

TRICK OR TREAT

Elizabeth Shiplake hammered on the front door and jerked the wrought iron bell-pull one last time. No matter how hard she pulled she couldn't hear it ring. Either the bell didn't work or it was hung so far inside the ancient building as to be out of earshot. She was quite sure that she had found the right place, but in the dark, the manor house looked deserted. Perhaps he wasn't there after all? Anyway, she decided, pulling her raincoat tight round her waist and raising the collar round her neck, she wasn't going to spend any more time standing in the lashing rain in front of an empty house. She consulted her watch; her friends back in London would be changing into party frocks and fancy dress for Halloween while she was getting cold and wet in the middle of bloody nowhere.

'Do come in.'

While she had been hopping up and down, squinting against the spray, the door had silently opened inwards. The speaker was a powerfully built, middle-aged man wearing expensive tweeds. She recognised him at once.

'Please,' he insisted, with practised charm. 'You'll catch your death out there.'

'Thank you,' she said crossing the threshold. She took off her raincoat and followed the man down the hall and into a reception room lit only by candles and a roaring log fire. The dark, oak-panelled walls were hung with armour and hunting trophies; burgundy-coloured velvet drapes covered the windows. A bas-relief coat of arms featuring crossed swords surmounted by a phoenix decorated the chimneybreast.

'I'm having a whisky,' said the man. 'Would you like one?'

'I presume you are...' she began.

'Jocelyn Kingswood.'

'Elizabeth Shiplake,' she replied, proffering her hand.

'What brings you here, Elizabeth?' he asked, placing a tumbler of whisky in her hand instead of shaking it.

'I was hoping to interview you.'

Her host swigged his whisky before answering. 'Let me guess, you've heard about my little run-in with the pension regulator and you are wondering what I intend to do about those poor souls whose life savings I have allegedly ransacked?'

'Something like that, Mr Kingswood.'

'If we are going to be formal, Miss Shiplake, you can call me Sir Jocelyn.'

'In that case, Sir Jocelyn, it's Doctor Shiplake.'

'You're not a medical doctor?'

Elizabeth shook her head. 'PhD in Mediaeval History'

'So, you are a historian,' said Kingswood.

'Freelance journalist. I didn't fancy being an academic.'

'Bit of a waste, all those years of study?'

'You'd be surprised Sir Jocelyn. Studying history is rather like being a detective: limited source material; thorough investigation; weighing the evidence; and coming to a well-argued conclusion. How do you think I found you here?'

'I don't know, Miss Shiplake. While I'm lying low here, most of your lot are chasing around, looking for me in Monaco.'

'Because where you are domiciled for tax purposes is the obvious place to look. They are following the new money.'

'But not you.'

'I'm following the old money. You've cultivated a rags-to-riches persona, but it only took me a few days in the British Library to discover that your ancestors have owned this house for centuries.'

'Well, I can't deny that you've found me,' said Kingswood, sipping his whisky. He raised his glass to his visitor. 'Highland Park. Special Reserve. Do you like it?'

'It's very good, thank you. But I'd rather talk about you.'

'Not about the pension fund business?'

'It's the human story, I'm interested in. Your story.'

'I suppose it might pass the time. Very well, you can interview me. But no notes and no recordings. Give me your phone.'

'I'll turn it off.'

'No phone, no interview. I'll give it back to you afterwards.'

'Can I quote you from memory?'

'You can say what you like, my dear. I will deny ever having met you. If you choose to persist, remember that I have a pack of very expensive lawyers at my beck and call.' Kingswood checked that Elizabeth's phone was turned off, placed it on a side-table, and leaned back in his armchair. 'Fire away.'

Elizabeth sat upright on the edge of her armchair. 'I'll get straight to the point, Sir Jocelyn, how could you bring yourself to misappropriate funds that your loyal employees were relying on to support their families when they retired?'

'Misappropriation is a very strong word, Miss Shiplake. My lawyers will have a field day if you print it. As for my employees, I have deeper loyalties than they will ever know.'

'To whom?'

'To my family, of course, and to others you wouldn't understand.'

'We all have families,' said Elizabeth.

'Joselin du Bois came to England with William the Conqueror. We have been nobles for over a thousand years; we fought in the Crusades. What's your name... Shiplake? Peasants, all of them. Do you know what it means? Sheep Wash.'

'As a matter of fact, I'm well aware of my Saxon origins, and proud of them. Why did the du Bois family change their name to Kingswood?'

'By the time James I was selling titles, it suited us to pass as English.'

'Why a mere baronetcy, not a dukedom or an earldom?'

'Dukes and Earls are too much in the public eye. We prefer to keep our heads down and look after our own.'

'How does a family like yours thrive for so many years?'

'The secret is scruples.'

'Scruples!'

‘Not having any. At least so far as family is concerned. Amass wealth whenever you can; use it for whatever brings you advantage. Over the centuries, families like mine have extorted, pillaged and plundered our way to fortunes.’

‘Not much has changed, has it?’

‘The City of London is a thieves’ kitchen, my dear. It’s made for my people to do what we’ve always done best: get rich at your peoples’ expense. Never forget that loyalty is the highest, the only virtue.’

‘Loyalty to one’s family and to others that I wouldn’t understand, apparently.’

‘I could show you, but you might not like what you see.’

‘Show me, I’ll risk it,’ Elizabeth taunted.

‘If you insist,’ Kingswood shrugged. He walked over to a bookcase full of leather-bound volumes, pressed three seemingly random books in sequence and swung open a secret door. Holding a candelabrum in front of him, he stepped through. ‘Mind your footing, the steps are very old and worn.’

