CHAPTER ONE

The roads grew increasingly narrow and undulating, the closer I got to the village of Broad Campden. The strange intimacy of travelling with a dead woman in the back of the car joined with the timeless effect of the towering trees and long stone walls, the combination making me quite light-headed. I found myself muttering out loud, addressing my silent passenger in none-too-friendly terms.

'What a place to bring me,' I accused her. 'Why couldn't we have stayed in Somerset and done the business there?' I groped once again for the map beside me, checking that I really did have to take the right turn shortly before the town of Chipping Campden. Yes – right, and then right again after passing through a small village, and then left into a small sloping field

on the edge of a wood. Three cars awaited me, and I greeted their occupants with due dignity, straightening my tie. It was windy, the trees tossing loudly overhead.

Broad Campden was a mile or two away from Chipping Campden, in the middle of the Cotswolds. It was a region I hardly knew at all, the road map on the passenger seat a vital part of my equipment as I transported the dead woman in her cardboard coffin to her place of rest. Cardboard had been selected after an exhaustive discussion about the coffin, a year before. 'Willow,' she had said, to begin with. 'I hear there are lovely willow coffins available.'

'There are,' I had agreed, 'but they're extremely expensive.'

When I told her the price, she gulped. 'And that's with only a modest mark-up,' I added. She had not questioned my integrity; it was my own sensitivity to the practices of some undertakers that led to my saying what I did.

I really had not expected to be handling Greta Simmonds' funeral so soon. She had seemed to be in good health when I met her, and I had wondered why she was so intent on arranging and paying for her own funeral at the relatively tender age of sixty. Childless, retired, and passionately committed to all things Green, she was a type that I recognised. We had got along

well, and I was sorry when her family contacted me to say she had died.

The funeral had come at a bad moment, and I was in no mood for the task that particular week. It was going to take all my most conscientious efforts to conduct things as they should be conducted, for a number of reasons. It was sixty miles from home, for one thing, and poor Karen, my wife, wasn't happy about being left on her own with our children. I took no pleasure from driving, and had little anticipation of a warm reception from the family. The dead woman had been emphatic about wanting me to dispose of her body according to sound ecological principles, while admitting that her relatives were unlikely to be very cooperative about it. I had been visited by her sister and nephew, who had stiffly agreed to the day and time for the burial, casting their eyes to the ceiling and sighing heavily as they did so. Now they were gathered, along with another nephew and a handful of friends, in the windy little field, where Mrs Greta Simmonds was to be interred.

The great majority of the funerals I conducted were in the land at the side of my house in Somerset. I had been running Peaceful Repose Natural Burials with my partner, Maggs Cooper, for nearly five years, building a quiet reputation for reliability, sensitivity and frankness. I told

people how they could reduce costs, how they were still permitted under the law to opt for a range of alternative burials, and I invited them to take control of the process as much as they wished. As a result, Maggs and I earned an embarrassingly small income, but made a lot of friends.

Greta Simmonds had been unusual in several ways: her insistence on the precise position of her grave, in this obscure corner of the Cotswolds; her comparatively early age; her wry acceptance of the need for a minimum depth for the grave in order to safeguard her from scavengers. 'You know,' she had said, with a little tilt of her head, 'I'm not sure I would mind if some hungry vixen took part of me home for her cubs. What's the difference between that and providing nourishment for a lot of fat pink worms?'

I had been careful to retreat from that line of conversation. People were almost never as sanguine about their own dying as they might appear on the surface. I had diverted her to the question of timing. 'Statistically,' I said, 'you are quite likely to live another thirty-five years. You need to be sure that your money is safe, and the funeral costs secured, however far in the future it might be.'

Her smile suggested that she knew something I didn't. 'I don't think we need worry about

that,' she said. 'We don't make old bones in this family.'

As any undertaker would, I had inwardly permitted myself to hope she was at least more right than I was. With risibly low interest rates, and every prospect of rising costs and changes in regulation, the sooner I could gain access to her cash the better. But I squashed the thought. I liked this woman far too much to wish an early death on her.

She had paid for it all, up front, quite content to trust me with her money, thrusting the carefully drawn-up agreement into a large shoulder bag.

That had been fifteen months earlier and now she was dead. I was shocked when her sister, Judith Talbot, telephoned me with the news, and harassed by the implications. Maggs had been on holiday at the time, with Den, her husband. They'd gone to Syria, of all places, and I had a nagging worry that I might never see them again. I had to arrange the Cotswold burial for the day after they came back, dropping everything into Maggs's lap only hours after she crawled off an overnight flight from Damascus. But we both knew this was the way it went. She made no complaint, helping me to slide Mrs Simmonds' coffin into the back of the vehicle and waving me off with a good grace.

