

Chapter One

You get lumbered. If you're kind by nature, you get lumbered, and Billy was. Even a mild sense of duty means you can't say no. So when Nan shuffled into the kitchen that fateful Saturday morning, Billy knew something was wrong.

Although it was supposedly the nicest time of year, Christmas, Nan was far from happy. She had been in a tetchy mood for days, not her usual breezy self.

She was the long-serving churchwarden at St Michael's, Threapton, as dedicated as any minister from miles away ever could be. But this year things were getting beyond her. Her hip was crumbling like a biscuit and the operation wasn't due for months. There was so much to do and so many people had let her down. There was no one left to ask. The Advent procession was scheduled for the very next day, Sunday, December the second, and the church was still as barren as a desert.

'The vicar's in a blind panic. He swore under his breath, I'm sure he did,' she said. 'He's better suited to the happy-clappy sort of place, all free and easy. I can only do so much ...'

Billy was feeling increasingly guilty. Nan's pained expression was directed at him. She sighed and stumbled against the long oak table as if she was under so much stress she was losing control of her limbs. She dabbed a fake tear. That clinched it. Yes, it was the old "martyrdom of Saint Peggy" routine.

'Don't worry, Nan, I'll come and give you a hand.'

'Will you? Oh, you are an angel. Maybe your grandad can drop us off on his way to the rugby club.'

Billy was annoyed with himself for weakening, but there was little else he could do. By now, he should have been slinging his tools into the canopy of the tractor and heading through the deep sloughs down to the riverside meadows. He had planned a day's hedge-laying accompanied by *Sports Report* on the radio. That was the plan. Instead, he found himself in the back of the Land Rover clutching a different set of tools

– scissors and Stanley knives instead of billhooks and loppers. More sinisterly, he was given a cardboard box full of dried ivy, half-melted candles and crêpe paper that smelt of Christmas past.

His wire-haired terrier, Twiggy, was expecting to be chasing rabbits from the undergrowth. Now, she laid her chin on his lap and wagged her black stump of a tail in barely controlled anger. She could read humans like a book and knew she had been cheated.

‘She’ll be all right tethered in the nave where she can see you, Billy. There’ll be no one around to bother us. They’ve all gone down with this blessed flu.’

St Michael’s was the type of church you see in any village in the land. It sat on a round knoll that dominated the Shirle Valley, and not by accident. The early Christians deliberately took over the ancient religious sites and replaced their symbols with a spanking new version. A case, literally, of the Christian saint slaying the pagan dragon.

The Anglo-Saxons built their first church at the time of the Venerable Bede and that, in turn, was superseded by a Norman chapel. It was constructed on the earlier foundations, so the layout was dictated by the original geomancy. They knew about those things then.

The bell tower stood at the west end. A faded flag of Saint George flew at half mast. The tower and walls were castellated, so the church looked more like a castle than a place of worship. It seemed that, even a hundred years after the conquest, the Normans were still thinking defensively.

On rainy days, gargoyles belched rainwater from each corner – a sort of medieval practical joke. The once fine finials rising above them were eroded into knobbly fingers. It was as if the building was holding up its hands in surrender. An archetypal Norman arched door led directly into the tower.

At the east end, the morning sun shone through a Victorian stained glass window and illuminated the altar with mottled, psychedelic hues. At the midpoint of the nave, facing south, a modest porch formed the main entrance. Directly opposite that was the vestry. It was originally built as a chantry for the Neuilles, in the days when the rich could pay to be chanted into heaven. The Reformation put paid to that. The severe slopes of the knoll had prevented any further expansion.

A squat door in the west wall linked the main body of the church to the tower. Visitors wishing to enter the belfry from the nave had to twist and stoop very low, carefully stepping down into a tiny, claustrophobic vestibule. Then they had to push open another heavy oak door. This way was rarely used, largely because of modern health and safety paranoia, although no one had ever slipped on, bumped into or scraped against anything in known history ...

Immediately to the right of that linking door was an “unfinished pillar”. It was broken off at the top and so supported nothing. It was, according to Mr Clewes, the last full-time verger, made that way deliberately to symbolise the “unfinished work of God”. No one knew when it was put there.

There were yet more mysteries. A 10-foot long bluestone stump, reputedly a toppled monolith, was hidden alongside the north wall under heaps of moss and rakings. It was rarely spoken of. It was called the “devil’s stool”.

The church was encircled by an overgrown graveyard, full of ornate gravestones – angels spattered with lichen, marble bibles opened portentously, looping citations on gothic masonry. A tumbledown sandstone wall marked the boundary. It was a ramshackle Eden full of wildlife and long-forgotten stories.

An ancient elderberry grew by the porch entrance and had, over centuries, self-pollarded into a thousand ramrod fronds, springing from horizontal branches. Like everything else, it was not there by accident – elderberry, tradition says, soaks up evil spirits. A line of giant yew trees on either side of the gravel path created a gloomy deep green tunnel to the porch.

Peggy Ingham loved St Michael’s, though in some ways it highlighted the nation’s half-hearted approach to the Christian faith.

‘We’re letting it fall to pieces before our very eyes as if it isn’t worth the cost of upkeep,’ she would say.

Yet, the people of Threapton still quietly acknowledged that St Michael’s was at the heart of the place. It was not just a meaningless pile of masonry. Here, the significant events of life and death were still celebrated – christenings, marriages, funerals. Everyone, even those who never set foot in a regular service, took their turn in the age-old cycle. When the chips are down, places like St Michael’s make sense.

The unwritten history of the same local people was ingrained into its very walls, sometimes literally. There was a line of musket ball holes on the shadowy north wall, where seven Roundheads were shot during the English Civil War.

St Michael's stood as a microcosm of old England, faithful England, hard-won, bloody England. The bells ring out every Sunday without fail, like a ghostly peal summoning up the past. And while the lazy may turn over in their beds, the irreligious curse and incomers complain, those bells will always ring.

