



Secrets in the Cotswolds

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Chapter One

‘I thought you said you were going to Bibury,’ said Drew, shaking his head in confusion. ‘What’s this about Barnsley? Isn’t that in Yorkshire?’

‘Yes, but there’s a little village in Gloucestershire of the same name, and that’s where I’ll be staying. It’s near Bibury. All very upmarket over there.’

‘As opposed to the poverty-stricken hovels we live amongst down here in Broad Campden, you mean?’

Thea laughed briefly. She had been trying to reconcile her husband to her forthcoming absence for a whole week of the summer, and still he seemed to think it wouldn’t really happen. She was leaving him in charge of his two children and his alternative funeral business, with the assistance of his colleague, Andrew. The school holiday was almost halfway through, during which Thea had conscientiously entertained Stephanie and Tim day after day. ‘Why can’t we go to the seaside for a bit, as a family?’ Drew had asked three days into the holiday. ‘Wouldn’t that be nice?’

Thea had shaken her head impatiently, without really hearing the tone behind the words. ‘We can, if you organise it,’ she said. ‘I can’t do that for you, can I? You’ll have to clear the diary, let the nursing homes know – and all sorts of other things.’ Thinking back on it later, her words sounded cold in her own ears, but they were nonetheless true. People did not die to a schedule, and the small-scale operation in Broad Campden had no facilities for embalming or long-term storage of more than two bodies. To close down even for a week would risk disappointing people who were relying on having one of Drew’s burials. Thea had gone on to say, ‘I think it’s a bit late now. Everything will be booked up already.’

For some days Drew had carried a thwarted look, which Thea belatedly supposed had to do with his own desire for a holiday. There was a subtext, which said, *Most wives would have made sure something got done in good time. I’ve got enough to think about without arranging family holidays.* But he knew what her answer to this would be: ‘If you want a family holiday, Drew – you fix it. Because for myself, I’m not sure it’s something I’d enjoy.’ She didn’t say that out loud, but they both heard it anyway. The unpredictable nature of Drew’s work really did preclude any prolonged absences. He did, however, frequently find himself with very little to do for three or four days in a row. He had become adept at using these periods for relaxation, guiltlessly watching old films, reading biographies or walking the local footpaths with Thea and her dog. But he seldom involved himself in household minutiae. He was a

reluctant cook and inefficient cleaner. He would play board games with his children and hang washing on the line in the small back garden, but increasingly he left domestic matters to his under-occupied new wife. Again, there was a definite subtext that said, *If you're not going out to work, then surely it's obvious that your job is to run the house and family.* Thea could never find a persuasive argument against this assumption. She knew she had boxed herself in by having little desire to get herself an outside job, while finding the daily grind of basic survival increasingly tedious.

The suggestion that she abandon her husband and stepchildren for a short while had come a few months earlier from Detective Superintendent Sonia Gladwin, who had observed something of the reality in the Slocombe household in recent times. Her relationship with Thea had broadened and deepened over the years since they were first brought together in a village crime. Thea had found a body and Gladwin, newly transferred from the North-East, had been happy to make use of her, regardless of her amateur status. Now Thea was firmly established in a hard-to-define role that gave her an unusual level of access to police matters. Drew's profession clearly helped to make them both acceptable as semi-official assistants in murder enquiries.

Gladwin, it turned out, had a friend by the name of Tabitha Ibbotson in possession of an old Cotswold house in need of renovation. The builders had to be supervised, the contents safeguarded, and the friend was temporarily unavailable. Thea would be paid to take charge, staying

on the premises day and night. It was something she had done many times before, in the company of her spaniel Hepzibah. Only since marrying Drew had she abandoned her house-sitting career, and she found herself missing it.

