

Chapter One

June 7th, at last! Phil Hollis hummed a broken medley to himself, in sheer boyish exuberance at having reached the long-awaited date without any last-minute impediment. Even the sun shared his sense of a holiday deserved, as it rose over the hills and warmed central England to Mediterranean levels.

Thea would be waiting for him in the house she had described as ‘quaint’, just outside Temple Guiting. She had already been there for two days, taking charge of a rare collection of tropical fish indoors and two horses outside. ‘And that’s not all,’ she’d said on the phone. ‘You can have the complete inventory when you get here.’

He hoped to stay the whole of Sunday, including

the night, leaving first thing on Monday for a full week's work. He had not enjoyed a free Sunday for the past five weeks, thanks to complex work patterns combined with a massive emergency in Worcester a fortnight earlier, involving a cache of ricin and great political fallout. Despite one or two lone voices, asserting with complete authority that ricin was not an especially dangerous substance, utter panic had resulted from the overwrought reporting and the police had been expected to find those responsible in a matter of hours. The small pockets of calming reason were ignored and their message unheeded. Like many other chemicals or plant derivatives, they insisted, ricin could cause damage and death if administered directly into the body, but simply having it scattered in the vicinity wasn't going to hurt anybody. Detective Superintendent Hollis did his best to keep an open mind, but knew he was unlikely to succeed. When everyone around him used the word 'ricin' as if it were the greatest killer substance of all time, it was impossible to believe it was no more harmful than asbestos dust or the sap of the giant hogweed. Much more prevalent was the idea that it was as poisonous as polonium or some sort of 'dirty bomb'. Besides, Phil knew the real

danger came from public panic, regardless of the actual objective level of risk from the material in question.

The only balancing words of scepticism he ever heard were those uttered by Thea, his girlfriend. Thea Osborne did not take newspaper headlines or politicians' utterances seriously. She understood the pressures on the police, and sympathised, not least because her daughter was in the Force. But she had grown up in a family that regarded law enforcement as something that should remain in the background, not affecting people's lives unless they demonstrably transgressed. Surveillance, pre-emptive arrest, holding people in custody without charge – it was all quite obviously wrong in her eyes, and any attempt to justify such practices earned him her scathing rebuttal.

But this weekend, he was smugly confident that Thea would be entirely focused on the weather, her dog, the house-sitting commission and her feelings towards himself, perhaps not in that order. Approaching their first anniversary as 'an item', they were resolved to devote themselves to consolidating their relationship in the isolated charm of Hector's Nook. Phil had not brought his own two dogs, and hoped that Thea's spaniel

would refrain from being too effusive. It wasn't difficult to have too much jumping up and licking, however lovingly meant.

Thea's directions were clear, and he wound through the village with the sunlight flickering through the wooded areas on each side of the road. Accustomed to the skewed levels of many parts of the Cotswolds, he dropped his speed enough to admire the succession of tree-capped hills to the right and the sweeps of upland to the left. He glimpsed water between the trees and remembered that this was yet another village built on the River Windrush. He anticipated a long riverside walk later in the day, with perhaps a meal in one of the characterful pubs the area boasted.

The trees were striking and he took a moment to analyse what it was about them that he found so significant. It came to him that they had a special air of age to them. Twisted and mossy, rooted in uneven stony ground, they gave the appearance of having been there forever, witnessing aeons of human folly. Uncharacteristically fanciful on this sunny day, he imagined the scenes they must have observed over the years. This village was on the way to nowhere, secluded and ignored,

like dozens of others in the area, until the taste for English heritage took hold and busloads of tourists found their way to Gloucestershire to admire the colour of the stone and the neatness of the gardens.

DS Phil Hollis had spent most of his life in the Cotswolds, and knew his way around. But he could still make new discoveries, and only since meeting Thea had he realised the depths of his ignorance as to the history of these places. She had made him aware of wool as a great economic and political force, and the sheer aesthetic brilliance of turning its profits into sumptuous yellow buildings that showed every sign of lasting several times as long as the venerable trees that surrounded them. Just such a building loomed ahead on a modest promontory, a classically breathtakingly beautiful manor house, basking in the sunshine with complacency oozing from every stone. He mentally saluted its claim to be just as complacent as it liked. Anything as lovely as that deserved to be pleased with itself.

