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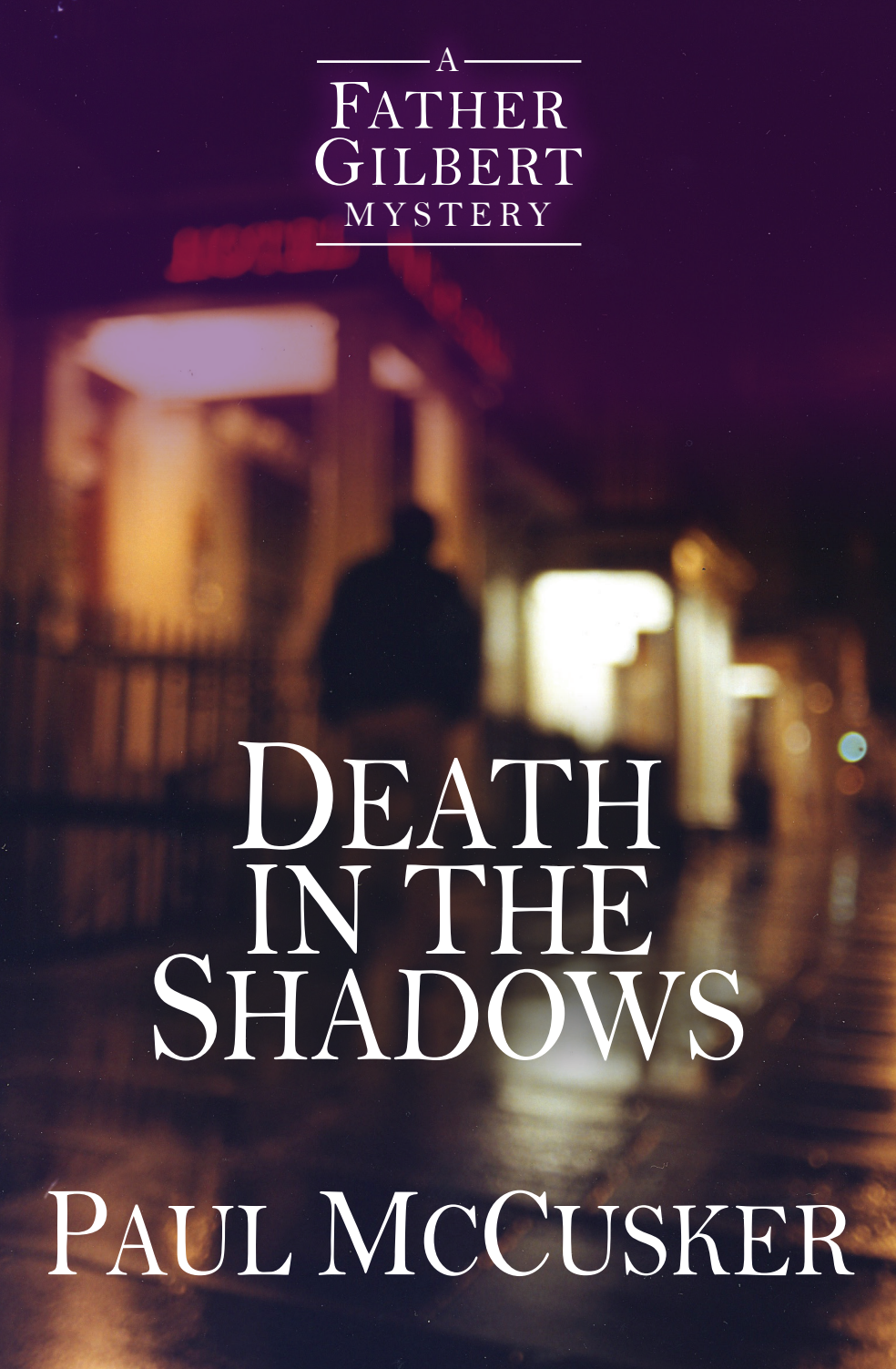
Death in the Shadows

Written by Paul McCusker

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MYSTERY
DEATH
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SHADOWS
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DEATH IN THE SHADOWS

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Death in the Shadows

A Father Gilbert Mystery

Paul McCusker



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

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Chapter 1

The body of the young woman was found in a skip full of rubbish behind a seaside restaurant on the south side of Englesea. According to the newspaper article, the woman was probably Chinese, in her late twenties, and had no identification in her possession. The police were treating the death as suspicious, but were withholding any further details. The reporter had learned from an inside source that the woman was dressed in only a T-shirt and cut-off jeans.

"Rough night."

Father Louis Gilbert pulled his attention away from the newspaper article and looked up.

Reverend Brad Planer sat directly across from him at a small table pressed against the wall of the hotel's modest dining room.

"The *storm*," Planer said, tapping the opposite page of the newspaper. "Last night."

Father Gilbert nodded. He had arrived by train for the church conference just as the first lashings of rain hit. The taxis had disappeared, as they often seemed to do in the rain, so he walked from the station, up the hilly streets to the Masthead Inn. He was soaked to the skin by the time he reached the lobby. The faux-maritime look of the place only added to his rather damp feeling of entering a sinking ship.

