



Peril in the Cotswolds

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Chapter One

‘For heaven’s sake, Heps, get out of the way,’ pleaded Thea, feeling ashamed of herself even as she spoke. The dog had one leg in plaster and could hardly be expected to move quickly. Combined with her physical handicap, she was also in need of constant reassurance that one day she would be able to run and jump again.

But it was the first day of the spring school term, and the household was in chaos. The children were every bit as demanding as the spaniel, in their different ways. Stephanie was adamant that only one particular headband was acceptable, and Timmy was making it very clear to everyone that school was a place full of torturers and criminals, and it was indefensible to make him go there.

Drew was in the room at the back of the house on the telephone to a man whose wife had died during the night. Sounds of family conflict were very much not permitted to filter through the closed door, which

left Thea on her own, trying to attend to every need.

‘She can’t help it,’ said Stephanie, leaping to the dog’s defence. ‘Don’t shout at her.’

‘I wasn’t,’ said Thea, with a strong sense of being unjustly accused. ‘But I can’t move with her at my feet all the time. How can I find your headband if I can’t even go into the hall without kicking the dog?’

‘You can’t *kick* her!’ protested Timmy, his face full of horror.

‘No I know I can’t. That’s why I’m stuck here, and you’re going to be late for the bus.’

It was obvious that Timmy thought this an outcome devoutly to be wished. ‘Here it is, still in my bag,’ Stephanie discovered. ‘It must have been there for *ages*. Since we broke up last term, in fact. It smells.’ She sniffed at the strip of blue satin. ‘Pooh!’

‘Why? What else is in there?’ Thea asked warily. She had a sneaking feeling that she had simply left the bag unexamined for two and a half weeks. ‘Let’s have a look.’ She pulled out a plastic bag containing the mildewed crusts of lunchtime sandwiches and a furry apple core. ‘Could be worse,’ she muttered. ‘The smell’s just your trainers. You haven’t needed them over Christmas.’ She turned to the small boy. ‘What about you, Tim? What’s been left in your bag all holiday, I wonder?’

He tipped the mini-rucksack upside down and nothing whatsoever fell out of it. ‘I emptied it in my room,’ he said, ‘on the first day of the holidays.’

‘Well done, you,’ she approved. ‘I’m glad one of us has got some sense.’

The child made no reply, but merely sighed.

‘Where’s Daddy?’ asked Stephanie.

‘You know perfectly well he’s on the phone.’

‘I want him to kiss us before we go. It’s a new term – it’s special. Timmy wants it as well.’

‘The bus goes in two minutes. You’ve got to go *now*. You can’t miss it on the first day – they might give your seats to someone else, and then I’d have to drive you every morning.’ Thea had worked hard to get permission for the children to travel on the school bus, despite living under the requisite two miles away. Timmy had seemed terribly young to be consigned to such a form of travel, but his sister promised to watch out for him, and the previous term had seen them collected and returned without mishap, five days a week.

It was in no way her fault that Drew was unavailable to kiss his children goodbye. That she was getting the fallout from it was inevitable and not unduly burdensome. She felt no resentment about it. But she noticed it, just the same. She noticed everything, from the way everyone automatically assumed she would step into the role of general family organiser, to include everything from meals, clothes, housework, timetables and health matters to the absence of space, either physical or emotional, for her to be herself – whoever that might be. Thea Osborne had mutated into Thea Slocombe, and the new person was often hard to recognise.

She had spent half her life as Osborne, having married young and been widowed twenty years later. Drew Slocombe had come along quite out of the blue, here in Broad Campden. They had fitted together like magic, knowing – as they afterwards insisted – from that first day that they would end up as a couple. Now they were married and she had become a replacement mother for the two children, their own mum having died not too long ago. It had taken her a foolishly long time to accept that she was well and truly a stepmother, with everything that label entailed. While the fairy tales dealing with the subject held virtually no overt relevance to the new-made Slocombe family, the daily detail, the ever-present sense of responsibility, had been a slowly burgeoning shock. It was so far from the future she had imagined for herself that she was still not entirely convinced that it was real.

