



*A Cotswold  
Christmas Mystery*

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## *Prologue*

One whole week to go until Christmas. Four more days at school. Stephanie and Timmy were both close to bursting with anticipation. ‘We can walk over to see Ant,’ said Thea. ‘You two need to get out for a bit.’

‘Three,’ Stephanie corrected her. ‘Don’t forget Hepzie.’

‘When do I ever forget Hepzie?’ laughed Thea, giving her spaniel a quick ear-tickle.

The walk took them up onto high ground to the west of their village, and across a small road to a large estate where the Frowse family lived in a dilapidated old cottage that was actually a converted stable block on a large rural estate. The route was a section of the Monarch’s Way footpath, which ran for hundreds of miles and was much loved by walkers. On this uninviting Sunday afternoon, however, there were very few examples of this species of humanity. Grey clouds drifted heavily not far above the wolds, but it was not quite raining. Nor was it particularly cold. Gloves and scarves had not been called for, but all three wore woolly hats.

The procedure for gaining access to the Frowsses' cottage was entertaining in itself. The owner of the estate surrounding the little house had caused an intimidating electrified fence to be erected between his own large mansion and the small residence of his tenants. On their first visit, this had plunged Thea and Stephanie into great confusion. Once you left the road, there was a paved driveway that soon branched off in two directions. If you carried straight on, you encountered a large wrought-iron gate, which had a high wire fence on one side, and a good-sized patch of woodland on the other. The road itself veered sharply away, circling the wood to the west. But if you were visiting the Frowsses, you took the smaller branch, which also had an entry gate. This one was more like an ordinary farm gate, but it was equally difficult to pass through. The high fence ran across your path, with the gate an integral part of it. The purpose quickly became clear, as you were confronted by this barrier. The Old Stables was enclosed by a security fence worthy of any prison. Its occupants could only enter or leave via this electronic gate, and the same went for any visitors. There was no back way, other than walking across fields from another larger road to the north. Even then, the fence would prevent access. When challenged about this outrage, the landlord insisted it was intended as added security, deterring intruders, which included deer and foxes. Two of his fields had been enclosed along with the cottage, which he claimed to be the main reason for the fence.

Ant's parents, Beverley and Digby, scoffed at this piece of blatant dishonesty. 'What's so special about the fields?' Digby demanded. 'All he keeps in them is those

dozy alpacas.’ The alpacas had been a whim on the part of the landlord’s wife, and had rapidly become sadly neglected. One of the employees was required to feed them every day, but beyond that nobody gave them any attention. They would run to greet anyone who managed to negotiate the gate, eager for diversion.

Arriving at the gate, pedestrian visitors, as well as those in vehicles, were obliged to request entry by a telephone kept in a small weatherproof box mounted on a post close by. Unless, that is, they knew the passcode; then they could use the keypad that was also in the box. Or so the landlord believed. In fact, Digby Frowse had employed unsuspected computer skills to hack into the software governing this arrangement, so that the mere act of lifting the phone bypassed the code and opened the gate without further ado. Nobody in the family or amongst his friends could understand how he did it, but it worked.

Stephanie delighted in this act of rebellion. Ant had sworn her and the others to secrecy. ‘Old Rufus still thinks it works his way,’ he chuckled. ‘He can’t see the gate from the house, luckily. And the camera only shows cars or people standing a bit further away.’ The CCTV cameras were another outrageous intrusion on the privacy of the Frowse family.

Beverley met them at the door and welcomed them in. Stephanie gave her a hug, as always, and Timmy stood shyly back and was excused from making a similar gesture. Thea was no more demonstrative than he was. ‘Digby’s upstairs and Ant’s walking the dog,’ said

Beverley. ‘He’ll be back in a minute.’ She was a sturdy woman of few words, in her early sixties. Stephanie knew little about her, other than that her daughter had been murdered in America, not very many years ago. This gave her an aura of tragedy, as it did her husband too. It made them seem slightly distant, as if wrapped in an invisible cloak of misery that they could not shake off, even when chatting and smiling.

Beverley gave them drinks and mince pies and asked one or two questions about Christmas, while they waited for her son and Percy the dog. Digby came downstairs to join them.

