

The logo consists of the letters 'a' and 'b' in a white, elegant, cursive script, joined together. A thin white horizontal line is positioned directly beneath the letters. This logo is centered within a solid black square.

*a&b*

*Death in the Cotswolds*

REBECCA TOPE

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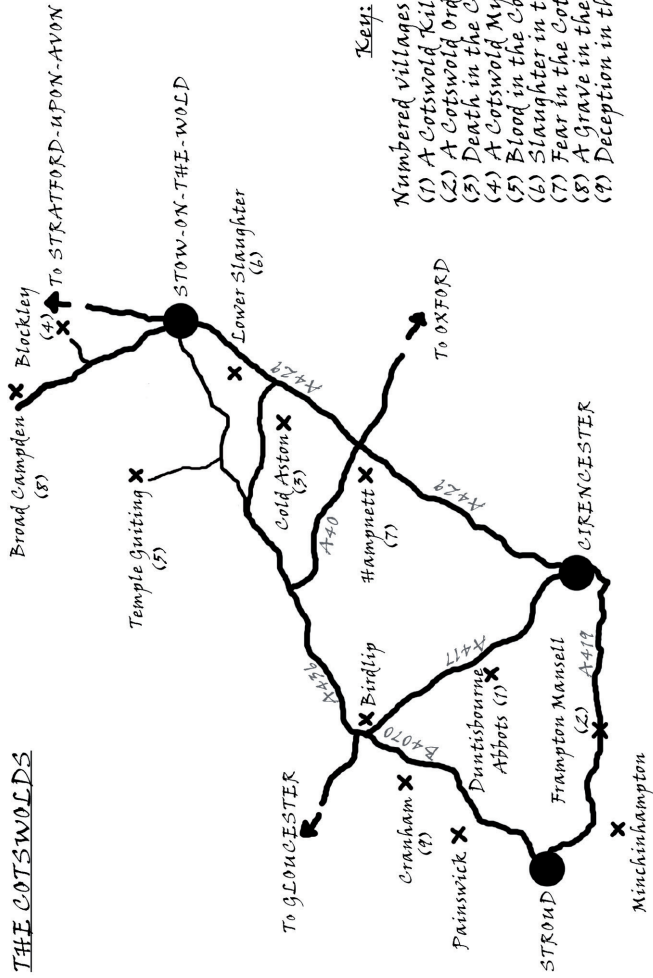
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*For everyone in the letter group:*

*Anita, Carol, Jo, Madelon, Margaret,  
Martha, Quenda and Sheila*

# THE COTSWOLDS



## Key:

Numbered villages featured in:

- (1) A Cotswold Killing
- (2) A Cotswold Ordeal
- (3) Death in the Cotswolds
- (4) A Cotswold Mystery
- (5) Blood in the Cotswolds
- (6) Slaughter in the Cotswolds
- (7) Fear in the Cotswolds
- (8) A Grave in the Cotswolds
- (9) Deception in the Cotswolds

## CHAPTER ONE

That October was much as usual – blowy, damp, mild, the leaves still green on the boughs, the sheep fat-bottomed and clean with their new fleece, complacent from the attentions of the tup. Odd, I suppose, that most people imagine the mating season to be the spring when in fact that's the time of birth, which is quite another matter. Conception can be any time from high summer to dark November for most mammals left to their own devices.

October, for me, was the dyeing season. Dahlia heads, sloes, the seeds of the golden rod and lichens pulled from the boles of old trees – they all have to be gathered and stored in the days of the first frosts or just before, and then steeped in pans with the raw fleece, mixing colours and trying in vain to get anything near a decent blue without resorting to indigo yet again.

\* \* \*

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I had known Phil Hollis since he was in his teens and I a clamouring infant of four and five, following him through the village, encouraged by his kindness. And here he was, finally due back that Friday afternoon to tackle his dead aunt's possessions at last.

The car arrived quietly, but I'd been listening for it and was waiting at my door before the engine stopped. He didn't see me as he got out of the driving seat and I was able to watch him go round to the passenger door and stand beside the woman he'd brought with him.

*'We should be there by six on Friday. I'll have Thea with me,'* he'd written in the letter he sent to tell me his plans. *'And three dogs. We'd appreciate it if you could air the bed and get some dry firewood in. Also, some basic provisions – bread, eggs, milk.'*

He knew that I wouldn't have any idea who Thea was, but the reference to only one bed made it clear enough. I imagined he wrote instead of telephoning in order to dodge any questions I might throw at him.

It was dark and my cottage was shielded by shrubs. I could have stood there much longer, quietly observing them, and they'd never have known. As it was, I only gave it a minute before going down to my gate and calling out, across the street. A minute, though, was enough to see that Phil had found his new lady, and she was just that

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bit less certain about the whole thing than he was.