The children had been gone for three minutes when Drew reappeared. Having waved to them from the doorstep, Thea was sitting with a mug of tepid coffee thinking of nothing. Drew glanced around the kitchen, made a little face of regret and bent to scoop Hepzibah into his arms. ‘How’s our patient this morning?’ he crooned. ‘Does it hurt, I wonder?’ He stroked the animal gently as she flopped awkwardly on his arm. A cocker spaniel, with all her weight at the front end, she was never easy to carry. Drew had only recently begun to do it, apparently feeling a need to demonstrate his affection for her.

‘She’s getting lumpy,’ he observed, pulling at a section of matted hair over one haunch. ‘Ought to have a haircut at the poodle parlour.’

‘Put her down,’ said Thea. ‘You missed the children. They were hoping for a goodbye kiss.’ *And so was I*, she added silently. Not goodbye, but good morning. As far as she could recall, Drew had not so much as looked at her since the alarm had gone off at seven-fifteen.

He very carefully let the dog slide to the floor. ‘That was a funeral,’ he said. ‘Completely out of the blue. He wants it on Monday next week.’

It was currently Tuesday. ‘Is that a problem?’ she asked.

‘No, not really. It means more work for Andrew, which’ll please him. In fact, he’s going to be flat out for the rest of the week. We’ve got Miss Temple on Friday, and three separate lots of people want to come with trees on Saturday.’

‘In January? Is that sensible?’

‘Apparently you can plant bare-root things during the winter, so long as there’s no hard frost. I didn’t think I should argue.’

‘No.’

‘Are you okay?’

She sighed. ‘Oh, yes. First day of term. Tasks left undone. Stephanie’s schoolbag hadn’t been emptied since the end of last term and we couldn’t find her headband. It was in the bag, which was quite smelly. My fault, obviously. And I still don’t understand the

system for school dinners that they're doing now. It's going to be a nightmare.'

'I used to do their packed lunches every day. I did it for about two years. You get into the swing of it. Buy stuff in bulk – that's the secret.'

'I know the theory. But now it's cooked dinners for two days and sandwiches for three. How will that work? And the obesity police will check everything I give them and hold them up to ridicule if there's a Wagon Wheel.'

'I've got to give a talk to the local radio people this afternoon. I mean – they're going to come here and ask questions and then broadcast it a few hours later. I wanted to think up something that sounded really up to date and innovative.'

'Have you made any notes for it?'

He shook his head. 'All I can think of is what's wrong with our field. It would never have been chosen as a burial ground by anybody who knew what they were doing. It's too low-lying, too shady and too far from the church.'

'You can make all those things sound like advantages if you try. It's working out well enough, isn't it?'

'It could be a lot better,' he persisted. The field had been left to him, along with the house, by a woman who had embraced the concept of green burials shortly before she died. Remaking her will in Drew's favour must have felt like an act of supreme generosity as she did it. The house was certainly a valuable gift by any standards. But

the field was a distance away, the planning permission slow and complicated to obtain, and local attitudes still hovered on the fence between acceptance and rejection of such a business in their midst.

‘Say something about New Year resolutions, and giving some thought to making a will, and keeping everything simple and affordable for the family,’ she suggested.

He pulled a face indicative of scepticism and impatience. ‘It doesn’t sound very positive,’ he objected. ‘I get the feeling I should be aiming much more for the aesthetic side of it. How every grave can be individually designed, to reflect the person’s character.’

‘More of those embroidered felt shrouds, I suppose. I don’t know why it is, but I can’t take them seriously.’

‘People like them,’ he said vaguely. ‘But they mostly change their minds when they hear the price.’

‘Drew . . .’ She had no idea what she was going to say. She felt tired, with nothing to look forward to. Christmas was over, with a stack of greetings cards on the windowsill and a large bag of crumpled wrapping paper behind the sofa all there was left to show for it. She had been intending to smooth out the paper in the hopes of using it again. The cards were too fresh to throw away, but were entirely useless. She remembered her grandmother cutting them up for labels the following year, and entertained the idea for a brief moment. But there were too many of them, and they would only create clutter in the intervening eleven months.

‘What?’ For the first time that day he looked into her face. ‘What’s the matter? You’re not really okay at all, are you?’

‘Oh, it’s nothing in particular. I’m just a bit frazzled. It’s the sixth of January – isn’t that supposed to be a national day of depression or something?’

‘Is it? Sounds barmy to me. Like a government edict to be miserable.’

