Strangers at Drakeshaugh

by Northumbrian

Summary

The locals in a sleepy corner of the Cheviot Hills are surprised to discover that they have new neighbours.

Notes

Alwinton and Harbottle (and Harbottle Castle and the River Coquet) are real places in Coquetdale in the Cheviot Hills, Northumberland. The house called Drakeshaugh (pronounced Drakes-hoff) does not exist, but Drakestone Burn and the Drake Stone itself do. Haugh is an old English word meaning meadow, or hollow (or sometimes hidden place) and is a common place name in Northern England and Scotland.

This is a part of the UK I am familiar with (as should be obvious from my nom de plume). Any resemblance between my Original Characters and the residents of Coquetdale is purely coincidental. And apologies to footballing legend Jackie Charlton for the bad joke.
The Drop Off

My husband saw her first.

I'd been facing backwards, twisted uncomfortably in my seat and with my fully-extended seatbelt digging into my shoulder. My discomfort had been enforced on me by Henry, who had been prodding his little sister until she squealed. I'd given him a mild scolding, and had succeeded by creating a barrier between them using his school satchel. As a consequence, Henry was glaring at me with that sullen "how dare you stop me from doing what I want" expression of his.

'Blimey,' said Mike admiringly. 'D'you think that's real?'

As I turned to face forwards I caught a brief glimpse of the object of his appreciation. The woman was not tall, but she was curvy; she wore tight denim shorts and a white t-shirt. Her bright red hair was a twisted rope tied with two black bows; one was at the nape of her neck, the second was a little above the small of her back, and it danced and swayed as she walked. She was holding a small boy firmly by the hand and pushing a buggy. The boy was wearing grey shorts and a turquoise sweatshirt, the same sweatshirt that Henry was wearing, the uniform of Harbottle Primary School. I doubted that Mike had even noticed him.

'The bum?' I asked, knowing my husband. 'Definitely real.'

'I was talking about the hair,' Mike protested as we drove past.

'No idea,' I replied.

I turned and looked back; the buggy was a double. The woman was striding determinedly down the road towards Harbottle and the village school. She was a stranger, a newcomer to our little corner of the hills, but I instantly decided that I wasn't going to like her. She had no right to a figure like that after three kids.

The Alwinton to Harbottle road is narrow, and there are no footpaths until you get into the village. The woman had been walking down the road, facing the oncoming traffic. Not that there was anything coming. We don't see many cars on our roads and anything larger than a car is very unusual, unless the army are on the ranges.

We'd been crossing the River Coquet when Annie had started protesting about her brother's prodding and we had just reached the castle car park when Mike pointed the woman out. I wondered where she had come from. I know everyone on our side of the river, in Alwinton and the surrounding farms. On this side, the south side, we had only passed two properties and I know who lives there, too. There was nowhere else.

Unless ... unless someone had actually bought Drakeshaugh. The old farmhouse had been derelict for years, but as I considered the possibilities I realised that there was nowhere else the redheaded woman could have come from. Drakeshaugh was a mile and a half from Harbottle, up the track alongside Drakestone Burn. If she was from Drakeshaugh she had walked along the old and rutted track, and then along this road, while pushing two kids and holding on to the third.

'Anyone mentioned any newcomers to you?' I asked.

'You keep up with the gossip, Jacqui, not me,' said Mike. 'We'll find out soon enough; she'll be
taking the lad to school. He was in uniform. My husband had noticed the boy. Sometimes I underestimate him. After nine years of marriage I should know better.

We swept around the bends and into the single street that is Harbottle village. The stranger was lost in the distance behind us.

'I could drop you off at the school, go back, and offer her a lift,' Mike suggested.

'Michael Charlton,' I told him as we slowed down. 'You are here for your son's first full day at school, not to pick up curvy redheaded strangers.'

'I could combine the two,' he said with a grin.

'What're you talking 'bout?' Henry asked us from the back seat.

'We've just seen a lady who we don't know walking towards the school, Henry,' I informed my son. 'She has a little boy with her; he might be a new friend for you. That would be nice, wouldn't it?'

'No,' Henry told me firmly.

I kept the sun visor down at all times, and I kept the flap which conceals the vanity mirror up. By careful use of the vanity mirror and the passenger door mirror, I could watch my children without them realising what I was doing. Henry was convinced that I really did have eyes in the back of my head. My son was close to tears this morning, poor little lad. He was worried, nervous. It was a big day, his first full day at school.

Henry had been going to school for half days, mornings only, since Easter. He had settled in nicely, even made friends with a couple of the older children, but the six week summer break had been long enough to make him forget all about that. We'd had tears and tantrums from the moment we'd roused him this morning and I was extremely thankful that Mike had arranged to start work late.

My husband had insisted on helping, he wanted to be with Henry for the start of his first full day at school. He pulled up at the end of the long line of cars already parked on the street. We were almost out of the village; we'd only just passed the school warning sign.

'Here we are, Henny,' Mike announced.

'Hen-ry,' Henry corrected his father crossly.

'You used to say Henny when you were a little boy,' Mike reminded him. 'Aren't you still a little boy?'

'No!' announced Henry importantly. 'I'm a big boy, I'm nearly five.'

'A big boy who's going to school for a whole day, like big boys do,' said Mike knowledgeably.

'I'm glad you're here,' I told my husband in an undertone. He grinned and winked at me.

I took my time getting out of the car, allowing Mike to walk around to lift Henry out from his seat onto the path. I leaned across Henry's car seat and unbuckled Annie from hers. As I settled her on my hip, I watched Henry take his daddy's hand. Mike was doing a good job; he was playing the ignorant fool, keeping Henry's mind on other things.

'Is it this way?' Mike asked, leading Henry in the wrong direction, away from the school gate, and allowing our son to scold him and lead him into the school yard. Mike says that sometimes acting
daft is the most sensible thing to do; it certainly works with Henry a lot of the time. I smiled as I watched them walk down the path towards the gate, and noticed that Henry didn't have his bag.

I checked the back seat and realised that Henry had knocked his school bag onto the floor. When I picked it up, I cursed. It was dripping. The carton of fresh orange juice I'd packed for him was leaking, that was obvious from the smell. I swore under my breath, lifted the bag out from the car and dropped it onto the path. The bag was a sticky mess, and now, so was my hand.

'Wassamatter, Mammy?' my daughter asked.

I lifted her into Henry's car seat and ordered, 'Don't move, Annie; I need to clear this up.'

'I need any help?' someone asked. Her accent gave her away instantly, she certainly wasn't local. It was a southern drawl; West Country I thought. A few more words and I'd be certain.

I looked towards the voice. There was the boy in the school sweatshirt. He was auburn-haired and freckle faced and he was looking rather worried, not unlike Henry. There, too, was the buggy. It was a muddy three-wheeled off-roader. Two children sat side by side in the buggy. The younger was a toddler, eighteen months old I guessed; a girl with hair as bright a red as her mother's and tied into two bunches. The older child was perhaps three, and completely unlike the other two, he had a mop of unruly jet-black hair and bright green eyes.

Behind the buggy was a pair of sturdy, freckled and well-muscled legs. The woman's faded denim shorts were quite long, three or four inches above her knees and they did not seem so tight from the front, but as her white t-shirt was low-cut, my husband would probably find something else to attract his attention; two something elses.

Oblivious to my uncharitable thoughts, the freckle faced and red-headed stranger looked at me, smiled, and then waved at my daughter who sat patiently in the car seat. The woman's children looked at me as though they'd never seen another human being before.

'Are we there yet, Mummy?' the boy in school uniform asked her as I opened Henry's bag.

'Yes, James, we're there,' she told him.

Juice had dripped from Henry's lunch box and onto his coat, which was wet and sticky. Under the silent scrutiny of the woman and her three children I pulled out the coat and dropped it on the path before opening the lunch box and checking the contents. Henry's apple could be salvaged, if it were washed and dried it would be fine, but the rest of his lunch was ruined.

They were still there, watching and waiting. I glared at the woman; then remembered that she'd asked me a question; she'd offered to help, and I hadn't replied. I was horrified to realise that it was me, not her, who was being rude.

'Sorry, I don't think that you'll be able to help, but thank you very much for the offer,' I told the woman apologetically. 'My son's orange juice carton has leaked and his lunch is ruined.'

'Lunch?' The young woman looked worried. Her children simply continued to watch me. 'Isn't lunch provided? I thought that lunch was provided.'

'It is, if you've paid for it,' I told her. 'Have you?'

'I don't know,' the woman looked confused. 'Harry - my husband - made all of the arrangements.
He was supposed to be here with me, but there's been a crisis at work and he had to go.

'Want Daddy,' the dark-haired boy announced. His ears had pricked up at the word "Harry".

'He's at work, Al,' the woman said exasperatedly.

'We can talk to Mrs Wilson, the early-years teacher,' I reassured her. 'She'll know whether ... James (I struggled, but remembered what she'd called the auburn-haired boy) ... has his name down for school dinners, and I'll need to buy Henry lunch, too, now.'

'Thanks,' the woman gave me a pleasant and very grateful smile.

'Would you like me to dry your son's coat?' she asked. 'I'm Ginny Potter, by the way.'

She held out freckled hand. I shook the hand she'd proffered. She had a surprisingly firm grip. I'm a farmer's daughter; my grip is good, but hers was better.

'Jacqui Charlton,' I said, warily telling her my name. 'I've heard all of the jokes, so don't bother.' She looked at me blankly. She's a Southerner, I remembered, so she's probably never heard of Jackie Charlton.

'I don't think that you'll be able to do anything with this,' I told her as I carefully examined Henry's jacket. Thanks to the sticky juice, it also had grit sticking to it. She simply smiled, reached under the buggy and pulled out a magenta towel. Taking the coat from me, she wrapped it inside the towel and rubbed vigorously. When she lifted the coat out it was clean and dry, and it wasn't sticky.

'How on earth did you do that?' I asked.

'This ...' Ginny Potter stopped and thought carefully before starting again.

'George ... my brother ... one of my brothers ... is a bit of an ... inventor. His son, Fred, is the scruffiest, stickiest kid in the family, although he's got a lot of competition, especially from this one.' She ruffled her eldest son's hair affectionately. 'George ... invented ... this towel. It's ... specially treated ... and a sort of test version.'

'I'd buy one,' I told her.

'Don't be so sure. I wouldn't be surprised if everything I clean with it suddenly turns magenta later.' She smiled, then realised what she'd said. She looked horror-struck at her words and covered her mouth with her hand.

'Oh, shi... da... bother,' she exclaimed, moving from one uncompleted swear word to another and doing the "not in front of the children" word shift I often do myself. 'If it does, let me know and I'll replace the coat. I'm sure we'll see each other at the school gates again.'

'Oi!' my husband shouted.

'Coming, Mike,' I called.

'My husband,' I explained. 'It's our son's first full day so he decided to take time off work.'

'So did Harry, but something came up,' Ginny told me. She was looking rather bewildered and I suddenly felt sorry for her.

'Come with me, Ginny, I'll introduce you to some of the other mums. This ...' I lifted Annie out of the car, '...is my daughter, Annie.'
I put Annie down, grabbed her hand tightly, and we toddled slowly towards the school gates alongside the Potters.

'Say hello to Mrs Potter, Annie,' I suggested.

'Ello,' Annie mumbled shyly.

'Hello, Annie. These three are James, Al, and Lily. Say hello to Mrs Charlton and Annie, kids.'

'Hello,' the two younger ones chorused.

'Hello to Mrs Charlton and Annie.' James scowled.

'James, behave yourself,' Ginny scolded.

'But I don't wanna go to school!' James told his mother.

'Neither does my son, Henry,' I told him, 'Perhaps you could keep each other company.'

'That would be nice, wouldn't it?' Ginny asked.

'No,' James announced.

Before Ginny could speak we'd reached the gates, where my husband and son stood waiting. I performed the introductions. Mike was on his best behaviour, thank goodness, and he graciously agreed to look after Annie, Al and Lily while Ginny and I took our sons into school.

James and Henry were assessing each other carefully. James was looking wonderingly at the impressively painted school yard and, as we strolled up towards the school, the two boys began talking quietly to each other. Henry, I noticed, was explaining things. Suddenly my son wasn't the new kid. He had found someone even newer.

'It's quite an old building,' Ginny observed.

'More than a hundred and fifty years old, early Victorian, but it's been well modernised, don't worry,' I reassured her.

'The school I went to was a lot older,' she said with a smile.

'Really?' I began, but my son interrupted us.

'James's having school dinners,' Henry announced.

'Would you like school dinners, too?' I asked, desperately praying for the right answer.

'Yes,' he announced.

'Well, if that's what you want, Henry, we'll organise it now.' I winked at Ginny, who smiled a knowing reply.

So we took our sons into the school, spoke to Mrs Wilson and watched her settle the boys into the small class of four-, five- and six-year-olds.

It did not take long for Mrs Wilson to set them to work with paint and paper. When they turned their backs on us and started to mix paints, we left.
'We can't offer you a lift, sorry, Ginny,' Mike said when we left the school. 'Five seats for six people, I'm afraid that you won't all fit. Have you been here long? Just moved in? Where are you living? What does your husband do?'

'Oh, for goodness sake, Mike, don't be so nosey. How can she answer all of those questions?' I glared at Mike and he shut up. I could see that Ginny was on her guard the instant he began firing questions at her. Realising that Mike's blundering questions meant I'd not find anything out, I decided to tell her about us.

'Mike works in Morpeth, he's a solicitor and land agent,' I told Ginny. 'I was born and bred up here. Mike's the newcomer, originally from the big city, Newcastle. Eight years and he's still not used to our quiet country ways.'

We were passing the huddle of other Mums at the school gate when I spoke. Mary Saville called across to me. She was looking curiously at Ginny and would want to know "absolutely everything, darling" about her.

'Just as well we are out here in the "quiet country",' boomed Mary, waving a newspaper, 'I certainly wouldn't want to be in Sheffield at the moment.'

The headline read: "Werewolf Killer Writes: I'll keep killing."

Ginny frowned grimly and walked on, ignoring Mary.

'Daddy gone Se'feed,' Al Potter announced, looking up in interest at the mention of the city.

'Yes, he has, Al. He's there on business,' Ginny said. 'Thanks for your help, Jacqui, but I'd best get these two home. We have a lot to do today.'

'Thank you,' I told her. 'Henry has a clean coat and, I hope, a new friend. He was very nervous this morning.'

'So was James. It will be nice if he can mix with some Mu... some children who he isn't related to.' She looked a little sad as she spoke. I knew how she was feeling.

'Kids have got to go to school. It's good for them, even if they are a miss around the house,' I reassured her.

'That's what Harry says, too, I hope that he's right. Bye, Jacqui, bye, Mike. I'm sure I'll see you again.' With that, she turned and pushed the buggy containing her two younger children back down the road.

I didn't have a chance to discuss Ginny Potter with Mike because Mary bustled over.

'A mysterious stranger, tell me everything, darling,' she began. I was a severe disappointment to her and I was glad when, after a couple of minutes, Mike helped me to escape by reminding me that he needed to take me home in order to get to work.
The Pick Up

That afternoon, while Annie was sleeping, I sat in the armchair beside the bay window, drinking my coffee and carefully reading the newspaper articles about the Sheffield murders.

Reading the paper is not something I normally do. Daytime television (especially the property programmes) are my vice, but my interest was piqued, probably because of Ginny Potter's conversation with her younger son, whose Daddy was "In Se'feed". Ginny had said that he wasn't with her because there had "been a crisis at work". Her remarks had intrigued me and because of them, and Mary's remarks, I'd even watched the lunchtime news.

The BBC News at One had led with the story, and it was the main headline in the newspapers, too. Late on Friday night, or early on Saturday morning, there had been a brutal murder in Sheffield. The body of a young woman had been found in a suburb called Grimesthorpe. She had been torn to pieces "as if by a wild animal", according to the reports in Mike's copy of The Independent. The later editions of the Saturday papers had been full of the story, although I hadn't paid it much attention at the time. Then on Sunday the News of the World broke the news that there had been a similar murder in a different part of Sheffield, Nether Edge, about four weeks earlier.

The first body, a middle-aged man, hadn't been found until several days after his death. But the News of the World was already claiming that both victims had been killed on the full moon night. They had even rounded up a few "witnesses" who claimed that they had heard a wolf howling at the moon. The police had confirmed that Friday had been the night of the full moon, but the police spokesman pointed out that the time and date of death of the two victims had not been reliably established. Nevertheless, the paper had called them "The Werewolf Murders" and the name had already stuck.

That was Sunday. Mike collected his paper on the way to the office, so I would have to wait to read the latest. However, The News at One had been contained a report on a letter, purportedly from "The Werewolf", who threatened to continue to kill on every full moon night "until Greyback is freed." South Yorkshire Police had initially dismissed the reports with a brief "we will not comment on an ongoing investigation," but "The Werewolf" had sent a copy of the letter to The Sun newspaper. Eventually, and with some reluctance, the police had confirmed that they had received a copy of the same letter. They claimed to have no idea who "Greyback" was. There was a lot of speculation about whether or not this was true.

I read a lot of crime fiction; too much, Mike says. But I'd rather read a meaty murder mystery than a dreary and boring romance. Who cares what happens to a stupid and self-obsessed girl and her arrogant and wholly unsuitable beau? Probably because of my reading habits, my mind had been running riot.

This morning, news broke about the mysterious "Greyback Letter" and—also this morning—Ginny's husband was called to Sheffield on urgent business. I wondered if he was somehow involved with the murder investigation. Exciting new neighbours; now that would be news for Mary!

I picked up my cup and discovered that my coffee was almost cold. As I checked the living room clock, I realised that it was already time for me to leave and pick up Henry from school. I had been so engrossed in my speculations that I had forgotten to check the clock.
I was a few minutes late leaving the house and I was made even later because Annie was still asleep. It is always a struggle to get her into her car seat without waking her. Fitting her seat into the Micra isn't an easy job for me, either. Had I thought about it, I would have ensured that Mike swapped the seats over before he left for work. Fortunately, I'm usually at the school gate at least fifteen minutes before school closes, so "late" simply meant that I arrived only five minutes before the kids were due to finish, rather than my usual quarter of an hour.

I drove past the school, turned around in Drakestone View and drove past for a second time. It was obvious that I was the last to arrive. Mary and her friends were already standing just inside the gates and the taxi buses for the kids from the outlying farms were all neatly lined up along the road, too. When I pulled in and parked at the end of the line of cars and mini-buses, I was furthest from the school gates.

Annie was still asleep in her car seat, which gave me an excuse not to go and chat to the other mums. Waiting in the car with my dozing daughter meant that I wouldn't be interrogated by Mary and her friends, and they wouldn't realise how little I knew about the newcomers. I certainly wasn't ready to share my crazy suspicions with them.

It was then that I realised I had not passed Ginny. One glance back at the school gates told me that she wasn't there. That hair of hers was unmistakeable and it was obviously absent from the crowd. James would be out soon, and his mammy wasn't going to be waiting. I was surprised, because, after my initial hostility (which, I had admitted to myself, was entirely because of her looks) I'd decided that she seemed to be a nice woman. I stared through my windscreen, looking back up the road. She should have been approaching the school by now, but there was no sign of her.

I sat for a few minutes and tried to decide what to do. I had just met Ginny, I didn't know how she would react if I went to find her. If she'd simply been delayed for a few minutes, then I'd be a busybody. If, however, there was a problem...

I had just resolved to drive up towards the lane which led to Drakeshaugh, to see if she needed any help, when the motorbike arrived. It roared up the road from behind me and pulled up to park directly in front of my car. The bike brought with it memories of my younger days. It was a big, black and very noisy machine, a classic old Triumph, I thought, although it didn't have a name badge on the petrol tank. The rider dismounted and, in a fluid and obviously well-practiced motion, he pulled the bike up onto its stand. This was even more mysterious than this morning's encounter. I watched with interest.

The biker was wearing faded blue jeans and a leather jacket which was a peculiar green-black colour; it looked almost scaly. I watched him unzip the jacket to reveal a worn and faded green t-shirt with the letters -RPI- on the chest; I couldn't see the entire word. Then, finally, he took off his helmet. It was a bright red thing with a lion rampant painted on each side. This was Harry Potter, I realised, and he knew how to make an entrance.

While he was busy fastening his helmet to the bike, I got out of the car and smiled at him. The muttered conversation at the school gates behind me had almost stopped. I did not turn around, but I could sense the enquiring eyes of the school-gate mums behind me. I wondered if they, too, had recognised him.

'Hello,' I said, rather breathlessly. 'You must be Ginny's husband.'

The second he'd removed the helmet I knew that this was definitely Al's dad, Harry Potter. There could be absolutely no doubt about that, the jet black hair and bright green eyes proved it. Al Potter was a "dead spit" of his father, as my dad would say. The only difference was that, unlike Al, Harry Potter's eyes were hidden behind glasses.
He was about average height and was probably, like Ginny, in his late twenties. He certainly didn’t look his age; he looked young, very young. He wasn't skinny, but he wasn't muscular either, he was lean and slim and his hair was tousled and untidy. I prefer more meat on my men, but he was rather cute. He had a strange boyish charm which made me (and some of the mothers behind me, I suspected from the excited murmurs which I could now hear) want to look after him.

'You must be Jacqui,' he said, smiling as he held out a hand in greeting. 'Ginny's told me about you. You're right. I'm Harry Potter, James's dad.' There was so much pride in his voice when he spoke those last two words that I wanted to hug him. I resisted temptation and simply shook his outstretched hand.

'Hello Harry Potter, James's dad,' I burbled stupidly.

I cursed inwardly at my ridiculous greeting. I was talking to a nice looking bloke and suddenly I was acting like a love-struck teen. He merely grinned at me.

'Call me Harry, please,' he said firmly. 'Thanks for helping Ginny out this morning, Jacqui. I rather left her in the lurch ... James, too,' he added sadly.

'I do hope that you're not thinking of taking your son home on that thing,' Mary Saville boomed from behind me. Harry Potter looked over my shoulder in surprise.

