

DEATH
IN THE
SHADOWS

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DEATH
IN THE
SHADOWS

— A —
FATHER
GILBERT
MYSTERY

PAUL McCUSKER



LION FICTION

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*To Elizabeth, Tommy, and Ellie, who make my
joy complete.*

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CHAPTER 2

Father Gilbert shifted his messenger-style briefcase onto his shoulder and stepped from the front door of the hotel onto the pavement. The pedestrians passed by with shoulders hunched against the drizzle. The wheels of the cars and cabs hissed against the tarmac, with the occasional horn or squeaky brake penetrating the normal noises of a wet morning.

He glanced to the left and right for the man in the dark coat but didn't really expect to see him. When the man appeared, if he appeared at all, it was often at a distance. There was no sign of him now.

Going to a nearby Boots, he bought a spring-loaded-put-your-eye-out-if-not-careful umbrella for five pounds. He had the presence of mind to buy a tourist map and stopped inside the front door of the shop to get his bearings. Built on a hill, Englesea's streets were mostly cobblestone and laid out according to centuries of horse-paths that served to take the traveller further up towards the mainland or down to the docks servicing the boats on the sea. The larger roads stretched east and west, parallel to the sea, while the smaller streets ran north and south to connect the roads. Many of them were pedestrian-only areas to accommodate the nationally owned franchises and smaller boutique shops. The conference centre was two streets downhill from where he now stood.

"It must be worrying for you," the woman at the till said.

Father Gilbert turned. A young Chinese woman, similar in age and look to the spectre he'd seen, was paying for cosmetics. "Yes. It is... sad. We are watching. But don't worry, we can protect ourselves," the girl said with an accent.

"Be extra careful," replied the shop assistant. "You never know what kind of sick people are out there."

"Thank you," the Chinese woman said. She grabbed her bag of merchandise and rushed out, glancing at Father Gilbert as she went.

He strolled towards the conference site under his newly purchased umbrella, trying to avoid bumping into the other pedestrians while sidestepping puddles on the pavement. The rain washed out all variance of light, blending the buildings, road, and people into one continual grey blur.

The image of the apparition of the dead Chinese girl stayed with him. There was no question in his mind that she was the victim he'd read about in the newspaper. Had she appeared because he'd been reading about her – or was there some other purpose to her arrival? Either way, he wasn't entirely surprised. He'd often had unexplainable encounters where the dead or dying suddenly showed up. At times, as with the Chinese girl, they came as spectres without any specific interaction. Other times he found himself playing out a scene with cryptic conversations and bewildering actions that connected to unfolding events. Usually, they were unrelated to him personally, making him feel as if he'd been dropped into some other time or place, a character in someone else's story. If there were specific rules of engagement to this supernatural reality, he hadn't figured them out. He had no explanation for why he, of all people, had these experiences. All he could do was wait to see what would happen next.

The biggest surprise was that the waitress at the hotel had also seen the apparition. That had never happened before.

He reached the conference centre: a large brick building with leaded windows and iron doors. According to a display just inside the lobby, the hall had originally been a market when the town had thrived beyond shipping and fishing. Pirates frequented here, according to a historic plaque. And the French invaded once, back in 1448, setting fire to the town and burning down the original building. It was rebuilt and repurposed as a meeting hall. Later, in the economic fallout of the First World War, the maritime industries moved elsewhere and the hall fell into disrepair. An initiative in the Thatcher era led to its being refurbished to cater to the tourist trade.

Father Gilbert greeted a few acquaintances, mostly met at other conferences he'd attended, and signed in to get his name badge and packet of information. He headed to the exhibition area to kill time before the official start of events. Pausing at the double doors, he

had a strong feeling that someone was watching him. He turned to the lobby again. It was half-filled with men and women in clerical garb or suits and dresses. They chatted amiably, greeting one another with cordial handshakes or the occasional embrace. He mused that, though they were there to discuss church issues, most had come to get away from their routines of meeting the same parishioners to talk about the same things, going about the same parish duties, often with a seasonal rhythm that some might find comforting while others would find it mind-numbingly tedious.

