

Chapter One

It was much smaller than a village – a hamlet, then. Hampnett was a hamlet. Thea played with the words as she drove along the A429 watching for the sign that would take her to her latest house-sitting commission. The bare trees that dotted the landscape, along with the short colourless grass, created a whole different world from the Cotswolds in their summer lushness. Now the palette was all greys and browns, as the low January cloud sapped light and clarity from the scene. It fitted her mood alarmingly well. After a dutiful Christmas and New Year spent with her recently widowed mother, and an assortment of other relatives, she felt as drained as the surrounding countryside. The past months had been gruelling in a number of ways – the death of her father, the ending of her relationship with Phil Hollis, and a very difficult time with her older sister, Emily. She was ambivalent about the forthcoming house-sitting commission, which involved

a month in this isolated little place, in the depths of winter.

The tops of the round hills were indistinct, misty with the damp vapour settled on them. Shapes with fuzzy edges came and went along the roadside, as the small car climbed the gentle incline towards its destination. As always, the sheer unpredictability of what lay ahead of her was both enticing and unsettling. But this time there was a new element: an unwelcome feeling of apprehension. If it hadn't been so foreign to her nature, she might almost call it fear. An insistent tightening of her insides, a faster-than-usual heart rate, a dryness in her mouth – her body was telling her that it was uneasy, however strenuously she tried to ignore it, and however irrational it might be.

Hampnett had two approaches: one from the A40, which ran roughly east–west; the other from the A429, which crossed at an angle, south-west to north-east. The hamlet sat in one niche made by the intersection, to the west of it. At least, that was how it looked on the map. In reality, all awareness of the main roads disappeared within seconds, once you'd left them behind. Thea had experienced before the sense of passing through an invisible curtain into a different universe, as she approached a hidden Cotswold settlement. Temple Guiting, Cold Aston, Duntisbourne Abbots, and dozens of others, were all tucked away behind folds of land, invisible from any thoroughfares

and almost forgotten even by tour leaders and walking groups. But Hampnett was closer to the bustle and security of the twenty-first century than most. It would be a ten-minute walk from the church to the A40, twenty minutes to the other road. The town of Northleach was almost within shouting distance. Yet another road ran Roman-straight to the west, only a few fields away.

So why, she asked herself, with a questioning glance at the spaniel beside her, did it feel so very remote?

Lucy Sinclair had been shameless in her explanation of why a house-sitter was required. ‘I’ve got to an age where English winters are intolerable,’ she said. ‘So I’m going off to the Canaries for a month.’ Her cat, donkey and five lion-headed rabbits all needed somebody on the premises, it seemed.

‘Lion-headed rabbits?’ Thea queried, trying to imagine such freaks.

It turned out that they were fairly ordinary rabbits with a lot of fur in the head area and quite short ears. They were four does and a buck, of assorted colours and sizes – and surprisingly appealing. Lucy plucked one from its palatial quarters and thrust it into Thea’s arms. ‘This is Jemima. She’s very friendly. They all are, except Poppy. She scratches rather.’ The buck, named Snoopy, had his own cage, and sat looking somewhat sulky. Thea stroked Jemima, who was a blue-grey colour, with a frosting of a lighter grey.

‘She’s lovely,’ she said. ‘And quite heavy.’

‘You should feel Snoopy. He’s a monster.’

Thea liked Lucy. In her late fifties, she was divorced and self-employed. ‘I fix people’s computers,’ she said, briefly, with a sideways look at Thea. ‘The last bastion of male supremacy, for some reason.’

More relevantly, Lucy’s mother had died a year ago, leaving a substantial property for her daughter to inherit and sell for an astonishing figure. ‘Quite against the trend,’ she laughed. ‘Plus I get the state pension in another couple of years. I’ve never felt so rich, even when my ex was raking it in, in the Eighties.’

The rabbits seemed an anomaly, even more than the donkey did. ‘It’s a long story,’ Lucy had laughed. ‘To do with my daughter and an allergic boyfriend.’ She rolled her eyes and sighed. ‘I knew it would happen, right from the start. Kitty got Snoopy first, before all the does, and I fell for him the minute I saw him. He’s getting on a bit now – you will take good care of him, won’t you?’

But it hadn’t been the rabbits or the cat or the donkey that Lucy was primarily concerned about. There was an even greater reason for spending fifteen hundred pounds on a house-sitter. Leading Thea through the house to a conservatory at the back, she grimaced ruefully before opening the door. ‘It breaks my heart to leave him,’ she said. ‘After the life he must have had, it’s the last thing he needs.’