Phil raised his head from the little woman – who must have been nearly a foot shorter than me – and met my eyes. He didn't smile. 'Hello, Mary,' he said. 'I like your hair.'

I swayed with the gust of rage that flooded through me. 'Ariadne,' I said loudly. 'My name's Ariadne. You know it is.'

'Sorry, sorry,' he put up his hands. 'I should remember by now.' He tilted his head towards his friend. 'This is Thea Osborne. Thea – this is Ariadne. She and I have known each other for ever. She was wonderfully kind to Auntie Helen before she died.'

The woman and I looked at each other like two cats. I'd known it would happen, of course. Phil had been single for over three years by that time, his misunderstood Caroline already remarried. He was fit, friendly, good-looking. A definite catch. And this person was just his type. Small, vigorous and lovely. And keen on dogs from the look of it. In the back of the car there was a whirl of bouncing, yapping canines. I shuddered. Dogs repelled me, with their great slobbering jaws and stupid fawning habits. One of these seemed to be a spaniel – a breed I loathed more than most. As it jumped from seat to seat I could see it was a cocker, with an undocked tail. I could almost hear my farmer father sneering at such a monstrosity.

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‘There’s no power in the house, you know,’ I said.  
‘You had it cut off, remember?’

‘Of course. We’ve got a lamp and a camping stove and a few candles. And there’s always the pub if things get desperate.’

‘I’ve cleaned,’ I went on. ‘Not because you were coming – I’d have done it anyway. The window frame in the back bedroom’s rotting.’

‘You’re a star,’ he said. ‘Thanks.’

They were hardly listening to me, wrapped up in each other and their foolish adventure. Greenhaven hadn’t been lived in for a year, and even with my regular visits for dusting and airing it was bound to be clammy and uninviting. But Phil was behaving like a schoolboy, already digging about in the boot of the car.

‘Can I let the dogs out?’ said the Thea woman.

That was my cue to leave them alone. I retreated without them even noticing, except that she gave me one last look. Then she turned her pretty face up at Phil and I could see her mouth shaping the word *hair*, with a nasty smile. So what if I’d done yellow and black stripes in it? What did it have to do with them?

In another week, the clocks were going back, and it’d be dark by four-thirty. As it was, the light had all gone by the time Phil and Thea had arrived. I had wasted much of the day thinking about Phil



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and how it would be to have him across the street for a week, pottering about tidying my house when I should have been working in the garden, digging potatoes, picking up windfall apples for my pig. She was a very beautiful Tamworth, incidentally, called Arabella, living in a patch of old coppice I rented for peanuts half a mile away. Arabella was turning it over, uprooting a lot of brambles and nettles, which the owner thought a fair return for the loss of small saplings in the process. I'd worried that she'd be lonely, but it seemed she was too busy for that.

It was by then much too dark for working outside and a chill breeze had sprung up. I threw another few shovels of coal into the Rayburn and wondered about my supper. I'd got ham from my own pigs, and ridiculous quantities of home-grown vegetables. Living the way I did, it was never likely that I would run out of food. Nor wine, because I made my own. I should have had six kids, by rights, to help me dispose of it all. As it was I'd left a large basketful at Greenhaven – carrots, onions, spuds and beans. It all needed cooking, of course – something they'd have trouble with on a camping stove.

I went to Phil and Caroline's wedding, all those years ago. They had it in the church at Painswick, where she came from. Some of their friends showed up from Sussex and Surrey and raved about how

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gorgeous the Cotswolds were and how nobody had ever *heard* of Painswick, which they thought was amazing, because it had to be the most gorgeous place in England. They all ignored me, of course – a gawky fourteen-year-old with lank hair and huge feet. I spent the time despising them for their false laughter and expensive clothes. But Caroline was lovely to me; already we'd become friends in a gentle careful sort of way. It took me a while to appreciate how special she was to accept me as she did.

I actually babysat their two kids in the early years. Everything seemed to be sweetness and light in the Hollis household in those days. Phil was just an ordinary PC then, not much overtime, none of that stuff you see on the box where the wife goes apeshit because he's never there. That was twenty years ago – more, even. He's forty-six now. I know that for a fact. Ten years older than me.

