

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 3

The rain had stopped. Between the buildings across the street, Father Gilbert could see crested waves of grey on a choppy sea. They turned left at the closest street and ascended up into the town. After six or seven streets, they turned right on Tanner Lane. Further along, the shops and restaurants became noticeably dingy. To the left was a place called “Magic Fingers Massage”, advertising Thai and Swedish massages. The Lily Rose was a few doors down on the right. The windows were covered with a thick curtain, leaving room for only an “open” sign that flashed in bright colours.

Gwynn pushed the door open and stepped in. The small entryway had the look of a chemist’s shop. There was a counter, behind which an older bald-headed Chinese man stood wearing a white physician’s coat. Behind him was shelving lined with dozens of glass containers, each one labelled with Chinese characters and typed English translations. Father Gilbert saw names like Honeysuckle Leaf, Wolfberry, Reishi Mushroom, and Morinda Root.

“Herbal medicine?” Father Gilbert asked.

“They think it makes them look legitimate,” Gwynn said. He leaned on the counter.

The Chinese man forced a smile. “Hello, Detective Inspector.”

“I want to see *Mamasan*.”

“She no want to be disturbed,” the man said.

“Disturb her anyway,” Gwynn said. “Unless you want me to send my men in to check your licences, immigrant documentation, and what’s in those jars.”

The man scowled at him and rushed off down a long hall to the back of the shop. The two men exchanged glances as sharp words, presumably in Chinese, echoed back to them. A sudden silence and then a short woman wearing an ornate robe appeared at the end of the hall. She strode towards them, adjusting and readjusting her long, dark hair as she did. She had a round matronly face with cunning

eyes. Her eyelashes were thick with eyeliner and her mouth was a gash of red lipstick. Her cheeks looked tight and inflated, like small balloons, probably from Botox injections.

“How good to see you, Detective Inspector,” she said. Her eyes darted to Father Gilbert, noted the collar, and then flashed back to Gwynn. “Why do you need a vicar to visit us?”

“To protect me from the unholiness of your establishment,” Gwynn said.

“It never bothered you before,” she replied.

Father Gilbert glanced at Gwynn, wondering if the woman was teasing or if Gwynn truly had been a customer there.

“Would you like a massage?” she asked Father Gilbert. She tried to sound sultry but years of smoking had given her voice the sound of dry leaves clawing at the face of a tombstone. “You wouldn’t be the first vicar we’ve had in here. I give you first time for free.”

Father Gilbert shook his head. “No, thanks.”

“Why are you here?” Mamasan asked Gwynn. “You have come about murdered girl? You want to tell me you are doing everything you can to protect innocent Chinese girls in town?”

“You’re half-right,” Gwynn said. “She was one of yours.”

Mamasan pressed a hand to her chest and gave an expression of shock. “One of mine?”

Gwynn brought out the printout from the Internet site. “This is the girl in an advertisement for your place.”

Mamasan eyed the picture and looked as if she was formulating a denial. Instead, she pushed it away and said, “She worked here from time to time.”

“What was her name?”

“Anna.”

“Her *real* name.”

“*Anong*,” Mamasan said.

“Last name?” Gwynn asked, his impatience putting an edge to his tone.

Mamasan hesitated, clearly deciding between the truth or a lie. “*Chuan*. She did massages here occasionally. Mostly she worked the streets. I don’t like those kinds of girls.”

“In spite of the percentage you get from them.”

Mamasan looked indignant. “I am a good citizen.”

“I’m sure all the girls here are – and that they’ll be very cooperative,” Gwynn said, taking a few steps down the hall.

Mamasan tried to block his way but quickly realized she was no match for a man his size. “You need a warrant to search my shop.”

“I’m not searching. I’m an enquiring customer. Come on, Gilbert,” Gwynn said.

With no way to stop them, Mamasan walked backwards in front of Gwynn, jabbering about how clean and reputable her “spa” was.