A skeletally thin grey dog was curled on a bed in a corner of the room. Tufts of hair barely covered the

skin. A ratty tail flickered as he lifted his head to gaze questioningly at Lucy. ‘Hello, Jimmy,’ she crooned. ‘This is Thea. She’s going to look after you when I go away next month.’ Thea reached down her hand for the animal to sniff. Politely, he touched it with his cool nose.

‘Jimmy?’ she repeated. ‘He’s called Jimmy?’

‘That’s what I named him. I don’t know what he was before. I found him at the side of the road, two years ago. He’s not as old as he looks. He’s a lurcher, so he’s meant to be thin. But his wits have gone. He’s not going to get any better now.’

Oh God, Thea groaned inwardly. Just when it had been looking reasonably easy, this scrawny glitch had to gum up the works. ‘Will he be all right with my spaniel?’ she asked.

‘He’ll ignore her. He doesn’t have any problem with other dogs. It’s people who’ve betrayed him.’ Lucy stared angrily at the dog. ‘Has it occurred to you that the whole thing between humans and dogs is about betrayal?’

Thea had heard a news report, only that morning, in which the soaring numbers of abandoned dogs had been presented as a sign of harsh economic times. Unable to meet their mortgage payments unless they made serious savings, people were giving up the dog – dumping it in rescue centres, for the most part. What must the poor creatures think – ousted from their beloved family, through no fault of their own, with no warning? ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘That had occurred to me.’

‘It makes me sick.’

‘And yet I’ve met people who’d go without food themselves in order to make sure the dog or cat’s all right. The very idea of abandoning the animal is unthinkable.’

‘Right. Those are always the people one knows, aren’t they? It’s always some faceless moron from the city who doesn’t know how to make a commitment, who quits when things get a bit rough.’ If possible, Lucy’s expression grew even angrier. ‘But that’s rubbish. *Everybody* would do it. The difference is in the justifications they give. That’s not important to the dog, is it?’

‘Devoted old ladies break their hips, or die,’ said Thea mildly. ‘They’re forced to give up their dog then.’

‘I know that. But it still feels like betrayal when you’re on the receiving end. Don’t you see?’

It was too much for Thea. She held up her hands in surrender. ‘So what’s the answer?’ she said. ‘Nobody should ever have a dog or cat, by that reckoning.’

‘Right,’ said Lucy again. ‘Exactly right.’

‘And then there wouldn’t *be* any dogs or cats.’

The smile finally came, as Thea had trusted it would. ‘So take good care of Jimmy for me, will you? Make sure there’s always something that smells of me in his bed. Don’t let him run away.’

Recalling a previous experience, Thea shuddered. ‘No, I won’t let him run away,’ she promised.

The house was isolated, down a lengthy track that ran alongside a small copse, half a mile before the centre of the hamlet. Hampnett consisted essentially of a remarkable church and a farm, with a handful of other stone buildings scattered over the rolling ground to the north and west. Lucy Sinclair was the proud owner of a converted barn with three acres of land. The conservatory was a carefully designed addition, with no embellishments that might be deemed out of keeping with the local style. ‘I bought it twelve years ago, and oversaw the conversion myself. It would never suit anybody but me.’ Where most people had created huge airy spaces inside their mutated homes, Lucy had chosen to divide it into five or six modestly sized rooms. ‘Easier to heat,’ she said. ‘And who wants to feel as if they’re living in a barn?’ A lot of people, Thea could have replied.

Now, on 6th January, Thea arrived nearly two hours before Lucy had said she would have to leave for Birmingham airport. Being in charge for almost a month was by far the biggest commitment she had made since she began the work. It hadn’t seemed nearly so demanding to watch over a homestead for a week or two – although she had experienced too many difficulties and alarms during most of her commissions to be complacent.

Jimmy seemed even more decrepit than before, still huddled in his conservatory and showing very little

interest in whatever might be going on around him. ‘He doesn’t like the cold,’ Lucy explained. ‘But he’s not happy in any other room than this. I think he must have spent his life outdoors. He gets agitated in the house. I built this specifically for him, but it’s not very easy to heat.’ Thea stared at her, open-mouthed. She built the addition for the dog? Was that possible?