Inghams were as local and as immovable as the church walls. They had been living around Threapton and Shirlington for generations. The church was their second home. In medieval times they must have been people of some importance. Not only did they inhabit at least three dozen graves outside, but they also had a memorial brass plaque inside. It was not grand by any means, but it was situated in the central aisle of the nave near to the lectern. It sent a chill down Billy's spine every time he walked by it. It said, in finely embellished script: "William Ingham RIP 1642". Smaller inscriptions to his "relic Sarah" and sons Ezekiel, Nathaniel and Joseph were written underneath. Below that, a bigger, bolder citation had defied the wearing down of time: "He died profesing trewe faith and trewe felloweship".

Nan, a keen local historian, believed that this William Ingham was one of the men killed in the notorious Civil War execution – local Puritans who took the parliament side, much to the annoyance of the local gentry. The citation bore this out and could refer to nothing else. Apparently, following a particularly fiery sermon by the Presbyterian preacher, Peter Stroud, William was inspired to call a meeting in the market place. When assembled, the town butcher suggested they should form their very own troop of foot soldiers and rally to the parliament cause. They drew up and signed a declaration of rights.

The lord of the manor, one Ralphe de Shirlington, heard about this "act of gross impertinence". He was a follower of William Laud and deeply suspicious of the "threadbare religion". He was also a fanatical Royalist, with a devout belief in the divine right of kings. He had little regard for rights or declarations.

'Shopkeepers should run shops, not nations.'

Commissioners were sent from his hall to the town. The citizens had the temerity to resist arrest, apparently sending one of the lord's henchmen away with a boxed ear and a sound telling off. This could not be tolerated.

A larger commission was sent out, backed by loyal members of de Shirlington's armed band – the local militia. This time the rebels were arrested.

Within days they were brought before the county assizes, accused of being the devil's agents. They were found guilty of affray and high treason and seven men were shot – Dunswell the butcher, Ingham the farmer, two shoemakers, two tanners and a blacksmith – not a minute's walk from this very plaque. Their bodies were hung from the town gibbet for seven days before being hacked down by de Shirlington's men and buried in unconsecrated ground outside the church walls.

But they were not forgotten. As soon as Oliver Cromwell took power, the bodies of the Threapton martyrs were exhumed and brought inside. William Ingham's plaque was placed by public subscription; no one knows why he was singled out for special attention. It was decreed the holes in the wall should never be repaired. They never were.

Billy often wondered which of these gruesome holes was the one that did for his ancestor. Being a lad of vivid imagination, he often thought about the precise moment: lining up, being blindfolded, saying a last prayer, maybe protesting innocence, maybe boldly declaring the rights of the common man ... how would he have responded in such a situation?

With a touch of telling irony a de Shirlington family tomb, carved in finest alabaster, was set against the south wall barely 6 metres away. It was a grandiose affair for murderers and oppressors of the people.

Inghams hadn't had much truck with politics ever since, but it seems fate had taken ample revenge on their behalf. While their descendants continued to farm and prosper all round the county to this day, the de Shirlington clan had come to a sticky end. Their name was reviled by history.

Nan treasured the Ingham inheritance more than the Inghams did themselves. She had married well. Her own origins were not so interesting and were anyway long forgotten. One grandfather had come from Crewe to help build the railway; another was a farmhand in Far

Threapton. In a way, she had adopted the Ingham genealogy as her own, simply because she coveted a more Romantic backstory. She had traced her husband's line to this very plaque. Generations of Inghams had borne the name of William since and Billy was the latest incarnation.

He pretended to be proud of the connection, but if truth be told, it spooked him. Yet, every time he came into St Michael's he was drawn to it and today was no exception. As soon as they entered through the main door, he veered off to the central aisle to sneak a brief look. Nan was ferrying boxes of paraphernalia to the ends of the pews.

'Come on, Billy! No time to stand around. Help bring the stuff over. Preparation is all!' she said breezily.

She was tirelessly efficient and placed things approximately where she would need them. That done, she pondered for a few moments and then walked to the crossing, where a nativity stable had been set up beside the lectern. It was a backdrop begging to be brought to life.

'My first job!'

She carefully drew carved wooden figures out of their boxes and, as she unwrapped them, dusted them lovingly. Every year, she arranged them around the manger in exactly the same position. She could have done it blindfolded.

'I don't know. It doesn't seem five minutes since we were packing them away!'

She considered it far too early to be setting up for Christmas, but that's how it was nowadays. She remembered when her own father, a postman, had to work on Christmas Day. The family never got to sit down to dinner until the evening. By then, he was drunk on the mix of spirits he'd been given at each house on the round.

'Look how it is now. Every year the frenzy starts earlier and earlier ... it's all big business ...'

Billy was busy unhooking the dog from the end of the pew where he had temporarily hitched her.

'... Advertising those silly dolls in September and those computer games with people killing one another. I mean, they'll water the whole thing down until it means nothing.'

'Honest, Nan, this morning you were panicking that we'd left it too late to get anything done.'

She deflected Billy's complaint by passing him an enormous yellow duster.

'Here, you can polish the lectern.'

The lectern was a glowering brass eagle with wings spread to support an enormous Bible. He looped Twiggy's lead around the base of the lavishly decorated stand and tied it in a loose knot. Twiggy looked up at him dolefully and half yawned, half yelped.

'Sorry, girl. Now lie down! Lie down!'

'Oh, Billy, mind you don't leave any blobs of cleaner ... every single eye in the church will be on that.'

'No pressure, then. Thanks for reminding me.'

'The stuff's all in that box there,' Nan said, pointing.

He hated cleaning. Not that he was lazy. When it came to helping around the farm he was like an old-fashioned yeoman and built the same way. He could happily muck out shippens or hump bales of straw all day, but give him anything domestic and suddenly he became work-shy.