He was aware of a need to remain steadfastly optimistic, given the setbacks he and Thea had endured over the past year. Her role as house-sitter had plunged her into a number of

adventures, most of them dangerous. The mere fact of a home owner disappearing for two or three weeks frequently appeared to activate malign forces in the neighbourhood. ‘But,’ Thea had asserted recklessly, ‘not this time. The sun is going to shine, the house will be a haven of tranquillity and you can come both weekends to share it with me.’

Both weekends had already dwindled into one definite Sunday and one possible thirty-six-hour period a week later. ‘And I might manage to come over for an evening now and then,’ he had added, with crossed fingers. ‘That leaves you with an awful lot of time on your own.’

Thea shrugged bravely. ‘I’ll be OK,’ she said. ‘I’ve got Hepzie, don’t forget.’

‘Oughtn’t you to think about asking someone to join you, like last time?’ he insisted. Thea’s daughter Jessica had been with her in Blockley, a few months previously, and her sister Jocelyn had shared part of an earlier commission. ‘One of your relations or something.’

‘They’re all busy,’ she said. ‘Besides, I wouldn’t know what to do with an “or something”.’ The feeble joke landed face down and the subject was changed.

The approach to Hector's Nook was a bumpy bendy track between high hedges, plunging alarmingly downhill for the last fifty yards. The house stood on a levelled shelf, facing the drive, in full morning sunshine. It was the mellow hue of every old stone building in the area, greyish-yellow, with woodwork picked out in a dark orange. A steep garden rose on one side, and a large shed or garage occupied another plateau on Phil's right. In a lopsided curve around the corner of the house, at the foot of the sloping garden, there was a lawn, partially shielded by a few shrubs and some tall willow trees. The willows were a narrow-leaved variety, with a delicate semi-transparent tracery presented by their upward-thrusting branches. On a windy day they would flicker and dance delightfully, he thought. The whole place had an unplanned, careless air which he found refreshing in the self-conscious Cotswolds.

He parked his car next to Thea's red hatchback, got out and paused to savour the sight before him.

Thea had come to the door with her dog. She stood there, the light in her face, smiling broadly. Her dark hair was longer than he had

ever seen it, the ends flipped up where it reached her shoulders, giving an impression of youth and innocence. She wore a sleeveless top, dark red, and white cut-off trousers. Her bare arms and calves looked brown and warm. But it was her face that held his attention. Thea was a beauty, by any standards. Large deep-set eyes, an elfin chin, slightly pouting mouth – it all added up to a picture that people liked to simply contemplate for its own sake. But for Phil, there was a lot more to it than mere contemplation. This was *his* woman and had been for nearly a year, despite cool times and angry times and periods of mutual suspicion. He would have only himself to blame if things went sour between them now, and he was entirely committed to ensuring that no such thing could happen.

He climbed slowly out of the car, mirroring her smile. ‘Here I am,’ he said. ‘As promised.’

‘So you are,’ she nodded. ‘Congratulations.’

She meant it genuinely – that much he had learnt about her from the outset. Thea Osborne did not do sarcasm or barbed remarks with critical subtexts. She was sincerely applauding his achievement in escaping from work and arriving when he said he would.

But nonetheless he laughed, a trifle uneasily. He could still hear the distant tones of his ex-wife, uttering the same word, loaded with venom and bitterness. He still felt the strain of the two conflicting demands on his energy and attention. He still believed, deep down, that senior policemen ought not to even attempt to engage in serious relationships. Even his dogs would have endorsed that sentiment, deposited as they so often were with his sister in Painswick.

‘Coffee’s brewing,’ Thea added.

He stepped quickly towards her, his arms held wide. Her smile went soft and her eyelashes fluttered. As he enfolded her to his chest, a voice spoke from inside the house.

‘He got here then,’ said a woman. ‘Just like you said.’

He tightened his grip on Thea in his shock, and angled his head to see who had spoken. The shadows in the hallway revealed nothing more than a bulky silhouette, until the figure moved further into the light. A very large person emerged; a woman he guessed to be around thirty-five years in age and close to twenty stone in weight, with short chopped hair and the oddly similar features of all fat people: small half-

buried eyes, rosebud mouth, multiple chins and long plump cheeks.

Phil waited for enlightenment as to who she might be, making no attempt to guess.

Thea pulled herself free, but kept one arm curled around his waist. ‘Oh, sorry,’ she said. ‘Phil, this is Janey. She’s from the village.’