His Auntie Helen had been great. She'd wanted me to move in with her when she got so arthritic and clumsy, but I compromised by buying the cottage across the road, which providentially became available just at the right moment. I was into my thirties by then and ready to own my own place. Nobody would give me a mortgage, of course, with no proper job and no man to bale me out. Although eventually one did – my father came to the rescue,

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selling the farm for close to a million, and offloading a chunk of the proceeds onto me. 'That's it, mind,' he said. 'There'll be nothing in my will for you, after this.' My brothers had grumbled about it for a while, but eventually persuaded themselves they'd probably get the best of it in the long run. Nobody owed them any favours, after all. They'd all been offered the choice of carrying on at the farm, but Robin opted for teaching, John went into the Civil Service and Graham set himself up as a motor mechanic. They all worked reasonably hard and made a decent living. Two of them were married with kids, the third, John, had never pretended to be interested in women. He had a close friend called Mark and nobody doubted that this was the only significant relationship in John's life. I suspect they all three felt guilty for abandoning the farm. Dad's grandfather bought it in 1921, so it had seen a lot of Fletcher history.

The thing I had not entirely bargained for was the distance that developed between me and the rest of the family once the farm had gone. Given financial independence, I somehow drifted away and made my own life, hardly ever seeing them. My mother kept in touch, phoning every couple of weeks, and I went along for the usual Christmas stuff, but something visceral had been severed. I think it wasn't just me, it was because the old life was over and my parents were having to remake

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themselves without all those sheep and bullocks. Now when it snowed or blew a gale, they didn't have to worry. Not worrying diminished them, even in their own eyes. My mother fell into the habit of hospital visiting, followed by regular work at the hospice. It was the closest she could get to her lifelong pattern of jumping out of bed to check the lambs, or help with the dipping, or any one of a hundred farming jobs.

My father found it even more difficult to adapt. He spent most of his time watching sport on the telly and most of his money on backing horses. He became a boring, irritable person.

All evening I kept glancing out of the front window, expecting to see something more of Phil. In the near-darkness I could see smoke starting to curl out of the chimney, and I could see the vague shape of the largest of the dogs as it ran round from the back, sniffing all the plants in the little front garden and cocking its leg against most of them. Male dogs have to be the most disgusting of all creatures. Their instincts are all centred on excrement and piddle and copulation. Cats aren't like that, nor sheep, nor pigs, nor *any* animal I can think of. Phil's perverse preference for dogs was one of the things about him that had put me off, even when I was mooning over photos of him and dreaming that he would wait for me to grow up and then we'd be

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married. He already has his own pooch by the time he was twenty: a fat yellow Labrador called Mavis, of all things. Mavis and I disliked each other relentlessly throughout her entire life.

I tried to imagine Phil and Thea in the house that had been a second home to me for three years and more. Before Helen died I'd spent a lot of my time there, getting her meals, checking she'd taken her pills, reading to her. Ever since my teens I'd taken pleasure in watching out for old ladies. I even worked in nursing homes, in advance of my mother, on and off through my twenties, although the routines and the careless cruelties drove me away eventually. Since then I'd just had one or two special favourites to focus on. Nothing formal, no stupid Social Services vetting procedures or paperwork – and not much payment either. Helen couldn't afford to pay me, except with her company, although I charged Phil Hollis for my attentions to the house that now belonged to him.

Helen and I had agreed that she should stay at home right to the end, keeping the medical people at bay, fooling them into thinking she was much less sick than the reality. It almost worked.

There were still some of my things there: rugs, cushions and my tapestry weaving frame. I'd made four big wallhangings in those last months, just sitting and chatting to Helen, as she dozed and

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dreamed. We'd played tapes of her favourite music – jazz, ragtime, anything American pre-1950. Neither of us had ever mentioned the future.

She left me most of her modest savings, which ensured I could carry on as I was for a while longer, before having to think about earning a sensible income. Now she was gone I had enough time and money to establish my new venture. Except it wasn't really new. I'd been knitting, spinning, weaving since I was six in a disorderly kind of way. Now I had some capital for better equipment and proper labelling and advertising. As a trial run I took a stall at the Stow Horse Fair in May. I sold everything I'd made in those years I'd spent with Helen: rugged jumpers in natural Cotswold colours, woven rugs, hats, scarves and two highly experimental wallhangings. I'd underpriced them, I realised. The Horse Fair was run by and for gypsies – who had no truck with my quirky handmade stuff. But there were plenty of tourists, in their cashmere and tweed and green boots. They turned up their noses at the gypsy wares – the gaudy cushions and glassware, the outrageous frills and flounces intended for small girls to wear – and fell on my stuff with relief. They assumed, of course, that I was Roma myself, with my black hair and the bright red headscarf I'd been wearing.

I'd only been allowed to have a stall at all

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because my brother Graham, the car mechanic, had connections with one of the many Mr Smiths who organised the Show. I was put at the top of the slope, near a chap selling lurcher pups.