The hall was lined with doors on both sides. All but one stood open, each revealing a massage table with white sheets, a side table with a Tiffany-style lamp, a portable music player, and bottles of oil and lotion. At the end of the hall was an office. Mamasan must have assumed they were going there, because she turned and walked in ahead of them. Gwynn had other plans. As Mamasan entered her office, Gwynn suddenly grabbed the handle of the one closed door and pulled it open. He quickly stepped through and descended a dimly lit staircase. Father Gilbert followed him. Mamasan, realizing too late what had happened, screeched and raced after them.

At the bottom of a dozen stairs, they came into a large room, decorated with red and gold wallpaper, Asian-style art, and statues of Buddha, warriors, and geishas. A small fountain trickled water from the mouth of a large vase into a small pool. More doors faced them from all sides. As Gwynn strode past, he pushed the doors open, revealing rooms containing more massage tables – though they were more like beds than the tables upstairs. The rooms were windowless. Of course they were, being in a cellar. But clearly there was a more nefarious purpose here. Each room said to come in, relax, this is a place where the world outside can’t see you or judge you. You’re safe here. Live out your fantasy. There’ll be no consequences because no one need ever know. It’s just our secret. These walls will never talk.

Mamasan continued to screech, trying to get in front of Gwynn.

Father Gilbert was struck by a feeling of uneasiness, as if he’d walked into a dark cavern filled with traps. Behind the ostentatious

oriental decor was a foul presence, like something had crawled into the woodwork and died there. Instinctively, his muscles tensed.

They reached the back of the room where Gwynn pushed open one of three doors there. Three Far Eastern women were inside, one standing at a sink wearing a thin robe, applying make-up, another in shorts and T-shirt, sitting on a small chair and lacing her shoes, and a third had just come out of a shower wrapped only in a towel. They seemed amused by the intrusion.

“Sorry, girls,” Gwynn said and closed the door again.

The second door opened into a small room with a bed adorned with white twinkling Christmas lights and a table sitting opposite holding a lamp and a laptop.

Mamasan made a valiant effort to get between Gwynn and the last door. He blocked her with his immense body, shoving the door open to reveal a room with mattresses scattered on the floor. Half a dozen Far Eastern women of varying ages were spread out on the mattresses, dressed in tracksuits and pyjamas. Some were texting, one was doing her nails, another was sleeping, and one sat with a laptop. The women were startled, but didn’t move, each looking up at them with puzzled expressions. The girl on the laptop suddenly closed the lid and pushed it aside. Father Gilbert noticed a single mattress propped up in the corner and wondered if it had belonged to the dead “Anna”.

As a detective, Father Gilbert had seen this kind of set-up before. The women lived in this room when they weren’t servicing customers. It was home for as long as they worked there. They had limited freedom to leave the premises, if they left at all. Food was brought in or meals were made in the small kitchenette in a curtained area at the back of the room.

Mamasan shouted at them and the women all stood up, like soldiers at an inspection. The sleeping girl was frightened awake and struggled to her feet. Father Gilbert scanned the faces. Most of the women were thirty years old or under. They were attractive, two or three even beautiful. One of the girls looked familiar to him, but he wasn’t sure why. She had black hair cut stylishly short and wore heavy blue eyeliner. Her eyes were red-rimmed and he wondered if she’d been crying about Anong’s death.

“You have gone too far,” Mamasan said to Gwynn.

“One of your girls was murdered last night. Don’t you care?”

“There is nothing I can do about it.” Mamasan pointed an accusing finger at him. “You know the Mayor is a frequent customer here. He won’t tolerate any bullying by you.”

Gwynn spread his arms in innocence. “Bullying? Am I bullying anyone?”

“Yes,” she said. “Look at the fear in these poor girls’ eyes.”

Father Gilbert was amused to see that the girls actually looked tired and bored rather than fearful.

Mamasan and Gwynn glared at one another.

Father Gilbert broke the showdown by clearing his throat and asking, “Did Anong keep her things here?”

“Why would she do that?” Mamasan whined. “I *told* you, she worked here only occasionally.”