‘He looks comfortable enough, and besides, winters aren’t as bad as they used to be,’ said Thea optimistically. ‘His bedding looks very warm.’

‘It’s felt,’ Lucy explained. ‘They use it in Mongolia, so it’s probably going to do a good job. I gather they’ve had massive snowfalls in New York this week, though. It often seems to get here a fortnight later.’

‘Lucky the main road’s so close, then,’ said Thea.

‘First get up my track. Even a quarter of a mile’s a lot of digging,’ Lucy laughed. ‘But I’ve filled the freezer with bread and milk and plenty of basics, so you should be OK.’

It felt like a joke at the time. Thea shared the laughter at the idea of being snowed in. That never happened in Gloucestershire, did it?

Chapter Two

The two hours they had together passed slowly, Thea wishing Lucy would hurry up and leave. She had already been shown the animals and the house, a list of important phone numbers taped to the door of a kitchen cupboard; it seemed a waste to have them both hanging around with nothing to do. Outside there was a sharp east wind, the sky a dense blanket of grey cloud. ‘My father always used to hate January,’ said Thea. ‘I think he got it from my grandad. He was a farmer and had to be outside in all weathers. I remember wondering how he could bear it, year after year.’

‘We’ve got soft,’ said Lucy. ‘I find myself feeling sorry for the poor sheep and other things outside all year round. And then I remind myself how daft that is. After all, in olden times, everything had to survive on what they could find. There haven’t always been people to bring them hay and mangolds.’ The last word sounded odd and Thea repeated it.

‘Mangels?’

‘You know – mang’l’wurzels, like in *Worzel Gummidge*.’

‘No. What are they?’

‘Vegetables. Like sugar beet. Sheep love them. The farmer down the track gives them to the sheep, even now. I walk that way sometimes to watch them at feeding time. She scatters them in an old muck spreader.’ Thea watched the woman’s animated face, wondering at the childlike pleasure she was displaying at the thought of a farmer feeding her sheep.

‘How nice,’ she said uncertainly. ‘Can people eat them?’

‘Probably. Might be a bit indigestible. But we eat swedes and parsnips, much to the horror of the French. They’d be much better than nothing in a famine, I’m sure.’ Again there was a faint air of relish in Lucy’s voice, as if the idea of a famine was secretly rather appealing.

At last it was time for her to go. ‘Look,’ she said, waving a cheque under Thea’s nose. ‘I thought I ought to give you half the money now, and half when I come home. Is that all right?’

‘Oh! I don’t usually – I mean, people generally pay me at the end.’

‘Well, I’m not “people”. I can’t leave you destitute for a whole month, can I? You’ll need to buy some food, and fuel for your car, and presumably pay your own

bills at home. Here, take it. Otherwise I might spend it all on cocktails and gambling in the sunshine.'

Thea heard this as 'gambolling in the sunshine', and giggled at the image. 'Well, thanks,' she said, trying not to show the small thrill she felt as she read the figure on the cheque. Seven hundred and fifty pounds – and that was only half the full sum. Lucy Sinclair had made no demur about paying her the fifty pounds a day that Thea had tentatively suggested was the going rate for a sitter who took up residence. It still felt like being paid for having a holiday and doing almost nothing, despite the many pitfalls she had encountered since she started the work.

Lucy leant down and kissed Jimmy, then stood up with tears in her eyes. 'Selfish cow that I am,' she sniffed. 'You will take good care of him, won't you?'

Thea drove her temporary employer to the station at Moreton-in-Marsh and waved her on her way. Driving back down the A429, she recognised much of the road from previous sojourns in the area. She passed Lower Slaughter just a short way off the road to her right, and then Cold Aston, a few miles further west. But she knew hardly anyone in either village well enough to count them as friends. There was a woman in Cold Aston, who she had first met a year ago, and again the previous summer – their relationship had taken some knocks on both occasions, and Thea was in no hurry to risk a third bruising encounter. And there was a man

in Lower Slaughter; a man who had got under her skin more than she had liked to acknowledge to herself at the time. Knowing he was going to be so close by for the next month created a small flame of interest at the back of her mind. She had persuaded herself that there could be nothing between them, that the whole idea was folly – and yet, he had taken root in her consciousness, and intruded uncomfortably often into her dreams.

She cruised unhurriedly down the hill to the crossroads, with Hampnett ahead and slightly to the right, Northleach to the left. On a whim, she turned right onto the A40, and then left into the small road leading through the hamlet, past the church and its neighbouring farm.