'Of course not, we'll be walking home; I'll come back and collect the bike later,' Harry told her abruptly before turning his attention back to me.

'So you're obviously from further up the valley, Jacqui. Ginny told me that you drove past her on the road, from Alwinton?'

'Yes, that's right,' I said, aware that by helping Harry to ignore Mary I was taking a dangerous path. School-gate gossip was the main form of communication in the valley; Mary was the mistress of tittle-tattle and undisputed queen of the school gate.

'We live in Alwinton village, and you must have moved into Drakeshaugh,' I told him. 'Because there's nowhere else you could be.'

He raised an eyebrow in surprise and I caught a glimpse of a scar on his forehead.

'I thought no one would notice us around here,' he said.

I laughed, and risked patting his shoulder in what I hoped was a friendly gesture.

'Everyone will notice you around here, Harry. There are so few of us on this road and we all know each other, even if it's just a polite nod as we drive past. But we don't know anything about you. We didn't even know that someone had moved into Drakeshaugh. All I know is that you're a southerner, but you're not from the West Country like Ginny.'

'How do you know that?' he asked, looking at me in surprise.

'Accents, they've always been a hobby of mine. Ginny drawls more than you. You're closer to Estuary English, not London, but close, I'd say.'

'You can tell that just by hearing me speak, and Ginny, too?' he asked. He sounded amazed.

'You're from the Home Counties; probably Berkshire, Hampshire or Surrey,' I guessed.
'Surrey,' he confirmed. 'And Ginny?'

'Possibly Cornwall, but probably Devon,' I told him.

'Impressive,' he said, and he actually looked like he was impressed.

'So you're from Surrey, you live in Northumberland and you work in Sheffield. You must lead an interesting life.' I smiled.

'Who said I work in Sheffield?' He asked his question rather brusquely and I saw a disconcerting flash of sharp steel behind those smiling green eyes.

'Your younger son, Al. Somebody mentioned Sheffield, because of those "Werewolf" murders and he said "Daddy's in Se'feed," so I assumed that's where you work.'

Harry Potter relaxed.

'I try to work from home when I can, but my office is in London and I sometimes get called away elsewhere. This morning I was called to Sheffield,' he said.

'Because of the murders?' I asked abruptly, taking a chance. I looked directly into his face. He hesitated. I immediately knew that he was trying to decide whether or not to lie to me, which obviously meant, yes--the murders. He stared into my eyes and I suddenly got the crazy idea that he was reading my thoughts. He probably simply read my guess in my face, because he pulled a slightly annoyed face, and gave me a grudging nod.

'Yes. My office ... my office provides specialist services for the government and the police. At the moment I'm working with South Yorkshire Police,' he told me.

'Specialist services?' I asked.

'Yes ... offender profiling ... that sort of stuff,' he said vaguely.

'Sounds interesting,' I said.

'Usually it's deadly dull office work and that's the way I like it,' he said with a wistful smile. 'But it has its moments.' He was absent-mindedly scratching his chest as he spoke.

I didn't get the chance to ask him anything else because the children were screaming out of the school gates. My mother's ear caught Henry's high pitched yells among the confusing cacophony.

'Mammy!'

I searched for my son and saw that he and James were side by side and running towards us, each proudly holding a curled up sheet of paper.

'Daddydaddydaddy,' James squealed. I looked round, then down. Harry had hunkered down onto the balls of his feet to greet his son at his own level.

'Jamesjamesjames,' said Harry, laughing. 'Have you had a good day?'

'esitwasgreatI'vedrawdapicher,' he said proudly and rapidly.

'You've drawn a picture, wow!' Harry said, then Henry was on top of me and his excited and insistent shouts required my full attention.
Henry had drawn a picture, too. It was of his family: Mammy, Daddy and a shapeless little pink blob which he dismissively assured me was his sister. He proudly pushed his picture under Harry's nose, and Harry, bless him, made all the right noises of appreciation at the confusion of smeared poster paints.

James then insisted on showing me his "picher", too. It was, I noted jealously, rather better than Henry's.

"'sMummy'n'Daddy'n'Al'n'Lililoo,' James announced.

He paused for breath. Lily-Lou, I noted. That was an unusual name, not like ordinary James. I wondered whether Al was an ordinary Alan, or, I smiled to myself at my flight of fancy, an Alphonse.

Ginny was basically red. She was a crimson circle for a head, crimson hair, crimson smile and a face spotted with crimson - not measles, I realised - but freckles. Harry was a black scribble of hair, glasses, green eyes and a smile; there was something else, too a red zig-zag between glasses and hair.

'It's lovely, James,' I told him, 'I'll give it to your daddy to keep safe, okay?'

I handed Harry James's painting, which he took very carefully as if it was a valuable masterpiece (which, of course, it was). As he took it, I looked curiously up at his forehead. He sighed in exasperation and lifted up a tangled lock of hair to reveal a faint zig-zag scar.

'James is fascinated by it,' he told me, 'My parents died in a car crash when I was fifteen months old. I survived unscathed, apart from this.'

'I'm sorry...' I began automatically.

'I have some photographs, but I don't really remember them. When I was younger they used to haunt my dreams all the time but they haven't since ... well, not for more than ten years now. I haven't forgotten them, but ... I think I've finally come to terms with...' Harry's words came out in a rush, his interruption making it clear that with those few words he had told me as much as he was going to about his parents. I wondered who had raised him, but I didn't ask.

'I like to think that I'm more than just an unusual scar...' he began with a smile.

'I'm sure you are, you're a mysterious stranger, too,' I told him jokingly. His face fell.

'After Ginny dropped James off this morning she warned me that we hadn't really thought this through. I thought that finding a nice quiet school in a remote area was the best thing for our children. Ginny and I like to lead a quiet life, but we're going to be gossiped about, aren't we? Just turning up and moving into Drakeshaugh and then arriving at the school unexpectedly is a big thing in a little place like this isn't it?'

'I'm afraid so,' I admitted.

'We'd probably have been more anonymous if we'd stayed in London. We'd have been lost in the crowds. But Ginny and I wanted our kids to have some space to grow up in, woods and streams and fields, not a London townhouse without a garden.'

'If you didn't want to draw attention to yourselves, you've done a spectacularly bad job. That bike of yours will definitely be a talking point, too,' I told him.
'Perhaps I should take James out of school...' he began.

'No!' James and Henry spoke together. Both Harry and I looked down at them in surprise. They had been listening in silence to our conversation. James looked close to tears.

'Have you already found a new friend, James?' Harry asked his son. Henry looked at James, James looked at Henry, and my son gave a quivering-lipped confirmatory nod.

'Yes,' James said firmly.

'Well, that's settled then. We're staying and we'll simply have to put up with the unwanted attention, again,' Harry said with finality. 'We'd best get home Jamesy, and you can tell Mummy all about your day at school, and show her your beautiful painting, and you'll see Henry at school again tomorrow.'

'Do you want a lift to the end of your lane?' I asked. 'My car isn't big, but I can squeeze you both in. The only problem is that I don't have a booster seat for James to use.'

'Thanks for the offer, Jacqui, but I'd like to walk back, to hear all about James's first day at his new school. We'll see you tomorrow. Bye Henry, bye sleepy-girl,' Harry waved at Annie who had, fortunately, woken up happy and was watching us in still-half-asleep silence.

'We're not bad once you get to know us, and you've probably given me enough to keep the local busybody happy for a while,' I replied quietly.

'Is that the big dark-haired woman who didn't like my bike?' Harry asked.

'Mary,' I said, nodding.

'I've had worse people than her snooping about,' said Harry, his eyes sparkling with mischief. 'Bye, Jacqui, and thanks again for helping Ginny.'

'Bye, Henry,' James whispered.

'Taraa, James, seeya termorra,' said Henry, strangling the English language to within an inch of its life.

'See you tomorrow, I corrected him.

'Swot I said,' Henry told me.

Behind me, car doors were slamming as everyone prepared to leave. I watched Harry walk up the road, hand in hand with his son, before lifting Henry into his seat.

When we drove past them a few minutes later, James was sitting on his Daddy's shoulders. I tooted my horn and waved as we passed. Harry gave a quick wave, but he had to stop as James was waving so wildly that he almost fell of his father's shoulders.

'It looks like you've found a new friend, Henry,' I said.

'es,' Henry said happily.
Misty Morning

The dawn mist was stubbornly refusing to move when I drove Henry down to school the following morning. On the horizon, the mist was lightly washing out the colour from the hills, fields and trees. It also lay in thick white pools in every indentation and concavity in the landscape. The clouds overhead were thick and grey, and they sapped the strength of the sun, ensuring that its rays were too feeble to shift the mist. Fingers of fog drifted out from the little lakes of white in the hollows, and the slithering white tendrils hung eerily in the air across the lowest points on the road. I was driving down the valley, and by the time I reached Harbottle the mist had thickened into a chill grey fog.

As usual, I turned the car around before returning and parking outside the school. I carried a happily burbling Annie on my hip and held Henry firmly by the hand. Mike had not taken a second morning off work, but despite his teasing warnings over breakfast, there were no mishaps ion the school run. No spilled juice and no sticky coats.

We walked through the grey murk to the school gates. The clouds would probably break later, and there seemed to be the prospect of some sunshine, but at that moment, as we approached the school it was a dull and dismal day.

When I walked into the classroom with Annie and Henry, I discovered that Ginny had beaten me into school. She was busy making James comfortable in the classroom when I arrived. There was no sign of either Al or Lily.

James was looking very unsure again, but he smiled uncertainly when Henry and I arrived. I said a quick hello to Ginny, which she returned, but I was then forced to concentrate on Henry, as he suddenly seemed nervous too. I stood Annie on the floor, watched her toddle curiously around the classroom and helped Henry take off his coat. The moment he pulled his arms free from it, my son strolled slowly across the classroom to where James stood.

"Lo, Henry," James said quietly.

"Lo, James," my son replied.

And that was it. They circled shyly around each other for a few silent seconds, then, by mutual agreement, they concluded that they still liked each other and began chattering happily.

Ginny stood up and smiled at me.

'Hello, Jacqui. I was beginning to worry again, but they seem to be okay,' Ginny said.

'They do, Ginny. Henry was looking forward to seeing James again this morning,' I told her. 'Bye, boys.'

'Bye,' they chorused.

'Bye, James, bye, Henry,' Ginny said.

I chased after Annie, who was investigating a box full of letter cards, scooped her up into my arms and followed Ginny into the cloakroom. I still had Henry's coat and was struggling to hang it up while holding onto Annie, who was protesting squeakily about having been picked up.
'Let me,' said Ginny, taking the coat from me and putting it on the peg next to James's coat. As she did so, I noticed that she examined the coat carefully.

'The coat is fine, thanks, Ginny; it's as clean as if it had been washed. The boys will be fine, too, I'm sure,' I told her. We exchanged understanding glances. It really is a wrench, taking your firstborn to school.

We were about to leave when a confusion of children piled into the cloakroom and continued through into the classroom. Ginny and I were forced to stand aside as they entered the school. The buses had arrived, and with them the majority of the pupils. The volume rose as over a dozen children squeaked and squealed their way to their seats. Ginny and I turned to ensure that our sons weren't worried by the noisy influx. But neither of them even gave us a glance. Instead they looked to each other for reassurance and simply stood side by side watching the tumult flow around them. They would be fine, I decided.

As we walked outside into the moist grey air, Ginny thrust her hands into the pockets of the faded and dirty jeans she was wearing. She was a lot less tidy than she had been the previous morning. Her hand-knitted sweater was a worn and scruffy old red thing with a familiar-looking yellow lion on the front. The same design as Harry's motorbike helmet, I remembered. The sweater clashed violently with her hair.

'Do you knit?' I asked her as we walked out of the school.

She looked down at her sweater and smiled depreciatively.

'I can, and I do, sometimes. But I'm not as good as Mum. This is one of hers; she knitted it for Harry years ago, but he grew out of it. It's my dirty-work sweater now. I need to get home as I still have a lot of tidying up to do. Mum is looking after Al and Lily while I finally finish moving us in. I hope that we will...' she rolled her eyes dramatically, 'finally be completely unpacked and tidy by tonight.' Ginny sighed and looked a little downcast.

'Moving house is a stressful time, Ginny,' I assured her as we walked towards the school gates. 'When we moved here the removal men broke two Lladro figurines. It took almost two years, and the threat of legal action by Mike, before they accepted responsibility. And then there was the dirt! At least our place had been lived in, though the previous owners left it in a real mess. We filled eight bin bags with their rubbish! Your house has been empty and derelict for years. It must have been a huge job getting it ready.'

I watched Ginny carefully as I spoke and sensed that the move wasn't the only thing was worrying Ginny; from the way she reacted to my words, I realised that something else was bothering her too.

'There's something else, isn't there?' I asked. We stopped, just inside the school gates and Ginny turned, looked up at me and nodded.

'You don't have to tell me if you don't want to,' I told her. 'Just tell me not to be nosey, I don't mind.'

'Harry was supposed to be off work, helping, but he can't, at least, not for a few more days. He said that he'd told you...' said Ginny.

'Yes, he told me about his job yesterday afternoon when he collected James. Can't he pass the Sheffield case on to someone else?' I enquired. Ginny's face fell at my suggestion and she heaved a deep, sad sigh.

'Usually, Harry would delegate. But everything seems to be happening at once. He has a werewolf
specialist ... at least a specialist in that sort of thing ... he would use for this case. But Lavender ... the specialist ... had ... is ... was ... pregnant.' Ginny's words came out in a rush; she simply wanted to tell someone, anyone, about her concerns, and she'd chosen me.

'She had her baby unexpectedly, late on Friday, more than a month early. Lavender lost a lot of blood and they couldn't do much for her until Saturday morning because ... well, for various reasons. She has a ... condition. The baby, a girl, isn't very well either. They are both in Saint ... in hospital and will be for some time,' Ginny told me.

I patted her arm understandingly. A new mother and baby, both of them in hospital, is bad news. Though from her garbled reply I wasn't sure exactly what had happened, or why the baby was premature. I was murmuring some sympathetic response and trying to figure out how to find out more when Ginny glanced past me.

'I'm sorry. I can't stop and chat any longer; I've got to go, bye, Jacqui,' she said suddenly.

With that she turned on her heels and strode rapidly ahead and out of the school gates. She appeared not to hear Mary shouting, 'Mrs Potter! ... Ginny!' from behind me. She simply marched rapidly up the road and vanished into the fine white swirling mist.

I began to ponder the latest snippets of information about our newcomers. Poor Ginny, from her anxiety, it was obvious that she knew and liked this Lavender woman. My musings were, however, interrupted.

'Well,' Mary said to me as we watched the dark shape which was Ginny vanishing into the mist. 'Very strange, don't you think?'

'She's busy, they haven't finished moving in yet,' I said.

Mary snorted in disbelief. 'Do you really think that they've bought the place, darling?' she asked me. 'They certainly don't look like they could afford to live here. Did you see that sweater she was wearing? And he wasn't much better yesterday. She walks here, and he arrived on a motor-bike, of all things! I wouldn't be surprised if they're simply a bunch of layabout hippy squatters. Perhaps you should call the police, Jacqui.'

*Perhaps I should call the police?* The bare-faced cheek of the woman! She was trying to persuade me to do her dirty work. Unknown to Mary, or any of our new neighbours, Mike had owned a motor-bike when we'd started going out a dozen years earlier. We'd travelled the country, and much of Europe, on it and we only sold it when Henry was born, just before we moved to Alwinton. I had encountered anti-biker prejudice before, and I didn't like it. Nevertheless, this was Mary, so I clenched my teeth, kept quiet, and tried to keep calm.

'I'd be dressed like that if I was still unpacking and tidying,' I said, somehow managing to keep my voice mild and reasonable. 'And Harry works in London, apparently.'

'Doing what?' Mary sneered. 'Is he a motorcycle courier?'

'I don't really know, but I got the impression that he was a manager of some sort. He wasn't here yesterday morning because there was a crisis at the office,' I told her neutrally. Mary was really beginning to annoy me, so I decided not to tell her what little I knew about Harry's job. 'Perhaps they simply want to keep themselves to themselves,' I suggested.

'Perhaps they don't want anyone to know where they are hiding,' Mary replied. 'Are you going to call the police?'
I was desperate to get away from the woman. But saying no to Mary was never easy, so instead I avoided answering.

'My husband is a solicitor and land agent,' I reminded her. 'I'm sure that if there was anything dodgy about the property deal Mike would have heard. He could easily find out about the sale if he needed to.'

Mary nodded and I saw an idea spark in her eyes. Happy that it did not involve me, I made my excuses and left.

As I drove home I thought carefully about the most recent pieces of information I'd discovered.

There are no hospitals which have the name of "Saint Anything" anywhere near us, so this Lavender woman wasn't local, but then neither were Harry and Ginny. Lavender and her baby were both still in hospital and Ginny was miles away, unable to visit. As a mother myself I could only sympathise. I wondered how they were, and how the dad was coping. If he was around, of course, these days you could never be sure that there was a dad.

I supposed that this colleague of Harry's would have been expected to work the case if she was the expert. Did our government employ people who were experts on werewolves? That was a ridiculous idea! But Harry had said something about a profiling office. They would probably have someone who knew the psychology of those weirdoes who believe in werewolves and flying saucers and other such nonsense.

I wondered what this Lavender woman was like. From her name I imagined her as an older mum, a bespectacled and skinny professorial type. She was probably in her early forties and just getting around to having her first baby. That would certainly explain the facts as I knew them.

Also of interest was the news that Ginny's mum had knitted Harry a sweater which he'd "grown out of". From the size of the sweater he'd have been in his early or mid-teens when it was new. The sleeves were still the right length for Ginny, though the sweater was very tight on her. I wondered how long Harry and Ginny had known each other, and smiled to myself as I tried to imagine Harry as a skinny little thirteen-year-old.

I filled my morning with housework and Annie-minding, and the events of the morning school run rapidly drifted to the back of my mind. I had little choice but to keep Annie occupied. It seemed she had decided that she had reached "the terrible two's" and it was one of those days when I couldn't afford to leave anything within her reach. When he'd been her age Henry had attempted to destroy anything he could grab. Annie simply tried to eat it; she was less destructive than her brother, but more likely to do herself an injury.

At about one in the afternoon I was standing in Annie’s bedroom, swaying from side to side and trying to settle her down for her afternoon nap. She would not be napping for much longer; Henry had not lasted as long, but Annie had exhausted herself with her antics during the morning.

She was almost asleep when the phone rang. I quickly carried Annie into the main bedroom, shifted her into one arm and picked up the phone. I wasn't quick enough. Annie twisted and squirmed and began to howl.

'What?' I snapped angrily down the phone.

'That's not very nice,' my husband told me.

'You've woken Annie,' I hissed. 'Why phone at this time?'
'You shouldn't have set Scary Mary on me if you didn't want a phone call, Jacqui.' Mike sounded hurt and rather anxious.

'I didn't set... What? Mary?' I asked, as I realised what Mike was saying. 'Don't hang up,' I ordered. 'I'm going to try to settle Annie.'

I shushed Annie, put her on the floor, dropped the handset on the bed and dashed through into the nursery. I picked up Raggedy Maggie and Freddy-Teddy and was about to head back when I heard Annie say "Daddy." She could hear Mike's voice. Inspired, I picked up the battered old play phone which had once belonged to Henry and took that with me too.

I placed the two cuddly toys on the floor, but Annie ignored them and reached eagerly for the toy phone. I handed it to her, watched her begin talking into it and then picked up the real one.

'Talk!' I demanded, urgently.

'Mary phoned up this morning,' Mike began. 'She said that you had suggested that I check up on the Drakeshaugh sale, that you wanted to be sure that it was all legal. I asked why she was phoning and not you...'

'Good man,' I interrupted. 'She thinks they're squatters. I said that you would know. But I did not suggest that you check up, I simply told her that you could.'

'Damn! Well, she told me that you were busy and asked me to check out the sale and call her back.' said Mike. 'So I phoned up Joe from Patterson's Estate Agents and asked what he could tell me about the purchase of Drakeshaugh. He said he'd check the files. He phoned me back an hour or so later. Joe said that the house was bought for cash, at least as good as cash. It was a direct bank transfer into the vendor's account from a private bank Joe had never heard of ... hold on ... Gringotts, I made him spell it. My question had made him curious, so he decided to check up on the bank but he couldn't find anything about them. They don't seem to have a phone number or a website or anything, so he called the Financial Ombudsman Service. They hadn't heard of them, either. The guy he spoke to said that he'd investigate and call back. I decided I'd better wait before I phoned Mary.'

Mike paused, whether for breath or dramatic effect I wasn't sure. The news that the Potters had bought Drakeshaugh for cash showed that they were extremely wealthy, but I was certain that Mike had more to say.

'And?' I prompted him anxiously.

'About half an hour ago Joe got a phone call from a very snooty young woman who claimed to be from Gringotts. She asked why he was enquiring about the bank. He told her that he'd been curious, because he had never heard of them. She said that they were a very small private bank and asked him how he had heard of them. He told her about the Potters buying a house. Joe said that that this woman’s attitude changed immediately. All of a sudden she sounded really scary. She asked why he was making enquiries about the Potters' home and bank. He panicked and told her the truth, that he'd been doing it as a favour for me. She said that she would be letting the Potters know. He phoned me straight away, and I knew that it could be trouble, so I phoned you, not Mary. I thought that you'd want to know before the school run tonight.'

I sighed.

'Thanks, Mike. If the bank contacts the Potters then they will think we're nosey neighbours, prying into their finances. Do not phone Mary and definitely don't tell her anything if she phones you back.
damn!'  

'damn,' Annie parroted. 'damndamndamn.' She looked up at me, extremely pleased with the new word she'd just learned.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

'sorry, jacqui, it's my fault, i should have ignored mary, but i thought...' Mike began.

'it's not your fault, mike, it's mine. I gave Mary the idea, sorry. Harry and Ginny seem like a nice couple, and Henry and James have hit it off. I don't want to fall out with our son's new friend's parents. I'm going to drive down to drakeshaugh now, to see ginny and apologise and try to explain everything. I don't want a scene at the school gate. thanks for letting me know.'