Gwynn asked, “Where did she live? If she was an employee of yours, then you must have that information.”

Mamasan frowned at him. “If you want to see my files, come back with a court order.” She folded her arms in defiance. As she did, her robe shifted and Father Gilbert saw a necklace at the base of her throat. It was a silver chain with a symbol of a horse in a circle – the same one he’d seen in “Anna’s” apparition.

“Where did you get that?” Father Gilbert asked.

She reached up and enclosed it in her hand. “It is a personal heirloom. Now, unless you want a massage, please leave.”

“I’ll be back,” Gwynn said.

As they were about to leave, something in the corner of the room, where the mattress was propped up, caught Father Gilbert’s eye. A greenish light glowed from behind the mattress. Then a hand, grey and shrivelled, reached around, the fingers claw-like, and scratched at the mattress cover. The fingernails must have been razor-sharp as five tears ripped opened the fabric. Instead of the expected mattress stuffing or springs spilling forward, bright red blood oozed out of the five widening lacerations.

“Gilbert?” Gwynn said. “What’s wrong?”

Father Gilbert turned. Gwynn looked at him, perplexed.

Mamasan, her brows pinched together, was looking at him, then back at the corner, then back at him. The girls in the room stared at him as if he'd just sprouted a third eye.

He looked at the mattress again. It appeared undisturbed and unmarred. "Nothing," Father Gilbert said.

\* \* \*

Back on the street, Gwynn swore softly and pulled out his mobile phone. "Court order," he muttered. "I'll give her a court order." He called someone at the station and barked orders to get the warrant he'd need.

Father Gilbert waited, his eyes going back to the door. Through the glass, he could see the young woman with the blue eyeliner standing inside watching them. She dabbed at tears in her eyes. Thinking she wanted to say something, he reached for the door. Mamasan suddenly came into view, pushing the girl back and glowering at the priest. Father Gilbert turned away.

He often wondered how women in that line of work got where they were. Why would they choose that kind of life for themselves? Did they have a choice? Was this massage parlour part of the sex slave industry, or were the women there because circumstances had robbed them of a better way to make money? The choices, circumstances, and consequences of life were a great mystery.

"Let's get a coffee," Gwynn said and marched off. Father Gilbert followed him around the corner to a café. They went in, ordered at the counter, and sat down at a table by the front window.

"What kind of place is it?" Father Gilbert asked, thinking about the unnerving sight of the hand clawing at the mattress.

"Wasn't it obvious?"

"Unless things have changed since my days at the Yard, there are different kinds of massage parlours. Some do full erotic massages. Most limit themselves to nothing more than sensual touching. Others offer the full gamut. Which is this one?"

"I think it's strictly rubs and touch," he said. "Which may be why 'Anna' hit the streets. She could make a lot more money from johns than from massage tips."

“And you’re sure Mamasan was getting a percentage?”

“No doubt,” Gwynn said. “All of the girls are connected to a syndicate of pimps. The bosses around here won’t put up with girls working independently.”

“Why do you allow it to go on?”

Gwynn shrugged. “Technically, the massage places are legit. We’ve tried raiding them from time to time but we can never catch them doing anything blatantly illegal. Both the massager and the therapist can claim it was consensual. The only success we’ve had happened a couple of years ago. One of the parlours brought in underage girls – and I mean *underage*. We put a stop to that right away.”

“What about the streetwalkers?”

“We bring them in if they’re too obvious or aggressive,” he said. “Other than that...”

Their coffees arrived, delivered by a black waitress who said “thank you” with a heavy accent that Father Gilbert thought might be from somewhere in Africa.

“This certainly is an international town,” Father Gilbert said. He doctored his drink with copious amounts of cream and sugar.

“They come and go with the tourist season – and the conventions.”

Father Gilbert drank his coffee and looked at the African waitress behind the counter. She had a name – a life – somewhere beyond the confines of this café. He thought about the anonymity of the girls at the massage parlour. They each had names, lives, even hopes and dreams at one time. Yet, who would know it to look at them? Did the men who entered that place give a thought to the human being behind the service she provided? Or was an impersonal encounter the whole point?

