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PROLOGUE

Excerpt from The Rough and Ready Travel Guide to Rural Britain, 2018 edition

‘Everybody calls it the Crooked Church. Each map and tourist leaflet, every walking route and history guide. Local villagers and passing cyclists never use its proper name, St Bart’s. They say, “Ah . . . you’ll be wanting the Crooked Church of Chervil village.” It’s been described that way for a hundred years. As soon as I arrived I saw why, because it really is one of the most physically wonky places of worship in Britain. Even more pronounced than the twisted spire of Sheffield Cathedral.

‘Records say it happened in December 1886, when a coal-mining company misread their underground maps. Some fella told another fella the wrong way to dig and – boom! – the ground began to sink up top. Nobody noticed at first, though a farmer did say his land felt a bit more hilly than usual. A week later, the choir at St Bart’s was suddenly showered with what looked like snow. True, it was Christmas Eve, but what actually poured on its members was powdered stone from the ceiling of the chancel – the section of the church where the Communion services are served.

Then the head of an angel statue fell clean off and plummeted with a loud, downwards whistle. They say it smashed off the altar, exploding into bits. Parishioners ran for their lives, screaming of world's end.

'It wasn't the apocalypse, just a bit of subsidence, but the congregation didn't know that. They gathered behind the long, drystone wall (which, to this day, still runs along the dirt road by the church). Horrified, they watched the west-end chancel, and two sycamore trees, slowly sink into what everybody assumed was going to be the groaning pits of hell. Yet the only part of the church that really dropped was the chancel. It sank a full six inches – with a groan “that sounded like the Devil himself” – then all was still.

'Nobody was hurt, thankfully, and a posse of brave (and superstitious) locals spent their late Christmas Eve frantically putting girders up inside. By early January the chancel was fully reinforced and the crevice below filled in. Somebody from the Missenden Mining company got fired, services began again – though it's said those early congregations prayed with one eye shut and another on the stone saints and apostles above them, whose heads looked heavier than ever.

'The church has stood with this quirky slope to it ever since. In 1901, Rev. Gerald Cartwright even immortalised the name in metal. With an eye to tourism, he had a huge wrought iron sign bolted over the entrance porch saying WELCOME TO THE CROOKED CHURCH. The sign, which still remains, has brought the church to the attention of the world.

'In late 2018, St Bart's found an unlikely surge of infamy when photographs of it became an Internet meme (a repeated and adapted image shared worldwide). The odd shape and entrance sign has become a social media shorthand for critics of the so-called “crooked” church in general. Made from stone, in typical seventeenth-century

style, today's visitors will find a modest but reasonably beguiling place of worship. Yet its bizarre shape and backstory, along with the current social media fame, make the Crooked Church a unique diversion on any cycle or drive through the Chiltern Hills.'

CHAPTER ONE

Reverend David East stood on the frosty gravel path to his church, watching his house across the dirt road. The tall trees of the vicarage swayed and rattled and a few beads of melting ice dripped from the gutters, but there was no movement from Micah's room. His black curtains were closed . . . again. No sign of him at breakfast. Again.

He plunged each chilly hand into the pockets of his tatty brown coat and started to pray, 'Father, would you . . . ?'

He paused because someone was whistling, filling the air with a chipper, happy tune.

He looked up and felt the first genuine smile of the day.

It was Miriam Aimes coming along the farm road, with her backpack tightly strapped to both shoulders. A decade younger than him – mid to late forties, he reckoned – she always seemed to bounce to church. Like a stage-school kid on the first day of rehearsals. God, he loved her enthusiasm. Even Micah said she was 'cool' once. Hearing his mouth form a positive word about another Christian felt like a genuine, unequivocal miracle.

When she saw him waving at her a massive smile lifted her rosy cheeks, but the sunlight was fierce, so she slipped her huge, curved sunglasses on. He watched her springing up the gravel path and was happy to log a guilt-free, godly thought. Miriam wasn't just the youngest and most recent parishioner to join his congregation – she really was, by a country-mile, the prettiest.

'How about this weather, Dave?' She sidled up to him, blonde curls bouncing under her bobble hat. 'Is it crazy, or is it *crazy*? Snow one day, storms the next.'