'it's not really your fault, either, jacques, it's scary Mary,' said Mike. My husband was worried and he was unhappy because he'd done the wrong thing. I knew that, because he only calls me jacques when he's worried, or flirting. These days it's usually the former.

'i should have guessed what she would do. Mary can be a right bi...' I saw Annie looking at me curiously and fortunately stopped short. 'she can be rather unpleasant, sometimes,' I concluded lamely.

'drive carefully, jacqui. And apologise to the redhead from me, too.'

'i will, thanks for letting me know, mike, bye.'

'bye, jacqui.'

i hung up the phone, lifted Annie from the floor and hugged her.

'well, Annie, we're going for a ride in the car,' I told her. 'we're going to see ginny at her new house. what do you think about that?'

'damn!' said Annie happily. I sighed; the day was turning into a disaster.
The sun was shining brightly as I drove down towards Drakeshaugh, and the few remaining clouds were being blown down the valley by a busy breeze. The day was certainly sunnier than it had been when I'd driven down to school, but neither sun nor wind had managed to drive away my foggy and overcast mood.

Henry had been so excited and excitable the previous night. He’d spent an age telling me all about school. "James'n'me mixed colours and then me'n'James painted, 'n then Sarah said my picher was rubbish n'James went like this,’ Henry shot out his arm straight forward in what almost looked like a fencing move, 'an'e poked Sarah inna tummy wiff his brush and said "Stupidfly'.' Henry hesitated, realising that in his excitement he'd accidentally told a tale on his new friend. "Miss stoptim'n'said that he shouldn't of dunnit," he'd admitted.

"Shouldn't have done it," I'd corrected, smiling.

On balance, I decided that James had been sticking up for Henry, which wasn't really a bad thing. Though poking a classmate with a paintbrush probably hadn't been wise. When he saw my smile Henry had staunchly said "But I think he should of dunnit!" I despaired at my son's grammar, but allowed him to enthusiastically tell me about the rest of his day, which seemed to consist entirely of what "me'n'James" did. It was almost as if they were one person.

I really did not want to fall out with the parents of my son's new friend, especially not because of the actions of a busybody like Mary Saville. My only option was to try to explain myself to Ginny. I glanced at my daughter in the rear view mirror. Annie's head was lolling from side to side and her eyelids were heavy. She was still fighting sleep, but she was obviously too tired to win the battle, especially under the soothing influence of travel. Nevertheless, she struggled valiantly. She was finally defeated by the Sandman as I slowed down to turn onto the track leading up to Drakeshaugh. I felt a momentary tingle of anxiety as I pulled off the main road and stopped in front of the gate. I would be arriving uninvited, which was rude of me. I fought the urge to turn away, because this was important.

The rusty old field gate I remembered was gone. Now, hanging from the weathered granite gateposts was a freshly creosoted timber five-bar gate. The adjacent ladder stile had been similarly renewed. I quietly got out of the car, unbolted the gate, drove on to the track which led up the hillside, stopped and closed the gate behind me. Miraculously, I managed to do it all without waking Annie.

In my memory the track was little more than two wheel ruts. Fortunately, the track I drove along was different. The potholes had been filled with gravel and the journey was much easier than I expected. It should have been familiar to me; this was also one of the public footpaths to the Drake Stone and I'd walked along it many times, but somehow it felt strange and new.

It was probably because of its proximity, but I hadn't walked up to the stone for several years. It felt almost as if I was travelling the route for the first time. As I drove slowly up the bank I was suddenly struck by the wild beauty of these familiar hills.

The Drake Stone was almost directly ahead, its prominent profile perched conspicuously on a ridge. The "Draag Stane", as my dad called it, was a splinter of sandstone erratic, deposited in some
ancient ice age. It loomed, lonely, atop Harbottle Crag and from this distance it seemed to be no more than a strange pimple on the landscape. In fact the slab-sided stone was over thirty feet tall.

According to legends, the Stone had healing properties, was a prehistoric druidic site, or was a lookout post in the days of the Border Reivers. The last of those is almost certainly true. You can see for miles from the top of the stone, if you can climb it.

To my right, sheep were busily cropping the rolling green pasture. A post and wire fence kept "the stupidest creatures on God's earth" - as my Dad would say - from straying onto the track.

To my left was a dry stone wall, behind which a gnarled and unkempt old hedge shielded my destination from inquisitive eyes. The hedge was hawthorn and blackthorn, with a scattering of holly. The thorns and holly consorted with a tangle of dog rose and Bramble to create a thick and prickly barrier, enough to deter even determined visitors from entering Drakeshaugh by any means other than the gate.

Red rosehips and thick Brambles tumbled wantonly over the wall. Some of the berries on the brambles were already darkening, and in a couple of weeks they'd be ripe for picking. Beyond this barbed boundary lay the thirty or so acres of weathered woodland which surrounded Drakeshaugh. The old house was almost invisible from the track. It was hidden within the woods and nestling in a hollow next to Drakestone Burn. I was now approaching the only entrance to Ginny's home.

I crested the rise slowly. Very occasionally Forestry Commission Land Rovers use this track to reach their forests and the foresters often travel faster than they should. About a hundred yards ahead of me on the left hand side, exactly as I'd remembered, was a gap in the dry stone wall. This was my destination.

Drakeshaugh lay just beyond the gate. It was, however, unreachable. The gate was open but I could not enter. A gleaming black Range Rover was parked only just inside the entrance, completely blocking it.

I pulled my car as far off the track as I dared and stopped. The verge alongside the track carried an overgrown drainage ditch and I didn't want to get stuck. Before abandoning the Micra I made certain that any other vehicles would get past, though I knew that it was unlikely that anyone else would travel this way. A few hundred yards further uphill, a single bar gate prevented vehicle from accessing the forest track.

By some miracle Annie was still asleep. Not wanting to wake her, I simply unbuckled the seatbelt and adjusted the carry-handle on her car-seat. I lifted the seat, with my slumbering daughter still in it, from the car and carried it with me. It was a struggle. Annie was not a particularly petite two-year-old and the chair was awkward to carry.

As I approached the gate, I heard voices.

I stopped, peered through a small gap in the overgrown hedge and saw three people standing in the gravel yard. One of the three was Ginny. She was still in her scruffy jeans and sweater and she looked rather harassed. She was facing two strangers. At least, they were strangers to me. Both wore long black trench coats.

The man was a couple of inches over six foot in height, broad shouldered and burly. His thinning brown hair was shaved close to his scalp. He looked like a rugby player; big, beefy, flat-featured and rather thuggish, just like a prop forward. The black coat added to his already threatening appearance. He certainly didn't look like the sort of man you'd want to mess with.
The girl (and she wasn't much more than a girl) towered over Ginny too. She was barely out of her teens and had a wild mane of tawny brown hair. She was about Harry's height, slim, willowy and unconventionally attractive.

'Are you here about the bank?' I heard Ginny ask. She knew already! I remained motionless and listened anxiously.

'Gringotts?' asked the man. He looked puzzled by Ginny's question. His voice was deep, pleasant and surprisingly gentle. 'No, we just wanted to let you know that Mark called into the office this morning with some news about...'

I had just identified the man's accent as Nottinghamshire when Ginny interrupted him.

'Lavender! How is she?' asked Ginny urgently. The man hesitated, considering his words carefully, and the girl took his silence as an invitation.

'She's recovering well,' the girl said. 'Mum went to see her after Mr Moon ... Mark came to the office. He said that it would be okay for Mum to visit. Her old wounds reopened on Friday, just as she was changing. But Mum has checked the wounds and she thinks that Lavender will be out of hospital in a couple of weeks. Unfortunately, they say there's no chance of Mr ... of Mark and Lavender having another baby. Her abdominal scars won't take another pregnancy.'

'Poor Lavender. How did they take that news?' Ginny asked.

'Lavender was devastated. Mark ... well when he was in the office I thought that he was just happy that Lavender and the baby were both going to be all right. The baby is doing well, she was four pounds...'

'And fourteen ounces, I know that, but it's all I know,' Ginny interrupted. The girl nodded.

'He told us that they've decided on a name. They're going to call her Violet Lillith Moon; she's got Lavender's eyes, apparently,' the girl continued.

Ginny was smiling, 'Well, at least they are all okay. That's one bit of good news, which makes a refreshing change. Thanks for letting me know; do you and Amber have time for a cuppa, Terry? I'd like to talk to you about a problem neighbour.'

I decided that it was time for me to move. I had been listening for a dangerously long time and I definitely could not afford to be discovered eavesdropping on this conversation. I continued along to the gate, squeezed past the Range Rover and walked into the yard.

I stepped out from behind the car as Ginny was opening the door to Drakeshaugh and I announced my presence by deliberately kicking the gravel in the yard. The trench coated duo whirled around at the sound and their hands darted inside their coats. For a crazy instant I thought that they were going to pull guns on me!

I screamed!

Time seemed to stop. The two stood motionless, each with a hand still inside their coats. My mouth suddenly dry, I looked at Ginny, then at her two companions. Annie, startled by the noise I'd made, had a shocked and unhappy awakening. She began to cry. Ginny's expression, when she first saw me, had been one of anger. But that look lasted only until Annie's wails echoed around the yard, when it was instantly replaced by a look of motherly concern.

'T've come to apologise, Ginny,' I said hastily, trying to make myself heard over Annie's cries. I put
my daughter's car seat down on the gravel drive and began to unbuckle her. I needed to calm her before her screams reached their eardrum-shattering peak.

'Let me explain, please,' I begged, raising my voice to be heard over Annie's wails. 'My husband can be an idiot sometimes.'

To my relief, Ginny grinned.

'We can all have that problem occasionally, Jacqui,' she said. Both she and the tawny-haired girl had started to move towards me when Annie began to cry, but Ginny stopped. Her face was suddenly anxious.

'I'll let you get Annie calmed down, Jacqui. I'll just go in and tidy up the kitchen, and then you can come inside and we can talk.'

The scary-looking man glanced questioningly at Ginny. I got the impression that he was waiting for orders and worryingly, that he'd have carried them out no matter what they were. I lifted Annie from her chair and held her tightly as Ginny spoke.

'It's okay, Terry. This is Jacqui Charlton, she's the mum of James's new best friend,' Ginny told him.

The man finally took his hand out from inside his coat.

'Jacqui, this is Terry Boot, and Amber Skoll. They both work for Harry,' said Ginny. 'They'll look after you for a minute while I tidy up.' With that, Ginny turned and dashed into the house.

It appeared that she wanted to make certain that her kitchen was in an acceptable state for guests; it was perfectly understandable, but it immediately struck me as strange that she had been prepared to invite two of her husband's work colleagues into her kitchen without worrying about the state of her house. I wondered what she wanted to hide from me.

I looked at the two trench-coated individuals and knew instantly that I would not be going inside until Ginny allowed it. I watched them closely. Could they really be carrying concealed guns? Surely that was illegal, even if they were armed police officers. Didn't they have to display any weapon they carried? If they were armed, then what did Harry really do?

'So,' I began nervously, 'you both work for Harry, do you?'

Terry simply nodded. The girl, Amber, smiled and swept her fingers through her hair, lifting it from in front of her right eye. She tried to tuck it behind her ear, but failed. After two further attempts she gave up and simply allowed it to fall untidily back across her face.

'Yes, I'm sorry if we startled you, Mrs ... Charlton,' she apologised.

'It's all right,' I crooned gently. I tried with my eyes to make it clear that I was speaking to everyone, not just my daughter, who was now sobbing into my chest. 'It's just ... the way you reached inside your coats ... I thought ... I mean, I didn't know what you were...' My voice trailed off. I couldn't bring myself to say the word gun. My dad's a farmer; he has a shotgun licence, and two shotguns. But, except when I've been abroad, I've never seen anyone with a pistol, and I don't want to.

The girl looked puzzled, but it was obvious that Terry understood.

'Big black coats make us look threatening,' he announced. He opened his coat wide, and took it off.
There was no holster, no gun, nothing. The only thing I could see was a pen, or more likely a pencil as it appeared to be wood, protruding from the inside pocket of his coat. Perhaps he'd been going to take a note of my name, I thought feebly.

Ginny and Harry were a little odd, but this had been a disconcertingly frightening encounter. Still shaken, I cooed and crooned at my daughter, but made no attempt to approach Terry or Amber.

Under the coat, Terry wore smart black trousers, a bright white shirt and a grey tie. He nodded to the girl and she followed his example, shrugging off her coat to reveal a short black skirt, white blouse and grey cravat. Her legs were slim, and so long that they appeared to go on forever. She wore sensible flat shoes. In heels she'd be as tall as Terry.

Annie's sobs were slowly subsiding as I chuckled her chin and rocked her. Terry and Amber simply watched as I concentrated on calming her down. As her sobs stopped, I regained my composure and decided to try to engage them in conversation.

'So, are you any closer to catching this "Werewolf" character?' I asked them.

'What?' Terry spluttered. He seemed to be astonished by the question. Amber stared at me, too. My question seemed to have upset her for some reason.

'Have I said something wrong?' I asked. 'Harry said that his office ... sorry, your office ... were specialists, that you were helping the police.'

'We are, we do,' Terry said. 'But Harry doesn't normally discuss active cases outside the office.'

'Oh,' I said. 'He hasn't actually told me anything, it's just that Al said that his Daddy was in Sheffield, so I asked Harry yesterday and he told me that he was working with the police on this case.'

'Well, we are working on it,' Terry said carefully. 'But there really is nothing to tell.'

The door opened and Ginny stepped out, smiling. She was followed by a rather plump, older woman who was obviously her mother. She was a fraction shorter than Ginny and a lot more round, her hair was a little lighter too, but only because it was streaked with grey.

'This is Mum,' said Ginny, performing an entirely redundant introduction.

'Hello, dear,' Ginny's mother smiled at me as she brushed crumbs from the white apron she wore over her long, old-fashioned dress. 'Ginny has told me all about you.'

'The kettle's on and Mum's been busy making biscuits with the kids,' Ginny smiled, 'Come in, please.'

I turned to pick up Annie's car seat, but Amber scrunched across the gravel and got there first.

'I'll carry this for you,' she said, lifting it by the handle and examining it curiously. She flicked her head, creating even more disorder in her wild mane as she strode towards the door. I followed her towards the house.

Drakeshaugh was at least a century and a half old; it was a long building with weathered sandstone walls and grey slate roofs, and it seemed to grow out of the hillside on which it was built. More accurately, it was three attached buildings. Nearest to the entrance gate from the track was the single storey former barn. There were huge arched windows where the large barn doors had once stood. A smaller side door into the former barn gleamed with fresh white paint and a new, oak
A black-painted wrought iron sign saying "Drakeshaugh" was affixed to the door. This was obviously intended to be the front door to Harry and Ginny's new home. The white door was flanked by sash windows, also newly painted. This was not, however, the door by which we were entering the house.

The gable of the old stone barn was attached to the main building, a two-storey farmhouse. The two buildings had been converted into one. The old farmhouse was half a floor lower than the barn and Ginny and her mother had disappeared down two steps and in through this open door. Annie was silent and very curious. Her head swivelled about and she tried to twist out of my grasp as I walked down to the door.

Strolling down the steps I looked along at the third and final building. The old outhouse was a lean-to attached to the opposite gable of the farmhouse. It was little more than a single-storey stone shed with a steeply sloping roof. Its door was ajar and inside I glimpsed the exhaust and number plate of Harry's motorbike and, hanging from the whitewashed wall, what looked like several birch twig besoms.

As I followed Amber through the door, Terry stepped aside and let us walk past him, allowing us to enter first. My first thought was what a gentleman but my second was now I'm trapped. With a rapidly beating heart I walked into Drakeshaugh.
Tea and Biscuits

Tea and Biscuits

With Annie squirming and sobbing in my arms, I followed Amber Skoll into a small hallway. The white-painted room was bright, but it darkened noticeably when Terry Boot followed me inside. He moved remarkably quietly for such a big man, but he was so tall and wide that he blocked most of the light. I heard him close the door behind me, and fought down my panic.

There were two doors from the hallway, but one was closed. Amber hesitated before walking through the open door. I followed her into a large and bright kitchen.

My ridiculous apprehension fled the moment I saw the normal kitchen scene in front of me. Ginny's mum was there, along with four young children. In addition to Al and Lily, there was a little girl with untidy and very bushy ginger hair and a red-headed boy. The girl looked to be about the same age as Al, and the boy a similar age to Lily. I gazed curiously at the room and its occupants.

The kitchen stretched the entire width of the house and was a strange mix of old and new. Several colourful rugs were scattered across the aged stone-flagged floor. The ceiling, between the ancient black oak beams, was painted white. The two outer walls were stone, but the windows in them were large and modern.

The afternoon sun was streaming through the west-facing French windows, which opened out onto a large patio area. Somehow the Potters had managed to move in, and have a lot of building work carried out, without anyone noticing.

The kitchen was dominated by a huge scrubbed oak table which was surrounded by a dozen solid-looking oak chairs. Ginny stood with her back to the table, and to us; she turned and nodded a greeting, but it seemed to me that she was still rather annoyed. She was busy at a large old fashioned range located centrally on the south wall, where a large copper kettle was almost boiling. Hanging from the wall alongside the range were several substantial looking pots and a large copper jam-pan hung, gleaming, from the rafters.

'You'll be able to make a lot of bramble jelly in a few weeks,' I observed, nodding at the jam-pan. Ginny grunted non-committally and began to look through her modern kitchen units. Her mum, however, beamed.

'That's what I told her, dear,' she announced. 'The blackberries will be ripe in a few weeks and several of the apple trees in the woods are fruiting nicely. I'm Molly, by the way, Molly Weasley.'

'Hello, Molly,' I said. 'I'm Jacqui Charlton.'

Stepping further to the left, Ginny opened the door of another of the oak fronted cupboards, with a murmur of success she pulled out a tray and placed it on the green Cumbrian slate worktop. A dozen mugs hung from pegs on the wall under the unit. Ginny selected five and placed them on the tray.

While Ginny worked her mum was busy putting a sugar bowl and a jug of milk on the table. Helping her was the bushy-haired girl. The ungainly little girl, who appeared to be all knees and elbows, was carefully carrying a plate of homemade biscuits. The three other children, Al, Lily and
the red-headed boy were silently watching the girl as she carefully placed the plate on the table.

'Thank you, Rose,' said Ginny's mum.

'These are Al and Lily's cousins, Rose and Hugo, Jacqui,' Ginny announced. 'Mum is looking after them, too.'

'Do they live locally?' I asked.

'Oh no, dear,' Ginny's mum said. 'We flooed up here to look after...'

'Flew, Mum, not flewed,' said Ginny forcefully.

'Yes, dear,' said Ginny's mum, looking rather embarrassed by her mistake. '...too look after these two while Ginny tried to finish unpacking.

Ginny was opening and closing cupboards almost at random. 'Do you want tea, or coffee, Jacqui?' I haven't found the Earl Grey or the Jasmine, yet, so it's either regular tea or Italian high roast coffee until we get ourselves sorted out.'

'Aftemoon tea would be wonderful, Ginny, thank you. Is it okay if I let Annie loose? She's woken up full of energy,' I said. My daughter was twisting and squirming in my arms, and staring curiously at the other children.

'I'm forgetting my manners, Jacqui. Sit down, please, and of course you can let Annie loose. I was going to ask Mum to look after the kids while we talked, I'm sure that she can cope with one more. If you think Annie will be all right with these four,' said Ginny, nodding towards the three redheads and Al.

'I don't know,' I began. Molly Weasley seemed a little eccentric. 'Five is a lot of kids to look after, perhaps...'

'I have a dozen grandchildren, dear,' Ginny's mum interrupted me. 'I really don't think that little Annie could be any more difficult than Fred, or Dominique. I was just going to take these four into the living room for biscuits and milk, and to tell them a story.'

'Stowy time, Gwanny,' Lily announced happily.

'Babty Rabty,' the little redheaded boy squeaked.

'Free Bruvvers,' Al said. 'It's Daddy's favouritest.'

'Well, if you're sure...' I said uncertainly, lowering Annie to the ground. I had never heard of either of those stories, but I knew that it would be easier to talk to Ginny without the distraction of Annie. I smiled at my daughter and watched her toddle over to the other four children. They looked carefully at each other.

'Ello, Annie,' said Al shyly.

'Annie will be fine, I'm sure,' Molly assured me. 'Rose, Albus, you can both take care of Annie. Lily, Hugo, take my hands, please.' With that, Ginny's mum took the children across to a second door and led them away. As I watched them leave, I pondered the name I'd just heard. Ginny had been watching me, and she'd obviously read my expression.

'Albus is an old Latin name, it was popular in Scotland in the eighteenth century. It means white,
and he's named after ... after someone who saved Harry's life.' said Ginny. She sounded rather defensive.

'He was a great man, old ... Albus,' Terry confirmed.

'It's certainly ... unusual,' I said. Saved Harry's life... I pondered that information too. There was nothing else I could say. It was a very peculiar name, and I decided that I'd research it when I got home. But, I reminded myself, it was no worse than calling your sons Brooklyn, Romeo and Cruz. In fact it was no worse than other old and unfashionable names, like Albert. Al was a nice enough name. And I was here to make peace, I reminded myself.

The kettle was boiling and Ginny had placed a large teapot on the tray. She was reaching for the tea caddy when Terry spoke again.

'If you're certain you will be okay, Ginny, we really should go,' he said. 'We need to get on our way.'

'Are you going to Sheffield?' she asked.

'No,' Terry glanced at me, and I watched him as he turned to Ginny and chose his words very carefully. 'We're going to Scotland, north, to the prison. We're going to interview ... the prisoner ... about Sheffield.'

Ginny nodded knowledgeably.

'And we're going to talk to my grandfather, too,' Amber said. 'Mum thinks that he might know something.'

Ginny nodded again. 'You've got a long way to go,' she said. 'At least take a few biscuits, please.'