“Does Mamasan have a real name?” Father Gilbert asked.

“I never needed to know until now. I’ll find out. If she’s the owner, her name will be on all the official business information. I’ll check when I get back to the station.”

“At least you have a name for the victim.”

“Anong Chuan,” he said with a groan. “For all I know, it’s the same as ‘Jane Smith’. I’ll be surprised if she’s in the database.”

“Everyone leaves a trail of some kind.”

“Not these girls. They come and go like ghosts.” He gazed at Father Gilbert. “What happened back there? You looked like you saw one. A ghost, I mean.”

Father Gilbert frowned. He couldn’t say anything to Gwynn about the apparitions he’d seen. Another thought came to him. “That mattress in the corner...”

“What about it?”

“If you get a court order to search the room, you’ll want to check inside of the mattresses. The girls might hide belongings there – the kind they wouldn’t want Mamasan to see.”

“You think the mattress belonged to Anong?”

“Possibly.”

“And the necklace?”

“Anong wore one like it in the picture. And hers is missing.”

“You think Mamasan killed her to steal the necklace?” Gwynn asked.

It seemed absurd to hear it said out loud. Father Gilbert said, “I was curious about the symbol – the horse in the circle. Does it have a cultural meaning or is it something else?”

“It’s probably something she picked up in Hong Kong on the way over. Years before she turned into the dragon queen. Or maybe she gives one to all her girls.” Gwynn pushed his cup aside. “It’s a waste of time. Mamasan will coach the girls about what to say. And I’m sure they’ll clean the place out thoroughly for anything incriminating.”

An awkward silence fell between them.

Gwynn had not aged well, Father Gilbert thought. His thinning light brown hair had blended with the grey to create a colour that defied categorization. The sweat matted it against his scalp, making it look greasy, as if he hadn’t bathed in days. The suit didn’t help, wrinkled and stained as if he’d taken it straight from a dirty laundry basket. The deep lines around his red-rimmed eyes and pronounced veins in his pitted nose suggested more than just casual drinking. Father Gilbert wondered if there had been more to his leaving London than just semi-retirement.

“What kinds of men go to massage parlours for full body massages? – or, worse, use streetwalkers?” Father Gilbert asked.

“You’re a priest, you should know the answers to questions like that.”

“I’m asking you.”

“As a detective or a man?”

“Is there a difference?”

Gwynn used his thumbnail to scratch at a dried crumb on the side of his coffee cup. “It’s men behaving like naughty boys.”

“There has to be more to their motivation than that.”

Gwynn smiled. “You know what the motivation is.”

Father Gilbert shook his head. “That’s too easy.”

“Is it?” Gwynn asked. “Put a man in a bad marriage with a non-accommodating wife and you’ll see how simplistic it is. A man wants to feel like a man.”

“What does that mean? Is it about being a great lover? How can a man believe he’s a great lover when he pays money for it?”

Gwynn shrugged. “Maybe it’s a way to alleviate the boredom of life, to get a thrill without a personal commitment – just use the girls and leave.”

“Maybe. Or it could be a sense of control or power over someone else – or his environment. It’s a way to dominate, to regain a feeling of strength.”

Gwynn drank his coffee, then put his cup down. He glanced at the girl behind the counter, then fixed his eyes on Father Gilbert. “Have you ever had an affair?”

Father Gilbert flinched at the unexpectedness of the question. “No.”

“Then let me tell you how it happens. A man thinks he wants or needs something that he’s not getting in his relationship at home or somewhere in his life. It may be sex, but it’s usually deeper than that. Then an opportunity comes along. He meets her at work or at a bar. Or maybe he creates the opportunity – like some of these men do with the massage parlours. Either way, he rationalizes why it’s all right and he’s on his way.”

“But that usually leads to guilt, some remorse...” Father Gilbert said.

“Sure. But he gets over that. You know how it works.”