Father Gilbert returned to the newspaper article. Detective Inspector Morris Gwynn was in charge of the case. *Morris Gwynn.* It had to be the same Morris Gwynn he'd known at Scotland Yard. He wondered how Gwynn had gone from the Metropolitan Police to a midsized resort town.

"What is this?" Planer asked as he used his fork to chase a shiny tinned mushroom between the eggs, tomato, and baked beans on his plate. He was a man in his forties, with shaggy brown hair, done in a style to suggest a hip connectedness with the youth of his non-

denominational church near High Wycombe. The hairstyle and deep lines on his face made him look more like a has-been rock star. He lanced a mushroom and popped it into his mouth. "It's like eating an eraser."

"You don't have to eat it."

"It's part of the price," Planer said, as if that explained everything.

Father Gilbert had avoided the hotel's "full English breakfast", choosing instead the "Continental breakfast", which consisted of bread with gum-destroying hard crusts, old cheese, and pastry with a mash of unidentifiable fruit in the middle. He wondered what continent the breakfast had come from and why it would feed its citizens such things.

"Any expectations about the conference?" Planer asked.

Father Gilbert shook his head. "Not really." The three-day conference was called *Issues Facing the Church* and had the usual denominational representatives from around the country talking about relevancy, sexuality, social justice, climate change, global economics, immigration, and the other hot topics. His own Bishop was speaking about "The Compassionate Church", after which Father Gilbert would participate in a panel discussion. He dreaded the event. His Bishop had insisted he do it.

"You're not hopeful?" Planer asked, with a wry look.

"Of what?" Father Gilbert asked.

"That we'll come up with policies to substantially change the state of our world?"

" 'Policies' and 'substantially change' rarely go hand in hand." Father Gilbert knew they'd hear the usual sentimental twaddle with a lot of handholding and emotional back rubs. One year they had ended a conference by singing John Lennon's *Imagine*. Why the organizers thought a song that dismantled the Christian faith was a good idea was more than he could imagine.

"I take it you're not a team player when it comes to these things," Planer said.

"Not the way *they* talk about it."

He took a drink of his tea. It tasted of metal.

Planer stabbed at a tomato and eyed it for a moment as if

something might crawl out from between the seeds. He shoved it into his mouth. "What do you think about the timing of *that*?" Planer asked, pointing to the newspaper.

Father Gilbert looked down. The small headline announced "Vandalism at St Sebastian's".

Saint Sebastian's was an ancient church on the top of the hill overlooking Englesea. It had a small abbey attached to it, housing fewer than a dozen monks. Father Gilbert had considered paying the church a visit, if only to say hello to Brother Gregory, the abbot. They'd met several months before at a weekend retreat about spiritual direction and had stayed in touch through emails.

Planer chewed and swallowed. "Somebody defaced the altar last night. Spray paint, offensive graffiti, symbols. Mostly sex stuff." He pushed his plate aside.

The paragraph reported only as much as Planer had said. Father Gilbert didn't know much about Englesea as a town, so he had no way to gauge if defacing a church, or finding a murdered girl in a skip, were normal or aberrations.

"I hope it's not related to the conference."

"Why would it be related to the conference?"

Planer shrugged. "There are a few Christians I know who wouldn't be beneath that sort of behaviour when it comes to Catholic churches." He leaned forward and spoke in a stage whisper. "Catholics are in league with the Antichrist – or haven't you heard?"

"I've heard the rumour," Father Gilbert said. From his peripheral vision, he became aware that someone had stepped up to the table. The waiter with a refill of tea, he hoped. He put the newspaper aside and moved his empty teacup towards the edge of the table. But the person lingered without doing anything at all.

He was aware of a feeling of nausea and a sensation on the back of his neck like the feet of a dozen spiders scrambling to invade his hairline. He heard a dripping sound, as if large drops of water slapped against a mould-covered mattress.

He turned and recoiled at the sight of a young Chinese woman only a few feet away from him, hanging in the air – not from a defiance of gravity, but as if she were floating in water. Her jet-black hair

snaked around the sides of her face, neck, and shoulders. Her eyes were almond-shaped black holes; the pupils, if she had any, recessed in a deep darkness. Her pale lips were shaped into an "O", as if she might be trying to whistle or preparing for a kiss. A rag that had once been a black T-shirt, with a faded logo, clung to her shoulders and chest. Her arms, pale with large smudges of blue and purple bruises, hung at her sides. A large rusted chain dangled loosely from iron clasps on her wrists. She wore fashionably torn denim shorts. Her legs were streaked with lines of mud, or they might've been scars. Her bare feet floated several inches above the carpet, water dripping from her toes. A glint of light took Father Gilbert's eyes back to her throat where he saw a necklace with a charm shaped like something that might have been a horse in a circle. The necklace lifted up as if a current of water had caught it.

Father Gilbert pushed back in his chair, his elbow banging the table and rattling everything on it. Flies, fat and green, came from nowhere and everywhere, landing on the faded red velvet wallpaper and then the table and food.

"What's wrong?" Planer asked, his voice coming from a great distance away.