Elizabeth picked up the two glasses and the bottle of whisky and followed him down the stairs and along a stone passageway leading to a massive studded door. Kingswood raised the candelabrum above his head to cast its flickering light on an engraved stone panel above the door.

Fraternitatem Diligite

Deum timeate

Regem honorificate

‘This is what it’s all about,’ he said. ‘Shall I translate for you?’

‘There’s no need. I studied Mediaeval History, remember? *Love the Brotherhood; Fear God; Honour the King*. First Epistle of Saint Peter, Chapter Two, Verse 17 if I recall my Vulgate Bible?’

‘Saint Peter was very keen that Christianity shouldn’t give the lower orders ideas above their station,’ said Kingswood, lowering the candelabrum. ‘The Brotherhood has existed for a very long time.’ He turned the ancient quatrefoil key in the lock and turned the handle of the door, which opened easily on well-oiled hinges. He entered the room and placed the candelabrum on a large circular table. ‘You will be the first woman who has ever sat at this table,’ he said, ‘and quite possibly the last.’

Elizabeth topped up both whisky glasses, pushed one across the table to Kingswood and put the bottle down in front of her. ‘Knights of the Round Table, eh?’

‘Not that Arthurian nonsense. The Brotherhood has met here since William granted my family this lordship in 1067. This is the oldest part of the house, unchanged since it was first built. Hence, no electricity and – useful in this day and age – absolutely no phone signal.’

‘And who is in this Brotherhood, as if I couldn’t guess.’

‘Membership is reserved exclusively for the eldest sons of the families descended from the Seigneurs who fought alongside William of Normandy at the Battle of Hastings. We are, as you might imagine, a select group: Osberns, Malets, Giffards, Warenes, Montforts, d’Auffrays, Nogents and others of that ilk. Over the years, most have Anglicised their names to avoid unwelcome

attention, but you get the idea. The fate and fortunes of this nation have been decided around this table for a thousand years.'

'Really? How many of you are left?'

'Fewer than there once were, but still enough.'

'How often do you meet?'

'Once a year.'

'Let me guess. You last met about two weeks ago on 14 October?'

'Not too difficult for a Mediaevalist to deduce. We always celebrate the day of our glorious victory over Harold the Pretender at Hastings. We make alliances, share intelligence, and manipulate the levers of power to our own advantage. You might call us outlaws: modern day Robin Hoods.'

'Except you take money from the poor and keep it for yourselves.'

'Just so.'

'Why are you telling me all this?'

'Because it amuses me to see the expression on your face, and because you will never tell anyone else.'

'How can you be so sure? Your lawyers might try to gag me, but a story this big won't go away. Word will get out and other journalists will start checking up on you and your cronies.'

'I imagine they might, which is why, when it no longer amuses me to see the expression on your face, I will kill you.'

'Is that some kind of bad joke, Mister Kingswood?'

'I never joke,' he replied. 'And it's Sir Jocelyn to you.'

‘Under the circumstances, I think I’ll call you whatever I choose. How do you intend to kill me, Mister Kingswood?’

‘The house has been shut up for the winter; this room is deep underground, it has no windows and only one door. No-one outside the Brotherhood knows of its existence and we won’t be meeting again until 14 October, next year. I shall lock you in here and leave you to scream and rip at the door with your fingernails until you die. A suitable ending for a nosey parker on Halloween, wouldn’t you say?’

Elizabeth leaned forward, arms on the table. ‘Let me give you three reasons why that’s never going to happen.’

Kingswood snorted derisively. ‘Go ahead, amaze me. Apart from the fact that I’m twice your size, I could hardly miss you from this distance.’ He pulled a pistol from his pocket and laid it on the table in front of him.’

‘The first reason is that you may be twice my size but I bet I’m twice as quick; the second is that you have no idea who I really am; and the third is this very fine bottle of Highland Park, Special Reserve Whisky.’

‘What’s the whisky got to do with it?’

‘This,’ said Elizabeth. She took a mouthful from the glass in front of her and sprayed it explosively through the candle flames directly into Kingswood’s face. The fine mist of cask strength, 55% proof alcohol ignited instantly, setting her would-be captor’s hair on fire; at the same time the force of her breath blew out the candles. As Kingswood beat frantically at his hair, Elizabeth ran out of the door, closed it behind her, turned the key in the lock and removed it.

She stood outside for a while listening to the bellows of pain escaping through the keyhole. When they subsided, she yelled back, 'Think about this as you are waiting to die, you arrogant Norman bastard. Tonight, you were bested by a Saxon: Elizabeth Godwinson Shiplake, descendent of Harold Godwinson, rightful King of England.'

As she felt her way back up the stairs, she was followed by the sound of frantic hammering on the door below and muffled cries of 'Let me out. Let me out.' Elizabeth closed the secret door in the bookcase, retrieved her mobile phone, walked briskly through the hall, and out of the front door to her car. Half way down the mile-long drive, she wound down the window and threw the key to the hidden chamber into the trees. Closing the window, she accelerated down the drive. With a bit of luck, she might still be in time for the party.

She slid a CD into the stereo and hit play. Blondie's *One Way or Another* belted out through the speakers. Nothing like a bit of Debbie Harry to celebrate a kill, she thought, as she sang along to the chorus.

One way or another, I'm gonna find ya

I'm gonna getcha, getcha, getcha, getcha

One way or another, I'm gonna win ya

I'm gonna getcha, getcha, getcha, getcha