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Crisis in the Cotswolds

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Chapter One

‘That was difficult,’ said Drew, clasping and twisting his hands as if holding himself together. ‘Worse than difficult, in fact.’

‘In what way?’ Thea frowned up at him. ‘Are they in a terrible hurry or something?’

‘No. They want me to pretend the funeral’s not happening. They want me to lie, if a particular person phones to enquire. And they will, apparently.’

‘Who? Don’t they know who they’re dealing with? What did you tell them?’

He went to the kettle and made himself a cup of strong instant coffee. His movements were jerky, and Thea could feel his tension from across the room. ‘I told them it wasn’t something I would generally agree to.’

‘Don’t make it so strong, Drew. It’s bad for your heart.’

‘It’s not my heart I’m worried about. It’s my

conscience. I let money overrule principle. A simple moral dilemma, on the face of it. But who am I to judge the rights and wrongs of it?’

‘So – I’m guessing these are nice people, and the person you’ve got to lie to is a feckless drunken cousin who’s going to come and wreck the whole thing.’

‘More or less, according to them. But how do I know if I can believe what they say? What if it’s the other way round? It’s a big thing, to stop somebody coming to a funeral.’

‘I could do it,’ she offered. ‘I’m a better liar than you, after all. You’d just stammer and choke, and they’d know you were fobbing them off.’

She could see he was tempted. ‘That would mean you answering every call for the rest of the week. You wouldn’t be able to go out.’

‘True,’ she nodded, with a glance at the clear blue sky outside. ‘But I can hear the phone from the garden, and that new lounger hasn’t had much use so far.’

‘You lazy object,’ he sighed. ‘What happened to those plans you had for getting a job? That was months ago now.’

‘It must have been New-Year-itis. Resolutions and new starts and all that. But Hepzie thinks it wouldn’t do. Not to mention Steph and Tim. The whole thing would get impossibly complicated.’

‘Other people manage. In fact, as far as I can see, just about every woman in the land has found a way of managing. Look at Maggs.’

'I know they have, but it doesn't look like fun to me. I've never imagined I could compete with Maggs on any level. And I'm not sure it would be sensible economically, either, in our case. We've still got plenty of my house money to fall back on. We'll talk about it again when Tim goes to the big school, okay?'

Drew sighed again. 'That's two and a bit years from now, right?'

'Indeed. No time at all. Now tell me about this dodgy funeral.'

He sat at the table, nursing his mug. 'The deceased is called Stephen Biddulph, aged seventy-nine. The funeral's on Tuesday. There's a wife, Linda, and a son, Lawrence. Second wife. Which is a secret, even from Lawrence. He's always assumed he was a one and only.'

'What? And she told you, just like that?'

'I'm a safe pair of ears. But now that Stephen's dead, she's worried that word will get back to the first wife and her two sons. Secrets have a habit of breaking loose when there's a death. That would rock all sorts of boats. Especially for her precious son, who would be exceedingly upset, apparently.'

Thea gave this some thought. 'He'd be very angry as well, probably. Especially with her for keeping the existence of half-brothers hidden from him. I know I would be.' She scowled at the very idea. 'What a coward she must be.'

'Hey! That's a bit strong. She says Stephen made

her swear never to mention it when Lawrence was born, and she's stuck with it. She's quite proud of herself, I think.'

'So, the man never saw his older sons in all that time?' Her outrage was still all too evident. 'How is that possible in this day and age?'

Drew shrugged. 'Good question.' He finished the coffee and stood up. 'Anyway, can't stop. Mr Fleming tomorrow, nine-thirty sharp.'

'The birdsong one?'

'That's him.'

They had enjoyed this particular customer more than most when it came to planning the funeral. Mr Fleming, deceased, had been avid about birds, and had insisted that his burial take place to the sound of their song. Dying at the beginning of May had been a bonus but, as Thea had pointed out, 'They sing loudest at about 5 a.m. You'll have to be out there pretty early.'

Mrs Fleming, being a woman of pragmatic character, had refused to consider anything sooner than half past nine. 'They won't sing at all if it's raining,' she said. 'These things are clearly impossible to control. If it's a fine day, there'll be very nice early sunshine and most likely some sort of birdsong, even if it's only collared doves.'

Drew, who lived to serve, had worried. 'What if I bring a CD player for backup?' he suggested. 'There are sure to be some discs of birds available.'