But this time, Hepzie was to stay behind. Stephanie had insisted, with Drew's somewhat surprising support. Thea was at first distraught at the prospect of a house-sit without her faithful companion, as well as doubtful as to how Hepzie would cope with the separation. 'She's never spent more than three days without me,' she protested. Those three days had been the minimal honeymoon that she and Drew had awarded themselves, a year earlier. They had gone to the Scilly Isles, while Thea's mother looked after the dog and Drew's colleague Maggs had accommodated the children. The spaniel had sat attentively at their feet, aware of being at the centre of the discussion. Thea bent down and fondled the long ears, in an excessive demonstration of her love.

'She won't even notice you've gone,' said Drew heartlessly.

While the argument was still raging, Gladwin had mentioned that her friend had vetoed the presence of a dog anyway. 'It'll get under the builders' feet, and there's quite a busy road through the village,' she said. 'And I don't think there's a proper door at the back. They've knocked a wall down, and it's open to the world.'

Thea had gone to view the property at the beginning of July and hadn't been back since. 'There was a perfectly good door when I saw it,' she grumbled.

* * *

The distance between Barnsley and Bibury was barely more than three miles, which accounted for Drew's bewilderment over their names. Initially Gladwin had cited Bibury as the location of the property, and somehow nobody had bothered to correct her to name the smaller village, which boasted a pub, a church and a hotel that called itself a spa. In a random piece of research, Thea had learnt that it was on an old drove road, which had been replaced by the B4425 two centuries earlier, shifting the focus to the south, and causing the hotel's frontage to become its back. There was considerably more history going back to Roman times, which she resolved to investigate during the dull days of house-sitting.

And now it was only one more day until she took up residence there, and she was again reassuring Drew that he'd manage quite well without her. Stephanie was eleven, and Timmy almost nine; they could be left in the house for an hour or so while Drew conducted a burial. Thus far, he only had three funerals in the diary, but 'There are bound to be at least another three before you come back,' he said.

'So? If you're as worried as all that, you can ask one of their little friends' mothers to have them.'

It was an unforgivably blithe response, as she well knew. Stephanie had two or three classmates she counted as friends, but they had made no plans to meet during the summer. They were all going to the same secondary school in September, and would undoubtedly regard the presence of Timmy as an intrusion, being a mere 'Junior'. In any case, he would

resist all attempts by adults to park him at some girl's house, even for an hour.

'I can't,' said Drew, listing several of these good reasons.

'Well, you could hold it over them as a threat if they don't behave.'

'You mean if they burn the house down, or one of them falls out of a window and cracks its skull?'

'Oh, stop it,' she snapped. 'You're only trying to make me feel guilty.'

'No, no. If I wanted to do that, I'd develop some psychosomatic illness and take to my bed. Then you'd tell me to pull myself together, and go off anyway.'

'Like Emily's Bruce used to do,' said Thea. 'He was a genius at it, until she realised what was going on. I think Damien can be a bit prone to it as well.'

Damien and Bruce were Thea's brother and brother-in-law respectively. Damien was experiencing parenthood for the first time in his late forties. The resulting anxiety was bordering on the pathological. One of Drew's many virtues was that he kept any tendency to worry under strict control. 'My father worried enough for us all, when I was small,' he said. 'I grew up determined not to go the same way. Other people's neuroses are such a blight. I wouldn't inflict that on anybody who chose to live with me.'

Now he said, 'If I get like Bruce or Damien, you have my permission to shoot me.' This was followed by a sigh, which Thea chose to ignore.

'That's more like it,' she said. 'So stop agonising about the kids, okay? And don't let them bully you. A bit

of boredom will do them good. Stephanie's quite happy with all her YouTube stuff, and Tim's got that canal map to finish. Just leave them to get on with it.'

Drew sighed again at this brisk advice, but made no further objections.

The logistics of getting to Barnsley had not been considered until the last minute. The Slocombes only had one car and there was no question of Thea taking that. 'I can drive you there,' said Drew. 'But then you'll be stranded without any transport.'

'I don't suppose that matters,' she said doubtfully. 'I expect there's a bus into Cirencester, so I can go and do some shopping. And I can walk to Bibury and other places. There's a trout farm – I can live on fish, if necessary.'