‘Hello, Janey,’ he said with deliberate pleasantness.

The woman responded with a complicated smile, acknowledging her size, her borderline claim to being fully human, her willingness to pretend that normal social intercourse was possible. He sensed the effort that even such a simple exchange required of her, the effort that virtually everything required, simply to shift twenty stone of flesh from place to place. He felt the exasperation that he supposed most people felt, confronted with such an example of rampant lack of willpower, or perverse refusal to link food with body weight.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not staying,’ she said. Her voice was musical, rich. He imagined it bubbling through double cream or melted chocolate. She looked at Thea. ‘Thanks for the chat,’ she said, and began to walk away. Her feet, Phil noted,

seemed tiny, and not at all burdened. Almost, she seemed to walk on tiptoe, though surely that wasn't possible?

The couple watched in silence until she had turned the bend in the rutted drive. Hepzie, the cocker spaniel, had followed her a short way, but Janey ignored her. Now the dog came back and devoted its entire attention to Phil, sniffing his legs for evidence of Baxter or Claude. 'She's putting on weight,' he said, innocently.

'Hey! Mind what you say,' Thea protested, glancing up the drive to where her visitor had walked. 'She might hear you.'

Phil blinked, and then laughed. 'Not *her*. Hepzibah. She's getting broad in the beam.' He patted the dog's rump.

'Nonsense. It's her coat. She always gets more hair in the summer – and loses it in the winter. She's on the Australian calendar, I think. Besides, cockers are meant to be boxy. Hepzie's always been too rangy until now.'

'So, who exactly is Janey?' he wanted to know. 'And why? And *how*? I mean – *how* is it possible...'

'Poor thing. It must be awful on a day like this. She's walked at least a mile to get here, and

a mile back again. It's already hot.'

He raised an eyebrow, awaiting replies to his questions. But Thea shrugged Janey away and began to talk about the house, its owner, the fish and the hitherto undisclosed creature in the shed at the end of the garden. 'A snake!' she said, wide-eyed. 'There's a python out there, and the dratted woman never told me, in case I was phobic.'

'Grounds for refusal to do the job, if you ask me. You're not, are you?'

'Not what?'

'Phobic.'

'Not in the least. I like them. I think they're fantastic, in fact. So strong and supple. Sinuous, muscular. I'm only sorry I'm not allowed to take her out and play with her.'

His eyebrow kinked again. 'You are, I assume, aware of the Freudian undertones in what you've just said?'

Her grin spread right across her face. 'I am,' she said.

The button had been pressed, and wordlessly they went indoors and indulged in half a morning of intimacy, which took in three of the house's rooms as they moved from urgent foreplay in the main living room, then to a wood-panelled

dining room from which stairs led to two upstairs bedrooms. The stairs were narrow with a sharp turn halfway up. Phil had an impression of a cosy house full of plants and mellow old-fashioned furnishings. In the living room he had glimpsed a row of fish tanks, one containing large bright orange fish like something out of a picture book.

Thea had been given a generously sized bed in the second bedroom, with a plump feather mattress that felt like sleeping in a cloud. Only after an hour or more did Phil come to his senses enough to comment.

‘This mattress is outrageous,’ he said. ‘I’ve never met anything like it.’

Thea ignored him, stretched naked on her back, watching the leaves of a tall willow make patterns against the blue sky. ‘We ought to be outside,’ she said. ‘We’re wasting the weather.’

He swallowed the implied insult, which she surely hadn’t meant. His own preference would have been to sleep soundly until early afternoon and then wake to a late but very tasty lunch in a riverside hostelry. Senior policemen, like dairy farmers, were habitually, inescapably tired. They snatched sleep whenever they could find it, and

learnt strategies for resting mind and body even when forced to remain awake.

‘So tell me about the person who lives here,’ he invited, hoping to keep her beside him for a while longer.

‘Miss Polly Deacon. Mid-sixties or so. Retired civil servant. Plenty of money. Lived here all her life, and her parents before her. Never saw any reason to move, but likes to travel. She’s gone to Argentina for nearly a month. I’m only needed here for part of the time, because her brother, Archie, is taking over from me. Archie’s wife has just kicked him out, being a selfish bitch and a spoilt cow. Or perhaps it was a selfish cow and a spoilt bitch. Anyway, we don’t like her. Miss Deacon wears tailored slacks and expensive shoes, and has red dyed hair. She goes to local history classes and hoards magazines. And cultivates house plants. You might have noticed the house plants? And the fish, of course.’