To our disappointment, natural burials hadn't caught on as well as I'd hoped when Karen, Maggs and I began the business. If anything, it had gone backwards – we'd had fewer customers over the past twelve months than in the year we started. It was galling in a number of ways, not least financial. If it weren't for the compensation package we got when Karen was shot, we'd have had to wind everything up and do something else. Even the stalwart Maggs's meagre salary would have been unaffordable.

All of which meant, of course, that I was in no position to turn away work, even if I had not been obligated by my agreement with Mrs Simmonds. Maggs assured me she could watch out for Karen, as well as keeping everything going in the office. She'd done it plenty of times before, after all. And I could do the funeral on my own, since three somewhat reluctant pall-bearers had been dragooned into helping out when it came to the actual burial. It was a far cry from the days when I worked for a mainstream undertaker, with no fewer than five members of staff always in attendance.

The dead woman's two nephews and brother-in-law helped me to carry her to the grave in a corner of a field that she told me had been hers for decades. I had, with some difficulty, arranged for the necessary digging to be performed that

morning, by a man from Blockley, who still dug graves for some local undertakers. He had promised to return as soon as the funeral was over, to fill it in again. I deftly arranged the pulley ropes around the coffin, and we lowered it in without mishap. There was no vicar or other officiant. Mrs Talbot, sister of the deceased, produced a sheet of paper and read a poem by Sylvia Plath which Mrs Simmonds herself had chosen. I hadn't heard it before, and forgot it as soon as it was over – but it was a relief not to have to endure the ubiquitous lines by Henry Scott Holland which claim that the person in the grave isn't really dead, but just in the next room. That had never worked for me.

I was unsure of Mrs Talbot. She showed very little sign of distress at the loss of the person she must have known for her entire life, longer than anybody else, in fact. She stood straight-backed and British, reading the poem with no trace of a regional accent, wearing a well-cut dark-blue suit and expensive shoes. Her elder son, Charles, kept close, flicking frequent glances her way, as if needing to follow her lead. Mr Talbot was silent, detached, as if wondering quite why he was there at all.

And then a little surprise sent ripples through the modest assembly. The younger son, still in his teens, cleared his throat, and moved a few inches

closer to the open grave. 'Auntie Greta,' he began, looking directly down at the coffin, 'I've got a message from Carrie for you. She says she wishes she could have been here, and she's going to miss you a lot. We both are. You've been the best auntie anybody could ever have. You were the bravest, funniest, cleverest person in our whole family . . .' here he glanced defiantly at his parents and brother, 'and it's a bastard that you went and died, when we still need you. But you've got what you always wanted, and that's a good thing. Rest in peace.' He choked out the last words, and retreated to the edge of the group, turning his back on us all.

A long silence followed. I waited for the mother to go to her unhappy boy, in vain. The father was equally unresponsive. I almost went to give him a hug myself, but resisted. After a minute or so, a small woman I had not managed to place in the general scheme of things strolled calmly to the lad and laid a hand lightly on his arm. I couldn't see the look they exchanged, but it seemed to be right.

The funeral was over. I filled in the minimal paperwork required by the law. Mrs Talbot – Judith – came up to me, looking relieved. 'Thank you, Mr Slocombe,' she said formally. 'I think we've satisfied my sister's wishes, haven't we?' As I had seen before, when she and Charles had

come to my office, there was irritation lurking just below the surface. She had actually said, on that occasion, ‘When my mother died, we had a cremation. For myself, I think that’s by far the most sensible option. But I’m afraid Greta hated it. That’s why we’ve got all this carry-on now.’

‘It’s what she wanted, Mum,’ Charles had said, more than once. Until the funeral I had not met the husband or the younger son. Nor the two middle-aged couples whose names I didn’t know, and who seemed to find the whole experience altogether fascinating. One wife kept nudging her husband and whispering. Nor did I know the pretty woman who had gone to console Jeremy Talbot. Throughout the burial, she had hung back, giving the impression she thought she ought not to be there.

The wind blew fiercely from the east, and I hoped I wouldn’t have a long wait for the gravedigger to arrive, it being unthinkable to leave an open grave unattended. To my relief, I glimpsed a man in heavy boots, leaning on the gate, when we began to straggle back to our cars. He was with two young people, who I took to be idle onlookers, curious as to what was taking place in this quiet corner. Having checked with Mrs Talbot that there was nothing more she required of me, I approached the gravedigger, exchanged a few words, and paid him in cash.