Conferences, he knew, were an escape, if not to relax then to do something different. Or perhaps they came to *be* someone different – to be someone holier or funnier or more thoughtful or more reckless or someone downright wild. On the outside they were clergy, bound up by self-imposed or external expectations while, inside, they were impaired humans with deep secrets they dared not admit to anyone, ever.

He pushed open the doors to the exhibition area, a wide-open space now filled with a labyrinth of booths and kiosks. Some were set up to sell books, Bibles, and instructional media; others sold crosses, jewellery, paintings, and other gift ideas; most were dedicated to promoting various charitable organizations created to help church leaders, missions efforts, the inner-city poor, children, the elderly, or just people who needed a new start in life.

While getting a coffee at a small stand, his eye fell on a table of the latest Christian fashion accessories. Among the necklaces and rings, he saw a collection of gold, silver, and leather bracelets. He walked over to look more closely and picked one up.

“Those are new,” the woman behind the display said as she busied herself unpacking boxes.

“JDFU” was inscribed on a small plate that joined the bracelet together. “What does JDFU mean?” he asked.

“‘Jesus Died For You.’ You wear the bracelet as a reminder. Or as a conversation starter.”

“My collar does that often enough,” he said as he put the bracelet down again.

Chains on wrists, he thought. He suddenly remembered reading about a series of homicides around the country where young women

were sexually assaulted and then murdered. The press called the perpetrator “The BackList Killer” – so-called because the police believed he chose his victims from an online “classified ads” website called “BackList”. The victims had either advertised as prostitutes or for easy, no-commitment hook-ups. They had always been bound somehow: handcuffs, leather straps, rope, even a chain. Their bodies were disposed of in dumpsites, bins, or skips, as if the murderer were making a statement about the worth of the women’s lives.

He wondered if Detective Inspector Gwynn would make that connection. Glancing at his watch, he moved for the door. It was just shy of nine o’clock. Apart from the opening speeches for the conference, there was nothing he had to attend.

He asked the woman behind the table, “Where is the nearest police station?”

“These aren’t *stolen*,” she said sharply.

* * *

Englesea’s main police station was only three streets east of the hall and sat on a circle with a war memorial at the centre. The building was made of cement, painted white to alleviate the look of a bunker. Unfortunately the white made a good canvas for graffiti, thinly hidden behind new coats of paint.

Father Gilbert pushed through two sets of scarred wooden doors into a small waiting area with walls lined with metal chairs. One woman sat alone, kneading her fingers, with a worried expression on her face. Directly ahead was a wall with a reception counter cut into the centre. Framed by the square window, a police constable sat with his head slightly turned, his eyes squinting at a computer screen.

A buzzer sounded and a door to Father Gilbert’s right unlocked with a loud click. As the door opened a man backed out into the reception area, talking in a language that sounded to Father Gilbert’s ear like Russian. He had a large, black Stalinesque moustache and gestured wildly with his hands. Behind him, a uniformed constable nodded impatiently, encouraging him with quick nudges to keep walking.

“I’m sorry. I can’t help you,” the constable said slowly as if it would help the man understand him better.

The moustachioed man, realizing he was being guided to the front door, stopped and protested. “No, no, no. Daugh-ter. Help.”

The constable looked around helplessly.

Just then, a large man in a light brown suit stepped in from outside. He nearly collided with the man with the moustache, who shouted and gestured all the more.

“What’s all this?” the suited man asked, trying to shake the rain from his arms and hands. He brushed a hand through his thinning grey hair.

Father Gilbert recognized him immediately as Detective Inspector Morris Gwynn.

“He doesn’t speak English,” the constable said. “He’s Russian or something.”

The man turned his attention to Gwynn and spoke quickly.

“It’s Romanian,” Gwynn said to the constable. “He’s from Moldova, but they speak Romanian there.”