He rummaged round the red plastic box until he found what he wanted – an ancient tin of Brasso. He tried to unscrew the rusted metal top, which hadn't been opened since the previous Christmas. It was nigh on impossible, even for a lad with the vice-like grip of a prop forward.

Nan ambled over, took it from him and twisted it off at the first attempt. A white powdery deposit made it screech as she forced it.

'You'd better eat more eggs for breakfast,' she said, handing it over with a broad smile.

'I must have loosened it beforehand,' Billy said.

He dribbled some of the pungent white goo onto the middle of the duster then flipped it over and wiped it into the fine detail of the feathers. This was an exacting job for someone with large, clumsy hands and a dislike of finicky work. To make matters worse, William Ingham RIP was staring up at him from approximately three paces away. He kept stepping back onto it, like it was a curse.

'What a lovely way to spend a Saturday,' he said.

'You what, Billy?'

'Nothing.'

The eagle took Billy an hour to finish. Even his bike didn't take that long. The fumes made him light-headed. Nan noticed him dithering and thought he was slacking. She marched over briskly, took the cloth off him and gave a final flourish to the brass. It gleamed magically under her touch. What was it with Nan and cleaning? As she worked, she dictated his next job. He didn't listen.

She handed back the duster then bent tortuously down to get some new wonder product out of the box. She passed it to him. He peered at it – it was an aerosol can of furniture polish. She pointed to the long pierced rail in front of the altar where people knelt and leaned their elbows.

‘Oh no, not that thing.’

‘Yes, that “thing” where people receive Holy Communion.’

The rail was an unnecessary piece of Victorian clutter. The design was composed of crisply carved escutcheons and lions rampant. No doubt it was intended to please the upper classes and make extra work for the lower classes. Like the pews, it had so far survived the trendy new vicar’s desire to “open out, get rid of barriers and simplify”. Nan loved it, lobbied for it, tended to it obsessively. She ran her fingers across the top rail affectionately.

‘Well, it’s not too bad, but it does need a doing.’

When her back was turned Billy ran his finger over it, too. He could see no dust whatsoever.

‘Now, I think we deserve a break, Billy. I’m going to make sure everything’s laid out ready in the vestry then I’ll make us a pot of tea.’

She marched off towards the vestry door on the opposite side of the church. Billy noticed her limp had been miraculously cured. Must be the setting.

‘And when you’ve done that we can start on the misericords,’ she said as she disappeared into the gloom. “Misericords” echoed through the arches ...

Billy looked up at them in awe. They were aptly named – they were the intricately carved stalls where choristers perched on narrow hinged seats. Gryphons, lions, angels, folk characters adorned the seats, the partitions, the canopies in an explosion of craftsmanship. All life, real or imagined, was there. It was a rare masterpiece for such a small church. He could be stuck here for days, polishing medieval cosmology.

He sprayed some aerosol onto a length of the top rail, let it dry for a moment and started polishing. Twiggy was slumped on the platform of the lectern, her eyes flickering as she drifted in and out of sleep.

The church fell silent apart from the occasional squeak of cloth on wax. Sparrows twittered outside, picking crumbs from the gravel. A distant tractor roared as it strained through the December mud. As Billy stood to stretch, trying to relieve his aching back, the heavy main entrance door creaked open.

It was held for a moment, then closed on its spring. The black cast-iron latch clanked into its slot.

Twiggy started and sprang to her feet. Billy turned to see who it was. A tall, bull-necked, middle-aged man with a severe crew cut had come in. He was dressed in a heavy black overcoat like a Jehovah’s Witness. He turned immediately to his left and looked down at the table full of pamphlets and notes to parishioners. He dropped a few coins into the donation box then headed towards the tower end. He came to a standstill beside the marble font just in front of the vestibule to the belfry. He was smiling broadly and craning up to see the fine oak vaulting of the roof.

‘Well, we finally made it, your lordship. We finally made it.’ he said, then diverted across to the north aisle.

Every now and then he would stop and squeeze along the pews to study a wall plaque or a stone memorial. He clasped a digital camera in one hand and in the other held a small black leather-bound book which he kept referring to. In particularly dark corners, he took a tiny pen torch from an inside pocket and pointed it at the page.

‘Aha! I gotcha.’

He seemed unaware that someone was watching him from the other end of the church. Billy cottoned on to this and, to save any embarrassment, purposely knocked Nan’s tin of beeswax off the kneeling platform. It rolled on the tiled floor in ever decreasing circles until it whined to a halt. The man swung round, his pronounced lower lip hanging wide open.

‘Hi there, buddy.’

‘Oh, hello. Sorry to make you jump.’

‘Ha ha! That’s okay. I had worse ambushes in ’Nam.’

He swaggered down the nave and up to the altar rail, where he stopped abruptly and held out a hand. The dog snarled but was strangely watchful. Billy was not used to such upfront friendliness.

‘I’m Waldron Theodore Shirlington the Third and I’m pleased to meet you!’

‘Oh ... er ... I’m Billy Ingham ...’

‘Ingham ... Ingham ... Why, there’s more of you guys in that ol’ graveyard than ticks on a dog’s back!’

‘Excuse me?’

‘There’s a whole heap of remains out there and you guys seem to be most of them.’

‘Oh, I see what you mean. Yeah. Remains. There’s loads of us.’

‘All your ancestors, I guess?’

‘That’s what Nan says.’

‘Nan?’

‘My grandmother.’

‘Well, I’m sure she’s right, buddy! It’s so strange, but you know, I really do feel at home here.’ He slapped Billy on the back heartily. The dog yapped.

‘Twiggy, sit!’

‘Never been here, darn it, yet it’s like I belong.’

It was Billy’s first experience of an ebullient American and he wasn’t sure yet how to react. Twiggy, however, thought her master was under attack and was straining at the leash. The lectern rocked back and forth alarmingly. It was not as immovable as it looked. The man seemed completely unfazed by the racket.