Phil had only the haziest impression of greenery on a number of surfaces in the rooms he had passed through on the way upstairs. ‘Mmm,’ he said. Then he summarised: ‘She’s a character, then.’

‘You’d like her. She’s the last of a dying breed.’

‘Must be. Sounds as if she’s in the wrong generation entirely. Apart from the dyed hair. That doesn’t seem to fit with the rest of it. Not to mention the snake.’

‘Oh, that’s Archie’s. The wife kicked it out as well. But Miss Deacon has always liked them, and bought in a consignment of mice for it to eat.’

Phil gulped. ‘Mice?’

‘Dead ones – they’re in the freezer. They breed them specially, apparently, for people to feed to exotic reptiles.’

‘That’s disgusting!’

‘Yes,’ said Thea equably.

‘What time is it?’

‘No idea. Nearly twelve, I guess. We could go somewhere for lunch.’

‘Just what I was thinking,’ he said, with only a flicker of disappointment.

Thea had not fully researched local pubs, apart from establishing that Temple Guiting did not possess one. ‘Just a shop and a church,’ she said. ‘The shop’s a bonus, although it’s not open all the time. A local collective runs it on a rota system.’

‘Quaint,’ said Phil.

‘Oh, yes. Everything round here is quaint,’ Thea confirmed.

They used his car to drive to the next village, which was Guiting Power. There, the Hollow Bottom offered an acceptable bill of fare, and they ate outside, chatting easily. The pub had an unmistakable affinity with horse racing, which neither Phil nor Thea found particularly atmospheric. ‘We’ll try the Farmer’s Arms next time,’ he ordained. ‘It has a much better view of the village. Which, I have to say, is quite a lot prettier than Temple Guiting, unless there’s a part I haven’t seen yet.’

Thea tilted her head. ‘They’re completely different. Temple Guiting’s got a lot of trees. It must be very dark on a dull day. And there’s not really a proper centre like this one has. But it feels *older*, somehow. More history. Not least the Knights Templar, of course.’

Phil sighed gently. ‘You mean all that tedious Dan Brown stuff, I suppose.’

‘It can be tedious, but not in the way you mean. The mythology that’s grown up around them is completely idiotic. But if you research them properly, as a real historian, you get a whole new angle on the Middle Ages.’

‘And you’ve done that? Researched them properly?’

She shook her head. ‘Not my period, but I did have a bit of a trawl on the Internet, just to get myself clued up. And Miss Deacon’s got stacks of books and magazines all about it. I’ll be able to sit outside in the sun, reading for long lazy afternoons. It’ll be blissful.’

‘You’re right about the oldness,’ he said, after a pause. ‘I felt it right away. As if the trees are the real inhabitants and the people are just recent intruders.’

‘Very romantic,’ she approved. ‘And exactly how I felt when I first saw it. Guiting Power is quite different from Temple Guiting – there it’s all about the people and their buildings. I suppose they both feel a need to be different – given how confusingly similar their names are.’

Phil nodded and changed the subject.

‘And that Janey – is she going to be a regular visitor? She seemed to think you were best buddies already.’

‘She’s been twice so far. She likes Miss Deacon’s horses. She’s one of those people you find yourself talking to about personal stuff after ten minutes.’

‘She doesn’t *ride*, does she?’ He entertained

a grim image of the wretched animal sagging helplessly as the vast woman landed on its back. ‘Or are they Shire horses? That might just work, I suppose.’

Thea giggled. ‘Stop it,’ she said. ‘Don’t be so nasty.’

He looked at her steadily, making her giggle again. ‘It isn’t really something you can just ignore,’ he said. ‘Is it?’

‘Maybe not. But there’s a lot more to her than her size. She’s a very nice person.’

‘Well, as a local friend, I’m sure she has much to commend her,’ he said primly.

Thea turned her attention to the spaniel sitting patiently in the shade under their table, and said, ‘Hepzie likes her, as well. She took to her right away.’

Phil was unimpressed. ‘Hepzie likes everybody,’ he said.

Hector’s Nook boasted a small courtyard at the back of the house, facing south-west and filled with more pots of exuberant plants. One in particular caught Phil’s attention. It had large palmate leaves and a cluster of ripening seedpods in a striking shade of pale terracotta. ‘That’s a

castor oil plant,' he said, his voice oddly harsh to his own ears.