“What does he want?” the constable asked.

Gwynn spoke to the man in what must have been broken Romanian.

The man’s face lit up, unleashing a greater deluge of words.

“Slow down,” Gwynn said. “I’m not that good with it.”

The man took a deep breath and spoke more slowly, punctuating his words with an occasional English equivalent.

“Well?” the constable asked when the long explanation ended.

“He says he is the father of a girl who went missing from London – Shepherd’s Bush,” Gwynn explained. “He heard about an unidentified young woman found dead and raced down to find out if it is his daughter. He would like to see the body.”

“Unless his daughter is Chinese, I don’t know how it could be her.”

Gwynn put the statement to the man.

The man shook his head emphatically. “No. Not Chinese.”

“Then she’s not your daughter,” Gwynn said in English.

The man suddenly slumped with a painful expression of

despondency. He lowered his head and said softly, in a thick accent, “But... my daughter?”

Gwynn put a hand on his shoulder. “Give your name and details to the constable here—”

The constable looked stricken at the suggestion. “It’s a London case. He needs to file a report there.”

“Take his details anyway,” Gwynn said.

The man turned to the constable. “I am Vadim Dalca. I am—” He stopped himself and finished the sentence in Romanian.

The constable glared at Gwynn.

“You’ll figure it out,” Gwynn said and gently pushed both the constable and Vadim Dalca back through the door.

Father Gilbert stepped forward. “Morris? Morris Gwynn?”

Gwynn spun around. His eyes fell on Father Gilbert’s face, then down to the clerical collar below it, then back to the face. “*Gilbert?*”

Father Gilbert smiled and extended a hand.

Gwynn swore loudly and wrapped him in a bear hug.

* * *

“Nice place,” Father Gilbert said.

They were in Gwynn’s office – a high-walled pale green cubicle with a gunmetal desk, a matching swivel chair behind it, and a metal chair sitting to one side, presumably for guests or suspects. A side table was overrun with precariously placed piles of files. The cloth lining of the cubicle walls was littered with bureaucratic announcements, mugshots, and newspaper articles held up with pins.

“Is it too early to celebrate with a drink?” Gwynn asked.

“It isn’t even ten.”

“I don’t care.” However time had changed him, Gwynn still had mischief in his eyes. It made him look jovial, though Father Gilbert knew how ruthless he could be. After a quick rummage in his desk drawer, he brought out what was left of a bottle of the Dalmore. He dug further, found two plastic cups that he blew into, used his finger to give them a quick wipe, and then poured a small amount into each one. He handed one to Father Gilbert and then lifted his own. “To better days.”

The two men shot back their drinks.

Father Gilbert didn't often drink, especially in the morning. The warmth of the Scotch working through his body had an immediate effect. "That's good."

"More?"

"No, thank you."

Gwynn put the bottle back in the drawer. He set the two cups on an exposed surface of his desk, and then waved for Father Gilbert to sit down in the guest chair. It creaked as he did. Gwynn dropped into his office chair. It groaned.

"How is it that you speak Romanian?" Father Gilbert asked.

"You remember Katrina," he said.

"Your wife."

"*First* wife – of three." He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "Her father was Romanian. We used to play cards and drink a lot. I picked up the language in the five years I was wedded to his daughter. That poor man in reception reminded me of her. It must've been the moustache."

Father Gilbert laughed, his mind racing back to the Horse and Groom pub near Scotland Yard where he and Gwynn had often tossed back a pint or two when their schedules allowed it. Gwynn had worked on cases of theft, larceny, and fraud. Father Gilbert had worked with more serious crime, usually involving kidnappings, assault, and homicides.

DI Gwynn eyed him. "Look at you," he said. "A *vicar*, of all things. Or are you a priest? Which is it? Anglican, Catholic, I get them all confused."

"I'm an Anglican priest, on the Catholic side of the Church of England sensibilities."

"Does that make you a 'Father' or a 'Reverend'?"

