



*A Cotswold Killing*

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## *Chapter One*

The pain in Thea's finger was intermittent, but sharp. She prodded, then nibbled it, making it hurt more. There was something so wincingly vulnerable about the flesh beneath a fingernail, like the underbelly of a turtle – protected by hard tissue because of its exquisite sensitivity. It was the ideal spot for a torturer's attention, and Thea gave a little groan of satisfaction as she focused on it. Hepzibah cocked an interested ear, but didn't budge from her sunny spot in the doorway.

It was almost time to set out. The cottage would have to be secured, everything turned off and tidied up. She wouldn't be back again for three weeks, by which time dust would lie thick on all the surfaces and junk mail be silted up behind the front door.

Shaking her finger, she gathered up her bag, laptop, coat and mobile phone. Hepzibah sighed. 'Sorry, babes,' Thea told her. 'Got to hit the road. Shame about the weather.'

Woman and dog boarded the Golf with some reluctance. It was very warm inside, from sitting in full April sunshine.

Thea stashed her laptop securely between two leather bags on the back seat and paused to run through her mental list of necessities one last time. Her greatest dread was boredom, as she spent the coming three weeks in charge of a house and smallholding with assorted animals and responsibilities. Surely there would be afternoons and evenings where everything was exercised and watered, and there was little to do but read, walk or play Scrabble online.

‘Let’s just hope we get some sunshine,’ she muttered.

The route ran westwards, along the A40 as far as Burford, then the 429 to Cirencester. Her goal was the Cotswold village of Duntisbourne Abbots, where a Mr and Mrs Clive Reynolds were shortly to leave for a luxury cruise of the Caribbean. Because they had two labradors, a small flock of rare breed sheep, a fear of intruders and plenty of money, they had availed themselves of Thea’s services as a house-sitter.

They did not know, and Thea did not tell them, that this was her very first commission. Never before had she agreed to occupy a stranger’s home, in return for money, a well-stocked freezer and a fragile trust in her competence.

She was not by any means a stranger to the area. Her own home was in Witney, an easy drive away. If Duntisbourne became impossibly dull, it would be feasible to escape back to the cottage for a few hours in her garden or drop in on one of her friends.

‘It won’t be dull,’ her friend and neighbour Celia had assured her. ‘After all, I thought the whole point of doing it was to get a change of scenery and meet some new people. It’s not as if you need the money.’

The money, actually, would be rather welcome. The

Reynoldses were paying her an impressive £630 for her services, and that was not to be sniffed at, the way her shares had slumped in the past year or so. It would pay the Council Tax for six months, if nothing else.

Another sharp pain stabbed through her finger as she pulled the car door shut. It was the long finger on her left hand, and she scrutinised it with a detached interest. She'd painted her nails a vivid pink that morning, the colour representing the medium level of discomfort in her own private code.

Although she was familiar with the Cotswolds, she had never before been to the precise area of her house-sit. She was pleased to see it matched up to the parts she did know, as she meandered down the A429 towards Cirencester. Scattered on the tilting hillsides were the distinctive stone houses and barns that typified the region. Creams, yellows, natural shades of beige and grey characterised stone that was not to be found anywhere else in Britain. Woodwork was painted black or brown or white, but never anything primary or startling. Cotswold buildings, like the sheep, evidently regarded colours as signs of corruption or contamination. Let the flowers offer up a few brave splashes of pink or purple if they must – they were beyond control – but that was as far as it went. Even the vivid black and white buildings of Herefordshire or Worcestershire were too much. Here, the original hues provided by the earth itself were the obvious and rightful choice, and the attentions of the world's discerning visitors provided ample confirmation.

The spaniel curled prettily on the passenger seat, and hardly moved for the duration of the journey. They made

good progress, skirting Cirencester and getting onto the broad sweep of the dual carriageway A417. A disappointingly featureless road, where the traffic rushed blindly through a corridor carved into the landscape. Strange rocky terraces bordered both sides of the road for part of the way, the sandy tints presenting an incongruous desert landscape, suggestive of heat and drought, whatever the actual weather. Only when she turned off as directed did Thea suddenly feel she was in genuine Cotswold territory again.

The scenery, in late April, was almost ludicrously English. White may-blossom, some of it drifting on the roadsides, mixed with the yellow faces of celandines and the occasional mauve of a wild violet. The fresh green of new leaves and lush grass in the verges carried an optimism that Thea could not ignore. There were months of summer ahead for her to enjoy. It had been a wet and windy winter, frustrating for her and Hepzie alike, and its passing was something to celebrate – or so she tried to convince herself. Celebration was still an uncomfortable concept, a year on from her catastrophic loss.