Father Gilbert nodded. "If the benefit is more powerful than the drawback, he'll do it again."

"It's like the pathology of a serial killer." Gwynn dropped his elbows on the table. "Different outcome, same behaviour."

"Then what?" Father Gilbert asked.

"The man fragments his life. He lives in multiple worlds. He compartmentalizes them. He's a solid family man at home, in his social circles. But he's created another world where he's someone special. Like Clark Kent and Superman." Gwynn eyed him. "Are you telling me you've *never* felt that way?"

"Not seriously," Father Gilbert admitted. "I suppose I was as tempted as any man to flirt, to fantasize, but I was never inclined to act on it."

"From a lack of opportunity or were things that good at home?"

Father Gilbert chuckled. "My wife and I did pretty well." They had loved each other. They had been good friends as well as lovers, he thought.

"A righteous man even then," Gwynn jabbed.

Father Gilbert smiled politely. "I thought of my marriage as a matter of commitment. I had committed to her with the same determination that I had committed to my job. I had no intention of messing up either."

"But you *did* leave. The job, at least. And now look at you," Gwynn teased.

"I left the job because of my wife's cancer – and the Atkins case made me rethink my priorities."

"Same difference," Gwynn said, spreading his arms as if he'd made his case. "A man gets into an affair for the same reason. Circumstances nudge him to think about it. Then a woman comes along with an aura of promise."

"What kind of promise?"

"She makes him feel good about himself."

"You're describing a full-fledged emotional affair," Father Gilbert said. "What about these massage parlours? Do the girls there affect a man that way?"

"The good ones do." Gwynn turned to the window, his eyes on

something far away. “They know how to make a man feel like he’s the greatest thing in the world.”

Father Gilbert watched him. “Are you speaking from experience?”

Gwynn slowly turned from the window and gazed at Father Gilbert. He smiled. “What does it matter if no one gets hurt?”

“Someone always gets hurt,” Father Gilbert said.

Gwynn considered him a moment, then shoved away from the table. “Are we finished profiling our suspect?”

“I’m trying to think of who killed Anong – and why.”

“Keep up the good work.” Gwynn stood up. “I have to get back to the office. You’re around for the next few days – for the conference – right?”

“Right.”

“So, if I need another set of eyes on this case?”

“I’m out of practice.”

“Once a copper, always a copper.” Gwynn opened his wallet, took out a card, and put it on the table. “You know where to find me.”

Father Gilbert reached into his pocket and pulled out one of his new cards. God bless Mrs Mayhew. “And this is me.”

Gwynn took the card and looked it over. “Thanks, Detective Inspective *Father*.” He chuckled, and then the chuckle turned into a full-throated laugh as he walked out of the café.

\* \* \*

Father Gilbert lifted his messenger bag onto the table and pulled out an electronic tablet. He didn’t have a lot of tech-savvy. Some of his parishioners had conspired to buy him the device as a Christmas present. They thought it would help Mrs Mayhew keep him organized. Most of the time he forgot to use it, leaving it sitting on his desk, or shoved in a drawer. But Mrs Mayhew had insisted he bring it with him to the conference so he could check emails and be reminded of his commitments.

He turned it on and, once it had come alive, thumbed his way to a web browser. The café had Wi-Fi for its guests and he was able to connect quickly to a search engine. He clumsily typed in “BackList Killer” and hit the search button.

A results list with thousands of websites appeared. Some were singularly dedicated to the killer. Others were dedicated to serial killers in general, with specific articles about the details of the “BackList” killer. An online “encyclopedia” had a summary of the killer and his victims. Father Gilbert tapped on the link for that.

The murders began in the summer a year before, the article stated, with the killer striking one victim in June, another in July, and two in August. He was dormant until October, with another gap until February, and then he had struck again a month ago, almost a year after the first murder. The police were concerned that summer would see an increase in his activity. Father Gilbert wondered if Anong was the first of the summer victims.