Amber thanked Ginny, but refused the offer. Terry smiled and grabbed three or four.

'Thanks, Ginny, and thank the kids for baking them,' he said. 'Goodbye, Mrs Charlton; bye, Ginny.'

Terry smiled at me, nodded politely, and with that he stood and left.

After a quick, 'Thanks and goodbye,' Amber Skoll followed quietly at his heels.

Suddenly, Ginny and I were alone in the kitchen. Ginny replaced the large teapot in the cupboard, found a smaller one and began making the tea.

'I'm sorry to turn up uninvited, Ginny,' I began. 'And I'm sorry that I screamed. It's just that ... well ... Terry looks rather scary, doesn't he?'

'Terry is one of the nicest and most gentle people I know. He's also one of the cleverest, although he's got a lot of competition,' Ginny told me. Her face softened as she spoke. She put the mugs onto the tray and carried them over towards the table. 'Don't let him fool you. He seems to be really shy and very quiet until you get to know him. And that's when you'll discover that he is really shy and very quiet, unless you've done something wrong. So, why did you contact our bank?' she asked, changing the subject abruptly.

'I didn't!' I protested.

Slowly, over tea and biscuits I told Ginny the story. I told her about Mary, and about Mike's phone call. She stared at me intently as I spoke; she was listening carefully to every word.
The biscuits were ginger, homemade and still warm from the oven. They were delicious, and the only time I strayed from my story was to tell her so.

'They're Mum's recipe, I used to bake them with her myself, when I was little,' Ginny told me.

I continued with my tale, finishing by telling Ginny that I'd asked Mike not to tell Mary anything, and assuring her that he wouldn't.

'Bloody Mary,' said Ginny.

'Mike shouldn't have listened to her, Ginny. I'm so sorry. Oh, I may need to apologise for something else, too. If your kids start saying damn, that will be my fault,' I admitted. 'When Mike phoned and told me what he'd done I said the word in front Annie. She picked it up instantly.'

'Given all of the other problems this move has caused, that's nothing,' Ginny assured me, smiling. I'm sure James has overheard me swearing, but he's never said anything. So, Mary thinks that we're Knut – penniless squatters, does she?'

'She didn't say anything about nuts, just squatters,' I said.

'Well, whatever she thinks we are, I can guarantee that she's completely wrong,' said Ginny. She smiled again, but this time with predatory mischief. 'Thanks for letting me know, Jacqui, I'll contact the bank and tell them to take no further action.'

'Action?' I asked. 'Were they going to take legal action?'

'They said they would take action. I didn't ask them what sort, but I'm sure that it would not have been illegal,' she told me, grinning wickedly. 'If you'll excuse me for a minute, I'll get in touch with them now. Have more tea and biscuits, make yourself at home.' She stood and hurried from the kitchen.

I sat in silence for a few moments, and then pushed back my chair and wandered across to the French windows. There was a large wooden table on the patio, and beyond it, a remarkably well stocked vegetable garden. I turned and gazed around the kitchen.

There was no sign of a washing machine, or a refrigerator, or a dishwasher. In fact, I realised, I couldn't see any electricity sockets anywhere. Of course, they could have been built into the units, but there were several gas, or oil, lamps spaced around the wall. Were the Potters living without electricity, I wondered. The place was homely enough, but no electricity? I couldn't imagine it.

I replaced my cup on the tray on the table and wondered about that, too. The table had a dozen chairs, but could easily accommodate sixteen or more. I tried to picture Harry, Ginny and their kids sitting at that kitchen table. They would only half fill it.

"A dozen grandchildren," Ginny's mum had said, "One of my brothers," Ginny had told me the first time I'd met her. I wondered how big her family was.

As I looked around the room I saw James's painting. I hadn't noticed it when I entered, because it was on the back of the door we had come through. That door had remained open until Amber closed it when she left behind "nice quiet" Terry Boot. Henry's picture was effectively in the same place in my kitchen, on the door between kitchen and hall, and that made me smile. The Potters were strangers, and possibly a little odd if they were trying to live without electricity, but the location of that carefully crafted picture was enough to assure me that they were normal, decent parents. That's when I had my idea, I could both make Mike pay for his mistake, and get to know our new neighbours a little better at the same time.
'I look like I've got spots,' Ginny announced, making me jump. I hadn't heard her re-enter the room. 'No, they're freckles, obviously,' I assured her. 'They're just not quite to scale,' I added, making her laugh. She was suddenly cheerful and happy again. Until that moment I hadn't realised that there had been a tension between us, but now its absence was noticeable. I waited for her to stop laughing before continuing.

'I've...' I began.

'I've...' Ginny said at the same second. We both stopped.

'You first,' I said quickly.

'No, you,' Ginny said.

'No, I insist,' I told her.

'I've spoken to the bank,' Ginny told me. 'They are fine, and the matter is closed. I've spoken to Harry, too, to let him know what's been happening. He's suggested that he meets me outside school. As Mum's here, we can leave Al and Lily and both go and meet James and Henry. Now, what were you going to say?'

'I feel really bad about disrupting your day, Ginny. But I'm blaming it on my husband.' I began.

'Always a good policy,' said Ginny approvingly. She smiled again.

'Mike has offered to do the cooking on Saturday. If the weather holds we'll be having a barbecue, because that's all he can manage. It will probably be the last one of the year. I'm sure that you're still all at sixes and sevens with the move, so...’ I paused, took a deep breath, and asked the question. ‘Would you like to come to our house for burgers and burnt sausages on Saturday? Come any time after four. We'll be out until then, because we take the kids swimming straight after lunch. Unless ... unless you want to come to the pool with us, too?' I said.

'I'd love to come to a barbecue, Jacqui, and I'm sure that Harry will, too. I'm not sure about swimming, but Harry was trying to teach the kids the basics when we were on holiday this summer. We can ask him at the school gates,' she hesitated and looked across at her clock.

'If I'm walking to school, I will need to set off in a couple of minutes,' she said. There was only the shadow of a hint in Ginny's words, but it was enough for me.

'I'll give you a lift down,' I offered.

'That will give Mary something else to talk about,' said Ginny grinning mischievously.

'I'll be in trouble with her anyway, because Mike certainly won't tell her anything,' I admitted.

'I'll go upstairs and change out of my dirty work-clothes. You can go up to the lounge with Mum and the kids for a few minutes, unless you want to stay here?'

'Lead the way,' I said, curious to see more of Ginny's house. She led me through the door by which her Mum had left the kitchen and into a small hallway.

'There's a loo there, if you need it,' Ginny pointed to another door. I shook my head.

'The lounge is up here.' Ginny led me through an arched door in a thick stone wall, up a short flight of stone stairs and into a huge room, the converted barn.
There were a couple of doors on the side walls of the room, but it seemed that the old barn had been converted into a massive high ceilinged lounge. The furniture was lost in the place. There were two sofas and four armchairs, but no television, simply an old fashioned looking radio. The massive arched window at the far end of the room was partly hidden behind unopened boxes and tea-chests. Ginny's mum was sitting on the floor surrounded by the five children. She smiled at me when I entered.

'Jacqui is going to take me down to collect James, Mum. I'm just going upstairs to get changed,' Ginny said. She climbed a half flight of open wooden stairs leading up to another door in the thick stone wall through which we'd entered the room.

'Can I ask; how do you spell your first name?' asked Molly.

I was confused, I know that some people write it Jackie, but until I saw the alphabet bricks scattered around the room I had no idea why she was asking.

'J A C Q U I,' I told her. 'But actually, my name is Jacqueline,' I added, spelling my full name for her, too.

'Ten letters, that's good. That is two each,' Molly announced.

She then set each of the children off to find two bricks each, Annie was given "A" and "N" the first two letters of her name, and shown an A and an N on some rather battered old letter cards to help her. She scuttled proudly back with an "N", and an upside-down "V". I watched Mrs Weasley in admiration and wondered why I'd been worried. She was great with the kids. I joined in the congratulations when the children finally scampered back and my name appeared in multicoloured wooden bricks on the floor. Mrs Weasley then asked them to find all of the green bricks.

'This isn't too much, is it?' Ginny asked me from the top of the stairs.

She twirled around on the top step. She was wearing boots, black leggings and bright green strappy top. Her hair was loose and it seemed to glow in the afternoon sunlight.

'You put me to shame,' I admitted, looking at the blouse and skirt I was wearing.

'Is it too much?' Ginny asked anxiously.

'No,' I admitted. 'It's fine. Especially if you're out to show Mary that you're not a scruffy squatter. You look great.' I checked my watch while I spoke. 'You really don't have enough time to change, again anyway, Ginny. Come on, Annie, we need to go to collect your brother from school.'

'Want stay here!' Annie announced petulantly.

'You can't, sorry, Annie, we're going to take Ginny down to the school to meet Henry, and James, too. And then we must go home. Ginny has a lot to do. I have stopped her from working this afternoon.'

Annie stuck out her lower lip and it began to quiver.

'Sorry, Annie,' Ginny said. 'You can come back again another day.'

Annie looked at me hopefully and made sure that I was absolutely certain that she didn't want to leave by giving me a wet-eyed sob.

'We will see Al and Lily again soon, I promise.' I scooped my daughter into my arms and carried
her, protesting from the room.

Annie was still unhappy when I put her into her car seat, and she continued to protest all of the way down to the school. Ginny was sitting directly behind Annie, and she did her best to keep my daughter happy as I drove. I glanced at the school gates as I drove past to turn around. Mary had spotted Ginny in the car and I saw her face crease into a disapproving frown. It was still there when I drove back.

Ginny held the door for me while I lifted Annie from the car. Once Annie was safe in my arms Ginny looked at me mischievously.

'Let's go and say hello to Mary,' she suggested. She then strode purposefully towards the gabbling mums at the school gate. I watched Mary carefully; suddenly, she looked a lot less confident.
I lifted Annie from her car seat and watched with some trepidation as, with leonine grace, Ginny closed on Mary like a predator. The gossiping mothers at the gate sensed the approaching altercation and their meaningless chatter died instantly.

'Good afternoon, Mrs Saville,' Ginny began with exaggerated politeness. 'I'm so sorry that I couldn't stop to talk to you this morning. I had left Al and Lily with my mother, and I wanted to get back to them. And, of course, as we're still moving in, I had a lot to do.' Ginny's smiled the smile of a lioness about to pounce. 'Unfortunately, I still have a lot to do, because of an unexpected problem with my bank,' Ginny continued. Now, what did you want to ask me this morning?'

Mary was lost for words. The immaculate and elegant young mother facing her in the afternoon sunlight was a long way removed from the scruffy and harassed woman of the morning.

'I, er ... nothing really, Mrs Potter, I just wondered if you needed any help with your move,' Mary began.

'No, thank you for the offer, Mrs Saville, but Jacqui has, very kindly, already offered her help,' Ginny said. 'Are you sure that there was nothing else? There seemed to be some urgency in your voice.' Ginny took a final step forward, bringing her only inches away from Mary.

I was watching a battle for supremacy. Mary was taller and heavier. Ginny was younger, fitter, and more agile. It would be interesting, I thought, to see if their physical attributes also applied to their verbal sparring.

'If you want to know anything, just ask,' Ginny told her. 'I expect that everyone is very curious about us, but I would hate to be the subject of misleading rumours and gossip. Mispneformation, and even scurrilous lies, can be spread so easily; can't they?' Ginny's voice remained even and civil, her accusation was so courteous that any counter-attack would make Mary look bitchy.

Ginny paused and smiled politely at the other mums while allowing her words to percolate through the crowd. Mary nodded and tried to smile at Ginny while also glaring at me. Her face was not equipped for such expressive gymnastics and she simply looked rather foolish.

'We like a quiet life, to keep ourselves to ourselves.' Ginny continued. 'That's why we moved out of our London townhouse and into a smaller, cheaper, and more rural property.' Ginny placed almost no emphasis on the word "cheaper," but it was noted by everyone present. 'We have nothing to hide, we're...' She was interrupted by a car horn. Harry waved to her as he drove past in a Range Rover identical to the one Terry Boot had been driving. Ginny waved back happily.

'Here's Harry now,' she observed, delightedly. She'd been self-assured before she'd seen her husband, and now she overflowed with confidence. 'So was there anything else you wanted to know?'

'No.' Mary shook her head.

'You don't want to know how much money we have in our bank account? You aren't interested in whether we've ever been convicted of any crime, even something as minor as drinking and driving?' Ginny's face was that of an angelic ingénue as she spoke. Her voice was pleasant and
polite, without the slightest trace of sarcasm.

She smiled respectfully at Mary, offering her another opportunity to speak. Mary's eyes widened and her jaw dropped at the second question, and she shook her head again, this time, without speaking. Mary had been effectively dealt with. Ginny leaned forwards slightly, and Mary worrily stepped back. Ginny had not only silenced her, she'd forced her to back off, and everyone knew it. I was also wondering if Mary had ever received a drink-driving ban, and I was fairly sure that I wasn't the only one. Her reaction to Ginny's final question was certainly suspicious.

I heard the car stop. The engine noise died and a car door clicked closed behind me. I forced myself not to turn around. Most of the other mums were facing us. It was almost comical to watch the way they were trying to look in two directions. They were fascinated by the now silent face-off between Mary and Ginny and didn't want to miss anything, but they were also very interested in watching Harry approach.

Ginny didn't turn to acknowledge her husband's arrival. She simply watched Mary, a polite and slightly amused smile on her lips. I tried not to turn and look at Harry, but almost everyone else had lost interest in Mary and was watching his approach. I finally gave in to temptation and glanced over my shoulder.

Harry was in the same "uniform": black trousers, white shirt and grey tie that Terry had been wearing. He looked good in it, and clearly, several others thought so too. Amanda Berry was staring in blatant admiration at him.

'Hi, Jacqui, nice to see you,' Harry began as he caught my eye. I watched him stride the final few feet towards us.

'Hello, Harry,' I said carefully, determined not to make a fool of myself in front of the other mums. 'Hi Ginny,' he said, slipping an arm around her waist and pulling her in towards him. She reciprocated; turning towards him she slid her arms over his shoulders and around his neck.

'Hi,' she said, and then they kissed.

It wasn't a simple "hello" peck, of the sort my husband and I exchange; it was a full blown love-kiss. It was the kiss of greeting you give and receive when courting, or when you've just married and are still in the first throes of passion. It was a young-lovers-meeting kiss of the finest sort, and I was jealous. One of the mums gave a romantic sigh. I knew how she felt. Mike used to kiss me like that once, I remembered. But for some reason having two children had changed things for us.

'Everything okay, Ginny?' asked Harry when they broke apart. Harry and Ginny held hands, fingers intertwined. His question was asked lightly and politely, but everything about him, from his perfectly poised stance, to his firm tone of voice and the searching sharpness of his bright green eyes said "if it isn't, point me in the direction of the problem, and I will fix it".

'Mrs Saville wanted to speak to me urgently this morning, but now she seems to have forgotten why,' said Ginny. Harry shrugged.

'Did you sort out the problem with the bank?' he asked.

'Yes. Someone was trying to find out about our finances, illegally unfortunately. The bank tracked the source of the enquiry, but I told them not to take any action. How was your day?' Ginny asked.

'Frustrating. We're no further forwards. I'm waiting for a report from Terry; he might have something for me later tonight. But I've got some good news. Terry is going to cover for me for the
next few days. I've managed to get the rest of the week off.'

Ginny beamed. 'Tomorrow should be long enough for us to finish unpacking and tidying.'

'Where do you work, Mr Potter?' Amanda Berry squeaked breathlessly. Tall and skinny, Amanda was Mary's right hand woman and rarely spoke, other than to agree with Mary. Her curiosity had got the better of her. I waited, wondering what Harry would say.

'Where? That's a difficult question to answer,' said Harry, smiling apologetically. 'I work wherever the Ministry sends me. I work for the Home Office and I have a desk, and a personal assistant, in the Ministry in London, but I'm not often there ... I'm sorry, I don't know your name.'

'Amanda, Amanda Berry,' she said eagerly. 'You work in the Home Office ... Immigration? There are far too many immigrants...'

'No, Amanda, I'm not in the Borders Agency, or Passports, or even the Criminal Records Bureau,' Harry said.

'And you're not supposed to talk about work, Harry,' Ginny interrupted him.

'I'm just a pen-pusher, a Home Office bureaucrat,' Harry said. 'But, Ginny's right, I've signed the Official Secrets Act, so I shouldn't say any more.'

He was teasing, I realised. He'd told us where he didn't work.

Amanda's next question was unheard over the noise of children. School was over and attention reluctantly, but necessarily, turned away from the Potters as children flooded from the school. Henry and James arrived together.

'MummyDaddy, MummyDaddy!' James yelled.

'Hi, Mammy,' shouted Henry. I waved at him.

'Hi James,' said Ginny.

'Hello James, have you had a good day?' Harry asked.

'Was all right,' James announced as he ran up to his parents.

'What about you, Henry?' I asked.

'Okay,' he shrugged.

James stepped up to his parents, stood between them, and pulled their hands apart. They made him fight to do it, but he determinedly untangled their intertwined fingers and placed himself between them, and held their hands.

'I told Ginny that nothing and no one would ever come between us.' Harry was smiling as he told me. 'It seems I was wrong.'

Ginny ruffled their son's hair affectionately.

'Would you like to go swimming on Saturday, James?' she asked.

'I'm going!' Henry said jumping with excitement. 'Can ’e cumwiffus, Mammy, perleez?'
'Are we goin' wiff Henry?' asked James. Ginny nodded.

'Great,' said James, literally jumping with excitement.

'We'll all go; Al and Lily, too,' said Ginny. 'Come along, James, we need to get home. We'll see you tomorrow, Jacqui. You too, Henry. Bye, Mrs Saville.'

'Bye, Jacqui, bye, Amanda; Mrs Saville,' said Harry, following Ginny's lead. He nodded politely at Mary, but the Potter's use of her surname was noticed by everyone. Mary glared at their departing backs and I was certain that I would be in trouble. But before she could speak, Amanda asked a question which stopped Mary in her tracks.

'I wonder why she mentioned drink-driving?'

I didn't hear any more as I was surrounded by Alice, Sara, and several other mothers all asking whether I'd seen the Potters' house and what it was like. I had difficulty answering as there was a confusing chatter of comments and questions and I was trying to listen to it all.

'Did you see that kiss?'

'Do you know how much a brand new Range Rover costs?'

'Home Office?'

'They deal with counter-terrorism, too, you know.'

'Do you think he's a spy?'

'James Bond, with glasses.'

Through the chatter I managed to explain that I'd been to the house and that they were definitely still in the throes of moving in. I said that the kitchen and living room were nice, and very big. I told someone that I'd met Ginny's mum too, but by then both Annie and Henry were tugging anxiously at my arms.

'I really must go,' I said to the other mums apologetically. 'I need to get the kids home.'

I made toad-in-the-hole for dinner, with Cumberland sausages, of course, as they're Mike's favourite. The Yorkshire pudding was rising nicely when he arrived. He walked worriedly into the kitchen. From his expression I knew that he was concerned that he'd be in my bad books. In the excitement of the afternoon I'd almost forgotten the fact that the last time I'd spoken to him, at lunchtime, I'd shouted down the phone at him.

'Hi,' he said cautiously.

'Hi, yourself,' I told him as, suddenly impetuous, I walked up to him. He looked nervous. I threw my arms around his shoulders and kissed him the way Harry and Ginny had kissed. He hesitated for no more than a fraction of a second before responding enthusiastically.

We only broke apart when Henry said, 'Eugh, that's gross, stoppit.'

'You won't think so in a dozen years time, Henry,' Mike told him while I tried to find both my breath and my composure.

'Will!' Henry said, with the certainty of childhood.
'Sorry about listening to Mary. I thought that I'd be in trouble. I'm obviously not. What on earth was that kiss for?' Mike asked me.

'That was ... because ... it was just because! Don't worry about Mary. Ginny and I have agreed on your punishment,' I told him. 'I'll tell you all about it over dinner. Put Annie in her high chair for me, please, Mike, and then you can mash the potatoes while I serve.'

Over the meal I told Mike what had been happening. He agreed without hesitation to both the barbecue on Saturday and to the trip to the pool. He really had no choice, Henry's vociferous enthusiasm for the plan made certain of that.

Mike was full of questions about the Potters, Drakeshaugh, and Ginny's visitors. I told him everything.

'So, swimming on Saturday ... d'you think the redhead will have a bikini?' he asked, grinning.

'You old lecher,' I scolded.

'What's a lecher?' Henry asked, and I again regretted my words.

'It's what lecturers give,' Mike told him, indulging in his passion for bad puns and leading our son away from the original word and into the world of further education. Henry soon got bored and forgot his original question.

Mike then told me about his afternoon. His friend Joe had phoned to let Mike know that he'd been ordered (by old man Patterson himself!) to delete all details of the Potter's bank from their records. Old man Patterson was the owner, the man with his name above the shopfront, but he never interfered. He simply played golf and left everything to the junior partners. Joe told Mike that Mr Patterson had sounded worried when he'd given the order.

'I apologised to Joe and promised to take him out for a pint. I wonder what Harry really does? What his job is?' Mike pondered as he poured custard onto his rhubarb crumble.

'He's a Nora,' Henry announced. 'He catches bad people.'

'A what?' I asked.

'A Nora,' Henry explained carefully. 'Swat James said when Miss asked us about our daddies. I said you was a special agent, an you sell feels.' Henry told his father.

Mike laughed.

'Nobody would buy them, trust me,' I murmured, and Mike laughed even more.

'I'm a land agent and I sell fields, Henry,' my husband said. 'And property, too. Did James say what his mother does?'

'She's his mammy,' Henry announced. 'She doesn't do anything.'

'I think that most mammies would disagree with that, son,' Mike said. I smiled, and then he spoiled it by adding. 'After all, it seems that your mammy spent the entire afternoon busily gossiping and drinking tea.'

I made him tidy up the kitchen for that crack.