I'd tried to clear all my stuff out of Helen's house when I heard that Phil was coming, but somehow the things hadn't wanted to leave. Her furniture was still there and without the throws and hangings and cushions it would have looked impossibly stark and cold. I hadn't the heart to take them away, which was ridiculous, considering that Phil's sole purpose in coming was to dispose of the entire contents and get the house put up for sale. Rather him than me – that was how I settled it to myself. I never liked getting rid of things.

It was unfriendly weather that day, more like late November than October. Really, it was the first chilly day of the autumn, which was bad luck for Phil and his lady friend. I revved up my Rayburn a bit, pulled the windows shut, and wondered what it would be like in Greenhaven with no proper heating. Helen had never wanted an Aga or Rayburn, relying on an open log fire for extra cheer, but essentially dependent on central heating fuelled by oil. And now, with no electricity, it wasn't going to work.

Cold Aston was often windy, exposed from most sides, on the upper levels of the wold. They

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used to call it Aston Blank, probably due to the chalkiness of the soil – or the festoons of old man’s beard along all the hedges, the white seed heads like snow for part of the year. Blank – *blanc* – get it? But blankness wasn’t so different from whiteness, and I often got into a mood where the place did indeed seem empty of that energy or whatever you want to call it that other places have. Cold Aston was beautiful, of course, like everywhere in the Cotswolds. It got prizes for Best Kept Village, and any new building was rigorously controlled, to ensure it matched what was already there. The remaining farms were all huge ranches with endless acres of corn and grassland. You could stand on the high ground at Notgrove and scan the views in all directions and barely see a living creature, man or beast. Another reason for calling it Blank, now I think about it.

But they changed it to Cold Aston, not so long ago – or so they think. The signs all keep Aston Blank as an alternative, and I don’t believe either name will ever really disappear.

It was as good a place as any to live, and all the better for not being on the tourist trail. There was at least the normality of a school, and a pub and a fair number of small houses for not-so-rich people to live in. The farms were mostly approached by plain rutted tracks, left open and unannounced to



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the road. There were avenues of trees on all sides, remnants of driveways to country mansions, in many cases. If there was frost overnight, I thought, the leaves would have lost their green within a couple of days.

Just as it was getting properly dark and Thomas, my big tabby, had come in from the cold, seeking out the fire I'd already lit for us both in the back room, there was a knock on the door. Phil was there, eyebrows raised in a sort of mock drama, holding a broken oil lamp chimney.

'We've made a bad start,' he grinned. 'Baxter knocked this over with his tail.' I didn't need to ask who Baxter was. 'It's useless now. I don't suppose you've got one anywhere, have you?'

'An oil lamp,' I said slowly. 'You're asking me if you can borrow an oil lamp.'

'I know – it sounds a bit like a fairytale, doesn't it. It's just that they cast such a lovely romantic light.' He cocked his head sideways, coaxingly, infuriatingly. 'Besides, there are only four candles. We forgot to buy a new boxful.'

'Well, sorry, but I haven't. There might be one in your attic, though. Helen kept all sorts of junk up there. You should keep those dogs under better control.'

'You don't have to tell me that – but I've never found a way to stop them wagging their tails. Even

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Hepzie – that’s Thea’s spaniel – can do some damage with hers.’

‘Cut them off,’ I said. ‘Now...’ He was letting the cold in, and I was cross with him for being so soppy. The Phil Hollis I remembered had never been soppy. He was a senior policeman, for heaven’s sake!

He blew out his cheeks, still playing the same game, helpless little boy, appealing to an earlier version of me, fishing for some old shared childhood that had never really existed. ‘It’ll be awfully dark in the attic,’ he whined.

‘So use the candles for the rest of tonight and have a look up there tomorrow. It’s got a skylight – you’ll be able to see quite well by day.’

‘Oh, well, thanks, um, Ariadne.’ He worked his lips and repeated quietly, ‘Ariadne. I must remember to say Ariadne.’

‘Oh, go away,’ I said, and pushed the door shut in his face.

It wasn’t as bad as it sounds. If we were playing a ‘reversion to childhood’ game, then this was entirely in keeping with the rules. He would tease me, I stuck my tongue out or punched him, he retreated and forgot all about me. It had been a regular pattern for decades and I’d have been lost if anything had changed. The presence of a love interest on his side made no difference. Whatever it was between Phil Hollis and me, it definitely wasn’t

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love. For love, you had to have equality, respect, attention, seriousness, understanding – and about fifty other qualities which were utterly absent from our relationship, such as it was. Instead, on his side there was a decency, a good heart – and a kind of unimaginativeness which prevented him from working out that I might be bad news. For me there was a curiosity about his life, along with our shared history and an uncomfortable knowledge of secrets. Secrets that Detective Superintendent Hollis certainly would rather I hadn't known.