‘Yup. Ing-ham! I reckon those guys might be cut from quality cloth like me. They spent some on masonry.’

‘They were all just farmers.’

‘Just nothing, young fella. Farming surely is the noblest of professions. Where I come from the pig farmer is king. Cincinnati, Ohio. Porkopolis. That’s what we call it. Porkopolis. We all gotta eat, buddy.’

The yapping ringing through the arches alerted Nan. She emerged from the vestry with a pristine cassock draped over her forearm.

‘Billy, will you keep that dog quiet in the church, please? Oh, hello!’

‘Hi there, ma’am. Mighty pleased to meet you. Is this whippersnapper yours?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, he’s a fine, polite young gentleman and you oughta be proud of him!’

Nan was instantly charmed. ‘He’s our grandson.’

‘Wowee. I could’ve sworn he was your son. Are you kidding me?’

‘No. Grandson.’

‘Must be the country air.’

‘I don’t know about that. We get dust from the power station here.’

‘We have those kinda problems in the States, too, ma’am.’

‘Are you on holiday?’

‘Hmm ... kinda ... shall we say I’m here partly for a holiday and partly for a little research. I always wanted to come here. It’s a roots thing and all.’

‘Roots? Are you a New Threaptonian?’

To an outsider this would mean nothing. Half the village had set sail to New England in the late 1630s, to escape the unpalatable edicts of our friend William Laud. They survived biblical-scale storms and plagues and famines, to establish a colony of “true believers”. There is still a town called Threaptonville in one Shirle County and several surnames peculiar to the two areas.

‘No, ma’am, my interest is jes’ a little more recent than that. I’m called Waldron Theodore Shirlington the Third.’

Nan stumbled slightly backwards as if she’d been pushed off balance. ‘Did you say Shirlington?’

‘I surely did.’

‘One of the *de* Shirlingtons of Shirlington Hall?’

‘That’s me. Grandfather dropped the “de” when he went to the States ... we don’t do da de any more! Ha ha! Do da de! My little joke.’

‘Well, that is astonishing. Your grandfather? That would be 1919, I believe?’

‘You got it in one, ma’am. Hey, do you know sum’n about my family?’

‘Do I? Would you believe it? Not a month ago I gave a talk about the *de* Shirlingtons to the WI.’

‘WI?’

‘Women’s Institute.’

‘Women’s Institute. Gotcha! But what they gotta do with my folks?’

‘We do all sorts, even history. Not just jam and Jerusalem, you know.’

‘Sure, I saw that film, ma’am! Wasn’t it your Dame Helen Mirren who won an Oscar?’

‘Yes, it was. Anyway, we have a history section and I was delegated by Leonora ...’

‘Leonora? Would that be Leonora Jesty?’

Nan looked bemused. ‘Yes. You know her?’

‘I surely do. Tell me, has *she* been giving lectures about my ... er ... situation?’

‘I’m not sure what you mean, Mr *de* Shirlington. She allocated each member of the history group a famous local family to study.’

‘She did?’

‘Yes. We were doing a series of talks then compiling them into a pamphlet. Tourism, you see, and for the New Threaptonians.’

‘Ma’am, I have to tell you, I did warn that good lady not to say too much right now.’

‘I quite understand but, forgive me for seeming so forward. Are you something to do with the lost de Shirlington branch in the USA?’

‘That’s exactly why I’m here, ma’am. But it’s early days to be ...’

‘But she didn’t say anything specifically about you. I mean you, the individual.’

‘Nor should she! Not yet, anyhow ...’

‘A de Shirlington! This is just too wonderful.’

‘This is pretty wonderful for me, too, ma’am. I come all this way from Cincinnati, Ohio on a hunch and the first person I talk to is right on the button. Maybe you can help me plug a few gaps already.’

‘Well, I can tell you what I know. But I just don’t understand why she didn’t mention there was an actual person on the horizon.’

‘Like I say, early days. There’s a lot of legal stuff and I guess those probate guys like to see things done by the book.’

‘I appreciate that, but don’t you think she might have said something just to warn me?’

While Nan was trying to compute this sudden appearance and the timing of Leonora’s project, Waldron de Shirlington was angling to make the most of the unexpected opportunity.

‘Well, since you are here and obviously an expert, ma’am, perhaps you could direct me to the tomb of Rycharde and Agnes de Shirlington, which I believe is located right here in your beautiful church of St Michael’s.’ He flipped open a page in his *Pevsner Guide*.

Nan snapped out of her reverie. ‘Why, of course. Nothing could be easier. Turn to your right and you’ll find it in the de Shirlington monument, against the wall over there.’ She pointed to an out-of-scale tomb set against the south wall and sectioned off by a pierced wooden screen. ‘We believe there used to be a chantry chapel. See the slight recess in the wall?’

‘Holy mackerel! So we had very our own private chapel?’

‘I should say! You were lords of the manor. I’m just so amazed to be meeting one of the *actual* family. They were thought to have died out with Randle junior.’

‘Ah yes, that bad guy Randle. I found out some things ’bout him. His brain went Awol, so I believe.’

‘Awol?’

‘He went mad.’

‘Oh, yes. I’m afraid he very probably did. And it was thought he was the last of the line. There were appeals in the local papers, even in a *Times* column. I saw them myself on the microfiche in Shirlington Library. Nothing came of it, you see.’

‘That’s where I come in, ma’am. I finally got the message. Say hello to the long-lost American branch of the family.’

‘This is extraordinary! Billy, can you believe this? You really must come and visit us at Brandywell. I can show you the research I did for the talk. Pages of it. This must be a million to one chance, meeting a long-lost de Shirlington. But it was thought the American branch was deceased or untraceable.’

‘It was what now? Do I look untraceable?’ He puffed out his ample stomach, patted it and laughed a laugh that boomed all the way up to the rafters. ‘Believe me, ma’am, the last de Shirlington is well and truly traced, and pretty soon “the truth will out” as the man said.’