Later, after we'd got the kids to bed, Mike poured a couple of glasses of red wine, sat on the sofa,
and patted the space next to him. When I sat he pulled me in close and kissed me on the cheek.

'You're chirpier, and livelier, than you've been for a long time,' he told me. 'I'm not complaining. I think that the redhead is good for you.'

I turned sideways, almost turning my back to him, shuffled my shoulder under his armpit, settled my cheek against his chest, and lifted my feet onto the sofa. Sitting like that, with my back pressed against his side, was something I hadn't done for years. Mike automatically draped his arm diagonally across my chest and held my waist. It was just like before we had the kids, except now he had more waist to hold onto.

'Thanks, and cheers,' I said, raising my glass before sipping my wine.

'Cheers,' Mike responded. 'I wonder what James really said? A Nora? An aura? Neither make any sense. Perhaps he is a spy.'

'Counter-terrorism,' I told him. I'd been saving the information until we'd got the kids to bed. 'I checked the Home Office website. They are in charge of something called the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism. The OSCT "coordinates other agencies and government departments" but also has "responsibility for some aspects of the counter-terrorist strategy", at least I think that's what the website said. It didn't say much else. Harry's involved with the Sheffield murders; perhaps this "Greyback" is a terrorist. That would explain why nobody knows much about him. "Greyback" and "The Werewolf", they're like codenames.' Another idea hit me and my imagination ran wild.

'Big bad Terry and his long-legged sidekick were on their way to Scotland to interview "the Prisoner"; that would be Greyback. They're trying to find out what he knows and who is trying to get him freed?' I concluded. 'That "profiler" story he gave me always sounded a bit suspicious.'

'You know, normally I'd say that you'd read one too many thrillers, that you were talking complete and utter rubbish,' said Mike. 'But the way that Grim Guts Bank acted...'

'Grin Gots,' I corrected. For some reason I was struggling to remember the name of the bank.

'And the way poor old Mr Patterson got dragged in to stop anyone asking awkward questions,' Mike continued. 'That's almost enough to make me think you're right.'

'Almost?' I sounded petulant, I realised. 'What more do you want?'

'Persuasion,' he said. He moved his hand up from my waist, lowered my head backwards, and kissed me. Red wine and a snog! It really was like travelling back in time.

'Maaameee,' Annie wailed from her room. I cursed.

The remainder of the week passed with remarkable rapidity.

Harry delivered James to school on Wednesday. He was wearing jeans and a faded red t-shirt with the same lion symbol I'd seen on his bike helmet and Ginny's sweater. He'd gone to a private school in Scotland from age eleven, and so had Ginny. The lion was the crest of his old school house he told me as we walked into the classroom together.

He introduced himself to Mrs Wilson and hugged his son goodbye. That was when I spotted the scar on his arm. He caught me staring at it.
'I've got others too,' he admitted. 'This was a knife wound. It seems like it happened a lifetime ago.' He lapsed into silence, so I didn't ask.

Amanda was positively gushing towards him as we left the school; she was almost begging for an invitation to the house. Harry was polite, but non-committal, citing the move, and the clutter, as an excuse. He strode off up the road claiming that they were still very busy and I again found myself the centre of attention. Mary was left to stand sullenly on the sidelines as I told everyone the latest about the Potters.

That afternoon Ginny collected James, setting the pattern for the rest of that week. Harry delivered, Ginny collected. She arrived early and stood and chatted with the other mums. She told us that they had almost finished moving in and that they had moved here from a big townhouse in Islington. They hadn't sold it, but now owned both properties. They were letting their London home. When I told Mike that evening he whistled and said that we could probably live comfortably on the rent from an Islington townhouse.

By Thursday evening Ginny was on first name terms with several other mums. Almost everyone except Mary. Despite Mary twice asking 'Call me Mary, please', Mrs Saville remained Mrs Saville.

The morning run, which Harry did, offered fewer opportunities for gossip. He'd arrive just before school started, drop off James, and then leave. Everyone arrived for the afternoon pick up quarter of an hour, or more, before finishing time, so Ginny was the primary source of information.

Harry worked "with the police" and that's all Ginny would say. Amanda was telling everyone that he was some sort of secret agent. As we were leaving on Thursday, I mentioned this to Ginny. I also told her what Henry had said about Harry being "a Nora". She burst out laughing.

'I'll tell Harry,' Ginny said. 'He'll think that's really funny. Thanks for letting me know, Jacqui.'

On Friday morning Harry caught me by surprise while I was lifting Annie from the car. He seemed to appear from nowhere, I was certain that I had not passed him on the road.

'Ginny told me what Henry said,' he began. 'And what Amanda has been saying about me. I'm not a spy, but I work for...’ He paused.

'The Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism is my guess.' I filled in the gap for him. He smiled.

'We're a very small office within that larger office,' he confided. 'We liaise with local police forces and other agencies. Any Anti-terrorist Units in Regional Organisations are dealt with by my office, the A-U-R-Or Office. We pull together information from the coastguard, the police and various other local agencies. I know how curious everyone is, and I think that the truth would be better than rumours. So, if you want to mention that I work for the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism to the leader of my fan club...’ He didn't finish the sentence, but simply nodded towards the Amanda, who was watching us from the gate. I smiled at him.

'You've noticed?'

'It's hard for me to miss, and impossible for Ginny. I've told you as much as I can. I can't and won't talk about my job, Jacqui,' he said.

We walked down to the school together and Harry offered to take both boys into the classroom. Henry was happy to go off with James, so I passed on the latest snippet of gossip to Amanda and the other mums.

I somehow missed seeing Harry leaving. No one else saw him go, either. It was almost as if he
vanished into thin air.

On Friday afternoon Ginny was forced to field questions from several sources. She assured the other mums that Harry was head of an office of about fifty people and that she was not even slightly worried for his safety.

'He doesn't do field work, he hasn't for years,' she said. 'He has people to do that for him. I'll see you tomorrow, Jacqui.' And with that, she grabbed James' hand and was gone.
Wet Afternoon

I sent the kids into the garden to play and set Mike to work tidying the kitchen. While they were busy, I dusted and vacuumed the entire house, and then cleaned the toilets.

When I walked back into the kitchen over an hour later, Mike had only succeeded in making more mess! The bench was littered with knives and vegetable peelings. I looked around the room in annoyance, and when Mike advised me to calm down, I exploded.

‘We’re having guests, Mike!’ I yelled.

‘And the rest of the house is tidy, Jacqui,’ he told me.

‘The kitchen isn’t. It’s nowhere near tidy! What on earth have you been doing while I’ve been slaving away?’ I demanded. ‘This place is still a complete mess!’

‘I’ve been sorting out the food for this evening, Jacques. I’ve prepared a salad, I’ve got the burgers and sausages out from the freezer to defrost, and I’ve made some spicy chicken kebabs. There’s white wine in the fridge, and I even put some lager in there too, just in case Harry’s a philistine. There’s red wine and proper beer in the corner. I’ve got plastic glasses out for the kids and we’ve got lemonade, orange squash and “lashings of ginger beer” as they used to say in the old-fashioned kids’ books. I’ve packed the swimming costumes and put everything we need for the pool in the car. Do we need anything else for the barbeque?’ he asked.

I couldn’t find fault with his preparations, damn him, so I shook my head. He’d done work that needed to be done; he simply hadn’t done what I’d asked him to do. Mike is a messy worker. I tidy as I go; he works and leaves everything a complete mess, refusing to tidy up until he has finished making a mess. It shouldn’t annoy me, but it does. ‘The kitchen…’ I began.

‘We’ll be having lunch before we leave for the pool. I’ll finish tidying up the kitchen after we’ve eaten, I promise,’ he told me.

‘Finish! You haven’t started,’ I began.

He walked up to me, placed his hands on my cheeks, bent forwards, and kissed me. I was wearing rubber gloves and carrying a bucket in one hand and the bottle of bleach in the other; there wasn’t much I could do to stop him. It was a nice kiss and it succeeded in calming me down.

‘Do you think that we need to buy anything else? We could nip across to the supermarket when we leave the pool,’ he said, releasing me.

‘No, I think we’ll be okay,’ I said.

As I emptied the bucket down the sink, he squeezed my bum, kissed the back of my neck and assured me, ‘It will be all right, Jacqui. You’re always in a panic before we have guests, and afterwards you always wonder why you panicked. You’ve forgotten, because we haven’t invited anyone around here for ages.’ With those words he opened the kitchen door and took the vegetable peelings out to the compost bin.

I didn’t reply. I really hate it when my husband is right.
Henry wolfed down his lunch and skipped and bounced crazily around the kitchen while Mike tidied up and set the dishwasher going. Our preparations to leave took a lot longer than we expected because we were constantly avoiding the four-year old bullet ricocheting around us. Henry was first out of the kitchen door when we were finally ready to leave.

He was standing next to Mike’s car shouting, ‘C’mon, c’mon, hurry up,’ while we locked up the house. Henry was so giddily excited that Mike had to hold him down in order to strap him into the car seat. Not only was he going “swimbling” with James, but James was coming to see him afterwards. As we set off, my son was busily listing all of the toys “me’n’james” were going to play with, which seemed to be all of them.

‘You tidied his bedroom, didn’t you?’ Mike asked as we drove towards Harbottle.

‘Of course.’ I nodded.

Mike sighed. ‘If James is anything like Henry, it’ll take the two of them less than a minute to make it a complete mess again,’ he murmured.

If Mike had his way, I’d never tidy Henry’s room.

I was prevented from making a catty reply by Mike saying, ‘There they are, Henry. I can see the redhead.’

Mike pointed towards the Range Rover, which was waiting to join the main road, and Henry whooped with joy. I tried to wave but we were already past them.

The journey to the pool was a long one, forty minutes. It didn’t seem to matter which route you took, it was always forty minutes. Henry usually got fractious and fidgety on the journey to the Sports Centre. That day he was too excited to complain, but he was driving me demented anyway.

‘Is them still ahind us?’

‘Yes, Henry.’

‘Still?’

‘Yes, Henry.’

‘Can James swimble?’

I have no idea where that word came from, but Mike didn’t help. ‘It’s not swimble, Henry,’ I began.

‘It’s swimblerate,’ my husband interrupted. ‘Tricky thingles, these wordices, aren’t they Henry?’

‘Yes, Daddy,’ Henry agreed, nodding seriously. I gave up.

After half an hour in the car, Henry must have asked ‘Is them still ahind us?’ at least two dozen times, and the only improvement I’d managed was ‘Is they still ahind us?’ That tiny piece of progress was lost when, five minutes from the pool and frustrated by being asked the same question over and over and over again I cracked, and stupidly said, ‘No.’

Henry burst into tears and demanded that we stop. I had to apologise to him for lying, and promise faithfully that, ‘Them is still ahind us, honest.’

I had just managed to calm him down and dry his tears when we arrived. Mike pulled into a
parking space well away from the pool and Harry pulled up alongside us.

‘Hello, James,’ Henry yelled at the top of his voice, making me jump.

Henry sat behind me, and James was behind his dad. They were waving frantically at each other and I could tell that James was yelling, too. Harry smiled at me, and politely indicated that I should get out first.

We disembarked en masse in a bewilderment of greetings and squeals. Henry and James were jabbering away excitedly at each other. I was trying to warn them to watch out for cars while also getting Annie from her seat and trying to say hello to Harry and Ginny. Mike cut across my greetings.

‘I’m Mike Charlton,’ he said, reaching out his hand to Harry. ‘But I’ll answer to pretty much anything these days: Daddy, hey you, or even Michael if you want to use my Sunday name. It seems that our wives are too busy to perform the introductions.’

‘Harry Potter,’ Harry said, shaking my husband’s hand. I’d completely forgotten that they hadn’t met, and so, apparently, had Ginny. ‘It’s nice to meet you, Mike. I’ve heard a lot about you. But almost all of it has been from Henry, via James.’

‘In that case, if it’s good, it’s true; if it’s bad, it’s a lie,’ said Mike, grinning.

‘Boys!’ Ginny screamed. Henry and James were running towards the pool. They were scampering between parked cars and they hadn’t spotted the car travelling down the next aisle. Fortunately, both boys stopped, at Ginny’s yell.

Mike and Harry had both taken off like sprinters when Ginny shouted.

By the time Ginny and I had got the three little ones under control, both boys had received a severe telling off from their dads. They looked suitably chastised, but the moment the scolding was over they turned towards each other and grinned sheepishly.

Ginny had noticed too. She glanced at me and rolled her eyes skywards. ‘We’re going to have to watch those two, aren’t we?’ she said.

‘Henry can be a bit boisterous sometimes. He was probably leading James on,’ I apologised.

‘Don’t bet on it. I was going to say exactly the same thing about James, and apologise for his behaviour,’ said Ginny.

Mike was supervising Henry and James as they walked, and definitely did not run, across the car park towards the Sports Centre entrance. As we set off to follow them to the pool, Harry dashed back and picked up all of the bags, including ours. He ignored my protests and told me, ‘I can manage, you just look after Annie.’ He turned to his wife and added, ‘I’ve got to go, Ginny. Mike’s threatening to pay for everyone.’ He strolled off after Mike and the two boys, leaving Ginny and I with the three little ones.

‘James was driving me crazy in the car,’ said Ginny as we crept across the car park at toddling speed. ‘He was so excited. He was asking “Izzat Henry in front?” every two minutes.’

‘Henry was the same,’ I admitted.

‘Can your two swim?’ Ginny asked.
‘Henry can, almost,’ I said proudly. ‘I’ve been teaching him, but Annie’s still too small to be let loose without floats. Mike usually plays with her while I look after Henry.’

‘You teach swimming?’ Ginny asked.

Sort of,’ I said modestly. ‘I did a basic teaching course when I was in my teens. I was a club swimmer. I wasn’t really any good, just one of the plodders, but it was good fun. I was a backstroker, though not a great one. I was the one who makes up the numbers for the clubs relay B team. But it’s good exercise for them, and me, so I was keen for Henry and Annie to learn. What about you and yours?’

‘Harry and I learned together, about ten years ago. He prefers breaststroke to backstroke,’ she said. Her eyes sparkled and the corners of her mouth twitched.

‘Most men do,’ I told her. We grinned at each other. The three little ones were listening carefully so I returned to safer ground. ‘Ten years ago? That’s late in life to decide to learn to swim, isn’t it?’

‘On our first holiday together we saw some kite surfers. We tried it and loved it, and that’s when we decided that learning to swim properly would be a good idea. Harry tried to teach the kids to swim in Italy over the summer, but James thought it was a waste of time. Henry has told him that it’s lots of fun, so now he’s changed his mind,’ said Ginny.

We entered the Sports Centre to find a good-natured argument between our husbands, each of whom was insisting that they should pay for everyone. Ginny and I interrupted them and we agreed that we’d pay for our own families.

We led the Potters down to the changing area. It was fun to watch them. We were familiar with the place, but the Potters were all looking around with interest. It was as though they’d never been inside a Sports Centre.

‘The family cubicles are at the far end,’ said Mike.

Harry nodded and led his family towards one cubicle while Mike headed for the adjacent one.

We were changed first and we waited for the Potters to emerge.

‘C’mon James, hurryup,’ Henry shouted impatiently.

The door opened almost immediately and James dashed out.

‘James, don’t run on the wet floor,’ ordered Ginny as she followed him out.

Ginny was holding Al tightly by the hand, and Mike’s wish had been granted. She was wearing a blue bikini, at least, a Speedo two piece. She had tied her hair up. She looked pretty, and annoyingly curvy. Inlike me, she wasn’t bulging out of her costume. Harry followed immediately behind her. He was wearing black jammers and was cradling little Lily, who was in a green one-piece, to his chest.

The changing room was almost deserted. We watched as a group of wet and giggling teenagers pulled bags from lockers and moved into cubicles, leaving us the only people out in the open.

‘Harry,’ said Ginny quietly, glancing around the empty changing room and then at his chest. Harry took a deep breath and passed Lily over to his wife.

He was lean, almost skinny and his muscles weren’t well defined, but I knew that good muscle
definition didn’t equate to fitness. In fact, Harry looked lithe and fit, and surprisingly scarred. There was an oval scar on his chest. Next to it, over his heart, there was a second lightning scar, apparently identical to the one on his forehead. There was also a very faint trace of what looked like claw marks on his ribs. As Mike and I stared, he clenched his fists nervously. That’s when I noticed what looked like handwriting on the back of his left hand.

‘You’ve seen this,’ he said to me, twisting his arm around and revealing the knife scar I’d seen during the week. ‘And this,’ he lifted his untidy fringe revealing his scarred forehead.

He pointed at the claw mark. ‘This was done by a Bagh Nakh, or…’

‘Tiger claw, bloody hell!’ my husband said, revealing his compendious knowledge of ridiculous weapons, learned from years wasted on computer games. Harry nodded.

‘Burn,’ he said moving his hand up and pointing to the oval scar. ‘And the guy who gave me the burn thought that it would be a good idea to kill me by recreating the scar on my forehead too. They are old war wounds. Scars from a lifetime ago, and that’s all I’m saying about them.’

‘Harry and I have been together for years. We went on our first holiday together just before my eighteenth birthday,’ said Ginny, standing staunchly at her husband’s side. ‘Complete strangers stare at his scars, and ask stupid questions. It’s very annoying, so I thought that…’

‘It’s okay, red…’ my husband began. He stopped the instant he saw Ginny’s face. It was Harry’s turn to intervene. He stepped forwards.

‘Ginny is Ginny. Not redhead, or Red, or Ginger, or Ginge and definitely not Gin,’ Harry said quietly. ‘She isn’t Virginia, either.’

Ginny laughed when he said the last name. ‘Mummy to my kids, but Ginny to everyone else,’ she said forcefully.

‘Sorry, Ginny, I’ll remember that,’ Mike apologised. I glared at him, making certain that he knew I was unhappy, and that from now on I would be pulling him up every time he referred to “the redhead” too.

‘Has everyone forgotten that we’re going swimbling?’ Henry asked, breaking the uneasy silence. We laughed, assured Henry that we hadn’t, and we led our kids up to the pool.

‘She’s definitely a redhead,’ Mike said in an undertone. ‘She’s got a temper that’s even quicker than yours. I don’t want to die a horrible death, so don’t let me call her “red” again.’

‘I won’t,’ I promised him.

We trooped up to the pool together and entered the water. It was chaotic and a lot of fun. For a few minutes Ginny and I spent our time with Henry and James in the deeper water, trying to teach our sons to swim. Henry was much better than his new friend, and I could tell that James was annoyed by the fact. What he lacked in technique, James made up for in determination.

Mike and Harry were in the small pool with the two girls and Al. I saw Al looking longingly at James and Henry, but Ginny’s younger son was far from confident in the water. Lily however, was too young to appreciate the danger and she happily splashed and burbled alongside Annie.

We’d been in the water for about ten minutes when Ginny asked me, ‘Can you cope with these two?’
I assured her that I could, so she left. Using an easy and fluid—though technically poor—breaststroke, Ginny swam across to join Harry. After a short discussion, Harry left Lily with Ginny and brought Al into the big pool.

Harry was gently supporting and encouraging his younger son as he slowly moved out of his depth, splashing wildly. I was watching, while also keeping a careful eye on Henry and James; they had decided to have breath-holding competition. Henry won, and I intervened when a gasping James demanded a rematch.

‘You need more practice, James,’ I suggested. ‘Why don’t you try to do a forward-roll instead?’ I demonstrated, tucking up my legs and rolling over before emerging again.

‘Blow froo yer nose when y’roll,’ Henry added helpful. ‘Else the watter’ll go upyer nose.’ James tried, and emerged coughing and spluttering. But he watched Henry do it, and tried again. James refused to give up, I was impressed. Henry was practicing a lot harder than usual, determined to make sure that he remained better than James.

After more than half an hour in the water I was still play-teaching Henry and James. Usually, that was the time when Henry would announce that he was tired and that he didn’t want to learn any more. Neither he nor James complained; they were each keen to keep up with the other. It was wonderful.

I was still busy with them much later when Harry drifted alongside me, still holding and encouraging Al. ‘Mike says that it’s time to go,’ he said. I looked up at the clock; we’d been in the water for more than an hour.

‘He’s right,’ I said. ‘Henry doesn’t usually last this long. Off you go, you two,’ I told the boys. ‘First one to reach Henry’s dad is the winner.’ They splashed away from us with their arms flailing like windmills and their heads out of the water. In their excitement they had forgotten everything I’d taught them.

‘I go too, Daddy,’ Al squeaked.

‘Okay,’ Harry said. ‘But you need these on first.’ He lifted the armbands he’d been carrying. Al looked unhappy.

‘Do you want to try this, Al?’ I asked. I handed him the float I’d been using to teach the older boys to kick properly. He nodded enthusiastically, so I showed him how to hold the float and Harry and I flanked him as he enthusiastically kicked his way across the pool.

‘You’re a good teacher, Jacqui,’ Harry told me. ‘I’ve been watching you. James has learned a lot.’

‘I told Ginny, I did a preliminary teaching course when I was in my teens, while I was still swimming,’ I said. ‘Amazingly, I seem to remember most of it. And teaching James and Henry together is actually easier than teaching Henry. Henry gets bored following his mum’s instructions.’ I turned to Al, who was starting to struggle. ‘Don’t bend your knees, Al, keep them straight and kick with your hips,’ I advised.

Al did as he was told, and started to move through the water a little more quickly.

‘Well done, Al,’ said Harry smiling encouragingly at his younger son. ‘Kick—kick.’

When we finally reached the others Henry and James were in the shallow water and standing talking to Ginny, who was cradling Lily. There was no sign of Mike or Annie. I looked around the pool. ‘Where’s…’
‘Annie’s had an emergency,’ Ginny said. ‘It was “Needatoiletdaddy”, and Mike got her out of the pool quick.’

‘I just wee inna pool,’ my son announced proudly and loudly as we left. James laughed.

‘Henry!’ I scolded, shaking my head in annoyance.

Mike was waiting for us when we got into the changing room. I retrieved her from him and led Ginny and Lily into the Ladies’ showers.

