

Threads of Life

Chapter 1

The first full moon of the new year shone down on Wainbridge's frosty streets, sparkling off the medieval houses' gabled roofs and on to the old cobbled lanes around the abbey and the market place.

In the spacious drawing room of number 5, Riverside Terrace, lamps were lit and the apple logs burning in the hearth were giving out a welcoming blaze.

Already feeling too warm in her cashmere twinset Laura Thurvaston twitched aside the thick velvet curtains and looked down on to the moonlit street. A feeling of gratification filled her self-centred soul as she saw several people, well wrapped up against the cold, making their way towards the house.

It was good of dear Sylvia Coombes to hold the inaugural meeting in her lovely home; much more convivial and exclusive than one of the impersonal meeting rooms attached to the abbey. On any other occasion the simplicity and style of this elegant eighteenth century townhouse would have filled Laura with envy, but tonight she was sufficiently puffed up with her own importance for it not to matter. After tonight the 'Thurvaston Heritage Tapestry' would be up and running.

At three minutes past eight Laura counted seventeen heads and rang a little silver bell to begin her meeting.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please, I think we’d better make a start. Thank you, Sylvia, for allowing us into your home, and to all of you for braving the cold and coming along to this first meeting about... the Wainbridge Heritage Tapestry.’ She gave the assembled group what she hoped was her best and most sincere smile. ‘I’ve been simply overwhelmed by the interest and enthusiasm already shown. The time for talking is over; we now need to proceed with a plan of action.’

‘Which, I expect, will involve a lot more talking.’ A ripple of laughter followed the rector’s interjection.

‘Canon Ednastone, always the joker, but you all know what I mean.’ Laura allowed herself a gracious smile of amusement before resuming. She needed to keep the rector on her side as she intended to utilise all the resources and facilities he and the abbey could provide. ‘Of course there will still be an awful lot to discuss but I hope that after this evening we will have made some positive steps forward.’ Laura glanced at her notes but before she could continue there was a ring on the doorbell.

‘So sorry I’m late.’ Miriam Pearson, aware that all eyes were on her, struggling out of her navy overcoat as she sidled into the room and sat on the nearest empty chair.

Laura chose to ignore this interruption, carrying on as if nothing had happened.

‘Now, I’m going to ask Dr Hugh Bromley, Wainbridge’s heritage director and archivist, to say a few words on the historical background of the town and to give us a brief outline on what we should include in our tapestry.’

As Hugh rose to his feet the doorbell rang again.

Once more everyone turned to see who the latecomers were. Laura’s ‘tut’ of annoyance was

clearly audible as her mother, Vi Wright, and her daughter, Cassandra entered the room, their cheeks glowing pink from the cold, closely followed by that interfering do-gooder, Hetty Baker.

This time Laura could barely contain her annoyance. 'For heaven's sake, this is so inconsiderate; you are twelve minutes late. I made it very clear on the leaflets: seven forty-five for eight o'clock.'

'Sorry, Mum,' said Cass, unwinding a brightly striped scarf from around her neck, 'But Dad was late coming round to babysit.'

The latecomers settled down, and without any further preamble Hugh Bromley began to outline the historical time-span they should attempt to cover in the tapestry.

'For a small market town Wainbridge has a particularly rich historical background. We all are so familiar with our surroundings we forget what a momentous past our town has had. There's Sir Hubert D'Acre's gift of Saint Filbert's relics to the abbey, making Wainbridge an important pilgrimage centre, the market charter granted by King John, Henry VIII's interest in the rebuilding of the abbey's nave and, although outside Wainbridge, Charles II's visit to Wainford Hall; and, of course, Queen Victoria's visit as part of the 1894 royal progression.' Hugh paused and looked around the room to see if his audience was with him. Noticing several heads nodding in agreement, he proceeded.

'Our homes and places of work are an equally significant part of our heritage. Some of your houses were once part of the abbey's buildings and some of you, like Mrs. Pritchard and Councillor and Mrs. Doleman, live or work in the timbered buildings in the lanes and courtyards surrounding the Market Place. Even the houses built after the railway arrived add to our historical legacy, as do the tales and anecdotes which are part of your own family histories.'

‘You mean when my great-great-grandfather was gored by an escaped bull one market day?’ a strong, strident voice called out.

‘That’s exactly what I mean. Look back through your family albums, letters and newspaper cuttings. As you know, Laura’s inspiration for the tapestry came from her grandmother’s meticulously-kept scrapbooks.’

Laura tried her best not to look smug but didn’t quite succeed.

‘I can determine the chronology and, of course, help with the research,’ continued Hugh, ‘but I think the tapestry would be a much more valuable project if the people of Wainbridge decided amongst themselves what was to be included.’

A murmur of voices greeted this, most in agreement.

‘But before we get encumbered with historical details, I think you need to consider practical matters, such as the design and the medium for its execution. Laura, I think you’ve made some enquiries?’

‘I have been in contact with two other organisations that have accomplished similar projects. Both have invited us to visit them.’