The lanes narrowed dramatically within a few hundred yards of leaving the main road, closing in on her, swallowing her up. The open vistas she'd noted on the road down to Cirencester had now vanished.

Clive Reynolds had given careful directions, which turned out to be indispensable. Tiny country lanes dived off at strange angles, down steep slopes. Trees on both sides made them dark and mysterious; it was impossible to see more than a few yards ahead. There was a strong sense of venturing into alien territory.

It was two minutes to two when Thea drove through the

gateway to Brook View House. The handsome wooden gate stood wide open, the gravel drive looked recently raked, and two mature beech trees dominated the manicured lawn that sloped away to the left of the house.

‘Wow!’ Thea nudged the dog. ‘Have a look at this.’

It hadn’t been necessary. Hepzie was already sitting up and scanning the scene. Her long tail wagged enthusiastically. A man Thea recognised appeared in the front doorway of the house, wearing a grey Aran jumper, surely too hot for the spring day. The dog’s tail slowed and stopped.

‘Hmm,’ said Thea, as she turned off the ignition.

‘This is the thermostat,’ Clive Reynolds told Thea, pausing to ensure he had her full attention. It was the ninety-third thing he’d shown her, or so it felt. He’d raised a disapproving eyebrow at her lack of notepad and pencil. ‘I hope you’ll be able to remember it all,’ he’d said.

‘Oh, I’m sure I shall,’ she assured him. ‘Especially as you’ve already made so many helpful notes.’

The ‘helpful notes’ amounted to five single-spaced pages of A4, immaculately produced on a computer, with bullet points and underlinings. Thea had quickly come to the conclusion that Clive Reynolds was a typical senior civil servant, accustomed to giving orders and extremely fond of making lists. His wife, who he persistently referred to as ‘Mrs Reynolds’ was tall, stiff-necked and narrow-eyed. She did not appear comfortable with the idea of leaving her house in the care of a stranger.

Thea had provided references when requested to do so, and had met the Reynoldses two weeks earlier, in a tea

shoppe in Burford. She had not overtly confessed to her total lack of experience, but led them to believe it had been some time since she last undertook such a commission. It was only when she mentioned her brother-in-law as a potential referee, who happened to be a superintendent in the West Midlands police and known, at least by reputation, to Clive Reynolds, that she seemed to pass muster. Oh, yes – one of us, she could see him thinking. And, as always, her appearance helped.

Thea had known she was beautiful for the past twenty years. Before that she had been a plain schoolgirl, with poor skin and insufficient flesh. Leaving home and discovering men had worked a transformation: by some inexplicable chemistry, she had developed into a woman who attracted people of all ages, both genders and most races. She took no credit for it, often found it hard to take seriously, but nonetheless exploited it to the full.

Even now, in her early forties, it persisted undiminished. She took care to get her hair expertly cut, to smile at people – and that was about it. Nature did the rest, however unfair that might seem to other women. She just happened to have pleasing cheekbones, a wide mouth and nicely arched eyebrows. As usual, the magic had worked on Clive Reynolds.

When she further divulged, with downcast eyes, that her husband, Carl, brother to James-the-policeman, had died in a very unpleasant traffic accident, just over a year ago, the sympathy vote clinched the deal. A good-looking widow in her early forties with such respectable connections had to be all right. In fact, by the time the pot of tea was drained, she had the impression the Reynoldses thought she was rather a catch.

‘Feel free to pop along to the next house up the road’ – he told her now, waving an arm to indicate the direction – ‘and introduce yourself to Helen. She told me to mention it. I think she feels a bit bad for not being up to holding the fort herself.’

*Holding the fort* was going to be a somewhat more arduous task than Thea had anticipated. She was to monitor the temperature in every room, as well as the humidity, and ensure that all twenty-six house plants were kept in peak condition. She must be sure to always be in when the postman came, in case there was something to sign for. She must make a meticulous note of every telephone message, with date and time. She must memorise the security code on the burglar alarm, because they were absolutely emphatic that it must never ever be written down anywhere. If it didn’t rain, she would have to water the garden and keep the pond filled to a certain level. Failure to observe this requirement could lead to deleterious consequences for the water lily.

The dogs were both neutered male labradors, named Bonzo and Georgie, and fantastically well trained. To Thea’s eye they seemed virtually lobotomised. Hepzibah did her usual female trick of lying on her back and displaying a clean pink underbelly as soon as she saw them, but quickly righted herself in the face of their humiliating lack of interest.

The labradors had a whole page of the notes to themselves, and the sheep even more. These comprised a small flock of shaggy Cotswold ewes, with a clutch of pretty lambs at their heels. Despite the lengthy notes, which had side-tracked into interesting but irrelevant descriptions of the breed, their requirements seemed mercifully straightforward.