‘Are you coming straight back to ours, Ginny?’ I asked while we quickly showered. ‘Or will you need to go home and get changed?’

‘I’ve brought a change of clothes, Jacqui. We can come straight back, if you don’t mind. But if you need to get ready for us, we can wait,’ Ginny offered.

After a short discussion we agreed that they would follow us home and we returned to the changing room to tell our husbands the plan. Ginny and her family vanished into a cubicle. They were ready and waiting for us when we finally emerged from ours. My hair was still damp when we left, but somehow, the Potters were all completely dry and smartly dressed. Ginny’s hair was shining and she was wearing a completely different outfit, black leggings, denim shorts and a grey sweatshirt, to the one she’d been wearing when they arrived. Dressed like that, she didn’t look old enough to have three kids.

I was once again struck by one of the many slight oddities about the Potters. The two bags Harry had shouldered were big enough to carry the towels and costumes, but they didn’t look big enough to carry all of the other stuff they must have brought with them.

We walked out of the Sports Centre together. Mike again watched Henry and James across the car park, I carried Annie, Ginny carried Lily, and Harry held Al’s hand. As we walked out into the afternoon sunshine there was a raucous whistle.

‘Wotcher, boss,’ someone shouted.

There was a woman leaning against the back of the Potters’ car. Her hair was black and spiky and the sides of her head were shaved. She was a tall, solidly built Goth. There really was no other way to describe her. She wore Doc Marten boots, fishnets and a profusion of black and purple clothes.

‘Damn! Give me a minute?’ asked Harry. Ginny nodded.

‘Stay with Mummy for a minute, okay, Al?’ Harry asked. He released his second son and trotted across the car park towards the woman.

‘Do you mind waiting?’ she asked us. ‘That’s Polly Protheroe, she works for Harry. It must be important if she’s tracked us down here. I really hope that he won’t have to go into the office.’
‘What’s happening, Mammy?’ Henry asked me, his face creased in confusion.

‘James’s daddy needs to speak to that lady in private,’ I told him.

‘Why?’ Henry asked. I hesitated, unable to provide an explanation as I had no idea who she was, or what she wanted. Ginny came to my rescue.

‘She probably wants to tell him a secret, Henry,’ Ginny told him. ‘At least, I hope she does. If she thinks she’s going to drag him off to work right now, then she’d better have a bloo—ming good reason.

Ginny was wearing the same predatory expression I’d first seen when she was facing Mary, the expression which I’d seen again today and which I was certain would ensure that my husband would never again call her “Red”. Her scorching gaze seemed to cut through the air; perhaps it really did, because the woman glanced worriedly across at Ginny. I watched with interest.

Harry and the woman who Ginny had called Polly Protheroe had a very brief conversation. Harry signed something for her and beckoned to Ginny. I wasn’t certain whether he was extending the invitation to everyone, but Ginny set off immediately, carrying Lily and holding Al tightly by the hand. James did not want to be left behind and he started forward too. Henry followed James, so I followed too. I caught Mike’s eye and indicated to him that he should keep Henry and James under control. He nodded.

‘Do not run across the car park,’ Mike ordered the two older boys. James and Henry exchanged a “we’d-better-not-risk-it” look and walked alongside me. Mike brought up the rear, keeping a watchful eye on them. The strange-looking woman was watching us coolly as we approached.

Henry and James were blatantly gawping as they drew closer to the pale-skinned, black-clad and heavily made-up goth. It was embarrassing, but hardly surprising. I had to force myself not to stare at her. I tried to examine her surreptitiously as we approached. What a sight, I thought, and then I realised that I’d just used one of my mother’s expressions. My God, I realised, I’m turning into my mother! I’d always prided myself on my tolerance, but I’d never really tested it.

Purple painted fingernails protruded from black lace fingerless gloves; her face was white pancake, with black lipstick and crimson mascara. Her right arm was tattooed from her wrist to goodness knew where. If I’d seen her in the street, I would certainly have avoided her; she was that sort of woman. So much for tolerance I thought to myself. But despite Ginny’s obvious unhappiness, the woman was smiling and waving at Ginny and the kids. I realised as I got closer that she was also older than I’d first thought. She was older than Harry, older than me; it was difficult to tell because of her makeup, but she was probably in her late thirties.

As I came closer to her, I realised that she was looking at the Potter family almost longingly. I glanced at her left hand and it confirmed my suspicion. She wore rings of pewter, silver and gold. They featured skulls, pentagrams, a coffin, and her right thumb ring was what appeared to be a staring yellow eye. Only one finger was without a ring, the third. That seemed to be the only way in which she conformed to normal behaviour.

‘This is Polly Protheroe; she works for me,’ said Harry, introducing us to his colleague. ‘Polly, this
is Mike, Jacqui, Henry and Annie Charlton.'

‘Hello.’ The woman nodded politely at us before turning to Ginny. It was obvious that Ginny knew her.

‘And hello, Missis P.’ The woman grinned at Ginny, somehow managing to ignore Ginny’s predatory glare. ‘Quite the family scene, eh? I only ever see Harry at work, and he’s not so relaxed in the office. It’s easy to forget he’s a dad too. Seein’ you with this lot makes me feel really old. I’d really like…’ I never discovered what Polly would really like, because Ginny interrupted.

‘Hello, Polly, it’s been a long time since I saw you. I hope you aren’t bringing bad news!’ Ginny spoke forcefully, but it seemed to me that Polly was unafraid, that she was deliberately not giving Ginny a straight answer.

‘Yeah, well, you wouldn’t see much of me, would you? Work and family don’t mix much, do they? And I weren’t at the office party at Christmas. They really aren’t my thing; I don’t fit in and the music is a steamin’ pile of sh…’ She stopped mid-sentence, looked at Ginny, then me, then the kids, and rather lamely finished her sentence. ‘…not very good.

‘I’d rather go to one of the pubs in Camden Town,’ she continued. ‘But that ain’t your cuppa tea.’

Ginny continued to glare at her; with a wry smile, Polly finally told Ginny what she wanted to hear. ‘Don’t worry, I’m not draggin’ Harry to work or anything; I just needed a signature from the boss, that’s all.’

Adjusting a flounce of black, pink and purple petticoats, she squatted down in front of Al and James. ‘Wotcher, Jimmy, Hiya, Al. I ‘aven’t seen you two for years. You were a tiny baby, Al, an’ just look at you now. You’ll be at school yerself, next year, eh?’ Al nodded nervously. Polly ruffled his hair, an entirely redundant action, as Al’s hair was as untidy as Harry’s. ‘And you, Jimmy, I hear all about you! I hope that you’re being a good boy!’ She grinned at him and stood.

‘And look at you!’ she said, beaming at Lily. ‘As gorgeous as yer mum already!’ She gently stroked Lily’s cheek. That was when Henry decided that he’d been silent for long enough.

‘That’s a dragon,’ he announced, pointing at her arm.

‘Smart kid,’ Polly said. She held out her arm and twisted it, allowing the boys to see the fire-breathing monster twisting up her arm. ‘It’s a Hebridean Black.’ She tapped the side of her nose conspiratorially. ‘You can still see them in the wild, if you know where to look.’ She winked at me. She was obviously teasing the kids. ‘I’ve got a Hippogriff, too. Wanna see it?’

‘Polly,’ Harry said sharply. Up until then, he had been watching in amused silence.

‘Yeah, best not,’ she said. ‘Well, I just wanted to say hello to the Potter family. I’d better get away, bad guys to catch and all that. Thanks, boss, and cheers all!’ She waved at the kids and strode off across the car park.

‘She works for you?’ I asked Harry, trying not to sound incredulous.

‘Where’s the Hippogriff tattoo?’ Mike asked at the same time, talking over my question. Harry smiled almost apologetically and looked me in the eye.

‘Yes, Polly works for me, Jacqui. She walks a different path to most of us, at least as far as her lifestyle and dress sense goes…’ Ginny sniggered at that remark for some reason. ‘But she’s good at her job. And she’s not the most eccentric member of my team,’ he added ruefully before turning
to my husband. ‘I’ve no idea where the Hippogriff tattoo is, Mike. I know where she tells everyone that it is, but in my job, I need evidence, and I’ve never seen it.’

‘Is it on ‘er bum, Daddy?’ James asked, revelling in the use of that rudest of words in the way only a little boy could.

‘Bum.’ Henry giggled. To my dismay, Mike snorted with laughter too, thus showing the Potters, if they hadn’t already guessed, that my husband is no more mature than most four-year-olds. I glared at him.

‘James.’ Ginny frowned at her son before turning to her husband. ‘So, is it good news, Harry?’ He glanced meaningfully at us and shrugged.

‘It’s too early to say, Ginny. Polly has a name and it looks better than the others we’ve been given. She wanted to tell me about it, and she needed authorisation for a surveillance operation. I’ll tell you all about it in the car.’ Harry smiled apologetically at us. ‘I can leave work for a few days, but work doesn’t always leave me, I’m sorry. Are we all ready to leave?’

‘Yes, you can follow us home if you’d like.’ Mike had already unlocked the car and was busy putting our bags into the boot when there was a sudden bang. It came from the direction Polly Protheroe had headed.

‘I’ve told her to get her car fixed,’ said Harry, shaking his head.

Henry, ignored the noise, he had something much more important to ask. ‘Can James come wiff us?’

‘That’s up to Harry and Ginny,’ I told him. When I looked questioningly at them, they exchanged worried glances.

‘We’ve never let him be driven anywhere by someone else…’ Ginny began.

‘I wanna go wiff Henry,’ James announced. ‘An’ I’ve bin in Antermynee’s car.’ James spoke rapidly and I was unable to decipher the name. *Aunt who?* I wondered.

‘So you have,’ Harry agreed. ‘I think that Mummy must have forgotten about that.’

‘There probably isn’t room for you in Henry’s car, James,’ said Ginny.

‘They can have her,’ Henry offered, pointing disdainfully at Annie and offhandedly dismissing his sister into the care of the Potters. ‘That’ll make room.’

‘They can not,’ I told him. ‘Annie is your sister; you can’t just give her away, Henry!’

Henry pulled a face, obviously unconvinced about the necessity of Annie, and sisters in general. There were a few minutes of confused discussion. It was obvious that Ginny was not keen on entrusting James into our care. Harry was wavering, and Henry and James were standing shoulder to shoulder, determined to remain together. I marvelled at the speed at which they’d bonded. They’d only known each other for six days, and they were already inseparable.

‘They’ll both be upset if we say no,’ observed Mike quietly, addressing Ginny. ‘I’m a good driver. I got a speeding ticket on my bike a dozen years ago, but I’ve been clean as a whistle since.’

It seemed to me that Ginny was waiting for Harry to say no. He said nothing. They looked at each other. Harry held reached out for her hand and squeezed it. Ginny’s thumb caressed the back of his
hand, and she pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows enquiringly. Harry still said nothing. The implication was obvious. He would not prevent James from riding with us. I watched, fascinated. I’d never seen a discussion carried out in almost complete silence, and so rapidly.

‘He’ll be safe, Ginny,’ Harry assured her. He sounded definite, and Ginny nodded.

‘You be on your best behaviour, James Potter, or else,’ Ginny warned. ‘And remember what we told you!’

‘Yes, Mummy,’ James said. And that was it; the decision was made. Mike and Harry strapped James’s car seat into the back of our car, between Henry and Annie. Mike did most of the work, as Harry was concentrating on muttering something to James—reinforcing Ginny’s warning, probably. Once he was safely strapped in, we waved to the Potters and drove home with our new passenger.

From the moment we left the car park, Henry and James were chattering. Henry began by asking James about toys. James, it seemed, had very few toys. No cars, fire engines, diggers or soldiers. James did, however, have a train set, Lego and a broom! That last one puzzled me.

Henry began to boast about his toys, but he was struggling even before I could scold him. James was remarkably unimpressed. I knew why.

The Potters did not own a television. The fact that James didn't know about the Cartoon Channel meant that the poor boy had no idea about the origin of several of Henry’s toys. Henry’s complicated and confusing explanations were beginning to bewilder James, and I had to help my son to explain the cartoon background behind many of his action figures. Annie tried to help too, but her explanations were mainly centred around Peppa Pig, and even more confusing for James. At least the boys weren’t bored. Their conversation did not flag until we were on the final leg of the journey.

When they finally lapsed into silence, I asked, ‘So, apart from your daddy’s car, which other cars have you been in, James?’

‘Antermynee’s,’ he said. The nonsense word he’d said still made no sense.

‘Aunt who?’ I asked.

‘Aunt ’ermione,’ said James slowly.

‘Aunt Hermione,’ I clarified. ‘Do you have many aunts and uncles, James?’

‘Yes,’ he said. He paused. ‘Daddy says I have to ’member the National Statue of Secrets. But aunties an’ uncles aren’t secrets, are they?’

‘I wouldn’t think so. Unless your aunt Hermione works for your daddy,’ I told him, wondering how he had managed to transform the Official Secrets Act into the National Statue of Secrets. It didn’t seem to fit, but I know from experience that four-year-old brains are sometimes strange places.

‘Uncle Ron says Daddy will be working for Aunt ’ermione soon,’ said James. His tone of voice told me that this was obviously important news.

‘Uncle Ron?’ I asked.

Uncle Ron and Aunt ’ermione are Rose and Hugo’s mummy and daddy,’ James told me.
‘I’ve met Rose and Hugo,’ I told James.

‘I knows, and Granny too,’ James nodded.

‘Yes, I’ve met your granny, too. So, where do your cousins live?’ I asked.

James gave that question some considerable thought. ‘Inna house,’ he told me. ‘It’s called “The Roost”, but our new house is better.’

Mike burst out laughing. ‘Good answer, James,’ he said. ‘Most people do. What about your new house? What do you like about it?’

‘It’s great,’ James began. In the mirror, I saw James’s eyes light up excitedly. ‘There’s a tactless forest an’ a raging river, just like inna stories. An’ I’m gonna make a den, an’ it’s gonna be secret. It’s great. It’s better than grim ole place an it’s even better than The Burrow.’

‘Tactless forest? Grim old place? The Burrow?’ said Mike, confused by James’ answers.

‘You mean “trackless forest”, don’t you, James,’ I explained to Mike. ‘You don’t read stories to your kids often enough, Daddy. But grim old place?’

‘S where we use to live,’ James explained. ‘Kreacher still does.’

Mike and I exchanged expressions of confusion. The Potters had lived with a creature in a grim old place? I decided to simply let the subject drop.

‘Daddy’s made me a rope swing over a deep an’ trechruss river,’ James added. ‘It’s very dangerous an’ I’ve gotta be very careful.’

‘We gotta swin’,’ Annie squeaked, trying to join in the conversation. James ignored her.

The “deep and treacherous river” would be the Drakestone Burn, I realised; it ran through Drakestone Wood, not far from the Potters’ home. At this time of year, it would be no more than four feet wide, and nowhere would it be more than a foot deep. I wondered how dangerous the swing really was. After Ginny’s concern about James riding in someone else’s car, I suspected that she would not allow her children to face very much danger. I imagined Harry and Ginny seriously telling their son to be careful.

‘Can I have a go on your swing?’ Henry asked.

‘Yes, you can come to my house whenever you want,’ said James.

‘Whenever your mummy and daddy want, James,’ I suggested. ‘You’d better ask them before you invite Henry round.’

‘They won’t mind,’ James said confidently.

‘Here we are,’ Mike announced as we turned off the road and clattered up the steep gravel drive to our house.

When we bought the place, our house had been named “Rivendell”. One of the first things we did was change the name back to the original. I did a little research to confirm it, but it took me no time at all to confirm that the property had always (until the last owners changed it) been “Lintzgarth”. The builders had taken the trouble to carve the name “Lintzgarth” and the date “1873” in the lintel above our front door, so there really was not any doubt.
Lintzgarth was built by a factory-owner from Newcastle. Some rumours claim that he built it for his mistress, although I’ve found no evidence to support that. It is a Victorian house, built of solid stone and with a slate roof. Mike and I spent a huge amount of money updating it when we bought it. After our first freezing winter, we spent even more on insulation and new windows.

From the road, Lintzgarth conformed to the standard child’s drawing of a house. Our front door, which we rarely use, is flanked by a window on each side (both bays); there is an identical arrangement of windows on the first floor and a chimney midway along the roof.

The drive passes the left side of the house and continues through the six foot high stone wall which surrounds our rear garden, separating us from the pastures of Riddshiels Farm. Our garage is an old stable, open fronted for most of its length. The old tack room at the far end is full of the usual junk, the kids’ bikes, the lawnmower, and various plant pots and gardening implements.

Mike pulled his car under the stable roof, stopping a lot closer to the wheelbarrow than I was comfortable with. He ignored my sharp intake of breath, wound down his window and waved his arm, indicating that Harry should pull up behind our car. I waited until Harry had stopped before getting out and helping the kids from their seats.

Mike carried the swimming bags across to the kitchen door, and feeling suddenly nervous, I herded the kids along behind him.

‘Welcome to Lintzgarth,’ I said to Harry and Ginny. They were both gazing around my garden. ‘Make yourselves at home. I’ll give you a guided tour later if you want. I’ll just…’ I waved vaguely at the kitchen door and bustled past Mike, who had just unlocked the door, in order to get into the kitchen first.

‘Jacqui is in full panic-mode,’ announced Mike, embarrassing me in front of our guests. ‘She is always the same when we have guests. She needs to make sure that the place is spotless, although she did that twice before we left.’

I went inside, fuming, and looked around the kitchen. It had been tidy when we left, and of course it was still tidy, but Mike shouldn’t have said what he did. There was an uneasy silence outside as the Potters waited. Thanks to Mike, they were waiting to be invited in.

‘What’s that?’ James asked. I looked through the kitchen window, but James must have been directly beneath it. I couldn’t see where he was pointing, but at the far end of the lawn, there was a swing, a seesaw, and…

‘A trampoline,’ Henry said. ‘You jump on it and bounce; it’s almost like flying. Wanna go?’

I saw Harry and Ginny exchange a worried glance. I was again surprised; I really had not expected them to be so overprotective of James. Mike had obviously noticed, too.

‘He’ll be perfectly safe,’ Mike reassured them. ‘There’s a net around it.’

‘I know he’ll be safe,’ said Ginny. She seemed certain, so I wondered why she’d sounded so worried.

‘Be careful, James,’ Harry warned. ‘Don’t do anything silly.’ From the way he spoke, I got the impression that rather than falling, he was expecting James to do something very spectacular.

If you all want to go and play, go ahead,’ said Mike. The kids all scampered up the garden.

‘I’ll keep an eye on them,’ Harry offered.
‘Thanks, Harry, I’ll just offload the swimming things and I’ll be straight back. I need to get the barbecue going,’ Mike told him.

I glared at Mike as he strode through the kitchen.

‘It’s okay, Jacqui, everything is under control,’ he told me.

‘You haven’t offered them drinks,’ I reminded him.

‘I haven’t started on the food, and I haven’t put these away, either,’ he said. ‘Think of the trouble I’d be in if I just left these on the floor. Relax, Jacques!’ He thinks that phrase is really funny! He winked at me and walked into the hall. I heard him go upstairs.

‘Do you need any help, Jacqui?’ Ginny asked, peering into the kitchen through the still open door. She was still waiting for permission to enter. I cursed inwardly.

‘Sorry, Ginny, what must you think of me? Come in, please. Would you like something to drink? What about the kids?’

‘Drink!’ said Ginny, shaking her head in annoyance. ‘I’ll be back in a minute!’ She dashed back to their car, pulled open the boot rifled around in one of the bags and returned with a bottle. ‘We brought this for you. We didn’t want to come empty-handed. Thanks for inviting us. And thanks for all your help in the pool, Jacqui.’ Ginny offered me the bottle of red wine.

I protested that she didn’t need to bring a gift, and she insisted that she did. We indulged in that little dance of polite chit-chat which, as was inevitable, finally resulted in me saying “you’re very kind” and accepting the bottle. It was a Sicilian red wine, “La Segreta Rosso” according to the label. I’d never heard of it, but from the look and feel of the bottle, it wasn’t cheap.

‘You do drink wine, don’t you?’ Ginny asked me as Mike re-entered the kitchen.

‘Red?’ he said. Ginny rounded on him.

‘The wine,’ he said, trying to sound innocent. ‘We’re very fond of red wine, aren’t we, Jacqueline, darling?’

‘He’s going to be like this all night; sorry,’ I told Ginny. ‘He’s trying to be clever.’

‘Only trying?’ Mike asked.

‘You are always very trying, Michael,’ I told him. He burst out laughing. Ginny watched our bickering with apparent amusement.

‘Do you want to open it now?’ Mike asked us. ‘Or would you rather wait until we eat?’

‘That will be never, unless you light that barbecue,’ I reminded him.

‘I’m on my way, Boss,’ he told me. ‘You can sort out the drinks.’

Mike strolled into the garden, leaving Ginny and I alone in the kitchen. I watched as he began busying himself at the barbecue. Harry was happily supervising the kids. He was pushing Al on the swing and then rushing across to help Annie and Lily on the seesaw, as Lily was too light (or Annie was too heavy) to get any reasonable motion going.

‘Mike’s actually a pretty good cook,’ I told Ginny. I then had another panic; suddenly worried that the Potters might not like the food and drink which Mike had prepared, I quickly ran through the
Ginny reassured me about the food, assured me that ginger beer would be fine for the kids, and accepted my offer of a lager from the fridge. I found a bottle of Riggwelter Ale for Mike and asked, ‘What will Harry drink?’

‘Ginger beer, probably, provided it’s not the alcoholic stuff,’ Ginny told me. ‘He won’t drink any alcohol when he’s driving.’

‘Mike’s the same,’ I told her. ‘If we go out to the pub, we take turns driving. I expect you do that as well?’

Ginny shook her head.

‘I can’t drive,’ she admitted. ‘I passed my bike test, so I can take the bike out, but that’s no use now we have the kids. I suppose, now we’re here, I really should learn…’ She shrugged.