‘People!’ he said with a twinkly smile. ‘Good to see you.’

Stephanie settled into a rather doggy chair and observed the scene. The kitchen was immensely untidy, with bottles, boxes, papers, old tin cans, jam jars, utensils, a radio, and many other objects cluttering the central table and much of the floor. Beverley carelessly cleared a small space for the plate of mince pies, but otherwise left everyone to fend for themselves.

Ant and Percy were soon back, as promised. The young man – who was their real friend out of the Frowse family – hung a grey jacket on the back of the door leading to the rest of the house, where it joined several others. The dog flopped down on a muddy piece of material in a corner, which comprised his bed.

‘The daughters are here,’ said Ant. ‘Two of them, anyway.’

‘Already!’ Beverley groaned. ‘Christmas isn’t for another week.’

‘Carla’s going to be sick of them by then,’ said Digby.

‘And Rufus even more so,’ laughed Ant. ‘All they want to do is spend his money.’

‘They deserve each other,’ Beverley snarled. ‘Rotten, the whole lot of them.’

Stephanie was startled at the venom in the woman’s voice. Usually she kept things light when the landlord was under discussion. Everyone fell silent for a moment.

‘Don’t let them get to you, pet,’ said Digby wearily, as if he’d said the same thing a thousand times. ‘We’ll beat them in the end, you’ll see.’

## *Chapter One*

Stephanie Slocombe, aged eleven and three-quarters, had completed the first term at her new school. The last day had just ended and she was going home to wait for Christmas. Her schoolbag was pulling on her shoulder and making her walk crookedly because it was packed with cards and presents from just about everyone in her class. Even nasty Millie Forster, who hated her, had dropped a card for her into the classroom postbox. Stephanie had opened it in horror, aware that she had not sent the girl one herself. There was no time left to post one now, either, unless she could persuade Thea to drive her to the post office to catch the last collection, which was vanishingly unlikely. It was all a great worry, but at least there were a few boys who hadn't remembered her, which balanced things out a bit.

The special Last Day Lunch was still weighing almost as heavily in her stomach as the schoolbag on her shoulder, mainly because at least three of her friends hated Christmas pudding, so she had helped them to finish theirs.

But she did not feel at all overburdened. Instead she skipped lightly up the driveway to the waiting car, driven by her stepmother, Thea. Millie had probably sent the card with the clear intention of embarrassing her, she decided, and could therefore be safely forgotten. It would be stupid to let her spoil these thrilling days before Christmas Day itself.

Thea looked to be in a reasonably good mood. This was not always the case. By a frustrating twist of Local Authority rules, Stephanie was not allowed onto the school bus that went right through Broad Campden and on to more outlying villages. She lived just over a mile away from school, which everyone said was perfectly walkable for someone at a secondary school. Two miles, and the bus might have taken her. So Thea or Dad, who did not think it walkable at all, had to drive her to school in the morning and bring her back in the afternoon. There had been talk of sharing with other parents, but there was nobody in Broad Campden who seemed to fit the bill. Two Year Ten girls and a boy in the sixth form were the only ones who lived anywhere near the Slocombes.

Thea complained quite a lot about this extra driving. ‘Another nine years of this,’ she moaned, having worked out that Timmy would be at school for that long. ‘It’s a life sentence.’

‘Don’t be so melodramatic,’ her husband had reproached her. ‘It’s only for another year or two. They can walk it when there’s two of them, at least in the summer. And I already take her some mornings.’

‘I know you do—’ Stephanie was sure Thea had been going to start sounding off about having to answer the phone when Drew was out, which was nearly as bad as driving back and forth to school. Thea’s restless nature was all too familiar after a year and a bit of living with her. Things had not gone nearly as smoothly as everyone had thought they would when there’d been a funny little wedding with hardly any people and a sort-of party in a pub afterwards. Stephanie still remembered how her mum had always been around, even before she got so ill and could hardly get out of bed. Thea was a lot more restless, never altogether satisfied. But at least she loved Dad. The special smile she reserved just for him was enough to keep Stephanie on her side. Dad was lucky in that respect, although he didn’t always seem to remember it. Sometimes he forgot to smile back, and Thea would shake her head about it, and look cross. Stephanie always wanted to explain about the way his mind worked; how he could only do one thing at a time, and you just had to wait your turn for his attention. Thea wasn’t good at waiting. It was like having a semi-wild animal in the family – or maybe a selkie. A creature that was always yearning to be somewhere else, however much she might love the people she lived with. The story of the beautiful fisherman’s wife who was actually a transformed seal had gripped Stephanie in Year Six, not least because she could see how close to her own family life it was. One night she actually had a dream that Thea turned back into a seal and swam away for ever.