‘It’s probably next week, now I come to think of it. But you can understand it. Short days. Too much family jollity. Overeating and drinking. No wonder everybody feels a bit sick.’

‘I don’t. I’m looking forward to a promising new year. I hate to say it, but I really am counting my blessings.’

‘You’re disgusting. What happened to worrying about your talk and providing innovations for your customers?’

‘I wasn’t really worried; just thinking aloud. It’ll be fine when it comes to the point. After all, everybody who’ll be interested is going to be over eighty, in all likelihood, and quite happy with something traditional.’

‘Traditional? What’s traditional about being buried in a shallow hole in a field with a tree for a memorial? No church, no hymns or fancy flourishes. No, my love, your customer base is the mavericks of this world, and you know it. Not every eighty-year-old is a conformist, anyway. Especially these days.’

He smiled at her, patient as always. ‘Depends how far you go back through history, I suppose. I’m thinking nineteenth-century tradition. I agree with you, if we’re talking twentieth. And the twenty-first has still not decided what it thinks about anything.’ Drew’s innumerable virtues – tolerance, patience, benevolence – had not faded or changed in the months since their marriage; Thea’s awareness of her own imperfections had intensified as a result. The imbalance made her search for flaws in him. Surely nobody could be as perfect as he often seemed to be? And wouldn’t it be impossible to endure if you turned out to have married a paragon?

One of his characteristics was to address discomfort or discord head-on. ‘I am very far from perfect,’ he regularly assured her. ‘I’m afraid of lots of things, lazy, unobservant, impatient of trivia . . .’ His list would generally fizzle out at that point. They both knew, but did not mention, that his greatest and most serious failing was in his relationship with his son. Timmy had been an intruder into the cosy family circle of Drew, Karen and Stephanie. He had brought noise and worry and inconvenience in his wake. A fractious baby, demanding at first and then all too dreadfully *undemanding* as he seemed to grasp the limitations of the situation. His mother had almost died when he was still a toddler, and never fully recovered her health. The deficiencies that he endured from that time on could be glimpsed in his eyes, from time to time.

Thea suspected that the other children at school could see it, and punished him accordingly for his frailty.

And she herself found it hard to give the child what he craved. She substituted – as Drew had done – an undue emphasis on the superficial. He was given his favourite foods, electronic toys, the right clothes and shoes – as far as finances would allow. His school progress was closely monitored.

‘Oh, well,’ said Thea, after a silence. ‘Better get on. The dog hasn’t been out yet. She must be bursting.’ Taking Hepzie for a walk had been reduced to a brief hobble to a corner of the garden, where she would obediently relieve herself. The broken leg had been the result of a farcical accident as Drew had been unloading two newly constructed coffins from his van. The dog had been sniffing interestedly at the fresh woody scent, jumping up at the exact moment that Drew lost his hold, and the whole thing slid to the ground on top of her. A sharp corner caught her femur, and despite the relative lightness of the coffin, the impact on the soft body was disastrous. ‘I swear I heard the bone crack,’ Drew said miserably, as they waited for the vet to diagnose the damage. Thea had heard the canine screams through two closed doors, and rushed to see what had happened. It had been Christmas Eve. The whole family piled into the car and dashed to the vet, who had to be summoned from a party. The resulting bone-setting and plastering had been traumatic and expensive, and Hepzie became a heroine in everybody’s

eyes. Drew, however, managed to avoid censure for his carelessness, except in his own conscience.

Now two weeks had passed, and everyone was growing impatient for the plaster to be off and normality resumed. The dog had tipped over into middle age: her coat was less glossy and her eyes more rheumy. As Drew pointed out, there were matted areas all over her body, where the soft feathering had turned into felty lumps. Thea knew she would be forced into regular trimming, losing the shaggy animal she loved, and replacing it with a streamlined version that looked completely different.

‘Come on, then,’ she said now to the dog. ‘Let’s get you some fresh air. We’ll go down the lane a bit for a change. You can manage that if you try.’

She opened the front door, and waited for Hepzie to limp through it. Three-legged progress was not supposed to be such hard work, she reflected, thinking of a number of dogs permanently reduced to such a state, which she had seen running as fast as any fully equipped animal. ‘Come on,’ she said again. ‘We’ll go into the field a little way.’

But before they had even got down the little path between the door and the little lane they lived on, a man had interposed himself, standing solidly in their way.