Father Gilbert kept his eyes on the apparition. He had experienced these sorts of things before. How and why they appeared to him was rarely clear. All he knew was that they usually meant he was about to be pulled into trouble.

He was aware of Planer speaking to him, unaware of what was happening. He kept his eyes on the girl.

Would she speak to him? *Could* she? What if he reached out to her? Would his fingers touch water just as his ears heard the dripping? He lifted his hand, extending his forefinger to test his theory.

Suddenly there was a loud crash. Father Gilbert snapped in the direction of the sound. A young woman, dark-skinned, possibly Middle Eastern, had dropped a tray full of dishes and cutlery. The woman was looking his way. Her eyes were wide with fright and fixed on the floating Chinese girl.

She sees it, Father Gilbert thought, surprised. *She sees what I'm seeing.* That was a first.

The girl put a hand to her mouth.

A manager appeared at the kitchen door and growled, "What's going on here?"

The young woman lowered and angled her face away from the spectre, dropping to her knees to clean up the mess from the tray.

Father Gilbert turned back to the apparition. She had disappeared. In her place, the flies swarmed, then flew as one mass to the large front window, escaping through an open pane at the top. Beyond the window, out on the street, a man in a dark coat faced him. A black hat obscured the man's facial features, but there was no doubt the man was looking straight at him. A passing truck cut off his line of sight and then he was gone.

The other diners seemed oblivious to the flies. They stared at the commotion by the kitchen door.

"I'm so sorry," the manager announced to the room. He bent to help the girl pick up the broken glass, quickly throwing the pieces onto the tray. The girl's eyes came back to Father Gilbert.

Planer asked, "What was that all about?"

Father Gilbert stood up. "Excuse me."

He took a step towards the girl but stopped as his feet squished into the sodden carpet. He looked down, half expecting to sink into a marsh of carpet fibres.

"Where are you going? Come back here!" the manager shouted.

The girl had pushed past the manager and through the swinging door to the kitchen. He stood with the tray of broken dishes just as Father Gilbert approached. They danced to the left and right as Father Gilbert tried to move around him, his eye on the girl through the small panel of glass in the swinging door. She disappeared into whatever area lay beyond the kitchen.

"That girl," Father Gilbert said.

The manager blocked him. "What about her?"

"I'd like to have a word with her."

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait your turn," the manager said and backed through the door into the kitchen with the tray. "Employees only. Safety rules and all that. Come see me at the front desk."

Frustrated, Father Gilbert turned to the dining room. All heads

at the various tables were turned towards him. Planer watched him.

Father Gilbert gave them an apologetic look and strode out.

* * *

"She's gone," the manager said from behind the teak reception desk. He fidgeted with a pen and slid papers around.

"To where?" Father Gilbert asked.

"I don't know. She dashed out the back door. Which is just as well, since I would have sacked her anyway."

"Why? Has this happened before?"

"The breaking dishes or the running off? Both," he said, scowling. "She's been unreliable from day one. As jittery as an alley cat."

"I'd like to speak with her."

"Good luck with that."

"Can you give me her name and address?"

"Her name is Cari – but I can't give out any of her personal details."

"Because you're not permitted or because you don't have them?" Father Gilbert asked. It wasn't uncommon for employees in these seaside towns to work under the radar, especially the foreign ones.

"What do you want with her?" the manager asked, gesturing to his priest's collar. "I doubt she's a member of the C of E. More of the burka or towel-head type, I would think."

Father Gilbert frowned at him, restraining the varied unkind responses that rushed to be voiced. "Is she likely to come back – for unpaid wages or anything like that?"

"She might."

He reached into his jacket pocket for a piece of scrap paper and remembered that Mrs Mayhew, his secretary at the church, had printed up business cards for the conference. He grabbed one and handed it over. "Please give her my card. Tell her to contact me – on my mobile phone, or here at the hotel. I'll be back later."

"I wouldn't get my hopes up," the manager said.

"Just give her my card," Father Gilbert said and quickly added, "Please."

* * *

In 1884 an aging pontiff, Leo XIII, had just celebrated Mass at his private chapel in the Vatican when he suddenly stopped in his tracks. A few others were with him and watched with concern as the Pope stood for ten minutes as if in a trance, his face ashen white. Then he snapped out of it and went back to his office where he wrote something quickly.

He later explained that he'd heard two voices near the altar. One voice was gentle and kind; the other was harsh and guttural. In a Job-like exchange, the harsh voice claimed it could destroy the church with enough time and power. The gentle voice enquired as to how much time and how much power would be needed. The first voice asked for 100 years. The gentle voice, accepting the challenge, granted the time and power to be used however the harsh voice decided.

Pope Leo XIII handed over a prayer to his subordinates, stating that it should be prayed after all low Masses everywhere. And so it was until the changes brought about by Vatican II ended the practice.

Pacing in his room, hands clasped behind him, Father Gilbert now prayed the prayer, whispering, "Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle; be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, thrust into Hell Satan and all the other evil spirits who prowl throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen."

If the apparition was a signal for trouble to come, he needed to be prepared.

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.