‘And we will help you find it.’

As Nan picked up a discarded *Parish News* from a nearby pew and sketched a map to Brandywell on the margin, Billy looked on incredulously.

‘You must visit us. You really must; in fact, you can keep the file I did.’

‘Why, that is so gracious of you.’

‘I’d be so thrilled if it was of any use. It would only be gathering dust. I mean, this is a case of history actually being brought to life – the perfect end to the whole exercise.’

‘I can appreciate that, ma’am. We seem to be fated.’

‘Fated ... I do believe in such things, Mr de Shirlington.’

‘Please, call me Wally.’

Billy looked on in astonishment. Nan was never keen to make new acquaintances, let alone get on first name terms or dish out invites.

‘I’d be more than honoured, ma’am, to cut along and see both you and your researches. I’m staying at your local public house, The Miller’s Thumb, right over the Christmas break.’

‘You mean you’ll be spending Christmas alone?’

‘Oh, it ain’t so bad. I got no folks and you get used to it.’

‘That would never do. Just ring that number when you want company.’

‘I most assuredly will, but when would be convenient? I’m sure you’re a busy lady with your farm and your church duties and your WI talks and all.’

‘Oh! I’m always home around teatime.’

‘Teatime! That’s so very English. Thank you so much.’

With that he grinned and set off towards the tomb. Nan resumed cleaning but was secretly watching his every move. Duty had become secondary.

‘Yes, Mr de Shirlington, that’s the one.’

Waldron stopped for a second to gather himself. Then, with his chin held up and his hands clasped together, he strode into the partitioned area. He stood before the grey alabaster tomb covered by an ornate arabesque canopy and bowed his head. Lying side by side, slumbering on a luxurious bed, were two figures: a knight and his dame. He wore full armour with the visor lifted; she wore long, straight robes and a wimple. Nothing was slumped or crinkled to suggest the effect of gravity.

‘Holy mackerel! How old did you say this was, ma’am?’

‘Oh, built in about 1290, they say.’

‘1290! Two hundred years before the States were discovered. That is so mind-blowing.’

Years of zealous dusting and the rubbing over of hands had worn down much of the detail. Chunks of the sword and feet had been chipped off altogether. Layers of graffiti had been carved into thighs, drapery, armour, any inviting flat surface. Some cut marks were so deep they looked like battle wounds.

Waldron circled and circled. He laid his palms on the stone and traced around every mound and recess, as if taking in the very experience by touch. He lingered at the knight’s head, closed his eyes, lay hands on each side of the helmet and inhaled a loud, rasping breath. His fingers slid down on to the oval, rudimentary face that looked like a Modigliani painting. When he came to the end of the nose, he could feel it had been broken off. His eyes flickered open.

‘Couldn’t they show you a little more respect than this, damn it?’ he said.

Nan shook her head in sympathetic dismay.

He moved to the right shoulder, bent in close and peered at the worn detail of the knight’s chain mail. He moved around to the other side and did the same to the lady’s lace. Their arms were folded across their breasts, their heads slightly raised on roll cushions. He sighed and carried on to the other end one final time. Crouching at their feet were two faithful dogs, probably greyhounds. They seemed much more life-like than the humans; the detail in their ribs, tails and teeth was still sharp and tempting to the touch.

‘That little fella looks like he could bite your goddamned finger off right now.’

He playfully patted the dog at the dame’s feet then stepped backwards off the plinth. He put his hands together with his fingertips held at the end of his nose as a child would, and began to pray out loud. Unlike the usual English visitor, he was not embarrassed to show his faith.

‘I wanna thank you now, Lord, for bringing me here today.’ His voice filled the void far more effectively than the vicar’s ever could.

When he had finished, he took a handkerchief from the pocket of his overcoat. ‘Would ya believe this? It’s a kinda moving moment, seeing them lying here, my own flesh and blood. I didn’t think it would get me this way.’ He wiped a tear from his cheek with the kind of flourish you might see in a silent movie. ‘Please excuse me, ma’am ...’

‘Good heavens, Mr de Shirlington, there’s nothing to be excused.’

‘Ma’am, you have helped to make this, Saturday the first of December 2007, the most special day of my entire life. A day I’ve long dreamed about. Believe me; I am not given to exaggeration.’

He sobbed into his handkerchief again and blinked back the tears. Then he wiped his bulbous nose and mouth and double chin with the sort of extreme vigour people deploy to make themselves snap out of something. It seemed to Billy that *everything* he did was given to exaggeration.

‘Anyway, I guess I’d better be heading back. You have your work to do and I need some down time to take all this in. Thank you! Thank you so very much.’

‘Oh, please don’t mention it. It’s been an absolute pleasure to meet you. Do remember to call us. Do please.’

‘You’d better believe it, Mrs Ingham. You have been so gracious.’

It seemed to Billy that they were trying to outdo each other with politeness.

Waldron shook her hand and nodded, and ruffled Billy's head as he passed him. When he reached the entrance, he suddenly spun on his heels.

'Oh, ma'am, there is just one more thing I need to know. The de Shirlington Hall – where exactly is that?'

'The hall? It's halfway between Threapton and Shirlington. In fact, it butts right onto our farm.'

'Well, would you credit that – another trick of fate?'

'Yes, I suppose it is. We've been neighbours throughout hundreds of years of history. But I'm afraid it's a ruin. The last gentleman, Randle, as you know, went mad and just sat there while it crumbled around him. There were no grants then, no lotteries. Folk were glad to see the back of him. They said it was haunted, you see. But now the suburbs are spreading near it and it's badly vandalised.'

As Nan was speaking, Waldron was progressing back up the nave.

'Is everything in this country vandalised? Nevertheless, I would love to see it.'