Old man's beard straggled over the hedges, adding to the general greyness of the landscape. The January light was poor, with a faint damp mist covering everything. She met no other cars, and saw no living creature until she had passed the minimal village centre and was approaching the turn for Lucy's Barn. A few yards before the junction there was a man walking along the road, facing the oncoming traffic, so that Thea had to pull out to avoid him. He gave no sign of awareness that there was a car alongside him, although she was close enough to get a good look at his face.

He was tall and thin, and somehow the same shade of grey as the surrounding winter hedges. There were deep lines on his face, which sported a straggly grey beard, and his narrow shoulders were slumped. Something

about his loose gait suggested bony knees and fragile ankles. His longish hair flopped around his face, and his beard disappeared into a grubby-looking scarf.

‘I wonder who that is,’ she said to the dog beside her. Hepzie appeared as impervious to the encounter as the man himself had been.

Preparations for the winter month in the middle of nowhere had been made carefully. For Christmas, Thea had requested DVDs, computer games and books. She had compiled a list of long lost friends and relations to whom she would write rambling letters. She would take things slowly, reading a daily newspaper and listening to the radio. And she would teach herself lacemaking – a secret ambition she had nursed for twenty-five years. Her sister Jocelyn had given her a lace cushion, two dozen bobbins decorated with beads, a book of instructions and several reels of cotton. It was magically tantalising, in its own cotton bag with large red flowers printed on it, and she was itching to get started.

She visited the donkey when she got back to the house, stroking its long ears, burying her hand in the soft hair and mumbling daft nothings to it. The donkey was, Lucy had assured her, the easiest of all the animals. ‘He’ll patrol the paddock twice a day, whatever the weather,’ she said. ‘But apart from that he’ll mostly stay in the shed. I think he dreams a lot. Watch his face and you can see he’s remembering happy times.’

The donkey was about thirty years old, and had no

cause for complaint about his lot. He had belonged to a family not far away, living with his jenny mother until she died. Then the family opted to move to Spain, initially deciding to take the donkey along. At the last minute, the expense and bother of this had changed their minds, and he had come to live with Lucy quite cheerfully. ‘He never had a name,’ Lucy said. ‘Just Donk, mostly.’

He was a big brown individual, not like the furry grey donkeys of seaside tradition. His face was on a level with Thea’s, as she talked to him. Hepzie sat tolerantly at a distance, not tempted to join in the exchange. The paddock was about an acre in size, sloping downwards away from the barn, and fenced with a new-looking wire-and-post arrangement. A metal gate led into another field at the bottom of the slope, which Lucy had explained as recently installed. ‘It’s the only way a large vehicle can get in and out of the paddock,’ she had said. ‘Although that field doesn’t belong to me. There are beef cattle in there for most of the winter.’

The lower field was an odd shape, and Thea eventually worked out that it had at one time included Lucy’s paddock. One corner had been carved out of it, leaving a narrow strip to the north, and a much larger rectangle to the west.

The cat was a slinky black female, barely a year old. ‘She’s called Spirit,’ Lucy had told her. ‘She’s very self-sufficient. The worst thing is the creatures she catches and brings into the house. There was a slow worm not

long ago. I suggest you keep all the bedroom doors closed. Otherwise things die under the beds and make a dreadful smell.'

The bedrooms numbered two, and were suspended over the ground floor rooms on a platform which ended about two thirds of the way along the length of the former barn. A gallery overlooked the living room, with a balustrade to prevent accidental falls. The stairs were open-tread, rising from the hallway, and leading to a corner of the gallery. It was, according to Thea's inexpert judgement, very cleverly designed to make best use of the limited light. The bedrooms each had a small square window, while downstairs most of the lighting came from one large area of glass at the far end of the building, by the odd device of having the partitions between the rooms only eight feet high. Above them there was empty space. The idea of walls without ceilings was peculiar, and Thea was momentarily reminded of lavatory cubicles. The room furthest from the big window was a study, full of computer-related hardware, with only the scantiest of natural illumination.

She had, of course, been in barn conversions before, but had never properly considered the process of transformation. Lucy had been very ingenious in the way she'd conformed to the regulations restricting what was allowed. 'Though why on earth it should matter that the thing continues to look more like a barn than a house escapes me,' she had sighed. 'And the real irony is that when I needed to put up two new sheds outside

for the animals, there was nothing to control what they looked like. I could have erected steel bunkers, or glass-and-concrete monstrosities, just as long as they weren't too enormous.'