'And blazing hot sun in between. It's all over the place,' he nodded. 'Forecasters on the radio are baffled.'

'Maybe God's planning something. Something wonderful.'

'Maybe . . . you always see the good side.' He saw his own face beaming back from her sunglasses. What little hair he had spun wild and high in the breeze. When he palmed it down, it shot straight back up in a new gust. They both laughed, but his eyes soon drifted back to Micah's bedroom. He sighed. 'So tell me this, Miriam. How do you get teenagers to see the good side of church? How do you show them it's not crooked?'

'Easy,' she said. 'You love them. Don't be his vicar . . . and don't be his dad. Be his friend . . .'

'Simple as that, ey?'

She saw his eyes flicker. 'Micah will come back, you know.'

'And how can you be so sure?'

'Because Jesus always seeks the forgotten. And he always finds them too . . . never forget that, Dave.'

His smile was back. 'Miriam, my dear' – he opened his palm to the path – 'your faith is contagious. Shall we?'

They turned towards the bent silhouette of St Bart's, where a fat, fierce sun sat skewered on the steeple. He saw that blasted iron sign too, bolted over the entrance. WELCOME TO THE CROOKED CHURCH. He shook his head at it and started walking down the path, lined

with gravestones facing in. The long-dead gang, welcoming him to work. Once inside, the warmth from the church radiators hit and they both sighed, but when he closed the door, Miriam froze.

‘David,’ she said. ‘Look.’

He turned and saw something he hadn’t seen for twelve months. Something astonishing. It was Micah, in his usual black combats and top, in the sunken chancel, crossed-legged on the floor. He was on the other side of the Communion rail, sitting in front of the altar. He was staring up at a stained-glass Jesus, dying colourfully on the cross.

David put a hand on his chest, and whispered, ‘Oh, my.’

‘See? Now, go to him.’

His shoes clicked a bright rhythm on the stone floor as he headed up the aisle, and he felt that familiar – yet always strange – pressure in his knees as he moved down the six-inch slope to the sunken chancel. Micah sat in a perfect rectangle of multicoloured light.

Don’t be too jolly, he hates that, but don’t be all deadpan either. He’ll think you’re grumpy about som—

‘Heeeey, son!’ It came out like Barney the Dinosaur. All finger pistols. He dialled it down. ‘I thought you were still in bed.’

Micah mumbled like always.

‘Sorry, son. Didn’t catch that.’

‘I said, I’ve been over here a while.’

‘You have? Well that’s a-okay with me.’ He pushed through the little gate in the Communion rail and plonked himself down. They both sat cross-legged, looking up at Jesus. He was painfully conscious (‘painfully’ really was the right word) that they used to do this together each Sunday morning. He first started the pastorate here ten years back. Micah was six back then, and they’d sit here and pray for the service each week, while Zara hovered back at the vicarage, clearing up the breakfast bowls and gathering flowers for the altar. The idea of them sitting here like this, after

such a long time, made him want to burst into laughter and tears simultaneously, but then David's nostrils started to twitch. There was a dank smell coming from nearby. From Micah, perhaps? Possibly. Actually, make that probably. The kid wasn't much of a fan of the shower these days.

David tried to catch his eye, but only saw a profile of hair. He often wore it across his cheeks, to hide the acne. Poor boy. He was ravaged with it. 'So . . . um . . . what prompted you to come today?'

Micah shrugged.

'Did you come to pray, maybe?'

'To think.'

'Well it's the perfect place for that. Remember how we used to sit here and talk to God?'

Micah nodded, and David's heart tingled.

He leant in and whispered, 'Would you like to stay for the service, son? Absolutely no pressure.'

There was a long, ticking pause, and David watched for the usual shake of the head. He prepped his well-rehearsed broken-hearted response of 'fair enough. Maybe some other time'. After a year of saying that phrase, he'd become an expert at faking understanding, while being broken-hearted. But something else happened that made him gulp. A bona fide answer to prayer. The mass of hair nodded.

'Well, Micah, that just about makes my day. Heck . . . my week.' He really wanted to say 'year', but instead he put his hand on Micah's shoulder. The curve of black jerked away from his fingertips. Like a spasm.