There was no obvious pattern to the dates and times of the murders. But the murders themselves had a tell-tale consistency. Heather Grant, the first victim, regularly advertised on the BackList site in Blackpool as a “fun, passionate, redhead looking for a passionate experience” with a mobile number to call to set up a “great date”. The phrasing allowed for the impression that she was merely a woman looking for a good time. Police confirmed, however, that she was a known prostitute with previous arrests. They believed she met the murderer somewhere for their encounter, he persuaded her to be handcuffed, and then he bludgeoned her with a blunt object, probably a leather truncheon. Her body was found in a large industrial rubbish bin in an alley behind a print shop, her clothes and handbag nearby. There was no sign of robbery. Even her money and credit cards were left in the purse.

The second victim, Bonnie Young, was the same as the first – a prostitute, this time working in Bournemouth, who advertised on the local BackList site. She’d also been bound with handcuffs and bludgeoned with a leather truncheon, though it appeared to be smaller than the one used on the previous victim. Her body had been dumped in a construction skip in an office building that was being renovated. Unlike the redheaded Heather, Bonnie was a natural blonde.

The third victim was not a prostitute. She was a single woman named Angie Drummond in Edinburgh who was described as a

“swinger”, often cruising the clubs for men who were interested only in one-night stands. An attractive brunette, she posted on BackList that she was simply “bored with conventional living” and wanted a man who would take her to “ecstatic heights”. Police found no evidence that she had ever asked for money or engaged in her activities for business. Local pimps and prostitutes did not know her. In addition to being killed with a blunt instrument – yet another uniquely sized truncheon – she had been strangled. That was a change in the killer’s behaviour. The police believed the killer was “graduating” – going from a method in which he didn’t face the victim, to one in which he did. It took more courage that way, and made the killing more personal. She was found in a tip just outside the city.

Rose Kim, the next victim, was British-born but of South Korean descent. She was a prostitute advertising in the Reading area. Police learned that she was a student at a nearby university who had turned to prostitution as a source of income to pay her fees. Friends were surprised to learn of her extracurricular activities, stating that she was “beautiful, sweet and unassuming” and that they “never would have guessed she was capable of that kind of work”. Bound by handcuffs, she had been bludgeoned with a truncheon the same size as the one used on the first victim. She was dumped in a skip in an industrial park on the opposite side of town from her home. Police noted that Rose was the first non-Caucasian victim and the first murder to take place away from a coastal town.

Janice Nelson of Grimsby and Alison Kendrick of Margate, both prostitutes, had the same MO as the earlier victims. Janice, a brunette, had been found in a skip next to a derelict building. Alison, with light brown hair, was dropped in a department store skip – nearly unseen because she was tossed in amidst mannequins the shop had thrown out earlier the same day.

The most recent victim was the killer’s first black woman, calling herself Ebony Delight on BackList. Her real name was Chelsea Brooks. She had advertised body-to-body massages around South London. Her body was found in a skip behind a major hotel near Gatwick Airport. There was no evidence that she’d ever been in

the hotel itself. Her wrists and ankles had been shackled rather than handcuffed or bound with leather straps. The shackles had been attached to heavy chains, the kind used for towing vehicles. The press speculated that the use of chains on a black woman was a racist slur to evoke slavery – as if being a racist was the worst thing that could be said of a killer.

Father Gilbert turned off the tablet. He'd seen enough. The remaining websites were unlikely to have the level of information the investigating detectives had assembled from the crime scenes. He imagined the kinds of connections they were trying to make between the girls, the methods, and the places. They questioned potential witnesses, pleaded with the public to come forward with any helpful information. No doubt they were checking into local workers, lorry drivers, tow truck drivers, salesmen, vendors, clients, or anyone else who might travel to those locations. Without fingerprints or DNA, it was like looking for a needle in a field full of haystacks.

Unlike the others, Anong had been strangled and drowned. She'd also been dumped without any personal belongings. All of the other victims had their clothes and handbags tossed near their bodies.