'It's on the outskirts of town on the way back into Shirlington. You follow the signs to Threapton Golf Course.'

'And how many miles would that be?'

'No more than two and a half.'

'Of course, I don't have a car right now.'

'Oh, it's very walkable. There's only one taxi in Threapton and he's impossible to get hold of on a Saturday. It wouldn't get you much nearer to the old place, anyway; it's off the beaten track, you see. I'll tell you what, Mr de Shirlington. Our Billy's more or less finished for the day. Why not let him walk you down there? It's on the way to our farm and you would never be able to find it by yourself.'

'Why, that would be mighty civil of you, ma'am.'

Billy grimaced. He was fed up of being volunteered for things on a Saturday afternoon that did not concern him. At this rate, by the time he got home, the rugby results would have come and gone and he would have to suffer the endlessly repeated, hyped-up soccer reports on Sky while waiting to get them.

'Go on, Billy, you have to take the dog for her walk anyway.'

He shrugged his shoulders. At least it would get him out of polishing misericords. He unravelled the lead and tugged Twiggy towards the heavy oak door. Waldron buttoned up his overcoat, wrapped a white

cashmere scarf around his neck and followed him out into the fading light. The tears were gone and he was grinning like the cat that got the cream. Twiggy kept looking up at him suspiciously, as if he really was a cat with cream.

They set off down the gravel path. The yew trees towered over them, making it even darker. A barn owl suddenly swooped above them on its way to its lookout post on the tower. Waldron ducked with a surprisingly quick reflex for such a large man.

'Jesus! What the fu ...' He just managed to suppress the full swear word.

Billy didn't think posh people swore, but there again he'd never met a lord.

Chapter Two

It took them forty minutes of hard walking in the dark, dank evening to get to the ruins. Every few paces a car would speed past and force them onto the narrow kerb. Twiggy was neither used to being on a tight lead nor to walking on a roadside. She had no traffic sense whatsoever, no anticipation or fear. She just ploughed on, every few paces darting into the road, only for Billy to yank her back to safety. At one particularly narrow point he was forced to pick her up and carry her.

‘Sorry, girl; won’t be long.’

Waldron seemed amused by Billy’s constant apologising to the dog.

‘So it’s true. You know, I read somewhere that the English treat the people like dogs and the dogs like people!’

Billy wasn’t sure if he was joking.

About 2 miles south-east of Threapton, they came to an ancient green way track, now mostly used as a bridle path.

‘Here’s where we leave the road. Sorry about this.’

‘End of civilisation as we know it, eh, boy?’

Waldron squeezed his bulk through the kissing gate at one end of a main gate. It really was a “green way”, overgrown at the sides, boggy in the middle and stamped with hoof marks. Occasional patches of metalled road showed through where turf had been scalped off. It hadn’t seen serious traffic for years. It was the long-lost dray road that linked Threapton and High Golney, where there had been an old lead-mining settlement, now deserted. As they struggled along the hummocky ground, Waldron wheezed and muttered under his breath.

‘Sheesh, don’t this place got a proper road?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

When they eventually arrived at the tumbledown boundary walls of the de Shirlington Estate, Waldron was sweating profusely, even in the cool evening air. He took the large handkerchief from his pocket ostentatiously and mopped his brow like a surgeon under pressure. That piece of cloth was quite a prop.

‘How come your grandmom said we didn’t need a cab? It would’ve saved us some.’

‘She only said you’d have to wait ages for it on a Saturday.’

‘I would’ve preferred waiting a mite to this. How much farther?’

‘We’re nearly there. This bit’s the heritage site, with the ditches.’ He pointed towards a rough, pitted field. ‘And just over there you can see it, Mr Shirlington, the hall.’

‘That pile o’ junk? Are you kiddin’ me?’ He was taken aback by the sight emerging from the mist. It was like something from a Hammer horror film. ‘So *that* is it?’

From somewhere, Waldron suddenly found the energy to stride on ahead. Every few paces he stopped, stood back and exclaimed ‘Wow!’, or ‘Would ya believe it!’, or ‘Gee, this is enormous!’

It certainly was enormous – one enormous ruin. Only bits of the facade still stood intact. The west wing was like a Lego brick building kicked to smithereens by a child. The east wing still had three floors and a gazebo, but there was only one intact window frame. Most of the roof joists were exposed, broken and twisted. Some were charred by fire.

‘Gee! I wish I still had my roofing company, kid. I coulda made a killing outta this.’

Any remaining structure in between was covered in ivy, moss or lichen, so that only the odd patch of red brick showed through. Miraculously, the grandiose stone entrance at the end of an overgrown gravel drive had survived; otherwise, the place would have been unidentifiable. Waldron squinted up at a coat of arms carved in bas-relief on the tympanum, intended either to impress or suppress anyone who entered under it.

‘Jesus! Is that all that’s left?’

He took out his *Peusner* and flipped through it feverishly. He stopped at a page marked with a yellow Post-it then peered as closely as he could. It was far too dark to read the blurb. He took out the tiny torch, clipped it onto his top pocket like a pen and shone it down. His hand was shaking so the beam was oscillating wildly. Billy moved closer so he could just make out a flickering full-page picture of the Hall before it was destroyed.

‘Yup ... was built by Watling Prenderville de Shirlington ... a gothic folly ... early Victorian times. Badly built ... Ha, get this! Says he was a notorious rake and gambler. Failed to pay the architect, so it was com-

pleted by journeymen from the north-east, cheap and shoddy. “Built-in obsolescence” we call it in the States.’

He went on and on mulling things over, referring to the book then rubbing his chin as he struggled to match the reality to the image. Billy stood nearby reeling in Twiggy. She was becoming more and more agitated. He was cold, bored and wanted to get away. Waldron tugged at his sleeve.

‘Jees! Will you look at that?’