Lucy's voice echoed in her head as she explored the house in which she was to spend the coming month. Every small remark was magnified into significance, a clue as to how that month would be. The only mention of neighbours came with a brief comment about the continuing track past the Barn. 'That leads down to the next farm. They're busy at this time of year – you probably won't see anything of them.'

Thea had experienced neighbouring farmers before, and knew how reclusive they could be. On the other hand, it made sense to know something of her closest neighbours. 'Is it a family?' she asked.

'Not really. Old Kate and her aged parent, that's all. He's not well, so she's got her work cut out.' She shuddered gently. 'It tends to make her irascible, so try not to annoy her. That woman's temper is legendary.'

'Old Kate?' Thea raised an eyebrow at the less-than-respectful epithet, but nothing more was forthcoming. Lucy had been in overdrive, rushing her surrogate from one part of the property to another, throwing out random pieces of information as she went.

The heating was on, the modern insulation of the conversion efficiently keeping it where it should be. 'Underfloor,' Lucy had informed her. 'It cost a fortune, but is pure luxury.' *Not luxury enough*, thought Thea, *if*

you have to bolt for the Canaries when January arrives.

The mournful presence of Jimmy in the conservatory nagged at her through everything she did. Hepzie, too, was intrigued by the other dog, and whined at the door every few minutes. ‘Come on, then,’ said Thea. ‘Let’s go and talk to him.’

As predicted, the lurcher ignored the spaniel when they entered the room, but he raised his head to gaze enquiringly into Thea’s face. She knelt down beside him, and cupped his head in her hands. ‘You poor thing,’ she crooned. ‘It’s not much of a life, is it? What are we going to do with you?’

Jimmy sighed and laid his head back on the felt of his warm bedding. Hepzie approached cautiously and nosed him gently. He turned to look at her, and to Thea’s amazement began to lick the spaniel’s head, right between the eyes. Hepzie melted, lying down full stretch against the sparse grey hair of her new friend’s side. Thea almost cried. ‘Hey!’ she murmured, ‘well done you.’ And then she remembered that they’d be leaving again in a month, and perhaps two doggie hearts would be broken by the separation.

Outside it was already getting gloomy at half past three, and Thea was unsure what to do next. The rabbits would want to be fed, as would the donkey, but it seemed far too early to settle them down for the night. She could phone or email her daughter, to say she’d arrived and was already in harness. At the back of her mind was the thought that whatever she did today

would become the routine for the next month, which meant she should give it some serious thought.

As she moved to leave the room, both dogs watched her. ‘Come on, then,’ she invited. ‘Why don’t you both come outside for a bit?’

Hepzie was at her side instantly, but Jimmy didn’t move. He was, however, quite alert to his new friend’s behaviour, and when she looked back at him, he slowly got to his feet. ‘Good dog!’ Thea applauded. ‘Come and have a bit of exercise.’

She tried in vain not to think of the sadistic treatment he might have endured at the hands of people she could not begin to envisage. The expression in his eyes spoke of hesitation, wary anticipation of pain or abuse. ‘It’s OK, Jimmy,’ she crooned. ‘I’m not going to hurt you. But you do have to go outside sometime, and it might as well be now.’

He made no move to follow her, so she took down the lead that was hanging from a hook on the wall, and fastened it to his collar. He cooperated when she pulled him gently, but was plainly far from enthusiastic.

Outside, on the patch of grass that Lucy had identified as his toilet, he relieved himself, and then stood passively waiting for whatever might happen next. ‘Jimmy, you’re going to break my heart,’ Thea told him. She could feel tears at the back of her nose, and an accompanying annoyance with herself for being so sentimental. But hadn’t Lucy used almost the same

words? Was not this the legacy of the dog's ill-treatment – that softer souls would grieve for his hurt, for years after the event?

The day closed down, leaving hours of winter evening to be filled. Briskly, Thea got herself organised, stacking her DVDs on top of the television and plugging in her laptop where it sat on a small round table in a corner. 'Move anything that's in your way,' Lucy had said. 'It won't bother me at all.' And there had been things to be moved. Lucy Sinclair was not unduly tidy, with old computer magazines and other clutter on most surfaces. 'This is nothing – you should see my workroom,' she had laughed. When Thea went for a look, she was genuinely shocked. All four walls were shelved, the shelves groaning with an eccentric mix of discs, boxes, cables, potted plants, books, mysterious pieces of computer hardware, large and small. Everything was dusty. It felt like a cave.