He thought of all the promises of life the girls may have known before their choices or circumstances led them into the pathway of their killer. He thought of their parents and siblings, who may not have known what kinds of lives their daughters were leading until it was too late. He thought of other women who had given themselves to similar vocations. Did the murders scare some of them away from selling their bodies? He thought of the men who had used those women before their murders. Surely the police had found some of them and put them through tough interrogations. Maybe the close call with the law, the exposure of their appetites to greater scrutiny, caused them to rethink their lives.

He wasn't sure how long he sat and thought about those things. He could only pray that the sadness and tragedy of the dead might be redeemed in the lives of the living. And that the police would catch the killer before he struck again.

Father Gilbert drained the last of his coffee, a tepid and bitter swallow. The apparition of Anong and the unfolding case – which

wasn't his to solve – weighed on him. But he really should go to the conference.

A low rumble of an approaching truck caused him to turn to the window. Suddenly water splashed violently against the glass. It jolted him. He could only assume the truck had hit a large puddle.

For a few seconds, the world outside was a blur of distorted and impressionistic shapes and colours. In the midst of it all, he saw the dark figure in the coat and hat. The *Shadow Man* he had begun to call it. Faceless and menacing, it was there – until the water slid down the glass and took it away, perhaps onto the pavement and away into a drain.

\* \* \*

Father Gilbert turned left out of the café. He walked without any motivation. He had to return to the conference. His Bishop would be looking for him, not because the Bishop liked or needed him, but because the Bishop thought he was out of control. Bishop William Spalding liked control over his flock. To the Bishop, Father Gilbert was a wayward sheep, prone to wander into the hills or into a pack of wolves.

Looking objectively, he couldn't blame the Bishop for feeling that way. When taking the job a year ago, the Bishop had inherited a priest who'd been forced to take a lengthy sabbatical because of family stress. His mother had passed away, which was difficult enough. Then he had learned that he'd fathered a daughter by his first girlfriend. He hadn't known she was pregnant and had left her to begin his training to join the Metropolitan Police in London. They'd lost touch. He'd got on with his life, later marrying another woman and eventually becoming a detective.

His life had changed dramatically with the tragic Atkins case and then his wife's diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. After her death, he'd left Scotland Yard and become an Anglican priest. He'd learned about his daughter only after Clare Gilbert, his mother, had died, allowing him a closer look at her papers and photos. His mother had kept it a secret all those years.

It turned out his mother had been good at keeping secrets. She

had also hidden the fact that the man Father Gilbert thought was his father was not his father at all, but his father's brother – an uncle who had married his mother after his real father, a police constable, had been killed in the line of duty. It was an act of charity, not love, as Uncle George wanted to give Clare and his brother's baby a stable home. Unfortunately, George was an actor who was rarely home, travelling the world over for any stage, television, or film work he could get. As a child, Father Gilbert had felt abandoned. As a teenager, he had felt resentful towards the occasional and intrusive arrival of the man. As an adult, he felt alternately indifferent and annoyed at, if not resigned to, George's presence. If their relationship had been strained because George had hardly been a father to him, it was strained even further by the news that their relationship had been a lie from the start.

All of this was in the Bishop's files, Father Gilbert knew, including all the encounters with the supernatural. More recently, the suicide of the son of local crime boss Jack Doyle, followed by a series of bizarre murders, and accounts of demonic activity – all involving Father Gilbert – had made the Bishop more concerned. A political and pragmatic man, the Bishop didn't have any regard for apparitions, ghosts, or demons. He had less patience with his clergy getting involved in high-profile police cases. No doubt he felt it was his duty to keep Father Gilbert's "eye on the ball", to make sure "priorities were established and acted upon", to protect Father Gilbert from himself by staying focused on being a *priest*. And so the Bishop committed Father Gilbert to the conference – to watch over him.

*What will he say when he finds out I've already met with a detective about a murder case? And the answer was: Better he doesn't find out.*

Between a row of buildings directly ahead, Father Gilbert caught sight of St Sebastian's. He knew then where he needed to go next.