Behind me a voice spoke. 'Er . . . would it be OK if I helped?' he said.

I turned to see that Mrs Simmonds' younger nephew was addressing the gravedigger. 'It'd be good if I could see her covered up,' he continued. 'And my brother, if he wants to.'

The gravedigger nodded understanding. 'There's a spare spade in the van,' he said easily, as if this was no new experience. He gave me a quick wink, full of a wisdom and tolerance that made me think he would be exactly the companion young Jeremy needed.

I had some doubt as to whether Charles Talbot would be similarly moved to assist in the filling of the grave, though. He had not looked to me like a man who could abide to get his hands dirty. Then I wondered how Jeremy would get away, if he stayed behind while his family all departed. My little flock of mourners still felt like my responsibility while any of them remained in the vicinity of the grave.

'How are you getting home?' I asked Jeremy.

'On the bike,' he said, as if this was obvious. He indicated a blue racing bicycle, leaning against an oak tree, on the verge outside the field gate.

I smiled, and waved him a final farewell, turning to go straight home again. And I would have done, if it hadn't been for the small woman

standing slightly apart from the others, watching my face so intently. I smiled, pleased to have a chance to learn more about her.

'That was very . . . different,' she said, holding out a hand. 'I'm Thea Osborne. I was looking after Mrs Simmonds' house when she died. I feel sort of *involved,* although I'm not really.'

I took her hand self-consciously. People were not always comfortable shaking hands with an undertaker. They expected something bloodless, perhaps faintly redolent of formaldehyde. Thea Osborne did not appear to have any qualms. 'Did you not know her at all?' I asked.

'No, not really. I only met her once, when she gave me my instructions about the house. Then she went off to Somerset and died.' She shook her head ruefully. 'That's never happened to me before.' She spoke as if a lot of other things had happened, and this was something new to add to a collection. Here, I thought, was a woman who had seen things that many others had not. A woman like Maggs, who could confront the truth without flinching. A rare creature. Then she added an extraordinary remark: 'At least she wasn't murdered.'

I laughed. 'Why – do you often encounter people who've been murdered?'

'Actually, yes. It happens rather often. Partly because my . . . um . . . former boyfriend, I

suppose you'd call him, is in the police. So are my daughter and my brother-in-law. And there's something about house-sitting that skews the balance of the status quo.'

'Oh?'

'I mean . . . it creates opportunities, leaves a vacuum, changes the pattern in a community.' She shook her head. 'I'm not really as fey as that sounds. And it might not even be true. Every murder has its own set of motives, after all.'

'Well,' I echoed her own words, 'at least Mrs Simmonds wasn't murdered. It wasn't even much of a coincidence that she'd prearranged her funeral with me, and then died twenty-five miles from my house. She was visiting her former home, apparently. I assume those are friends of hers, from the place she lived before she came back here.' I tilted my head discreetly towards the two couples who had been amongst the mourners. They were looking back at the new grave, quietly talking.

'No, they're locals,' Thea told me. 'But I agree it's a very thin turnout. I'm glad I came.'

'There's not usually a crowd at these natural burials,' I said. 'They tend to be rather discreet.'

'So *you* knew her?' she said.

'No better than you. She came into my office a year and a bit ago, and made arrangements to be buried here, where she lived as a child. I

didn't realise it was now her full-time home.'

'She inherited it ten or fifteen years ago, apparently, when her mother died, and let it out for a while. That was when she was in some kind of cooperative place in Somerset. Which I suppose you knew.'

'They call it co-housing. Horrible word.'

'Indeed. Odd, don't you think, that she left it? People generally expect to stay for ever when they join something like that.'

'Ructions,' I shrugged. 'It can't be easy to get along together in that sort of set-up.'

'Well, she seemed nice enough. Unusual. Interesting.'

We were scattering stray comments back and forth, the wind making us uncomfortable. Skirts were whipping around female legs, which I suspected would normally be encased in trousers of some kind. 'After all, not many people plan their own funeral when they're only sixty – especially not a funeral like *this*.'

'I had the impression of someone rather, well, *forceful*. I made some joke, if I remember rightly, about her living another thirty years or more.'

'She seemed quite healthy to me,' Thea agreed. 'But perhaps she wasn't. Perhaps she knew this was likely to happen.'

'According to the certificate, she died of an occlusion.'