'So what if it is?'

'The seeds are used for making ricin.'

Thea grinned. 'My God! Miss Deacon's part of the supply chain for al-Qaeda. Who'd have guessed it? Do you think she has a little chemistry lab in the cellar? Has the Government banned these plants? If not, why not?'

'It's not funny, Thea,' he snapped.

'You're wrong, my lamb. It is actually *very* funny. There must be thousands of old ladies with one of these plants on their patios or even in the front room. It's a handsome thing – I bet the Victorians loved them. Besides, I thought we decided that ricin isn't especially lethal anyway. Didn't we?'

He screwed up his eyes, struggling to reconcile the two extreme bodies of opinion in his daily life. As a police officer, he was expected to anticipate and prevent all activity that might present a threat to the general public. He was supposed to take the worst case scenario and act as if it was certain to happen. But Thea threw doubt and even mockery over much of what he was obliged to take seriously. With feigned

interest, she cross-examined him on the precise method of extracting ricin from the plant, and just what damage it wreaked on the human body. To his irritation, he found he could give only the vaguest answers. 'It can kill,' he repeated doggedly. 'It killed that Bulgarian. The one that was stabbed with an umbrella.'

'Oh yes,' she recalled. 'And Miss Deacon's got an umbrella – probably. I can't say I've seen it, but there's sure to be one. So we can agree that ricin is dodgy if it's injected into you. That's true of quite a few substances, isn't it?'

'Stop it!' he ordered, laughing in spite of himself. 'You make everything I do look ridiculous. I don't know why I tolerate it.'

'It's not you,' she soothed. 'It's this idiotic Government. You're just the helpless instrument. Just obeying orders,' she added, less flippantly.

Phil was not much reassured. He had watched her becoming more and more enraged by the latest round of legislation further curtailing individual freedoms, sometimes floundering for the words with which to explain how sinister it all was. He worried at the wedge it threatened to drive between them. When sitting at one of the many briefings he received at work, he tried to

give space in his head for Thea's point of view, with increasing difficulty. *The innocent have nothing to fear*, came the official line. *These measures are designed specifically to protect the innocent*. But he wasn't stupid. He could see some of the dangers for himself. When he visualised 'the innocent' they were pink-skinned, rural-dwelling, unambitious zombies. Anybody brown or clever or angry or unusual raised suspicions. And it didn't stop there. The police were supposed to keep a close eye on people who behaved irresponsibly in their cars, who smoked or drank too much, who cast a lustful eye on young girls or accessed the wrong sort of websites on their computers. Surveillance was everywhere, and sometimes it seemed to him that it wouldn't be long before half the population were being employed by the police to keep a close eye on the other half. He knew it was possible, that there were unpleasant precedents in countries not so very far away.

But he couldn't let any of this spoil the day with Thea. The long lazy Sunday afternoon stretched invitingly ahead, slowing the pace of life almost to a standstill. There were scents of ripening grass and warm wood on all sides,

sounds of distant lawnmowers and bleating sheep. 'It could be a hundred years ago,' said Thea. 'Except for the lawnmowers.'

'If this is global warming, bring it on,' said Phil, aware that this was something he said slightly too often, and with a lurch of guilt every time.

'Easy to say,' she reproached mildly. 'But you know perfectly well it isn't something to celebrate. All the same, it's hard to argue with regular long hot summers. The Edwardians had them, after all.'

'And what about the Knights Templar?' he wondered. 'Did they have good summers, as well?'

She shook her head. 'I haven't the faintest idea,' she admitted. 'But I'll look it up and let you know.'

They walked a mile or so along the Windrush, much to Hepzie's joy. The sense of perfection persisted for all three of them. Landscape, buildings, weather – it all came together to bathe them in a pure sensory harmony that combined with the physical delights of the morning to reinforce a growing conviction that they too

belonged together. Phil could hear Thea's thoughts, hoping perversely that she wouldn't utter them. Nothing needed to be said, as they meandered with linked arms, pressed closely together, savouring the best that England could offer. If niggling recollections of the working week ahead, the existence of malevolent forces, the fragile edifice of civilisation teetering on the brink of some cataclysm intruded into his thoughts, he firmly pushed them away. Stay in the moment, he adjured himself. Whatever might happen, there'll always be this glorious afternoon to hold on to.