'Son? Is everything okay?'

The hair shook out a nod, but the face didn't turn. No surprise there, either. Micah didn't like looking people in the eye these days, especially his dad's. Just something acne-ridden teenagers do, he supposed.

‘Well, if you ever need to talk . . . I’m here. But do you mind stepping back from the altar and grabbing a pew? People are arriving and we need to set up for the Eucharist.’

Micah sighed and pushed himself up. ‘Fine.’

David stood to light a few candles and called out a happy hello to the organist, who was now settling onto his stool. Mighty power chords filled the church with wondrous sound.

‘Goodness.’ David checked his watch. ‘Ten minutes, folks.’

Micah sat in a pew with his head down, reading a leaflet over and over while David grabbed his bag and headed for the vestry, trying not to whistle. He was going so fast that he collided with Gwen Skeggs. She was waiting for him at the door. Her face was white.

‘Gwen? What’s wrong?’

She twisted a handkerchief around one bony finger. ‘Can we talk, David?’

‘Erm . . . we’re about to start. Could it wait till after?’

Shiny dentures pressed into a grey bottom lip.

He slid his hands over hers. ‘Course we can talk. How about you come into the vestry? The rest of them can wait a few minutes.’ He touched the door handle. ‘And guess what? Micah’s in church, praise God.’

She sucked in a breath and seemed to stagger back. One hand grabbed the door frame.

‘Gwen, love. Whatever’s the matter?’

She tugged her jumper into place, ‘We’ll talk later, then. After the service.’

‘Why look, you’re trembling.’

‘Later.’

‘But . . .’ David called out after her. ‘You’ll be first on my list, Gwen, okay? Top of the pile!’

He said a quick prayer, knowing what it was. Her wayward son Kyle was probably in debt again. He’d seek her out at the end

and pour her a good strong tea, just how she liked it. But for now, he wasn't going to let his jolly mood dissolve. In the vestry, he pulled on his white surplice-robe and black tippet (the long piece of material that Micah used to call his holy scarf). Then he did his usual quick stare at the photograph on his desk. The one where all three of them were on Skegness beach. Him and Zara with a ten-year-old Micah, flashing teeth and smiles between them. This was from before Zara cut her black hair short. Before she hacked it off in a rage. He'd always liked how it flowed around her shoulders. He kissed his fingertip and tapped it gently against her windswept cheek. 'And Jesus . . .' he prayed, 'find her too, and bring her home. Soften her heart.'

The vestry door rattled open.

'Vicar?' the church secretary nodded.

'Victor?' he nodded back.

'Showtime.'

David flattened his robe down and went to the door. 'God's going to move today, Vic. I can feel it.'

He pretty much glided up the pulpit steps and he threw out his usual opening line like a birthday ribbon. 'Welcome, one and all, to this morning's service of praise and . . .' he paused, 'celebration.'

Micah was gone.

David saw the empty space in the pew, just as he said the word 'praise'. So the jolly tone of his sentence drooped at the end, in a sound wave shaped exactly like this crooked building. His autopilot minister voice kicked in, saying generic things about God being great as they all shared the peace, but his eyes sprang like a lizard from pew to pew, from corner to doorway. He couldn't see Micah anywhere.

Back in position he thought he heard a movement in the chancel behind him. But when he turned he saw nothing but the headless stone angel high up in the rafters. The slice of her neck looked

ragged and sharp. He thought of Christmas Eve just gone. How he'd willed that angel to fall again, as he sat in here alone. Two weeks after the new, short-haired Zara had finally walked out. He'd laid back on the altar and willed that stone body to drop and smack his head right open. Demanded God do it, until he shook off his selfishness and knew it wasn't to be.

He drifted through the prayers and the homily on auto-pilot. Then, eventually, he heard his own voice announce the Eucharist and he clumped down the creaky pulpit steps. Miriam looked up from her service book and mouthed the words 'are you okay?' He dearly wanted to say no, but he'd rather not cry in front of everybody. Nobody would want that. So, he just threw her a happy, dead-eyed smile. He headed down the slope to the chancel and noticed the sun had changed. The stained glass threw no more light on the floor.