Thea Osborne blinked. 'I don't know what that is.'

'A blockage, basically. Generally impossible to predict. Very quick.'

'Oh. So she approached you because she wanted a woodland burial, and fixed up all the details – is that right? That weird coffin, for a start. Don't you have to make some special application to use something like that?'

I smiled. 'Actually no, hardly at all. You don't really want to know the whole story, do you?'

'Not if you can't be bothered to tell me.'

She meant it literally – not in a nasty way, but giving me permission to save my breath, if that's what I preferred. I saw her looking around at the people in the field. She had the air of a person slowly coming to understand that her role was over, the last line delivered, and all that remained was to leave.

The Talbots had begun to get into their somewhat elderly BMW, apart from the boy nephew who was hanging back as if wanting time alone. I wondered fleetingly about his bike and where he would go on it. The family lived miles away, somewhere the far side of Oxford. Was he intending to cycle the whole way? I watched the family for a moment. 'Who's Carrie – do you know?' I asked Thea.

'What?'

‘The boy said something about Carrie, in his little speech.’

‘Must be a girlfriend, I suppose.’

‘And why isn’t she here?’

She looked at me with a parody of patient understanding. ‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘Sorry. I wasn’t really asking you. Just wondering. It’s funny the way families get to you, in this business. You want to figure all the relationships out, and understand the patterns. Loose ends niggle at me.’

‘I know what you mean,’ she said. ‘I’m the same, but in my case, it’s just idle curiosity. I really should get myself a life, one of these days.’

I had no answer for that, other than a string of inappropriate questions that I would have liked to ask her. Like, was she married? Where did she live? Why was she doing house-sitting, of all things? Instead, I stuck firmly to the matter in hand. ‘Is there a get-together somewhere?’ I asked, thinking I would have heard if this was the case. Mourners were moving off slowly, apparently with nowhere definite to go. Nobody had said anything about adjournment to a local hostelry, or glanced at watches as if due somewhere.

‘Doesn’t look like it. How sad.’

It was time for me to go. The melancholy little funeral had given me scant satisfaction

– the woman had died too soon, with only the teenaged nephew showing any sense of loss. Every death should be important; the survivors should acknowledge that the pattern had changed. The permanent hole left by the deceased should be given its due recognition. In this case, I sensed surprised relief amongst the relatives, except for Jeremy, and an almost careless reaction from the middle-aged couples in attendance, who were purportedly local friends. Nowhere could I see evidence that Greta Simmonds' death caused much more than a momentary pain to most of the people who knew her.

'Oh, look!' said Thea suddenly, as I started to walk away from her.

I turned, following her pointing finger to a tree that stood at the edge of the field. Four big magpies were lined up along a bare branch, staring down at the grave.

'Four means a parcel or something like that,' said Thea.

'Pardon?'

'"One for a wish, two for a kiss. Three for a letter, four better." I always thought that meant a parcel.'

I smiled at her naïvety. Magpies were scavengers, and already they had detected the presence of decomposing flesh. I tried to catch the eye of the gravedigger, who would be well

aware of the need to proceed quickly with his duties. 'Maybe somebody's going to win the lottery,' I said carelessly.

I walked to the gate, where my vehicle was parked on a wide grass verge. I still sometimes called it a hearse in my own mind, but in reality it was a large estate car, with the rear seats removable to leave space for a coffin. Standing beside it was the young couple who had been chatting to the gravedigger, the woman sideways to me, the man behind her with a hand resting on her shoulder. She was light-skinned, in her early twenties. He was tall and black and a few years older. They were talking about my car.

'Is this your motor?' asked the man, unsmilingly.

I admitted ownership readily enough.

'Are you aware that three of the tyres are illegal, and the road tax expired over two weeks ago?' asked the girl.

They weren't in uniform. It did not occur to me that they were police officers, so I laughed. 'The disc's in the post,' I said easily. 'And the MOT is due next week. I'll sort it all out then.'

'Not good enough, I'm afraid, sir,' said the man. 'Might I see your licence and insurance documents?'

The penny dropped. 'Good Lord, are you police?' I asked.

‘That’s right, sir. PC Jessica Osborne, and Detective Sergeant Paul Middleman.’

‘Osborne?’ I had automatically filed away the name of the small woman I had been chatting to at the graveside. It’s a habit with undertakers – people’s names acquire considerable importance in my line of work.

‘Right.’ The girl gave me no encouragement.

‘There’s a lady called Osborne over there,’ I continued, pointing into the field.

‘She’s my mother,’ said PC Jessica.