The remaining walls were so unstable, warning signs had been posted at regular intervals. Some ruins have charm; this had graffiti. “DAZ O5” had been particularly active. Tesco carriers were snagged in brambles and little black bags of dog waste were dumped everywhere.

‘Don’t you guys ever pick up your litter?’

Deep skid marks criss-crossed the once pristine forecourt. There were heaps of blackened cans and the charred remains of rafters where bonfires had been lit.

‘What is this, the city garbage dump?’

‘The druggies hang out here,’ Billy said. ‘They get on our land, too.’

‘Druggies? You mean junkies? It’s like downtown Detroit. I didn’t think Ye Olde England was gonna be like this. Huh! I didn’t expect Buckingham Palace, but this ... sheesh! They’ve turned it into a worthless pile of crap!’

Waldron scanned around, squinting into the darkness to get some idea of the wider area. To the east, stark against the fading light, he could just see the last of a line of enormous six-bedroom houses. Herringbone drives and ranks of leylandii were advancing into the last few acres of green belt between the town of Shirlington and the village of Threapton. Waldron turned his attention to the encroaching estate.

‘Neat property. Shame about the setting. They been here long?’

‘Built about four years ago, just before I moved here. They couldn’t get past us, though.’ Billy smiled knowingly. ‘Grandad put his foot down.’

‘So I guess this must be your land between us right here and those houses?’

‘Yes. They tried to buy these 20 acres inbetween to build on. I think they wanted to put a road through and everything but he said no. It’s his best arable land and he grows special barley. It goes straight to a brewery.’

‘Does it now? Special barley and no middleman. He sounds like a man after my own heart. And is that your land there, too?’ Waldron

pointed towards the far corner of a ploughed field that disappeared behind the Hall.

‘Yeah. It goes all the way round to the back of your mansion, as far as the eye can see.’

‘So ya got me surrounded, huh?’ Wally raised his hands in mock surrender.

‘Nearly.’

Billy had never thought about things in those terms but indeed, over the years, as the Inghams prospered and the de Shirlingtons declined, this edge of Brandywell Farm had enveloped the hall like a giant amoeba.

‘And I guess that is yours, too, with the barbed wire round it?’

‘No, that’s the Norman thing. I pointed it out to you on the way past.’

‘Sure you did ... the Norman thing. And that belongs to?’

‘Erm ... the government, I suppose. Well, English Heritage.’

It was evident that the de Shirlington property was all but cut off from the world. Less than 16 acres of the once vast estate was left and that seemed to have attracted every nettle, thistle, dock and ragwort in the county.

Its only crop was fly-tipped rubbish, its only trees straggly willows hung with condoms and carriers. It was inaccessible to all but the criminals and vandals who used it as a private playground. In truth, the only intact part of the entire de Shirlington estate was the very oldest feature, the remains of the Norman moat – a broad ditch which surrounded an earth embankment. It sat 100 metres away from the ruins and about the same distance from the green way track. Barbed wire and an area of brackish water had afforded it a degree of protection. It was a scheduled monument and appeared on the OS map as a ring of tweaked lines. Hardly anyone visited it nowadays, although English Heritage had optimistically erected a new and informative Perspex sign in the hope they might. That had already been written over with a black marker by “DAZ O5”.

To Billy’s dismay, Waldron, despite his obvious discomfort, decided he had to investigate. He traced his steps back along the dray track until he came to a stile with a Public Footpath sign nailed onto it. Some distance beyond that was a metal pole with a brown Ancient Monument sign and an arrow pointing downwards. It had been bent double.

Billy followed some paces behind and stopped at the stile. Waldron struggled to climb over it, actually using his hand to grab his foot and plonk it on the top step. He hauled himself over, paused to wheeze and retch for a moment, then lumbered along the path. He seemed to take an age to arrive at the information display then proceeded to shout back in an embarrassing drawl that echoed across the fields.

‘Yup. Says here this is the last vestige of the original castle, built by Ranulfe de Sherlingeton on land given by William the Conqueror. That figures. No doubt his reward for lopping off a few Anglo-Saxon heads at Hastings, eh, Billy boy?’

Billy was in no mood for historical jokes. He was starting to hallucinate the crucial Heineken Cup results in his head.

‘And those Norman guys lived off the fat of the land ever since. See, I read the history books before I came over here. Yup, and they’ve lorded it for nigh on a thousand years over you poor suckers. Not bad for an afternoon’s work.’ He chortled to himself and turned to head back.

His figure grew bigger and bigger, his voice louder and louder, until he was back at the stile where Billy was leaning disconsolately. He clapped an arm around his shoulder to help him back over. Billy almost buckled under the weight, despite his robust prop frame.

‘Ya know, kid, I don’t know why people don’t find this history racket interesting. You guys take it for granted over here. All we got back in the States is Thanksgiving Day and Colonel friggin’ Custer, and he was a goddamned suicidal fool!’

He set off back towards the entrance, laughing uproariously. But he was still taking it all in, still referring to his book. After a few minutes he stopped, fell into contemplation, then checked back purposefully a few paces. He reached into a straggly bit of hedge, tore out a gnarled oak stake, knocked off a few snails and slugs then angled it across the rusty barbed wire that barred the main entrance. He delicately stepped sideways onto the stake to press it down, so that the wire was slowly compressed under his weight. For a large man it was a strangely elegant manoeuvre. Billy thought of a Laurel and Hardy film he’d seen in which Hardy managed to be both clumsy and graceful at the same time. Waldron stepped off at the other end and the stake sprang up. He carried on up the gravel path towards the remains of the front portico, muttering as he went. Once there, he fell into an awestruck silence.

'Yup, it's here, too, the famous ol' brand.'

The de Shirlington coat of arms had also been carved into a sandstone lintel over the doorway. It was badly eroded but just about decipherable. It showed three stars and one crescent in the four quarters of a shield. Above the shield were two charging creatures with tusks interlocked.

'There you are, my little beauties!'

'Wild boar?' Billy asked.