He stood behind the altar: a wooden table now covered in a brilliant-white tablecloth. This was the exact spot the angel's head had smashed into pieces two centuries ago – you could still see the marks in the wood. The exact spot of his suicide prayer a few weeks ago. When he'd lain on his back and begged for God to kill him for Christmas, not long after the last happy parishioners had left midnight Mass.

Focus, he told himself. Even if your family don't need you any more, this congregation do.

He opened his arms and that rank smell flooded his nostrils again. Like somebody turning on a switch. How odd. It smelt like a public toilet. Which suddenly made him feel spiritually oppressed. Like something ungodly was prowling. A cold shadow blew him a kiss.

Welcome to the Crooked Church, with its selfish, broken, piss-poor priest.

He blinked and announced a hymn – 'Eternal Father Strong to Save' – and the hefty organ kicked in. Only now it sounded louder and far less pleasant than before. These were chords straight

from a horror movie. The Phantom of the Opera sat in the organ loft now, springing his hands wildly off the keys, while David's mind played old, silent-movie memories of Zara, weeping in the bathroom and hacking off her hair. 'You don't care about us,' the flickering title card said, as she stood wide-eyed at the blackening sink, 'we get the dregs . . .'

He blinked her image away and turned around to the stained-glass Jesus, up on his cross. He raised the silver goblet of wine. 'The Blood of Christ,' he said, projecting it to the universe and to any dark force that was pressing in on him now. Because something was pressing in on him. Not so much the presence of something, but more like the absence of something. He could feel the absence of God. Which was the exact moment he noticed the back corner. The strange bulge in the long curtain he'd asked the church to add, years back, because he liked the orthodox style. There was a lump in it.

Nobody else seemed to notice. They were too busy pushing their old groaning bodies up from the pews and hobbling down the sloping aisle. They were lining up and singing and kneeling at the rail, with the audible creak and crunch and crack of old bones. But their heads were bowed and their hands were out and most importantly their eyes were closed. Tongues were set to loll out and flick a gluten-free Jesus back in.

David was the only one with his eyes wide open. He saw that bulge shift a little, just a few feet from where he stood.

A Micah-sized lump.

He thought, *Wow, there he is and this is good . . . he's listening after all.* Then he felt confused and embarrassed because Micah really shouldn't be on this side of the rail. He should be with the others, kneeling. Not lurking behind a curtain, which was just plain weird, acne or not. The hymn ended and somewhere behind him, someone made a very deliberate, get-on-with-it cough. He turned

back to the congregation and in the silence, he opened his hands across the altar. A magician, setting up his most famous trick. He read the usual passage from Corinthians 1, then said, 'For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim . . .'

He saw the shadow just then.

A puddle of very cold greyness spilled onto the white tablecloth in front of him. Since all eyes remained closed, nobody really saw what that shadow was, but David did.

' . . . the Lord's death until he comes again . . .' He turned his head to see Micah, who was standing in the strangest of stances. He had both hands behind his back. All solemn, like a funeral pose. His eyes were lost behind that mass of straggled hair that the old ladies always told him to cut. It was worse than ever right now, because he'd deliberately dragged and raked it not just over his spotty cheeks, but right across his entire face. It looked so damn ridiculous and immature. So savage. The hair was wet, maybe from tears, but who was he kidding? It was probably sweat. And that stink, dear Lord, that public toilet stench. The church seemed to be growing darker.

People were noticing now. Eyes were opening. He heard confused mumbling behind him.

'Micah,' David whispered, quite firmly. 'I'm sorry, but you shouldn't be on this side.'

Micah said, '*Eloi, Eloi, lama kataltani.*'

It was such a bizarre thing to say that David's brain was too busy processing it to see Micah's arms move. But then he noticed that Micah was holding something very long. It looked like a thick table leg, with a wedge on the end. Something big, and heavy and rusty-looking.

David was so disorientated by this. The table leg. The wedge. The swinging of it up, so that it was really only when he felt the impact against the side of his head that things became—

Thud.

