

*Betrayal in the Cotswolds*

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## *Prologue*

It was late April. The children had gone back to school and life was relatively quiet. Thea Slocombe had been approached for a new house-sitting commission in six weeks' time and she was presenting herself in Lower Oddington for inspection and instruction.

The village was readily located, a short way east of Stow-on-the-Wold and parking was easy. *The same only different*, Thea said to herself as she parked her car outside Umberto Kingly's handsome stone house with its perfect symmetry and colourful garden. He let her in and introductions were made. She waited in vain for him to say 'Call me Bert'. On closer inspection, it was perfectly obvious that this was never going to happen. Which was in no way a problem, since 'Umberto' was a splendid name by any standards. She liked the 'Kingly' too, because he was, rather. Very straight back and an authoritative look in his eye. But quite a lot less rich than a king, to judge by the state of his clothes and property.

He might be a man of substance in the physical sense, but there was a shabbiness about him that could not be mere eccentricity. The house oddly suited him – surrounded by second homes belonging to stockbrokers and barristers, only an initial careless glance could make it fit the Cotswold stereotype. A gutter was hanging at a precarious angle, paint was peeling from the window frames and the incongruous locked gate that opened onto the pavement was rusting in places.

Umberto was affable, with a large oval head and a matching paunch. His thick wavy hair was dark grey, having obviously mutated from black. He had an air of impatience with the world. Thea earned his approval by returning his gaze without flinching and replying to his remarks with very few words. He succinctly explained the nature of her commission and she replied with equal briskness. She was to remain in place for five days, taking care of three dogs, and a roomful of old cameras and binoculars.

Thea's first impressions of Upper and Lower Oddington were nowhere near as favourable as others had been in other places. This was nothing more than a street lined with old houses, the occasional new ones standing out vividly – custard-yellow amidst the mustard and caramel of their neighbours. She spotted an Old Post Office and Old Malthouse, evidence of lost businesses. There was no sign of a shop and The Fox Inn looked as if it was very slowly being renovated or refurbished or something. If she wanted a pub, she would have to go to the Horse and Groom in the other Oddington.

Umberto's house boasted the name of 'Positano', which struck Thea as highly unsuitable, even if it confirmed an

Italian dimension to the man. It had an iron gate and a keypad, as did about half the properties she had passed. The gravelled area outside the gate was adorned with a prominent 'No Parking' sign, and a smaller one asking people to prevent their dogs from fouling it or its strip of grass. The sign was particularly sinister, with a pair of eyes watching closely for canine misdemeanours.

'So welcoming,' Thea muttered to her dog. Hepzibah had been given permission to share in the house-sitting and had come on this preliminary reconnaissance to be approved by Umberto.

As he showed her round the house, he explained the business – which she had already understood was more of a passion that generated no more than a very modest income. An upstairs room had become home to numerous examples of his stock-in-trade. Cameras of every shape and size lined the walls. 'I buy them at auctions mostly,' he explained. 'And get them cleaned up and working. Then I take them back to where they were made – which is Germany for the most part. I'm especially passionate about Voigtländers.' He clearly wanted to say more about this, but thought better of it. 'I'm sorry. You don't want to hear all that now. I keep this room locked, as you'll understand. And I'd be glad if you wouldn't mention it to anybody. They might be rather specialist, but a burglary would be most unwelcome, all the same.'

'Of course,' murmured Thea, thinking about her grandfather who had shown her how to work his precious Leica when she was about eight.

'So I'm going off for a week in June on a selling trip. It's the first one since I got the dogs. Since . . .' he hesitated. 'Since we had some family trouble last year,' he finished.

Thea's curiosity was instantly aroused, but she bit back the questions. Umberto reverted to his plans for the trip. 'You meet such wonderful people,' he sighed. 'Absolute experts, most of them. It's a privilege to know them.'

'Must be sad to see the old equipment gradually disappearing,' she said. 'Can you even get film for them any more?'

He laughed and told her that there were specialist companies still valiantly producing thirty-five-millimetre film, as well as older formats. 'Not for much longer, I suppose,' he sighed. 'I hate progress, don't you?'

Thea had no answer to that, and realised that he didn't really expect one. He was happy in his bygone world, which apparently was even now quite lavishly populated with fellow Luddites.

'So come and meet the girls,' said Umberto, as if everything else had been a rather insignificant preamble. 'I'm sure they'll like you.'

Thea had already realised that the dogs were even more dauntingly precious than the cameras – pedigree salukis, with infeasibly long legs and shining brown coats. 'They just need company,' their owner told Thea. 'And somebody to stand guard over them. Don't *ever* take them out. They've got all the space they need here.' And he showed her his field, strongly fenced and scattered with doggy toys and a kind of miniature set of jumps and hurdles worthy of a gymkhana. Patches of untended long grass added variety, and Thea was excused from having to clean up their excrement. 'They mostly go at the far end, so just watch where you tread down there,' said Umberto.

He recited their names, which she jotted down on the

notepad she carried. 'They're beautiful,' she sighed, in all sincerity.

'They are,' he agreed. 'The loves of my life.' And he offered her more than twice her usual fee for keeping his darlings happy. 'But do remember that they're vulnerable to being stolen,' he added with a very poor attempt at carelessness.

'I'll remember,' she assured him, and then changed the subject. 'How long have you lived here?'

'Oh – that's a complicated thing to explain. My mother has lived here most of her adult life and had us all here as children. When my father died, she insisted she couldn't be here on her own, so the four of us organised a sort of rota to stay with her. None of us has properly managed to leave home, you see,' he said with a sigh. 'I moved in permanently at the beginning of last year, just to save money. I never dreamt that Mama would go and die on me. It came as quite a shock.'

'It must have done. Was your mother fond of the dogs?'

'I didn't have the dogs then. They're not even a year old. I only got them six or seven months ago. It's all very recent, you know.' Thea remembered the remark about family trouble. 'We're still settling down, actually. I wake up some mornings thinking my mother's still in the next bedroom to mine.'

'She died suddenly, did she?'

'Yes, she did. It was horrible.' He was suddenly unreasonably snappish, his face turning pink. 'It was last summer. Must be nine or ten months ago, now.'

'Oh dear,' said Thea feebly.

He took a breath and forced a weak smile. 'Sorry. It's still quite raw. She just dropped dead, halfway through a sentence. Never a day's illness in her life, everything to live

for, no will or anything. Threw everything into a spin for a while. We're a very close family, you see.'

Thea wasn't sure she did see, but she smiled understandingly. Umberto went on, 'The house came to me more or less by default. But it's still the focal point for the others as well. The grandchildren all love it. Not that any of them are mine.' He grimaced, and changed the subject. 'So you think you can manage my lovely girls, then?'

'They'll be fine with me,' she assured him. 'And it's not for very long, is it?'