standard white shirt with a black compact radio mic on the shoulder, a utility belt and dark trousers.

“Hello, Ian,” Father Gilbert said.

“Hi, Father.”

“Keeping everything under control?”

“The natives are more restless than usual.” He glanced at Benson as if he might be one of the restless natives.

“I’m the new guy,” Benson said.

“So you are.” He turned his attention back to Father Gilbert and said with significance, “Lord Haysham is here.”

“Is he?” Father Gilbert hoped to sound reasonably impressed. “Is that unusual?”

A nod. “He must’ve come because of that body found in the marsh. Not that anyone would tell me.” He grinned. “They just called me in to stand around and look tough.”

“You’re doing a fine job.” Father Gilbert moved on.

They followed the path through the woods. In the distance, Father Gilbert could hear the low growl of an engine – the pumps to drain the marsh, he suspected. The forest opened to a small meadow. A crowd was gathered. A few placards were held up with scrawled slogans like *Stop The Destruction* and *Save Our Heritage*. From the clothes and styles of hair, Father Gilbert assumed most of the participants had skipped their University classes to be here. Voices rose in a heated argument.

Father Gilbert circled around the crowd. Two men stood in the centre, both shouting, neither listening, and the crowd watching as if the encounter might come to blows. Yet there was something about it all that seemed well practised.

Benson seemed to have the same feeling and asked in a low voice, “What are we watching? It reminds me of a pro-wrestling match on the telly.”

Father Gilbert tipped his head towards the first contender, a stocky round-faced man with carefully styled curly brown hair, in his forties. “That’s David Todd. You may remember him. He was on the church committee that interviewed you for your job.”

Todd always had the look and energy of a man who had an agenda for his life – and he had fallen behind somehow. Every day was a struggle to catch up. He always walked like a man who had somewhere better he needed to be.

Father Gilbert nodded towards the other man – tall and slender with strawberry-blond hair and a classically pale English complexion. He was wearing high leather boots over his trousers and a white shirt under a waterproof jacket. “And that’s the current Lord Haysham.”

David Todd was shouting. “The bridge is of great historical importance. You can’t simply destroy it as if—”

“I’ve said nothing about destroying the bridge,” Lord Haysham shouted back. “Why do you assume that I—”

“Your entire record in the area of conservation and preservation is atrocious. It’s immoral and unethical that you—”

“I haven’t done anything that—”

“It’s been your family’s legacy to disregard the needs of the people around you—”

And so it went.

Father Gilbert noticed a man standing off to one side with a small digital voice-recorder to catch the action. Tim Patrick, with the local newspaper. Next to him was a photographer, also with the paper, snapping photos of the encounter.

Benson leaned to Father Gilbert and asked, “Is this real or for show?”

Father Gilbert shrugged. “Who knows any more? *They* probably don’t. Their families have been feuding for at least three centuries.”

“About this land?”

“About everything that strikes their fancy.” Father Gilbert tapped Benson’s arm. “There’s Bill Drake.”

The meadow sloped upwards to a ridge. At the top a man stood half-turned to them. His hands were clasped behind his back. He looked intently towards a small valley that had once been a river but was now a patchwork of fields and marshes. On the opposite ridge of the valley, a couple of hundred yards away, Haysham Manor sat on what would have been the far bank of the river, its back to them. Father Gilbert imagined that, had the river survived, the house would have sported a small dock and a boat or two. Now, the land sloped down to the builders who were busying themselves around the old stone bridge at the far end of the marsh. Earth-moving tractors and other pieces of large equipment sat silent near the mouth of the bridge. A concentration of men in wading boots had formed around the bridge’s base. Presumably that was where the body had been found.

“Ah! Gilbert!” Bill Drake called out as they drew close.

A retired solicitor, Drake had become one of Father Gilbert's best friends in Stonebridge. The sight of him always made Father Gilbert smile. "Hello, Bill."

Drake was an egg-shaped man, dressed in traditional English tweed. He had a wild crop of white hair on his head and a white goatee. His round face was free of wrinkles and his eyes had a youthful sparkle to them. He could have been a drawing in a book by Dickens. Someone from *Pickwick*.

Drake put out his hand to Benson. "And you must be—"

"Hugh Benson," the priest said and shook Drake's hand.

"Gilbert's new chauffeur." Drake smiled.

"His car is in the garage."

Drake laughed. "His car's been in the garage for years."

"Why did you summon me?" Father Gilbert asked.

Drake took a pipe from his jacket pocket. "Early this morning the workers found a wooden crate at the base of the stone bridge."

"A crate of what?" asked Father Gilbert.

"Cannonballs."

"I thought they found a *foot*," Benson said.

"They did – later," Drake said. He put the pipe in his mouth, lit it, and gave it a few decisive draws. "You see, there was a chain attached to the crate. The chain disappeared into the peat. So the men dug it out. That's when they found the foot. The chain was attached to the ankle."

"Sounds like a Mafia hit," Benson said.

"Two corpses in one morning – eh, Gilbert?" said Drake. "Business as usual for you."

Father Gilbert frowned. Drake had heard about the tower, probably from Mrs Mayhew. His eye caught two men in suits among the workers by the bridge. One held a video camera. "Are the police there?"

Drake pointed with the mouth-piece of his pipe. "That would be our own Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. Though we never know which is which. DS Sanders, and DC Adams is the one with the video camera."

"Well, I hope that's over with," a voice said from behind them.



They turned. Lord Haysham came close, reaching a hand out to Father Gilbert, who shook it politely.

“Good afternoon, my Lord,” Father Gilbert said.

“Please,” Lord Haysham protested. “I’ve asked you before. *Michael* is my name.” He smiled and the lines around his face and mouth seemed deeper and more defined than usual.

Father Gilbert gestured to Benson. “Michael, this is Hugh Benson, our new curate. Hugh, this is Michael Haysham. Or *Viscount* Haysham, to put it formally.”

Lord Haysham shook the young priest’s hand. “Glad to meet a younger priest. Not enough young people in the church these days.”

“A pleasure, sir,” said Benson, looking unsure about whether he should bow.

“You’ve had your share of trouble today,” Father Gilbert commented. He peered back at the protesters. They were huddled around David Todd. The reporter and photographer continued to chronicle the event.

“No worse than usual,” Haysham answered wearily. “Todd is making the most of it. He always does when the press are involved.”

“It sells papers.” Drake took another drag on his pipe.

“And you know *that* will sell papers,” Haysham said, turning his attention to the crew next to the bridge. “A *foot* attached to a crate of cannonballs. God save us!”

“Presumably the foot is attached to a body,” Father Gilbert said.

“I hope so,” said Haysham. “If the thing is in pieces, I’ll never get the marsh done. It was bad enough finding that bridge.”

“Does anyone know how old the bridge is?” Benson asked.

“I’ve got researchers trying to find out. Local maps and documents – that sort of thing,” Haysham said. “The foreman on the job thought it might be seventeenth century.”

From behind them, a protester began a chant of “Save the land!” A few joined in, but it gained no momentum and petered out to an embarrassing mutter.

A walkie-talkie crackled to life on Haysham’s belt. He fumbled with the catch, then lifted it up. “What is it, Dennis?”

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“The police would like you to come right away,” Dennis said.  
“The foot is definitely attached to a body.”

In any context, it was a comedic declaration.

“Right.” Lord Haysham waved to the three men. “Come along, gentlemen. I’d like you to witness this.”