He spun around like a dancer towards the others then fell into the altar. He hit it so heavily that it almost tipped over. Both hands slapped the white cloth, fingers splayed, crunching the white sheet into a ripple of thick folds. He thought, *my son just bloody well punched me in front of the entire—*

Then someone screamed.

The Communion wine had tipped over. It was gushing across the cloth, and he was furious that it might stain. Until he saw how the silver goblet stood untouched, full of red wine. He felt a fast, warm trickle fill his ear and he started to blink rapidly. Wails of horror shot from the crowd at the second impact. Something sharp cracked into the back of his skull. That was when the world truly exploded into pain. His scalp went warm and wet. His head felt way heavier, because it now carried extra weight. He let out a hideous grunt and it made people gasp. Then his head yanked and felt lighter again.

‘Son . . .’ He turned his head and was terrified to hear his own voice was no longer clear and well projected. His Bible college tutor had always taught him – *you must always speak to the back row!* Now his voice was gurgling and bubbling saying, ‘Son . . . Son . . . no . . .’

‘Please, Dad . . .’ Micah said. ‘Don’t look in my eyes.’

David held up his hands in defence, so Micah swung for those too. He missed, and David heard the *thwoop* of wood and metal slicing the air. Miriam, and a few of the others, had finally unfrozen themselves from shock. They were climbing over the Communion rail, booming loud voices at Micah to put the axe down, while David’s panicked mind kept obsessing: *but we don’t own an axe. How odd. We’ve never needed one.* Like that was the most important element to ponder right now, and not the fact that his son was clearly aiming for his neck.

David heard old ladies talking to God like never before. They

screamed their prayers out. Full marks for enthusiasm. The church was exploding with genuine lament at Biblical levels. He thought he heard God eagerly say: *This is exactly how it sounded when all those Egyptians found their dead first-borns.* Then he realised that wasn't God saying it at all. It was Satan, filling his ear with excited whispers. Like those screams were music to him. Others were running for the door.

Micah, blood-spattered and panting, was sobbing and he now turned to the stained-glass Christ. He said, '*Avi, Avi . . . Lama kataltani,*' then he raced off across the chancel, heavy axe still in hand. He slammed his shoulder against the side door just a few feet away, and it sprang open. A huge, snarling beast of a wind rushed into the church and blew all the candles out. When the wind roared David knew it was the devil, sighing with contented achievement. David watched his son dwindle on the path outside while Victor and a few others tried to run after him. Yet those young legs made Micah a bullet, and as David's vision blurred, he saw the old men stop on the path, gasping and gripping their knees. A strange thunder rolled above them. The sky was dimming.

Miriam dropped and both knees splashed into the blood.

'Jesus, please' She cradled David's head, staring up to the stained glass. 'Jesus . . . Jesus . . . please . . . *please* come'

Her prayers melted into a squelchy sort of murk, and instead he imagined her voice was Zara's voice, saying she'd changed her mind and accepted his apology. That she'd come back to love him again, but the satanic wind had another cruel message. It said:

It's too late, David. Cos you prayed you'd die in this chancel. That Christmas Eve prayer's been all signed off and contracted now. No turning back. You belong in the ground. Which was the only time a tear came. He felt it roll from his eye and drop.

'The thunder' David whispered. 'Micah hates the thunder . . . best get him home'

‘Jesus . . .’ Miriam closed her eyes. Tears welled through the lashes. ‘Jesus, *please* . . .’

‘And tell him it’s not crooked, okay?’ His own voice was fading. ‘Tell him we love . . . and we’re not crooked . . . we love . . .’

He watched the bent ceiling of the Crooked Church turn blue, then grey above him. Then this bizarre demonic weather sent storm clouds around the church, sweeping and squeezing so tight that the chancel turned jet-black. He wondered if the old mineshaft below might have finally opened its mouth as wide as it had wanted to. That two hundred years ago was only ever a dry run for this.

Then he felt himself sink into the ground, deeper and deeper, and could feel the dirt of the churchyard filling his eyes and mouth and nose. Then all senses were gone. All senses but one. Sound remained. He could hear the Devil’s chuckle in the muffled drumming of distant rain above him, and the clicking of well-dressed bodies that had slid from their coffins, patiently crawling through the deep soil to find him.