'You can order food online with your phone,' said Stephanie, as if delivering a piece of wholly new information. 'And a person brings it to your door in a van.'

Thea groaned. 'That sounds terrible,' she said. 'Probably more hassle than finding a convenient bus.'

Drew was in complete agreement with this. 'Take some provisions, then. Tea and coffee, beans and bread. Is there a freezer at the house?'

'I don't think so. The kitchen's being gutted. I can just about boil a kettle, and I think there's a microwave.'

'Can you microwave trout?'

'Probably,' she said.

Stephanie, Tim and Hepzibah went with them on the Saturday morning, the car full of Thea's luggage.

Clothes, books, her laptop (although she had forgotten to ask whether there would be Wi-Fi at the house and it seemed unlikely), a sketchpad and several coloured pencils, the large-scale Ordnance Survey map, boots, phone, some DVDs – there was a small television and DVD player provided – and a grubby piece of needlepoint that she had started years ago and never finished. It had been sitting patiently in her house in Witney, which was now sold and forgotten. She had wanted to throw the needlework away, but Drew wouldn't let her. 'It'll be lovely when it's finished,' he assured her. The picture was far from the usual cottage with garden and little stream: instead it depicted an urban scene with a crane, several high-rise blocks and cars in the foreground. Her first husband Carl had bought it for her as a joke, having found it in a charity shop, wool and needles included.

'It's never going to be lovely,' Thea argued. 'But it might keep me amused for a few evenings.'

Hepzie could not believe her senses when her mistress got out of the car, unloaded all her bags and then told her to stay where she was. She scabbled at the window and whined, convinced that there had been an oversight. Stephanie clutched her to her chest and repeated, 'You're staying with us, Heps. It's okay – your Mumma's coming back soon.'

Thea waved them off, once Drew had checked she could get into the house, and advised her with all due humility to do something to barricade herself in at night. There were tears in her eyes at her own multiple betrayal as the car disappeared from sight. 'Selfish –

that's what I am,' she muttered, before adding a mental note that surely she was allowed to have at least some time and space of her own. They were Drew's children – it was only reasonable that he should share the responsibility of looking after them. Any feminist would agree with her; but feminists seemed to be sadly thin on the ground these days.

She looked around, standing in the short driveway. At the side of the house there was a cement mixer, daubed with misshapen lumps of grey cement, its cable draped untidily around its legs. Exploring down towards the back, she found a small skip that must have been delivered on a truck squeezing through the space between the house and the hedge that separated it from a wooded area to the north-east. Whether or not there was a neighbouring house beyond the woods had yet to be discovered. So far, the only other house she'd noticed was across the road from the front gate. The skip was piled with cardboard, glass and rubble. The latter must be the ruins of the stretch of wall that had been knocked down, she realised. There was a hole into the kitchen, scantily covered with a plastic sheet. Peering inside, Thea could see rough walls where cupboards must have been torn down, and gaps waiting for new installations. There were no worktops, but the floor-level cupboards were in place. It seemed to Thea that there was a good deal of work still to be done.

She went round to the front, where she'd left the door ajar, and embarked on a quick exploration of the ground floor. The house was sparsely furnished, with no carpets

in the hallway or dining room and no pictures on the walls. Her footsteps echoed along the hallway. When she opened doors, there were smells of fresh plaster, new wood, and the sharp tang of some kind of adhesive, but the main rooms did not appear to have been structurally altered. The work was all concentrated on the kitchen and what appeared to be a brand-new downstairs lavatory.

She felt much more alone than on previous house-sits. The absence of the dog went a long way to explaining this, but the ravaged condition of the house added to it. It lacked the essentials for comfortable existence – nowhere to sit with your feet up, reading a book. There was a table in the dining room, pushed against the wall, where she could put her laptop. There were two upholstered chairs in the living room, and a small television, but again, they were awkwardly positioned, as if placed there reluctantly for Thea's use, without any thought. Everything felt temporary and indecisive. The owner of the house had lived there for only a few weeks, she remembered, having bought the house not very long ago. Presumably she had spent those weeks planning the renovations, and scattering furniture more or less at random. The fitted carpet in the main living room was clearly old and unloved. One corner had been pulled up and left loose.