'Wow!' she gasped.

'I know. I was determined not to let it get like this, but it's an occupational hazard. If you go to any computer geek's house, it'll be the same. If you don't mind, I'll just close it up and suggest you stay out. If anybody phones, wanting my services – which they will, I promise you – just tell them I'm away until the seventh of Feb. Don't let them leave anything here. I don't want to come home to a stack of broken PCs.'

Thea's experience of computers was not great. Her husband, Carl, had used a standard machine for his

work, and Thea had borrowed it for emails and letter-writing, until she'd got a laptop the year before he died. So far, nothing had gone wrong with it. But she knew there were people who were crippled without their computer; immobilised by panic as if their right arm had dropped off. 'Is there anybody else I could refer them to?' she asked.

'Not really. Don't worry about it. There are plenty of us in the Yellow Pages. Don't let them dump their problems onto you. The women are the worst – they get hysterical if the screen freezes for two minutes.'

Until then, Thea had not considered the need for computer doctors as being almost as urgent as that for the more traditional kind. She had a vision of a tower console being belted into a passenger seat and rushed to Lucy for emergency attention. 'I bet you're popular,' she said.

'I am sometimes, yes. But if I have to declare the thing dead on arrival, it can get scary. I've had my face slapped for it, though only once.'

The phone rang at seven-thirty on that first Saturday evening, and when she answered it, Thea was regaled with a confused story about a virus message which had begun replicating itself endlessly all over the monitor screen. 'Sounds nasty,' she said, 'but I'm afraid Lucy isn't here to help you. You'll have to find somebody else. Sorry.' She put the phone down on the anguished female yowl that met this information.

Not only, it seemed, was Lucy's work desperately needed – it knew no civilised restrictions concerning evenings and weekends. The prospect of more such calls was irritating, but it was a more difficult emotion that Thea found herself assailed by in the strange building with its peculiar spaces and absolute silence. She found herself to be nervous, jumping as the cat came noiselessly into the room, checking that the doors were all locked against the dark and chilly outside world.

The second bedroom was sparsely furnished, as if kept strictly for guests. There were paperback novels in a small free-standing bookcase, a lamp on a table beside the bed, and a wardrobe with a drawer beneath the hanging space, which Lucy had invited her to use. The bed was a generous single, with ample space for Thea and her dog – but not for a second human being. What if Detective Superintendent Phil Hollis had joined her again, as he had done in Cold Aston and Temple Guiting? What if she met a likely man and wanted to bring him back with her? Improvisation, she concluded. The lack of a double bed had never stopped a couple from copulating, she was sure. But the thought of squashing into this particular one with anybody, however appealing he might be, was not tempting. 'Just us, then,' she said to the spaniel. Hepzie wagged her long tail reassuringly.

The situation with Phil remained unresolved. There had been no final ending to the relationship, nothing

spoken that rendered it irreversibly terminal. As far as she knew he had no other female friend competing for his attentions. They had discovered aspects of each other that they weren't sure they liked, and Phil had been the one to voice his feelings first. Thea had not behaved very well in Temple Guiting. And in Lower Slaughter she had recognised more and more of the flaws and failings in the relationship. She couldn't see quite what a committed relationship with Hollis would bring her in terms of happiness and fulfilment, while at the same time she felt upset and apprehensive at the prospect of losing him completely.

'But what is it you *want*?' he had demanded of her, a few months earlier.

Good question – *very* good. Much easier to list the things she did *not* want: the constraints of constantly having to account for her movements; the endless discussions about food and mealtimes; the daily compromises; the sheer claustrophobia of couplehood. She had tried to say some of this, and Phil, to his credit, had listened carefully.

'I agree with you,' he had concluded, thereby almost changing her mind completely. 'I don't want those things, either.' She heard an added *with you, anyway*, that he never spoke aloud, and she felt irrationally rejected, despite everything. She had not liked it when he confronted her with the truth of her own feelings. She had both wanted him and not wanted him, and the craziness of this alarmed her.