Ginny and I sat at the kitchen table and spent some time discussing some of our motorcycling experiences. Outside, the men were doing all of the work. It was an enjoyable way to spend the early part of the evening. Mike was carrying on a loud — and frequently interrupted — conversation with Harry, who was at the other end of the garden with the kids.

Mike was in and out of the kitchen as he prepared the food. I handed him his beer on the first of his several trips to the fridge. On his second, he arrived with orders for drinks from the kids and Harry. Ginny was proved right; Harry was happy with ginger beer.

Ginny and I gossiped. I discovered that grim old place was, in fact, their London home, Grimmauld Place, and that the Potters had employed a housekeeper called Creech. Ginny was rather reluctant about discussing their old house and the conversation turned to Harry’s bike.

Harry and Ginny had travelled across the country on the bike when they were younger. The bike had belonged to Harry’s late godfather and had been part of Harry’s inheritance. The bike had been a wreck, apparently, but Harry had rebuilt it with some help from Ginny’s family.

‘They helped?’ I said. ‘My parents hated the idea of me going out with a biker, even though he was a university graduate with a good job.’

For me at least, the evening flew by. Ginny and I discussed our spouses and we talked about the kids. Lily had apparently been a terrible sleeper and Ginny was jealous when I told her how good Annie had been.

I gave Ginny a quick tour of Lintzgarth and we arrived back in the kitchen a little after seven, moments before Mike finally announced that the food was ready. He served the kids their burgers, sausages, salad and baked potatoes before serving us. I opened the wine and poured a glass for Ginny, Mike and myself. It was full-bodied, fruity and delicious; if it wasn’t expensive, it certainly tasted like it was.

I carried the drinks outside and we adults sat around the patio table while the kids picnicked on the lawn. We ate and chatted and joked, and Ginny flattered Mike by asking him for the recipe for his spicy chicken kebabs.

The kids wolfed down their food and Henry, realising that they’d been outside since they arrived and he hadn’t shown James any of his toys, dragged his friend indoors. The kids all seemed to be getting along well, although at that moment, I realised that Al was looking longingly after the two older boys. I suggested that he go and join them, but he shyly refused and went back up to join the girls on the swing and seesaw.
By the time Harry, Ginny, Mike and I had finished eating, the sun was slowly sinking and the horizon was just beginning to take on an orange tinge. Harry volunteered to watch the kids again. The rest of us cleared everything up and packed the dishwasher; at least, Mike and I did. Ginny looked as though she’d never seen such a thing.

Mike was busy pouring himself another beer when Harry strolled into the kitchen with Lily in his arms. His flame-haired daughter was whimpering and floppy.

‘Lily’s had enough,’ Harry announced unnecessarily. ‘I think it’s time for us to go, sorry. Thanks for a nice day, Jacqui, Mike. We’ve had a good time, and the kids have had a good time too.’

‘Happy kids! That’s the most important thing,’ I observed. Harry and Ginny nodded.

‘We might even get them all to bed early,’ suggested Ginny. ‘They’ve had a really busy day.’

It took us some time to get the kids rounded up. James created something of a scene, as he was happy playing with Henry, and with Henry’s toys, and he did not want to leave. I left Ginny to deal with him, which she did with a few firm words.

James was surly and sad when he stomped downstairs. But with Ginny standing behind him, he managed a polite ‘Thank you for inviting us, Mrs Charlton; I’ve had a really good time’.

‘We go swimming every Saturday,’ I told Ginny while Harry was strapping the kids into the car. ‘If you want to make it a regular thing … the swimming, not the barbecue, that is…’ I tailed off hopefully. I’d been lonely, I realised. I’d enjoyed my day too; it would be nice to have someone to visit, somewhere to go for a coffee.

‘Harry and I were discussing that while we were driving here,’ Ginny told me. ‘We’d love to. The kids all enjoyed their trip to the pool. But … I’m sorry … next Saturday won’t be possible for us … we have a party to go to.’ My heart sank, I wondered if that was the first of several weeks of excuses, excuses which would last until I stopped asking. But Ginny sounded genuinely sorry.

‘Party!’ Mike strolled in and interrupted us. ‘Are you having a house-warming party, Ginny? Are we invited? When is it?’

I glared at him, but Ginny looked thoughtful.

‘It might be a good idea to meet our new neighbours,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘I’ll discuss it with Harry. I’ll see you at school on Monday, Jacqui, and thanks again.’ Ginny impulsively kissed me on the cheek, and then, to his obvious pleasure, did the same to Mike. She climbed into the car and we watched and waved as the Potters drove home.

‘Well, that went well,’ Mike observed. ‘They seem like nice people.’

‘A bit eccentric,’ I said. ‘No telly, no electricity. But, yes, nice people.’

‘I’d really like to see Harry’s bike,’ Mike told me.
Interlude: Thirty

‘You’ve wetted me, Daddy,’ James complained.

‘You were already wetted, James,’ his father said. ‘In fact, you are soaked to the skin.’ Harry lifted another palm-sized pebble from the bank of the stream. ‘Watch out, Al,’ he called as he prepared to throw the stone into the water.

Ginny sat cross-legged on the grass and watched her husband. Harry looked over his shoulder and grinned mischievously at her. Once again, he managed to deliberately splash James, who was busy on the opposite bank. James simply laughed; he had already fallen into the water twice. It was impossible for Harry to make him any wetter than he was. Al paddled forwards and carefully relocated the stone his father had thrown.

Harry wore dark brown shorts, a pair of sandals and nothing else. He was busily helping five small children to move stones. They were attempting to dam Drakestone Burn. Despite almost an hour’s work, they were having only limited success.

Before they started work, Harry had stuck a couple of twigs into the gravel, right at the water’s edge, one stick upstream, and the other downstream of the proposed dam. Al, Lily and Rosie, unable to see any real difference in the water levels despite their labours, had all been back to check the sticks. The upstream stick was now slightly underwater and the water had receded from the downstream stick. Rosie, after careful consideration, was happy that they were making a difference, but she wisely observed that stopping water wasn’t easy. After a huge amount of effort, they had succeeded in raising the water level upstream of the stone and pebble dam by a little over an inch.

Ginny glanced at her three young children, and at Rose and Hugo, as they busily piled stone upon stone and pushed gravel into the gaps. She then returned her attention to her husband. She watched the movement of the muscles on his back and shoulders as Harry toiled in the bright mid-September sunshine. Ginny fought back her desire to wade into the water and hug her husband. She knew that such an act would result in complaints from the kids. Later, she promised herself. Hopefully, just like last Saturday, the kids would be really tired tonight. And, equally hopefully, Harry wouldn’t be.

Autumn was approaching rapidly; its inevitable arrival preceded by cooling nights, fields being harvested, and the honking early arrival of geese from Russia. The sun was giving up the last of its late summer warmth as the equinox approached. With October less than two weeks away, it was unlikely that there would be many more days as bright and warm as this.

Today, possibly for the final time of the year, the clearing behind their new home, Drakeshaugh, was warm and sheltered. Ginny soaked up the idyllic scene like a sponge, trying to imprint it forever on her memory.

White clouds were scudding across the sky. The treetops danced, teasing a blustery wind which within weeks would turn from mild to vicious and blow the leaves from them. The dell beside Drakestone Burn was surrounded by large mature trees, making this little hollow almost wind-free. The only noise was the faint rustle of the wind in the treetops and the splashing, clattering and chattering of five children playing.
Lily sat down in the stream with a splash and began to move several small pebbles.

‘Now I is wetted and sorking too, Daddy,’ she announced proudly.

Ginny smiled indulgently at her daughter. Lily refused to be left out. If James and Al were wet, then Lily would be wet too.

‘You are, Lily.’ Harry laughed. He bent down, kissed his daughter on the top of her head and hauled her back onto her feet.

Pleasure welled up inside Ginny. Harry was happy and the kids were happy. Drakeshaugh was perfect. It had only been a few short weeks since their move, but she was surprised to realise that she did not miss their old home.

Twelve, Grimmauld Place was close to the shops of central London and to the Ministry and Diagon Alley, but there were no other benefits. The house in Grimmauld Place had been big, bright and comfortable, but it had no garden. There was no outside space at all. Three young kids stuck indoors had proved to be something of a strain on poor old Kreacher, especially when James had discovered that the elderly house elf would obey “the little master”. Ginny and her children had started to spend a lot of time at The Burrow simply to spare Kreacher.

Grimmauld Place had been their home for the seven years since they married. Really, it had been their home since long before then. Almost from the day she’d left school, she’d spent at least as much time in London as she had at the two flats that she’d occupied on Ynys Mon, the Isle of Anglesea.

Early in the New Year, she and Harry had discussed the problems their London home presented. Often, after they had discussed and rambled and sidetracked their way through one of their problems, they were unable to remember who had finally come up with the solution. This had been one of those occasions. Moving into the countryside had been Harry’s idea, she was certain of that. Harry disagreed; he claimed that the idea had been hers. She’d started to argue, very vociferously, but Harry had merely laughed. He’d told her that he’d take the credit, if she insisted, but he didn’t care whose idea it was, so long as they were both in agreement.

Kreacher had remained behind at Grimmauld Place. It had always been his home, and it was the home of the still-revered Regulus Black. Their ancient house elf would have moved, had they insisted, but he would not retire, and despite their best efforts to persuade him, he refused to be freed. Kreacher considered freedom to be a punishment. Grimmauld Place was now a lodging house, let to a variety of junior-grade Ministry trainees. Harry and Ginny were landlords, and Kreacher was the happy, and very protective, concierge.

Drakeshaugh was a much better home for a growing family, although the house itself was a lot smaller than Grimmauld Place. Drakeshaugh lacked a formal dining room and had fewer bedrooms, but the living room was huge, and there were enough bedrooms for the kids. The kitchen was large enough to invite the whole family around for a meal. And the master bedroom had an en-suite bathroom. Not only that; the en-suite had a bath big enough for two.

The main benefit of Drakeshaugh, however, was the extensive grounds. They had thirty acres, most of which was overgrown woodland. That was more than enough land for the kids to play in. It was secluded and hidden from prying Muggle eyes, too. The only drawback was that they were not physically close to The Burrow.

‘He could do that by magic in seconds,’ Ron observed, pulling Ginny out from her thoughts.
Ginny turned. Her brother was watching Harry as he helped Lily and Hugo fill the gaps in the dam with pebbles. Ron was sitting on the roots of an old oak tree, his back against the trunk. As usual, Ron was keeping in the shade. Hermione, in shorts and a t-shirt, lay on a blanket on the grass, enjoying the sunshine, and reading. She, like Harry, was still tanned from their summer holiday.

‘The kids can’t, and they are happy that their daddy – or Uncle Harry – is helping. He’s happy too, Ron. Just look at him,’ Ginny told her brother.

‘Yeah, he really loves playing with the little ones, doesn’t he?’ said Ron with grudging admiration.

‘Yes,’ said Ginny simply.

_He does_, she thought, _because he always wanted to play in streams and kick balls and do what little children should do. And when he was their age, he wasn’t allowed to do anything like that. Now, he can. He’s not just being a good dad; he’s having the childhood he missed._ Even after all these years, there were occasions when Ginny felt like hexing Vernon and Petunia Dursley.

‘Has James settled in at school?’ asked Hermione, closing the book she’d been reading and rolling onto her side to face Ginny.

‘Yes, he loves it. He’s had two weeks of Muggle school now, and he’s made friends with a few more of the children, but he and Henry Charlton are still inseparable,’ said Ginny.

‘This Henry kid, his mum’s been here, hasn’t she?’ Ron asked.

‘Yes,’ Ginny admitted. ‘She gave me quite a surprise, but not as big a surprise as she gave Terry and Amber. They almost hexed her!’ Ginny’s eyes creased in amusement as she relived the scene.

‘You know that we decided not to hide the house from the Muggles, but we did put a Suggestion Spell on the entrance from the main road. It makes the Muggles realise that it would be very rude of them to arrive here unannounced. We can tell who has tried, because the next time we see them, they ask us if they can visit. There’s a woman called Amanda who is becoming a bit of a pest. Hopefully, that will stop after she’s been to the party.’

‘I think that you’re crazy to invite your Muggle neighbours to a house-warming party,’ said Ron. ‘We’ll be able to act normally, but you’ve invited _Luna_!’

‘Luna will blend in by not blending in at all,’ replied Ginny. ‘She can’t even blend in with other witches, you know that! We meet these people regularly at the school gates, Ron. If we’re going to stay here, we need to get to know them, to establish ourselves.’

‘How did this Jacqui woman get past the Suggestion spell?’ asked Hermione curiously.

‘We’re not sure. But Jacqui simply ignored the spell and drove through the gate. We think that she’s got some wizard blood, though we can’t be certain, because it seems to be through the female line. We checked up on the Charltons when it was obvious that James and Henry were getting close. Jacqui’s maiden name was Wake. Harry met her mum years ago, when he was hunting for Lestrange. We haven’t told Jacqui, of course, because we don’t want her to know we’ve been checking up on her, but Mrs Wake, Jacqui’s mother, once told Harry that she’d caught a glimpse of the Shivering Stone. We think that a combination of a small amount of wizard blood and the fact that she thought her news was urgent – which it was – allowed Jacqui to ignore the spell.’

‘You’re probably right,’ said Hermione. ‘Is Harry’s cover story working?’

‘Yes.’ Ginny nodded.
‘It’s worked for years, Hermione,’ said Ron. ‘The Muggle Interface Team uses it all the time. These days, most of the Muggle police forces know that if they get a weird murder or inexplicable death, the “Home Office” send a team from the Auror Office to investigate. The Muggles think that they are a “Major Incident Team”, of course. We walked in on a police investigation ourselves once, Hermione, years ago. Do you remember?’ Ron stared out into the distance, lost in thought. ‘Sometimes, I miss the old days,’ he said.

‘I don’t,’ said Hermione forcefully. ‘You remember the arrests and the victories and the plaudits, Ron. I remember the bodies, the danger and the hatred.’

‘Yes, but…’ Ron began. Ginny interrupted them before they began to bicker.

‘Our new neighbours don’t ask too many questions about Harry’s job, fortunately. Now that they think he works in national security, they’ve stopped asking. There’s a sort of understanding that what they know is enough,’ said Ginny. ‘It would have been nice to be physically closer to Mum and Dad, but as Harry said when we found this place, The Burrow is only a fireplace away. Anyway, there aren’t many remote places near Ottery St Catchpole, you know that! Perce and Audrey got the last one on the market.’

‘So, do you think that sending James to a Muggle school is a good idea?’ Hermione asked.

‘Yes,’ said Ginny with certainty. ‘I wasn’t sure when Harry suggested it. Mum did such a good job with Victoire and the others, but James is happy; he’s learning a lot and he’s making Muggle friends. Harry was right…’

‘Living completely apart from Muggles is a bad thing,’ said Hermione, staring pointedly at her husband.

‘It didn’t do us any harm, Hermione,’ Ron protested. ‘Did it, Ginny?’

‘No, but it would have been nice to know a bit more about Muggles, Ron,’ said Ginny. ‘Even simple things like how to use a telephone were beyond us. Dad always told us that Muggles were just like us, but without magic. He was right, but we didn’t actually know that, because unlike Harry and Hermione, we didn’t meet any. They didn’t know anything other than Muggles when they were little, and that didn’t do them any harm, either, did it?’

Ron gave a grudging nod of agreement.

‘Hiding away and staying completely separate can lead to prejudice and distrust, Ron,’ argued Hermione. The Malfoys and Greengrasses and a lot of other pureblood families, even the Macmillans, still hide themselves away. You were allowed into Ottery St Catchpole; you even wore Muggle clothes, you’re different to most of the old Pureblood families. I know that we can’t force everyone to change; a lot of wizards still know nothing about Muggles, and they don’t want to know. But I don’t want my great-grandchildren to turn out to be Muggle-haters like the Malfoys simply because they’ve never met a Muggle. Harry’s right, we need to interact more, understand more. It won’t be easy. I’m sure that there will be a few problems with little slips and accidental magic…’

‘Last Saturday, Harry had to stop James bouncing impossibly high on a trampoline,’ Ginny interrupted. ‘James has problems knowing what he can tell people too. He makes mistakes, but he’s not even five yet and he’s got a vivid imagination. People think that a lot of the things he says are nothing but silly stories. Fortunately, Henry Charlton’s dad tells his son all sorts of nonsense, and Henry believes some of it. Nearly every day we need an excuse for something James has said, but we are managing.’ Ginny looked thoughtfully at her bushy-haired friend. ‘So, are you going to
send Rosie to a Muggle school next year, Hermione?’ Ginny asked.

‘Yes.’ Hermione nodded.

Ron frowned and shrugged, but said nothing.

The two women exchanged a knowing glance. Hermione smiled, both women knew that Ron’s silent shrug was enough. His definite and vociferous “no” of two weeks earlier had already turned into uncertainty. Hermione had won this battle.

‘How’s the case going?’ Ron asked. He was obviously unwilling to continue any discussion about Rose and Hugo’s schooling.

‘Are they any closer to catching the werewolf?’ Hermione added. ‘Things are beginning to get … unpleasant … in several departments. Both DMLE and Magical Creatures are getting complaints from everyone. The werewolves are annoyed because of the increase in Auror raids; they claim that it’s discrimination. The old werewolf-haters and bigots—everyone who opposed the Sentient Entities Rights Act—are all saying “we told you so” and demanding a return to the old days. They want the old restrictions on werewolves and house elves and vampires immediately reinstated. The Daily Prophet’s editorial today is calling for more action, even though “fortunately, so far, it’s only Muggles.”’ Hermione spat the quote contemptuously. ‘The public are worried and frightened, Ginny. A werewolf killer who wants Greyback released. Harry needs to do something, and quickly.’

‘Don’t you dare say that to him!’ snapped Ginny. ‘He knows what’s going on, Hermione; he reads the papers too. He’s had your boss pestering him, and Kingsley is taking a personal interest in the case! Harry is under a lot of pressure, and our house move hasn’t helped. On top of everything else, the Auror Office is short staffed. Both Lavender and Shirley are on maternity leave; Bobbie has six weeks left before she’ll join them, and Susan is in Transylvania with Camelia on a vampire-hunter case. The most experienced members of the Muggle Interface Team are unavailable. Lavender has volunteered to come in to help, but Mark won’t let her.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought he could stop her,’ observed Ron.

‘You’d be surprised,’ said Ginny. ‘Just because you had no idea how to handle Lavender…’ Ginny left the sentence unfinished and simply watched Ron’s ears turn pink. ‘Harry’s got as many people on this case as he can spare. Polly and Dennis are both working undercover. The Auror Office is getting a lot of anonymous tip-offs, which doesn’t actually help. Harry thinks that most of the tips, possibly all of them, are simply mischief-making. Unfortunately, he can’t take the chance. The Aurors have raided seven werewolf homes on the basis of the anonymous tip-offs and found nothing. All they’ve done is…’

‘Annoy the witches and wizards who suffer from lycanthropy,’ Hermione supplied. ‘Perhaps, if the Auror Office would stop calling them werewolves…’

‘Lavender calls herself a werewolf and so does Amber’s mum. Because that’s what they are! Changing the name doesn’t reduce prejudice, Hermione; it simply gives the bigots another name to use. “Persons suffering from lycanthropy” is too long-winded anyway,’ argued Ginny. She waved her hand dismissively at Hermione’s suggestion. ‘But Polly has a new suspect. It’s another anonymous tip, but this one looks good. Doxine Gray is a werewolf, and she lives in Sheffield…’

‘We know who she is, Ginny, and so does Lavender,’ said Ron with feeling.

‘Yes, but now Harry has been forced to run two separate operations. Terry knows nothing about
Polly’s surveillance of Doxine…’

‘Why not?’ Ron asked.

‘Because Terry’s wife is Doxine’s niece, remember, Ron,’ said Hermione.

‘It is a werewolf, isn’t it?’ asked Ron. ‘I mean, everyone is sure, aren’t they?’

‘Who else would rip a victim to shreds on a full moon night, Ron?’ Ginny asked him.

‘Well, look at it this way, Ginny,’ said Ron. ‘There is no way that the Wizengamot would agree to release Greyback, especially as it’s “only Muggles” who are being killed.’ Ron looked sorrowfully at his wife as he spoke.

‘It will take years to remove the prejudice, Ron,’ said Hermione. ‘It will never go completely.’

Ron grumbled and thumped the grass.

‘Yes, but, the killer won’t get what they want,’ Ron continued. ‘They must know that, unless they are really thick. Just look at what’s actually happening, what if the murders are just part of it, if everything else that’s happening is the real plan? The werewolves are getting hassle from the Auror Office. Hermione is starting to get requests to rescind the anti-discriminatory legislation, which took her years to get passed. The bigoted purebloods are being listened to for the first time in years…’

‘I’ve been wondering about that too, Ron. I was going to talk to you about it later,’ said Harry. He was carrying a dripping Lily in one arm and an equally wet Hugo in the other. ‘The Muggles are easy targets, but why attack them? The Wizengamot are “expressing concern” but they are not as worried as the Muggles. Kingsley is getting a lot more pressure from the Muggle Prime Minister than he is from the magical community. If it is a werewolf committing these murders, why aren’t they targeting werewolf-haters, or even ordinary wizards? I’ve done a lot of checking. Both of the bodies have been carefully examined. The Muggle pathologist said “large dog or wolf” and the Healers agree. The bite marks, the claw marks, everything is consistent with a werewolf attack. Even so, Dacia Skoll is going to re-examine the bodies for us.’

‘Whatshoo talkin’ ‘bout, Daddy?’ Lily asked.

‘Work, Lily, I’m sorry. I’ve finished now; no more work-talk. It’s time for us to get you kids dried and changed. We have a very special birthday to celebrate.’

Harry carefully lowered the two soggy children to the ground.

‘Happy birfday, Mummy,’ Hugo squeaked.

‘Happy birfday, Antermione,’ Lily added.

‘Thanks,’ said Hermione rather offhandedly, her mind still elsewhere. ‘Werewolf, or simply conjured or enchanted wolf?’ she asked Harry.

