

## CHAPTER ONE

A noise woke Lawrence with a start. It was either the distant gunning of a car engine or a barking dog, he was too disorientated to tell which. Grimacing, he sat up and rubbed his neck. He was only thirty-two but, after a night curled on the hard seat of his pick-up truck with only a skimpy rug for cover, he felt twice that. The sun was barely up. Shivering, he slipped out of the cab and walked among the trees for a piss.

The official, tourist board view of the ancient cathedral city of Barrowcester (pronounced Brewster) was of a perfect medieval hill town rising in glorious isolation from wheaty plains and braceleted by the River Bross. From the best angle – and one only ever saw the best angle reproduced – it resembled an image of the New Jerusalem in an illuminated manuscript. In fact it was only one of a chain of interlinking hills, all of them lapped by the river, none so crowded as their famous sister but all of them inhabited. Aerial photographs and topographical maps showed the proud city as the head of a small serpent or cornering sperm. With a few exceptions, postal addresses grew less distinguished, property values less impressive, as one passed away from the principal hill. The final, least regarded hillock, the tail of the sperm, was mainly given over to Wumpett Woods, named, it was thought, after a corruption of worm-pit because the trees had sprung up on the site of an ancient plague grave and unconsecrated resting place for the city's outcasts.

It was here that Lawrence had begun his love affair with