She was nearly forty-four. Her birthday would be on 3rd February, while still here at Hampnett. Like any woman of the same age, she was perpetually aware that there was still time for another baby – or even two. She knew women who had given birth at forty-six. Her only child had been born when she was twenty-two, and she had not wanted any more, for reasons she could hardly now explain. The triangle created with Carl and Jessica had suited her perfectly. He had his little girl, who thrilled him beyond expression. There was a comfort and complacency to this small nuclear family which Thea used as a sort of cocoon. She passed her twenties and thirties in a haze of coffee mornings and outings, friends and conversations that had felt entirely sufficient at the time. She never had a proper job, having taken a degree in history, marrying Carl two weeks after graduation, and delivering Jessica thirteen months later. The degree had mainly been a matter of writing essays constructed from facts gleaned in the library. It had been completely unreal, and left scarcely a mark on her consciousness.

And then Carl had died. Killed in a car crash that nobody could ever have predicted. The indescribable pain of the loss and shock had lasted a year or more, a time of stunned bewilderment that she could hardly remember now. Everything she had taken for granted had dissolved into futility, and since then she had struggled to maintain any kind of purpose. Drifting from one Cotswold village to another,

taking a superficial interest in the events that swirled around her, living for the day – it had been enough to keep her alive. More than enough, when Phil appeared and she felt herself being drawn to him as if wound in by a nylon fishing line. Sleeping with a man who wasn't Carl had been a richly emotional exercise. With no sense of guilt, she had allowed herself to become lost in the sensations of novelty and recovery. But the novelty had worn off much too quickly, leaving them both wondering what it had all been about.

There had never been the slightest hint of marriage or another baby or a shared home. They had been joined together by a series of police investigations, in which Thea had found herself involved more or less directly, with not a great deal else to talk or think about. Phil was in his late forties, divorced, with a son. His daughter had died of an accidental drug overdose, effectively putting a stop to any furtherance of his police career beyond the level he'd reached. He was bruised, as Thea was, weary from life's blows and recently physically damaged by a slipped disc. A decent man, sometimes insightful, mostly kind... but... but...shouldn't there be something more than that?

Her family had done their best to be warily understanding about Phil. As a shattered young widow, Thea had been the object of appalled sympathy from her siblings and parents, who could

find little to say. They had gathered round and offered varying kinds of support, until the advent of Phil Hollis had brought about a collective sigh of relief. She could be treated normally again, now she had another man. When it became evident that this was not to be a rapid courtship and second marriage, they held off and waited patiently for what might happen next.

And so it was that this well-paid exile in a wintry hamlet was also in part intended to be a time of reassessment. She had another forty years of life, in the normal nature of things, and she had no intention of wasting it. Already she had rediscovered some of the pleasures of history, laid out for her on a plate during some of her house-sitting commissions. Walking the deserted uplands, where medieval villages had been abandoned, and megalithic bodies had been buried, she had sometimes felt a strong connection with bygone times. The notion of further organised study held some appeal – a year or two at a university doing a master's degree, perhaps. But the prospect of such an intense commitment gave her pause. She doubted whether she had the application for it, having found how much she liked the flying-Dutchman existence of a house-sitter. A few weeks in one place, getting to know new people, many of them under the stress of a sudden violent incident, brought out something she hadn't known was within her. A clear-sightedness; an ability to

make connections and see through prevarications and evasions, had manifested itself, and she liked this new talent.

Sunday was again cloudy, with a spiteful east wind cutting across the wolds. The animals were accorded over an hour's attention, first the rabbits, then the donkey and finally the unhappy Jimmy. Except the dog seemed less miserable than before, thanks to Hepzibah. The spaniel had gone straight to the conservatory after coming back from the donkey shed, and reintroduced herself to the lurcher. Again he licked her forehead, and she sat amicably beside him until Thea broke it up and took him out to his toilet. He drank a bowl of milk and settled down again on his warm bed.

Later in the morning, she decided it was time for a good walk. She had yet to locate the many public footpaths, or to visit the famous church. Not that a Sunday morning was the best time for that, she realised, unless she joined in the service. Church services were not part of her normal experience, and she inwardly cringed at the thought of trying to join in with a handful of aged parishioners, intoning hymns she didn't know and repeating words from a prayer book which had no meaning for her. Except, of course, there was little chance that such a small settlement continued to enjoy weekly services. Places of this size were lucky to get sufficient share

of a vicar for more than once-a-month attentions. The whole business was slowly dying away, and few people of Thea's age and below cared enough even to notice.

So she bundled herself into a thick coat, with scarf and woolly hat, and set out to see what Hampnett might have to offer.