On the tour of the outside acres, Clive drew Thea’s

attention to the good-sized brook running around two sides of the sloping field, which could just possibly be host to infant brown trout if conditions were optimal. A pool had formed in the bottom corner of the Reynoldses' property, providing the sheep with easily accessed drinking water. 'Not that they use it very much,' he added. 'Sheep drink remarkably little.' The putative trout would, however, be jeopardised by the sheep trampling the water too vigorously if they did go down to drink, and could she please check daily that the water was still running freely. If not, then she might take a spade and clear a way for the flow. They stood at a little distance from the pool, which Thea examined with some pleasure. It looked quite deep in the middle, and was edged with vegetation – brambles especially. It was eight or ten feet across in each direction, and seemed highly unlikely to run dry, whatever the weather.

'Did you make it?' she asked, aware of something unusual in its formation.

'Let's just say I gave nature a helping hand,' he said. 'We've had cattle and horses here from time to time, and they need a lot of water. I dug it out to this depth, to help save a bit more for them. It's perfectly all right to do that.'

Thea wondered at the defensiveness, suspecting a minor breach of waterway regulations.

There was an odd mismatch between the obsessive attention to detail, the desperate need to control every nuance of life at Brook View, and the personality of Clive Reynolds himself. He was careful in his demonstrations, but not unduly so. His wife let him get on with instructing the house-sitter, apparently unconcerned that he might

omit something or get a detail wrong. The pickiness was all in the written pages, which Thea carried with her as they moved from point to point, making sure she understood what was where. Despite a dawning fear that there would be considerably more work than she had anticipated, she found herself liking Clive. She sensed a fragility about him, a look in his eye of appeal and vulnerability, that sat uneasily with the hearty civil servant façade.

Promptly at four, Mr and Mrs Reynolds departed for Heathrow and their evening flight to Barbados, casting one last joint glance over their shoulders. Thea waved brightly, standing on the gravel for a full minute, in case they could still see her through the hedges. When she was sure they'd gone, she went back into the house and closed the door. 'Well,' she said to the three dogs, as they all stood watching her. 'There's just us now.'

This statement remained true for less than five minutes. The younger of the labradors turned towards the door with a rumbling growl before Thea heard anything. Then, as the rattle of gravel underfoot came to her ears, all the dogs became agitated. Before anyone could knock on the door, she had pulled it open.

The man standing there was almost comically rural. Not merely mud-stained and ill-dressed, but somehow from another age as well, despite his relative youthfulness. The material of his trousers was thick, his jumper evidently hand-knitted. Strands dangled from the cuffs where they were coming unravelled. His boots were ankle-high, with laces threaded through eyelets. The bottoms of his trouser

legs were bound with hairy bale string, revealing green socks between trouser and boot that could also have been made by hand. Around his neck was a bizarre scarf, patterned in purple and yellow, possibly made of silk. Thea watched in fascination as he shyly played with it. The labradors sniffed him thoroughly, but seemed to bear him no ill will.

The gardener, she decided, despite there having been no mention of such a person. ‘Hello?’ she said.

‘Afternoon,’ he smiled, not so much shy as *unpractised*, she decided.

‘I’m Joel. They’ve gone then, have they?’

His accent was so impeccably Oxford English that Thea wanted to laugh. A mad thought that he must be part of a local theatrical company entered her head. She cast a quick glance up the lane, wondering whether there might be more like him, putting on some sort of strolling play, going from house to house.

‘Yes, they went five minutes ago,’ she said. ‘I’m Thea Osborne.’

Without missing a beat, he asked, ‘Doro or An?’

Equally deftly, she said, ‘Neither. Nor Ale. Just Thea, pure and simple.’ It wasn’t the first time some variation on this question had been asked, but there had been a friendly intelligence in this man’s way of doing it. It made her feel warm towards him.

‘This your dog?’ He bent to pat the spaniel’s soft head.

‘That’s right. I’m afraid she’s called Hepzibah, for reasons I can’t properly explain. She seems to be settling in fairly well.’

‘It’s refreshing to see a long tail on a cocker – though not everybody would say so around here, even now.’

‘She certainly wags it enough.’ Thea refrained for the moment from pursuing the implications in that ‘even now’ remark. Already she was hoping there’d be time for further conversation with this very strange young man.

‘Here on your own, are you?’ he asked, glancing past her into the house as if scouting for a husband or friend.

‘Just me and the dog,’ she nodded. It had felt like a perfectly benign question.