'You got it in one, kid. That's the de Shirlington crest all right! Two pigs fighting! And here's me a Cincinnati boy! Ha ha! Ain't that just the ticket?'

The joke was lost on Billy. The moon was an apparent reference to the melancholic, some say lunatic, streak that has long cursed the de Shirlington family. Waldron took out a tiny, personalised notebook with a stamped leather cover and proceeded to scribble some notes. When he attempted to check them, the end of his nose almost touched the paper. By now he was straining to see even with the torch.

'There's a fog coming down, Mr Shirlington.'

'On the contrary, my dear boy. I think the fog is clearing wonderfully.'

Billy didn't understand what he meant but was now desperate to get back home. He needed to get moving this second or he could forget the results. Twiggy was past the stage of protest. She was sinking into depression, yawning and crying at the same time. It produced an uncanny screech that echoed into the far distance. Feeling irresistibly guilty, Billy picked her up and lodged her under his arm.

'I'm sorry but I've just got to go, Mr Shirlington. She needs feeding.'

'Awe, your little doggy needs feeding.'

'Yes. Do you think you can find your own way back to the pub?'

'I kinda think so, kid. I had to find my way outta enough goddamned jungles. You jes' go ahead and do what ya gotta do. Don't you worry your pretty head about ol' Waldron de Shirlington.' His voice seemed far less friendly than when they had met. 'You got that cab number again? I can look around some while I wait.'

By the time Billy got home, Nan had already told Grandad about the fascinating man she had just met in the church and how he was going to come to tea.

'To tea? Here?'

Old John Ingham was wary of visitors. His home really was his castle and invites did not come cheaply. To add insult to injury, he had a particular distrust of Americans. His favourite uncle, Stanford Ingham, had been in the Derbyshire Yeomanry at the Battle of the Bulge. Uncle Stan always swore that the small but crucial part the British played had been airbrushed out of history because, 'In the aftermath, Field Marshall Montgomery "sneeped" Eisenhower.'

"Sneeped" equated to "sighted" in local parlance. History confirms that from that day on, Montgomery's star was in decline.

It seemed to have passed Old John by that, without the American intervention, we would all now be speaking a purer form of Teutonic! Anyway, he baulked at the American tourists who invaded his farm every summer solstice to see the Twelve Witches, the standing stones on the eastern fringe of his land. At least that only lasted a day. But then came the September festivities, when the New Threaptonians arrived en masse. They were the descendants of the 200 villagers who had set off with Pastor Ebenezer Youngman into the unknown and settled in New England. The parish council fawned on them shamelessly, held receptions, laid on guided tours, spent fortunes of council tax money on pamphlets and grants to the Youngman Foundation – then ignored the needs of their own residents, particularly the farmers who were falling like ninepins. Well, that's how a dyed-in-the-wool curmudgeon like Old John Ingham saw things.

'I reckon the best ones stayed,' he would say every September the sixth, so-called "New England Day", within earshot of any unsuspecting visitors.

He somehow fused all his niggling little grievances into one giant, irrational grievance, so that when Bush requested our help in Iraq, and Blair said we should stand "shoulder to shoulder", he agreed, 'As long as it's three years down the line and we charge them for it like they charged us.'

The thought of a de Shirlington coming from America to take tea with them made him bristle with indignation. There was enough history between the two families as it was, without importing new additions from abroad.

'Why can't he just go and see the library or the local history society? They love 'em, don't they? Why does he have to come here?'

‘How would you like to be a stranger in a foreign country?’

‘Foreign country? We’re turning into an American state. You only have to watch the news. Primary this and president that. Their elections get more coverage than ours do! I know more about Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama than I do about Gordon bloody Brown!’

‘John, this man is as English as me and you and very proud of it, too. Apart from that I’m a historian and it’s my moral duty to help him.’ Nan was starting to see herself as an ace genealogy sleuth. ‘I was given a project to do for the Youngman Foundation and I’ll see it through!’

‘Yes, and I wonder why Leonora Jesty got you to do all that gadding about, when it’s plain she knew all about him anyway.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, didn’t you say this de Shirlington bloke had been in touch with her and her conniving husband already, to sort out the situation?’

‘So what? We were all allocated a famous local family to research and I just happened to get the de Shirlington.’

But, to him, it still seemed suspicious.

‘She’s either getting you to do the donkey work or she wants us to get in with this Waldron Theopholus bloke, get us in the frame ... I don’t like the smell of this one bit. What’s he to us? What are those Jestys up to?’

As long as Billy had been living at Brandywell the grandparents had hardly had a cross word. Now, even Twiggy was sent cowering to her wicker basket as if the world was caving in.

‘Well, if he does have to come here I’ll be making sure I’m not around. Bloody yank. Bloody aristocracy. No good’ll come of this.’

Nan would usually give way, but this time she was adamant. History was her passion, genealogy her speciality. And here she was, in touch with one of the noblest families in the shire, perhaps a long-lost cousin that Jesty and Simpkin had been trying to trace these last fifteen years. It was a dream come true.

Yes, it did seem odd that Leonora might be behind the scenery pulling the strings, but that was no reason to make him unwelcome. Quite the reverse. She had met him independently. She should be helping him to find his feet.

‘He can pop round for a sandwich before Christmas and you will have to put up with it, John Ingham, whether you like it or not. I haven’t had proper company here for years, neither family nor friends. No one

dare set foot over the threshold these days. You won’t have the WI, you won’t have the parish council ... we may as well be hermits. A prisoner in Shirlington Gaol gets more visits than I do.’

At that, she stormed out of the kitchen and into the living room. A few moments later Billy could hear *Make Me a Channel of Your Peace* tinkling away on the sit-up-and-beg piano. She rarely played these days. She must be angry, Billy thought.

Old John slunk out to the yard then across to the milking parlour. He usually sang *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* as he worked. Tonight he was silent.