'If you like,' the widow agreed. 'But I'm not sure

that's what Dicky had in mind. To be perfectly frank, it's enough for me that he died thinking it would all go as he wanted it to. He imagined the whole thing in advance, and that made him happy. What we actually do on the day isn't terribly relevant, when you stop to think about it.'

Drew was never quite sure how to handle this kind of scepticism. Any lack of consideration for the rituals of death made him uneasy. 'You still think the dead person's hovering over you, watching what goes on,' Thea accused him. 'Don't you?'

'Not exactly,' he prevaricated. 'But it feels wrong to risk it, just in case.'

This elicited a laugh that was more affectionate than mocking. 'You're a one,' she told him.

But they both knew that Drew had a comprehensive understanding of most of the emotional and cultural significances of a funeral. He regularly knew better than the families themselves what were the essential elements that should not be fudged or overlooked. Primary amongst these essentials was a recognition that the person concerned had gone and was not coming back. This was followed closely by a similar recognition that the same thing was going to happen to everybody else in the family, and it therefore behoved them to do as they would be done by. The dead were acutely vulnerable to disrespect and calumny, which explained the taboo against speaking ill of them. Whether grieving the loss or celebrating the life – or,

ideally, both – there were certain truths that Drew would not allow to be dodged. He never said ‘passed away’, never avoided referring directly to ‘the body’, and never carelessly agreed to any overriding of the dead person’s wishes.

And in the case of Mr James Fleming (always known as Dicky), he very much hoped that some obliging birds would sing spectacularly in the trees above the newly dug grave.

But the matter of the Biddulph family – or *families*, to be strictly accurate – was a whole other worry. Thea’s offer to shoulder the burden of blatant lying was of very little comfort. Her involvement in the burial business was capricious at the best of times. At the outset, he had assumed that she would step efficiently into the shoes of his first assistant, Maggs Cooper. Arranging the funerals, talking to the relatives, even handling the bodies and attending the burials – it was all there waiting for her when they moved to Broad Campden. But, bit by bit, she had detached herself until her role had reduced to little more than answering the phone and sending out the bills. Her first experience of making arrangements with a young wife and very young son had gone disastrously badly. The family took its business elsewhere and Thea swore never to do that again. ‘I’m not Maggs Cooper,’ she said repeatedly. ‘She’s irreplaceable.’

It was true that Maggs was unusual. If ever a person had a vocation, it was her. From her early teens, she

knew what she wanted to do and foisted herself on the local undertaker, brooking no arguments. When Drew set up on his own, Maggs went with him. Their success was as much thanks to her as to his own efforts. People loved her. Sensitive but direct, friendly but professional – she struck precisely the right note in her dealings with the bereaved. And now she was in charge of that original business, down in Somerset, with a small child, husband and versatile employee called Pandora, while Drew soldiered on in the Cotswolds, assisted not by his wife but a new employee named Andrew.

‘I’ll have to think about it,’ he said five minutes later. He’d made some toast for himself before pursuing further business in his office.

‘Think about what?’ Thea had been reading the local paper, forgetting all about Drew and his burials.

‘The first Mrs Biddulph,’ he reminded her.

‘Is that still her name?’

‘Good question. Probably not. Look – don’t stay by the phone any more than usual. If the call comes through to me, I can handle it. If you do answer it, just be careful what you tell anybody asking about that funeral, okay?’

‘No problem.’ She smiled at him, her whole face soft and pretty and guileless. His wife, he inwardly repeated, for the thousandth time in nearly a year. His *second* wife. Thea Osborne, née Johnstone, now Slocombe. Stepmother to his children, retired house-sitter and a

few years older than him. He had fallen for her within minutes of their first meeting, in the face of disapproval from Maggs and his own anguished conscience, his first wife Karen still being alive at the time.

‘Anything in the paper?’ he asked.

‘Quite a lot, actually. You’ve got a heartfelt thanks in the obituaries, and somebody’s stolen a Labrador bitch and eight puppies, one week old. How is that possible? What foul things people can be. Oh, and they’ve finally got your plans in the council announcements section. Only a month late, the idiots.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I can’t afford to do it yet, anyway.’

‘That’s not the point.’ Her look was part exasperation and part affection. ‘It sends a message that business is growing and you’re keen to add more facilities and attract more customers.’

‘Yes, I know,’ he said, with his customary patience.