"I usually go by 'Father', but will answer to 'Reverend', too."

Gwynn shook his head. "I'd heard you never really recovered from that one case. The one with the runaway who died. Adams, wasn't it? Paula Adams?"

"Patricia Atkins," Father Gilbert corrected him, and then asked quickly, "How did you wind up here?"

“It’s all so boring,” Gwynn said. “I was ready to retire and came to Englesea for a little holiday. I liked the town, they needed help, and I reckoned it was time to get away from the violence and crime of London.”

“How is that working out for you?” Father Gilbert asked, smiling.

“It’s getting more like London all the time. Especially with so many foreigners. We’re overrun with them.”

“Isn’t tourism good for the town’s economy?”

“These foreigners work here.”

“Isn’t *that* good for the economy?”

He shook his head. “With the foreigners, you get more crime. It’s not politically correct to say so, but it’s true.”

“I read about the murdered girl.”

Gwynn sat up. “That’s unusual. Crime is one thing; murder is another.”

“Can you talk about it?”

“Not much to say right now.” He picked up a file from his desk. “Chinese. Late twenties, maybe early thirties. The owner of the restaurant found her when he took out the rubbish around two this morning.”

“Is the restaurant usually open that late?”

“They closed later than usual because of a large party – an entourage of you church-types, in for the conference.” Gwynn opened the file and pushed the contents around.

“Time of death?”

“Old habits, Gilbert? As an immediate guess: sometime around or past midnight.”

“Witnesses?”

“It was a rainy night. There wouldn’t have been very many people walking the seafront.”

“Security cameras?”

“None that work. We’re checking others leading into the area.”

Photos taken at the crime scene slid into Father Gilbert’s view. The harsh light of the camera flash intensified the unnatural look of the scene. The skip and the rubbish under and surrounding the dead body; a close-up of the young woman’s face, her mouth slightly open,

a gash on her forehead, her dead staring eyes looking somewhere beyond the camera lens. Father Gilbert recognized without surprise that she was the same one he'd seen as an apparition earlier.

"A real beauty, eh?" Gwynn said. His eye caught Father Gilbert's expression. "What's wrong? Don't tell me she's a long-lost daughter."

Gwynn chuckled and Father Gilbert gave a quick smile. The Detective Inspector couldn't know how close to home his joke hit.

"Cause of death?" Father Gilbert asked. He pointed to the bruises around the woman's neck and shoulders. "Was she strangled?"

"Maybe, but that's not how she died. The Medical Examiner said she probably drowned."

Father Gilbert was surprised. "Drowned? In the sea or in the skip?"

"He's not saying until he does the full autopsy. It could be either."

He remembered how, as unlikely as it seemed, skips could fill up with enough water and sludge to drown a person, especially in this weather. It wouldn't take much. He knew of homeless men and women, drunk and seeking shelter in a skip, who had drowned in less than an inch of water.

Father Gilbert leaned forward to look more closely at the photos. "What about the gash on her forehead?"

"Post-mortem. The ME found a fragment of metal in it. We're having it checked. Maybe the murderer banged her head while throwing her in the skip. Or while transporting her in a car, probably the boot."

Father Gilbert's mind went back to the logistics of transporting a dead girl from a hotel room to a car to a skip.

"She also had traces of sand and seawater in her hair and what was left of her clothes. But the skip had the same, so she likely picked them up from there."

Father Gilbert thought about the chains he'd seen on the apparition. "Was she bound?"

"She has bruising around her wrists that might've been caused by something metallic, maybe handcuffs. The ME isn't sure yet. And there's a harsh scrape on her neck that's different from the scratches on other parts of her body, as if she wore a necklace that had been

pulled off violently.” He held up his hands as if inspecting his fingers. “And there was something found under her fingernails, as yet to be identified.”

He hadn’t asked the obvious question – and did now. “Was she raped?”

“No forced trauma,” he said. “Probably consensual, considering her profession.”