A brief tour of the upper floor revealed a functioning bathroom, which she knew was also due for modernisation, a back bedroom that had been reserved for her, two further empty rooms and a locked door that had to be Tabitha's private domain. Thea's room contained a single bed, chest of drawers

and chair. A narrow flight of stairs led up to an attic.

It was all perfectly bearable, she assured herself. On Monday morning, builders would arrive, and Thea would have all the company she could handle. There was a list of jobs to be done by the end of the week, and if everything went to plan, she would then be free to leave. There should be secure doors by that time, as well as new flooring in the hall and a set of modern appliances in the kitchen and bathroom. With a healthy dash of efficiency and forward planning, it had to be achievable.

She went back to the wreckage of the rear wall, to examine it from the inside. It would be quite easy for an intruder to get into the kitchen if he or she realised what was going on. The biggest risk, Thea supposed, was from unauthorised squatters – but the days had long gone when they could make free with an empty house, the law impotent to eject them. She had raised the question with Gladwin, who could speak for the owner of the house on every topic, apparently. ‘I’m pretty brave,’ Thea said, ‘but even I might feel a bit nervous about sleeping in a house with no back door. And Drew’s really agitated about it.’

‘Don’t worry – we thought of that. The builders have made a temporary thing between the kitchen and the rest of the house. You’ll see. It’s almost medieval in design.’ Now Thea had a look, and found two stout brackets fixed to the door frame halfway up, and a plank to slot into them. It was ugly and clunky, but it worked.

The conversation with Gladwin had taken place the week before, over a quick drink in the Broad Campden

pub. Thea had been full of questions, characteristically. 'I'm not really worried,' she said, once answers had been comprehensively supplied. 'The crime rate around here is pretty minimal, after all.'

'Give or take the occasional murder,' Gladwin smiled. 'But I wouldn't have suggested the house-sit if I thought you were in any danger. Mind you, there's been a spate of pop-up brothels.'

Thea had assumed this was a joke, until the police detective enlightened her.

'No, they're perfectly real,' Gladwin insisted. 'Mostly people from the Far East, with girls who thought they were coming to respectable lives and jobs. Trafficking, in a word. They move into an empty house, set up shop for a while, and then melt away if somebody starts to show any concern. My friend Tabitha would not like that at all.'

'No,' said Thea faintly. 'I don't suppose they tidy up after themselves.'

'Right.'

Thea had acquired a minimum of background information about Tabitha Ibbotson. In her sixties, and already earning decent money as a professional pianist, she had been left a considerable sum by her mother, two or three years earlier. The mother, it seemed, had inherited it in turn from a husband, who had been big in lawnmowers. Months before dying, he had sold the enterprise for three million pounds, and then left it equally to his son and second wife. Even after inheritance tax, they were both very much the richer. 'He was a nice old

chap,' said Gladwin. 'I knew him before I knew Tabitha and her mum, actually. He used to play bridge with my neighbour, and I sometimes made up a four with them.'

'You play bridge? You never said.' The game had been a factor in a recent investigation, which had drawn Thea in to an uncomfortable extent.

'Well, I've lapsed lately. I don't think I was ever very good at it, but it was a refreshing change when I was a stressed-out Tyneside rookie.'

Tabitha Ibbotson, stepdaughter to the lawnmower man, found herself in possession of almost all her mother's inheritance, because the old lady died barely six months after her husband. Before long, much of the money had been spent on this house, and Tabitha was expecting to part with another fifty thousand on the renovations. 'At least,' said Gladwin.

There were five bedrooms, counting the one in the attic, a large bathroom, a lovely dining room and living room, both with decorated ceilings, and a garden approaching half an acre in size. Built of the usual mellow Cotswold stone, it was old and solid and beautiful. 'It'd make a perfect brothel,' Thea thought to herself with a smile.