Stories about stepmothers were much less easy to relate to. Thea wasn’t wicked or jealous or cruel. She

was clever and funny and pretty, and kind most of the time. She helped with homework and suggested projects. And she was really good at birthdays. She had interesting relations, as well, like Auntie Jocelyn and her five children, all older than Stephanie. That was because Thea was quite a lot older than Dad, which was another thing that made them unusual.

‘Have you done the Christmas tree?’ she asked now.

‘Not yet. I was waiting for you. I thought you’d want to help.’

Stephanie sighed. She had hoped that Dad would explain properly to Thea that it had been a tradition, ever since Stephanie was born, for the adults to decorate the tree in secret and then make a big thing of revealing it, a few days before Christmas Eve. That had evolved into the last day of term, once Stephanie started school. There had been two wonderful exciting Christmases before Mum got really ill and then it didn’t happen in quite the same way after that. At least, Drew had done it instead, which had been good enough in the circumstances. ‘Tell her, Dad,’ Stephanie had urged him. ‘It was such rubbish last year, we need to get it right this time. We have to keep it the same as it used to be.’ And he had promised he would.

‘I got some new baubles and things for it, months ago, in Poundland, remember?’

There was every reason to go along with Thea, and trust her, Stephanie told herself, despite the appeals to Drew. If this Christmas turned out to be different, it was still Christmas. The only element missing was a crib. She would have liked a crib, similar to the one they had

in the window of one of the houses in the village. She mentioned it to her father.

‘I don’t really do religion,’ he said. ‘You know that.’

This had become something of an issue over the past few months. ‘But you sometimes have a vicar for the funerals,’ she reminded him. ‘That’s religion.’

‘That’s my *job*,’ he argued. ‘I do what the families want, whether it fits with my own beliefs or not.’

‘But this is what Christmas is all about. I mean – Jesus being born. It seems wrong to just ignore that altogether.’

‘Most people in this country do,’ he assured her. ‘They focus on food, and bright shiny decorations, and presents and family togetherness. Isn’t that enough for you?’

‘Not necessarily in that order,’ interrupted Thea, who’d been listening in. ‘Personally, the food comes last.’

She wasn’t religious either. Stephanie had never heard her say a single thing about God or Jesus or heaven, as far as she could remember. There was a sense of a pent-up need to have some sort of conversation about it, if not with her parents, then with somebody.

But there was so much magic in the very fact of Christmas itself, after all – enough to keep everybody happy. ‘Yes,’ she said now, about the decorations. ‘They’re brilliant. Has Dad been busy today?’

‘Fairly.’ Thea had no problem with the change of subject. ‘People seem to die quite a lot around Christmas. Usually just after, actually, but there was a new one today. Dad’s been doing office stuff mostly.’

Drew Slocombe was an undertaker, running his own alternative burial ground in a field not far from the

house. Assisted by Andrew Emerson, he performed every aspect of the work in a simple no-frills style that appealed to a dependable minority of people. A familiar face at hospices in the area, he provided a friendly, affordable service that ensured a regular stream of customers. As prices rose steadily for mainstream funerals, Drew kept his remarkably low. As a result, the Slocombes had very little cash to spare. If Thea hadn't sold the house she had owned in Oxfordshire, they'd have needed state benefits and free school dinners. But now there was also a plan to sell the original Slocombe burial field back in Somerset, where Drew and his family had lived before he met Thea. Stephanie was unsure as to how she felt about this, suspecting that if she had been ten years older, Dad would have let her run it for him. As it was, his one-time partner Maggs had let them all down by deciding she wanted to follow a different line of business from then on. Without her, Peaceful Repose was more trouble than it was worth. As the memories faded, Stephanie found it easy enough to deal with the loss of her one-time home. Timmy was even less concerned than she was. There was so much going on here in Broad Campden – the new school, new friends, even a new cousin – that the past just slid away unregretted.