“Her profession?”

“I’m sure she was on the game,” Gwynn said.

“How do you know that?”

“Around here, most of the girls from the Far East are.”

“But you can’t assume—”

“I’m not assuming anything,” Gwynn said quickly. “I’ll go where the facts of the case lead me. But my educated guess is that she was hired for some kind of sadomasochistic activity, what with the bindings on her wrists.”

Gwynn shuffled the photos back into the file.

“I assume you haven’t identified her,” Father Gilbert said, feeling as if closing the file might somehow erase the girl’s life from reality.

“Not yet. Her fingerprints aren’t in our database.” He folded his arms and gave Father Gilbert a scrutinizing look. “Why are you interested? Why did you come to see me? It’s not for old times’ sake.”

“I assume you’re familiar with the BackList Killer,” Father Gilbert said.

“Some guy has been targeting women who advertise their services on BackList. Six or seven girls have been raped and murdered.”

“You may want to check the details of those cases. The MO may be similar with this case.”

“Good idea.” Gwynn nodded, impressed. Then he smiled. “You can’t get rid of it, can you? Being a cop. Once it’s in your blood...”

Father Gilbert offered a small shrug. He couldn’t count the number of times someone had said to him *you’re more like a detective than a priest*.

An idea seemed to strike Gwynn and he turned to the computer, tucked away on the other side of the desk. With his back to Father Gilbert, he pushed the mouse around and the monitor came to life.

He typed in his access information and found a search engine. A few more taps on the keyboard and the BackList website appeared on the screen. “Have you ever seen this site?”

“No.” Father Gilbert pushed closer to get a better look. “I thought it’s like an online boot-sale.”

“It’s more than women selling baby-clothes and men selling unused tools.” Gwynn navigated the mouse pointer to different categories. “You want escorts? Men’s clubs? Body rubs? Massages?”

“Don’t forget – I’m a priest.”

“Are you?” he teased. “Are you sure you’re not working undercover?”

“I’m sure.”

“Then look away while I check this out.”

Father Gilbert turned away from the screen. He looked down at his shoes; they were black and scuffed, in need of a polish. “What are you looking for?” he asked.

“The dead girl. If she was local, then she might be on here.” Father Gilbert could hear Gwynn clicking the mouse and the occasional “hm”. “The escorts generally use real photos, even if they’re dated ones from younger and less-worn days. The massage places post pictures of generic models. Unless they have girls that really are pretty, in which case...” Another click and he said, “Ah. I think this is her. Take a look.”

Father Gilbert turned to look at the screen, bracing himself for an image that would be less than pure. He was half-right. The girl on the screen had taken a “selfie” in a bathroom somewhere. She was dressed in a bikini top and cut-off shorts. Though her face was slightly blurred and in a half-shadow, her smile came through as a seductive appeal. It was the same girl found in the skip; the one who had appeared to Father Gilbert.

“She calls herself ‘Anna,’” Gwynn said. “But that won’t be her real name.”

Father Gilbert pointed to the screen. “She’s wearing a necklace.”

Gwynn tried to zoom in on the necklace. It pixelated the image, but Father Gilbert could make out the circle and horse design he’d seen earlier in the apparition. Gwynn restored the original page where

the photo appeared with other photos of young women from the Far East. At the top, it said “Lily Rose Day Spa” and “You Won’t Be Disappointed.” The hours of operation were from 9 in the morning until midnight. There was a phone number and a small box with a map. A red dot identified the location.

“Is it near here?” Father Gilbert asked.

“It’s within walking distance.” Gwynn punched a button. Somewhere in the cubicle – off to Gwynn’s right – a printer came to life and spat out the image from the screen. He collected the printout, pushed back in his chair, and stood up. “Come on. Let’s find out who this girl is.”

Father Gilbert also stood up. The effect of the Scotch slightly tilted the floor. “Won’t it be distracting to have a priest with you?”

“Yes. It’s the last thing they’ll expect.”