All the time, she was examining his face, waiting for some explanation as to why he was there. He looked to be in his middle thirties, hair growing thickly on top, cut short at the sides. Clean-shaven, blue eyes, reasonably tall. His hand, playing with the dog, was narrow with long fingers. ‘Are you their gardener or something?’ she asked, when she could bear the uncertainty no longer.

‘Gardener?’ He stared at her. ‘No, of course I’m not the gardener. I’m Joel Jennison. I’m from the farm across the lane.’ He waved an arm in the general direction of the roadway behind him. ‘Barrow Hill, it’s called. I’m a neighbour. Gardener!’ he repeated the word with scorn.

Thea did not apologise. It seemed a perfectly reasonable mistake to have made. But it was nonetheless embarrassing, if only because she no longer knew where to place him. English society persisted in pigeonholing people according to accent, income, education and connections. And clothes. If Joel Jennison had wanted her to place him accurately, he should have put on a clean sports jacket and cord trousers before coming to the door.

She managed a half-shrug, a kink at the side of her mouth, to indicate confusion, but said nothing more. Bonzo, the

older labrador, lost interest and trudged heavily back into the house, head and tail slung low.

‘I thought I should come and say we’re just over there if you need anything,’ the farmer blurted. ‘I expect you’ll be all right – those daft sheep have all lambed by now, and been wormed. But one thing I need to tell you is that the shearer’s coming on the 10th, and it’s usual for the Reynoldses to send theirs over to be done at the same time. Did they mention that?’

The 10th of May seemed a long way off, and Thea filed it in a deep mental recess. She was still struggling with the man’s accent.

‘Not that I recall,’ she answered to his question. ‘It might be in the notes.’

‘Well, you won’t have to do anything much. We’ll come and fetch them, and bring them back again for you. Clive must have taken us for granted, as usual.’

Thea said nothing. Hepzibah had pattered off across the sweeping lawn, and Thea rather fancied going with her on a detailed exploration.

‘Well, milking time,’ said Farmer Jennison. ‘Just thought I’d show my face. You’re welcome to come over for a cup of tea any time. My old dad lives with me, and he always likes a visitor. Best time is just after dinner. Two-ish.’

Thea’s confusion deepened. He was shy, she realised. And single. And motherless. And busy. And against the docking of spaniels’ tails. ‘That’s really nice of you,’ she said. ‘Thank you very much. Let me get sorted out here for a few days, and maybe I’ll take you up on the offer sometime in the middle of the week. Should I have your

phone number? Then I can call and make sure it isn't a nuisance for you.'

He laughed. 'Don't do that. Just take pot luck. Bye, then.'

She watched him go, his walk unself-conscious in the cracked old boots. She wondered whether she would recognise him if she ever met him in Cheltenham, dressed in a suit and tie.

She didn't go back into the house, but followed Hepzie's paw-steps over the lawn. Her instinctive eye for the history of a place revealed that the garden was not in fact of any great antiquity. Despite the beech trees, which were perhaps fifty years old, there was ample evidence that this garden had not long ago been part of a field. A lot of stonework and fencing had transformed it into classic rural grounds, closely resembling something from a television gardening programme. All the basic rules had been observed: frame the distant view; bring everything together with careful design; aim for variations in height to maintain interest. There were seats, pathways, pleasing curves and a riot of different botanical textures. The pond had a trickling water feature over artistically arranged rocks, which provided a constant background noise that Thea expected she would quickly grow accustomed to. *We leave it on night and day*, Clive had told her. *Jennifer's very insistent about that*. He hadn't even shown her where the switch was to turn it off.

The only surprise was in the generous size of the lawn. Lawns were not fashionable these days, and there was no suggestion that the Reynoldses had a number of ball-game-playing teenage sons.

A wide five-barred wooden gate opened into the field containing the sheep, but this was not the favoured access. ‘We hardly ever use this one,’ Clive had said. Another similar gate led from the gravelled yard on the other side of the house. It was through this portal that Thea was to approach the sheep. A small barn stood close by, in which their winter fodder was stored.

Clive had given extra verbal orders regarding gates and dogs. ‘We prefer the dogs not to go into the field together. There’s always a risk that they’ll run off and get into trouble with neighbouring farmers.

‘This time of year everybody’s very sensitive about lambs, and you can never completely trust two dogs out on their own.’ The written notes just said *Exercise B. and G. in garden. Walks at your discretion, on leads.*

There had not, however, been any outright ban on using the garden gate, and Thea did so now, though minus the labradors. She and her own dog took a short stroll that way, admiring the bluebells growing in the copse on the other side of the brook, and listening to the piping song of a solitary starling perched in an alder. There was a buzzard mewing a field or two away. Everything seemed peaceful, the air mild and sweet-scented.

‘We’re going to like it here,’ Thea told the spaniel.