Stephanie liked Andrew well enough, not thinking of him as a substitute for Maggs, because he was so completely different. He hardly seemed to notice her, for one thing. When he did come to the house, it was always Timmy he concentrated on. He had been a farmer until a

couple of years ago, but he had seemed delighted to have given that up and gone into the funeral business instead. He knew the Cotswolds well, and had a lot of useful friends scattered across the villages.

They were home in no time, the conversation scarcely started before they were lugging bags out of the car. ‘People shouldn’t die at Christmas,’ Stephanie said. ‘There should be a law.’

Thea laughed. ‘I agree with you there,’ she said.

The schoolbag was upended onto the kitchen table and the cards scrupulously pinned to the long tape festooning the living room, almost doubling the display. ‘All these presents have to go under the tree,’ said Stephanie. ‘I’ll open them on the day.’

Timmy had been home for barely ten minutes when his sister and stepmother got back. Still at the primary school, he qualified for a place on the bus, which dropped him at the top of the lane where they lived. His haul of Christmas greetings cards and gifts was considerably smaller than Stephanie’s. In fact, the only actual present was from his friend Caleb. ‘Boys don’t bother with that stuff so much,’ said Stephanie kindly. ‘Mine are all going to be nail polish and snazzy socks, I expect.’

‘Mm,’ said the boy with a shrug.

The living room certainly looked very festive. Thea had produced a box of tinsel and red candles and artificial holly, saved from the previous year. ‘I’ve had this stuff for ages. I guess it’s looking a bit sad now,’ she admitted. Drew discovered that his own similar box

had not survived the move from Somerset. 'I must have chucked it out,' he said, scratching his head. 'I've no idea when I last saw it.'

So Thea had thrown herself into the whole business, getting great armfuls of silver and gold and red decorations from Poundland and other places, pinning them all over the room in a gaudy exhibition of Christmas spirit that made the room seem small and magical, like a fairy's cave. Or so Stephanie observed, in wholehearted admiration when Thea ushered everybody in to admire her handiwork. 'Worth waiting for – right?' she said.

'Do fairies live in caves?' wondered Timmy.

'Grottoes,' said Drew.

'That's the same thing,' said his pedantic daughter.

Drew was making an effort as well. He had gone on his own private shopping expedition two weekends ago and come back with a large bag bulging in intriguing ways. 'Don't look!' he ordered and hurried through to his office at the back of the house.

The air was crackling with anticipation. So many new things were going to happen, one after another. For a start, Andrew and Fiona Emerson had been invited to join the Slocombes for drinks the next evening. Their daughter, who usually did the honours by having them to stay for several days around Christmas, had a new baby and was letting her in-laws take the strain. As an added novelty, Thea's brother Damien had announced, with no consultation, that he and his wife and small daughter would be paying a visit to Broad Campden on the day after Boxing Day, hoping to stay overnight.

‘What!’ shrieked Thea, when he phoned. ‘What brought that on?’

‘It’s high time you got to know your niece. You’ve barely even laid eyes on her all year.’

‘I’ve been busy,’ Thea protested feebly.

‘It’ll be good to catch up,’ he said, brooking no argument. He was the eldest in the family and nobody had ever got the hang of arguing with him. Thea conveyed the news to the others with trepidation. ‘It’ll be like a state visit,’ she groaned.

‘It’ll be great,’ her husband assured her. ‘And Stephanie’s going to love the baby, aren’t you, pet?’

Stephanie had blithely agreed that she would definitely relish the company of a baby step-cousin.

‘Not such a baby now,’ Thea reminded them. ‘She must be over two. Same age as Meredith.’

‘It’ll be great,’ said Drew again, as if saying it would make it so. Stephanie’s faith in him never wavered for a moment.

For a family with very few close friends, the Slocombes were suddenly feeling alarmingly popular. Maggs and Den Cooper were coming at New Year, and Thea’s mother was making noises about hardly ever seeing her, with the clear implication that a visit was imminent.

And then there was Jessica.