‘There’s a wonderful Quaker Tapestry in Kendal,’ murmured Sylvia Coombes to no one in particular.

Once more a voice rang out. ‘We could visit the D-Day Overlord Tapestry in Southsea. That really is an inspiring piece of work.’

‘Why not go the whole hog and pop over to France and see the Bayeux Tapestry?’ was another suggestion.

‘Good idea, and we could have a jolly good lunch and stock up on cheap booze as well,’ chipped in the rector.

Laura rang the little bell again; she didn’t like the way the meeting was going. ‘I’m sure

we'll be able to arrange one or more of these visits. Now we must get on.' She glanced at her notes. 'I envisage this tapestry to be for the people of Wainbridge and therefore it must be made by the people of Wainbridge. We should endeavour to keep a high profile and be seen to be actually stitching it. This will help to keep enthusiasm and interest alive and provide an excellent opportunity to raise funds for the enterprise.'

'I propose that we work on the tapestry at least twice during the week and at weekends; preferably in a public place. Hugh has agreed to let us have space in the museum and we'll be able to stitch in the library and I hope we can use the abbey's facilities?' Laura glanced at the rector who nodded his agreement.

'Are members of the public going to be allowed to work on the tapestry or is it just going to be the chosen few?' Marigold Ednastone's voice was as clear as her husband's pulpit tones.

'I envisage that the public will be invited to work on the tapestry but their stitching will be closely supervised,' Laura informed her audience. 'There will have to be some ground rules which we must all observe; for instance everyone must wash their hands before working on the tapestry, and, naturally, there won't be smoking anywhere near it.'

'There had better be a ban on food and drinks,' someone called out. 'It would be a disaster if tea or coffee were spilt or if choccy biscuits were smeared on it.'

'We could leave baskets out for donations,' was another suggestion. 'If we stitched at major events in the town and people knew what we were doing and why, we could raise quite a lot.'

'Well, ladies and gentlemen, you can see how organised we already are.' Laura glanced at her watch. 'Maybe we should break now for some refreshments. During coffee I'd like you to consider who might be on our committee and who will design the tapestry. If at all possible we should use someone local.'

Sylvia hurried down the stairs to the basement kitchen, followed by Marigold, Hetty, and

Cass.

Laura summarily dismissed the host of eager questions from prospective stitchers and made a beeline towards Hugh who was in deep discussion with the rector and his wife.

‘Why did you have to bring in Wainford Hall?’ she demanded. ‘The project must be centred on Wainbridge.’

‘Laura, we have to include Wainford,’ Marigold Ednastone intervened. ‘The hall and the Dacre family are an essential part of the town’s history.’

‘Marigold is right, Laura. We’d lose the reason why Wainbridge and the abbey became so rich and important if we left out Wainford and the Dacres. I’ve got access to the Dacre papers so there’s no problem in getting the historical facts accurate for the tapestry.’

Laura smiled wanly. ‘Well, if you are sure, Hugh, we’ll include Wainford.’

Later that night Laura smiled at the triple images of herself reflected in her dressing table mirrors. The meeting had been a success, she thought, as she massaged her special moisturising cream into her face and neck; there was plenty of interest and enthusiasm and she’d got, more or less, the committee she wanted:

Sylvia Coombes would be an asset, she decided, as she smoothed her lower jaw with firm upward strokes; her City and Guilds background was bound to come in useful and there would be room to store all their stuff in her house, which was an added bonus. A slight frown crossed Laura’s brow; Sylvia’s snooty daughter, Antonia, hadn’t seemed too pleased about that. All those questions about how long the project was going to take had become very tedious.

Miriam Pearson had won prizes for her needlework in local craft shows so, like Sylvia, she’d be a real asset. Laura had been surprised when her mother had proposed Liz and

Jonathan Knight for the committee. She could see the point in including Jonathan; after all he was in banking and they would need a competent treasurer. Liz had been to art college but she was a kitchen designer, for heaven's sake. What earthly use would that be? But Liz seemed keen to be involved and, she supposed, her technical skills could be useful.

She wasn't at all happy about the suggestion of asking the art students at the sixth form college to help them design the tapestry. She'd find a way out of that, she decided as she brushed her carefully coloured wavy hair exactly one hundred strokes. Much better for everyone concerned if they had a professional designer. What had the rector said? Something about it being a real community project; sounded as if Freddie was thinking of sound bites for one of his sermons.

She was in bed, flicking through *Country Life*, when her husband entered from his dressing room. Robert Thurvaston, although recently retired, was still in his prime. He'd enjoyed babysitting his granddaughter. Maisie had persuaded him to read her three stories before he'd been able to settle down to watch the football, as well as having a bit of a snooze. Now, after his bath, Robert felt refreshed and invigorated.

Laura sighed and dropped the magazine on the floor. She recognised that look on Robert's face. But, on the other hand, she too felt pleased with the evening's result.

Robert was rather surprised when his tentative overtures were returned by a willing and receptive Laura rather than the cold shoulder he anticipated.