‘Enough, Hermione!’ Ginny ordered. ‘It’s your birthday! Like Harry said, no more talk about murders.’ She turned towards the three older children, who were still in the water. ‘Come on, kids,’ she called. ‘It’s time to get changed. We need to leave soon to visit Granny and Granddad Granger. We’re going to have a big birthday party.’

The three older children screamed excitedly and splashed out from the stream.
‘Party!’ Rose shouted. Ron ruffled his daughter’s wet hair, and then dried her with a wave of his wand.

‘How old is you, Antermione?’ James asked.

‘She’s positively ancient, James,’ said Ron. ‘Hands up everyone who’s in their twenties.’ He lifted his hand, laughing; Harry and Ginny followed.

‘Guess,’ Hermione asked her nephew, pointing to the badge on her t-shirt which was flashing; the words “Birthday Girl” were alternating with “30 Today”.

‘Forty?’ suggested James. Harry, Ginny and Ron burst out laughing, but Ron was quickly quietened by his wife’s expression.
Conversations and Invitations

On the Sunday night, the day after the barbecue, I forgot to set my alarm clock. I stirred briefly when Mike’s alarm went off, but then I rolled over and went straight back to sleep. I didn’t even hear him leave for work. When I finally woke, it was half an hour after I normally rise.

My usually orderly morning routine was turned into a frenzy of confused kids, rushed ablutions and shouting. I simply left a bewildered Annie in her pyjamas and concentrated on getting Henry ready. Breakfast was a hurried and sloppy affair, and my drive down to the school was faster than I liked.

The mini-buses were already leaving as I approached Harbottle. One of the buses was well over into the wrong side of the road as he came around the bend towards me, and I was forced to swerve. I heard the scrape of rubber against stone as I scuffed the kerb at the entrance to the castle car park. Fortunately, that was the only noise. I obviously hadn’t damaged the wheel trim, but my shriek had alarmed the kids. I arrived at the school even more anxious but without any further mishaps.

Annie was very clingy and rather weepy when I lifted her from her car seat. My anxiety over our lateness and my nerves over the near miss had rubbed off on her. I had to carry her, while also chivvying a still yawning Henry into school. He was quite happy to go, but like the rest of us, very lethargic. Fortunately, Henry was looking forward to seeing James and he perked up the moment we saw James’s dad. Harry was already hurrying from the school gate when I arrived. He looked very smart in his shirt, tie and black trench coat.

‘Where’s James?’ Henry asked.

‘In the classroom, Henry,’ Harry told him. ‘He’s wondering where you are. He’ll be glad to see you.’

Henry dashed towards the school.

‘Morning, Harry,’ I said, stifling a yawn. ‘Did you enjoy yourselves on Saturday?’

‘Yes, thanks,’ Harry told me. ‘James is unhappy because we can’t go swimming next weekend; so is Al. So am I, actually.’ His green eyes sparkled happily. ‘Ginny and I had a wonderfully quiet night on Saturday when we got home. The kids were exhausted. We got them straight to bed and they were asleep within minutes. We all loved your barbecue, too. But like we said, we’re busy next Saturday. It’s the birthday of a very good friend of ours.’

‘I’m glad the kids enjoyed themselves; so did I,’ I said. ‘I think that swimming…’ I got no further. Harry had pulled out a shining—though rather battered—gold pocket-watch.

‘I’m really sorry, Jacqui, but I can’t stop to chat,’ he said. ‘I’ve got an important meeting this morning. Bye.’

I watched Harry stride from the school as he made a rapid exit. His long black coat was identical to the one Terry Boot had worn. It flapped and fluttered behind him in the wind; it almost looked as though he was wearing a cloak.

‘Not so friendly now, is he?’ said Mary as I watched Harry climb into his car and drive off.
‘He’s on his way to work, and he’s late,’ I said sharply. I followed Henry into the school. He’d managed to take his coat off and was attempting to hang it up. The moment I took it from him, he ran into the classroom to see James and I was once again forgotten.

As I walked back out to my car with Annie heavy in my arms, there were whispers from Mary and her friends, who were still gossiping by the gate.

‘Have you had an invitation to the Potters’ house yet?’ asked Amanda.

I shook my head, feeling a little deflated. We’d invited the Potters over, but they hadn’t returned the invitation. There was no reason why they should, of course; we’d simply been showing kindness to our new neighbours and “kindness is its own reward”, as my mother would say.

‘They visited you over the weekend, but they haven’t invited you to their house,’ said Mary with cynical sagacity as she sought out my doubts and prodded at them. ‘I still think there’s something peculiar about them.’ Her final words reinvigorated me.

‘There’s something funny about most of us,’ I told her firmly. ‘But I’m expecting to be invited to Drakeshaugh soon, and I may not be the only one to get an invitation. They are … a nice couple.’ I changed tack mid-sentence and cursed Mary’s baiting. She had needled me to the point where I’d almost mentioned the Potters’ housewarming party. It was in the planning stages, I reminded myself. It was a possibility, but they could change their minds. I couldn’t say anything, especially not to Mary. I contented myself with giving Mary and Amanda a smile which I hoped was both knowing and superior. As I yawned midway through it, I suspect that I simply looked foolish.

That evening, Ginny made no mention at all of the party; I didn’t ask. Instead, we simply admired the latest artwork our sons presented to us.

On the Tuesday morning, I missed Harry completely. I was, however, approached by Amanda, who asked me which swimming pool I used. At least, she began by asking about the pool, but she was soon discussing Harry’s physique. She told me that she had decided that swimming was good exercise. I agreed, and asked her about strokes and times. My questions weren’t difficult, but they were enough to prove to me that, apart from on holiday, she’d never been in a swimming pool since her school days. She told me that she intended to take her kids swimming the following Saturday. I told her that although Mike and I would be there, the Potters wouldn’t, and Amanda changed her mind instantly. She was annoyingly blatant about it.

While we were waiting to collect Henry and James, I told Ginny about my encounter with Amanda, concluding: ‘You’re still causing a stir. I mentioned our Saturday swim to lots of people last term, but no one was interested in swimming with me. No one was interested in me at all. They still aren’t,’ I finished ruefully.

‘Amanda isn’t interested in me, either. She’s only interested in Harry,’ said Ginny. ‘She probably wants to see him in his swimming trunks. If she knew anything at all about Harry, she’d back off; he hates hero-worship. He always has and he always will.’

Ginny looked up at me thoughtfully. ‘I think Amanda has surprised him; he’s never thought of himself as good-looking. He’s always simply assumed that it was only girls who know who he is who wanted to get closer to him.’

Ginny’s remarks puzzled me. ‘Is Harry famous for something?’ I asked. Ginny looked embarrassed for a moment, as though she’d said something she shouldn’t have. The sides of her mouth twitched; she burst out laughing and then hugged me. Her laugh was joyous and contagious and I found myself joining in, although I had no idea why we were laughing.
The other mums watched us curiously, but didn’t approach. Since Ginny’s outburst at Mary the previous week, the other mums had kept their distance. They nodded politely to Ginny and returned her greetings, but nothing more.

‘Oh, Jacqui! What a lovely question to ask. I’ll have to tell him, it will make his day.’ Ginny wiped tears from her eyes as she continued to chuckle. ‘The easy answer to that is no. Hardly anyone has heard of Harry Potter, but in his own little community, then yes, he’s very famous.’

‘His own little community?’ I asked.

‘Harry is—the Head of his Department, he’s sort of famous, to a few people,’ said Ginny.

I was still more than a little puzzled, but she shook her head and it was obvious that she would say no more. My imagination began to run wild. I’d seen his scars. He had obviously led a dangerous life when he was younger. When he was younger? I was struck by the strangeness of that thought; he was no more than thirty.

Perhaps he was a James Bond type, promoted after being a field agent. But, at least to me, he didn’t seem to be a cool, super, secret agent. I found myself comparing him to a rather different fictional character. To me, he seemed more like a Peter Wimsey; a troubled war veteran who’d found his Harriet.

The following morning, I saw Harry, but only briefly. He seemed to be in a constant rush. Nevertheless, he grinned when he saw me.

‘Ginny told me what you said, Jacqui,’ he said, his eyes creased in mirth. ‘Thanks. I like to think that I’m no one important, nothing special. I’m just another dad taking his son to school. That’s right, isn’t it, James?’

‘Yes, Daddy,’ said James, nodding wisely.

On the Wednesday afternoon, Ginny quietly asked me to identify the other school gate mothers, and to match them up to their kids. Curious, I asked why.

‘It’s for the housewarming party,’ Ginny said as she walked back to the car with me. ‘We can’t invite everyone, so we’ve spoken to James. We’re going to invite those kids in his class he’s friendly with, and their parents, to our housewarming.’

My face must have betrayed my hopefulness, because Ginny smiled at me.

‘Yes, Jacqui, that puts you at the very top of the list,’ she said. ‘At least, it puts Henry there, so we have to invite the rest of you, whether we want to or not.’

‘I’m joking,’ she added hastily, ‘Of course you’re all invited.’ I wondered if my face had also given away my insecurity. ‘You’ve been really kind to us, Jacqui. You’ve made us feel welcome,’ Ginny assured me.

Ginny whispered nine names to me. Amanda was on the list; although her daughter was in year four, her youngest son, Daniel, wasn’t much older than Henry. Mary Saville wasn’t, but that was hardly surprising as Mary’s daughter, Helen, would soon be nine and would be going to middle school next year.

‘We wondered about asking Mary, too,’ Ginny said. ‘Harry thinks we should invite her. What do you think?’
I shrugged uncertainly; I didn’t really want to answer, but Ginny stared up at me, her big brown eyes demanding that I give an opinion. I decided to be honest.

‘I’ve never been much good at school gate politics, Ginny,’ I admitted. ‘Mary is Queen Bee here. If you don’t invite her, you’ll annoy her. But if you do invite her, there’s no guarantee that she’ll be any more pleasant to you afterwards. You may simply give her more ammunition if she doesn’t like the colour of your bathroom or…’ I finished with a shrug.

‘Thanks, Jacqui. That’s what I thought, too. I’ll discuss it with Harry,’ Ginny said. ‘See you tomorrow. C’mon, kids.’ She waved farewell and began walking up the road to Drakeshaugh. I watched her go. Her bright red hair was whipping in the autumnal wind as she pushed the buggy containing Al and Lily up the hill, with James chattering happily at her side.

As the week progressed Amanda’s hints that she’d like an invitation to Drakeshaugh had become as subtle as the average four-year-old’s. Even Mary, who had changed tactics and was now trying to be pleasant to Ginny, was becoming embarrassed by Amanda’s behaviour.

I was certain that Mary’s change had come about because James had told everyone that there was going to be a party at Drakeshaugh. Mary was cross-examining me about it when Ginny arrived. I’d been explaining that James was probably talking about a birthday party for an old friend of the Potters.

‘My sister-in-law, Hermione, is thirty on Saturday,’ said Ginny, bringing the conversation to a close. As we left, she winked at me. ‘I’ll be handing out the housewarming party invitations tomorrow,’ she whispered.

On the Friday afternoon, Ginny was already at the school gates when I arrived. She was talking to a beaming Amanda and an astonished-looking Mary, both of whom were clutching thick parchment envelopes. It was obvious that Harry’s opinion had won out.

‘Hello, Jacqui,’ Ginny said. She rifled through a small stack of envelopes and handed one to me. ‘Our housewarming party will be one week from tomorrow, on the twenty-sixth. I do hope that you, Mike and the kids can come. We’re still planning on going swimming with you beforehand. I was just explaining to Amanda and Mary that, unfortunately, we can’t invite everyone … There’s Judith; excuse me.’

With that Ginny strode across to hand an invitation to Dominic Hutton’s mother. Dominic was the best friend of Amanda’s son, Daniel; they sat at the next table to Henry and James and the four boys were all becoming close.

I opened the envelope and looked at the neatly hand written card. It was the same colour as the envelope, thick and of good quality. I felt it carefully, and considered sniffling it. I only just stopped myself. I’d check it when I got home, but it seemed to me that the envelope and invitation weren’t merely parchment-coloured paper; they were real parchment. I read the invitation:

Harry, Ginny, James, Albus and Lily now live at:
Drakeshaugh, Harbottle, Coquetdale, Northumberland.

We’d like to invite:
Jacqui, Mike, Henry and Annie
to join us at 5:00pm on Saturday 26th September 2009
as we welcome new neighbours, old friends and family, to our new home.

No gifts, please.
We look forward to seeing you.
‘Ginny says they are expecting over a hundred people!’ said Amanda excitedly. ‘I asked if she’d need help with the catering, but she said that everything was organised. She said that her mother and her sisters-in-law would be helping with the food.’ Amanda paused. ‘A hundred people,’ she repeated.

‘So, they aren’t getting caterers in,’ observed Mary acidly. ‘They’re probably trying to do it on the cheap.’

‘This isn’t cheap,’ I said, waving the invitation. ‘I think that it’s real parchment.’

Mary glared at me, but I didn’t care, and I didn’t shut up.

‘Perhaps they enjoy home-baking,’ I said forcefully. ‘I’m sure that Ginny knows what she’s doing. I know that they’re inviting ten or eleven families from here. That’s easily forty people if everyone turns up. And I’m sure they will, because we’re all curious about them.’

Mary simply sniffed disdainfully, trying to pretending that she was above such things.

‘Ginny has five older brothers,’ I continued. ‘I don’t know if they are all married, but if they are and they all have kids, that could easily be another forty.’ I said. I tried to remember what Ginny’s mum had said. ‘Ginny’s mum has at least a dozen grandchildren,’ I added.

I stopped and thought about that. The logistics of a family meal at Ginny’s mum’s house was mind-boggling.

‘She’s from a big family,’ I said. ‘They’re probably used to all mucking in together.’

Mary simply muttered something under her breath.

Ginny was still handing out the invitations when the kids came bouncing out. A couple of the invitations were going to children who were on the mini-buses and whose parents I didn’t know, farming folk from the top of the dale, probably. Ginny asked James to identify the children; they were the two girls who shared a table with Henry and him.

My conversation with Amanda and Mary was interrupted by Henry’s arrival. James and Daniel were both with him. The boys were chattering excitedly about the party. Nine-year-old Helen Saville stood next to her mother and looked disdainfully down on the young boys. My conversation with Henry was interrupted by Annie, who pulled at the hem of my skirt and announced, ‘Wanna wee-wee, Mummy!’

‘Can you wait until we get home, Annie?’ I asked. As I looked at her, I knew the answer. She was hopping from one leg to another in an urgent dance.

I gave Ginny a wave, shouted my thanks for the invitation and hustled Henry and Annie back through the schoolyard and into the cloakroom.

‘See yer on Sunday, James,’ Henry shouted.

‘Yeah, bye, Henry,’ James shouted back.

‘Annie’s desperate, sorry,’ I told Henry’s teacher, Mrs Wilson, as I escorted Annie into the girl’s toilet. She smiled and nodded.
'What are you doing this weekend, Henry?' I heard Mrs Wilson ask as the door closed.

Henry was still talking to Mrs Wilson when I returned with a much more relaxed and comfortable Annie.

‘Henry tells me that you’re visiting the Potters this weekend,’ Mrs Wilson said.

‘That’s next weekend, Henry,’ I corrected my son.

Henry shook his head forcefully. ‘‘Tisn’t!’ he told me. I decided not to argue.

The yard was deserted when we left the school. Mine was the only car outside and I was still busy strapping Henry into his car seat when Mrs Wilson drove past, waving.

Saturday’s trip to the pool was certainly not as successful as the previous Saturday had been. Henry was moody and nowhere near as cooperative with my teaching. He wanted me to promise that James would be with us the following weekend, and he had a tantrum when I couldn’t. Mike was at his dopiest, child-friendly best, but even he couldn’t make Henry forget about his friend.

As we got changed, Henry was still moody. Mike came up with a solution: rather than go straight home, we would take the kids to the coast. It worked; the prospect of a trip to the seaside diverted Henry and brought him out of his mood.

We had a pleasant, if rather windswept late afternoon on the beach at Druridge Bay. The kids and their dad played in the dunes, kicked a football around the beach and got wet when the tide crept up on them. I sat on a folding chair and failed to read “Five Red Herrings” because of the numerous interruptions from my family.

We left late and decided that we would stop for a pub meal at the Anglers Arms on the way home. When we arrived at the pub, Mike persuaded me to drive the last part of the journey, so he could have a couple of beers with his meal. I foolishly agreed.

We all ate too much. It’s difficult not to when the portions are so big. As we drove the last leg, Annie announced that she was thirsty, so Mike topped up her bottle with blackcurrant juice.

‘Well, that’s the last of it, Annie,’ Mike told her.

‘What?’ I said. ‘I filled a two litre bottle. You haven’t let her drink it all?’

‘What else was it for?’ Mike asked. ‘It’s thirsty work playing on the beach, isn’t it, little Annabel May?’

Annie simply let out a loud burp. That’s when I should have realised, but I didn’t. She fell asleep in the car and didn’t really wake up. Her head was rolling when I got her ready for bed and she was soundly asleep by the time I’d finished tucking her in.

When Mike and I went to bed a few hours later, he closed his eyes and instantly began to snore. Too much beer does that. It took me a couple of hours and a few hefty kicks before he rolled onto his side and fell silent. I was finally able to get some sleep.

Unfortunately, it didn’t last. I had a very early wake-up call at a little after three o’clock; Annie had been sick. Turkey dinosaurs and chips might not have been too bad, but two litres of blackcurrant juice had to go somewhere too. Her vomit was a colour I hoped to never see again. Her sheets and nightdress were purple, and after three pints of bitter, Mike was bleary eyed and barely capable. He tried to help me, but he was simply getting in the way, so after I’d cleaned and changed Annie I
sent him into our bed with her. By the time I’d stripped her bed, cleaned and disinfected the mattress, it was almost four o’clock.

I crept back alongside my husband and daughter and fell instantly asleep. The next thing I knew, it was after ten and Mike was waking me with a tray of coffee, hot buttered toast and marmalade.

‘Morning, sleepyhead,’ he said cheerfully. He’d brought himself a cup of tea, too. When I sat up he rearranged the pillows behind my back for me and plonked himself beside me.

‘The kids are sitting in front of the telly, watching Timmy Time,’ he told me. ‘Do you want to take Henry down to the Potters’ this afternoon, or do you want me to do it?’

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and sipped some more coffee.

‘The Potters’ party is next Saturday, Mike,’ I said. ‘The genuine calfskin parchment invitation is on the mantelpiece, remember.’

‘Yeah, but Henry says that James invited him round to play this afternoon,’ Mike said.

‘Ginny didn’t mention anything,’ I told him. ‘So that probably means she doesn’t know. This will be something Henry and James have dreamed up between them.’

‘There’s an easy way to find out,’ Mike said. ‘Just phone them up and ask.’

That was when I realised that I couldn’t contact the Potters. I didn’t have a phone number for them. There were no wires leading to Drakeshaugh from the telegraph poles which snaked up the valley. They obviously didn’t have a land line. I wondered whether they had mobile phones. They must have, I decided, because last week Ginny had contacted both Harry and her bank. Reception can be a little patchy in the dale, but I decided that I’d ask Ginny for her phone number; it would be handy if we could keep in touch.

‘I can’t,’ I said. ‘I don’t have their number, and they don’t have ours.’

I cross-examined Hanry carefully, but he stuck to his story. James was expecting him. James had invited him. He was adamant about that and would not be moved. So, early on Sunday afternoon, I drove Henry down to Drakeshaugh.

Before I set off, I gave Henry a stern talking to. I told him that if the Potters weren’t expecting him, then we’d be coming straight home and he’d be in trouble. His reaction cheered me up; it was one of annoyance, and absolute certainty, he knew that he’d been invited.

When I pulled into the gravel courtyard, there was another car parked there, a blue Mini. The Potters had visitors. I could hear voices coming from behind the house. Immediately worried, I unstrapped Henry. As I took his hand, led him to the kitchen door and knocked, I prepared my excuses.

To my surprise, the door was opened by a pretty little girl of about ten. Her blonde hair was almost waist-length and she wore a pretty, calf-length party dress which perfectly matched her bright blue eyes.

‘Oh,’ she said, sounding disappointed. She turned away from us and shouted, ‘Maman, ce n’est pas Oncle Charlie! C’est une dame Moldue avec un petit garçon mais je ne les connais pas!’

My French is so rusty it has almost corroded away entirely. I picked up “Mum, it isn’t Uncle Charlie” and something about not knowing us. But “une dame Moldue?”
The girl’s outburst in French was followed by the sound of several confused voices from inside the house.

‘What you say?’ Henry asked, looking up at the girl. ‘Can’t you talk proper?’

‘Henry!’ I scolded him sharply.

Before the girl could answer a tall blonde woman appeared in the doorway. The woman was obviously the girl’s mother. She was—I estimated—about my age, but she was slim, elegant and beautiful. Her long, loose hair was as straight and fair as her daughter’s. She somehow managed to look poised and chic despite the fact that she was wearing a rather shabby floral apron over her stylish dress. She looked at me, then down at Henry and she smiled.

‘Hello, I am Fleur Weasley and zis is my daughter Victoire,’ she began. She smiled fondly down at the girl. ‘I apologise for her lapse into French. You are not who she was expecting to see, and she believes that, by speaking French, she is keeping what she says secret.’ She turned to her daughter and her expression became serious. ‘It is very impolite, Victoire; you must use English.’

The girl, Victoire, nodded, but she was barely paying attention to her mother. She was staring at me with probing curiosity. I was certain that my clothing—jeans and an old cardigan—did not meet her approval.

‘We were expecting my bruzzer-in-law, Charlie,’ the woman added. Her accent was definitely French, but the faint hint of a West Country accent in her English turned her words into a melodic drawl.

‘I’m interrupting,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry. You’re obviously having a family get-together. I’m Jacqui Charlton; this is my son Henry. He’s James’s friend from school. He insisted that James was expecting him this afternoon. Henry was obviously making it up. I’m sorry to have bothered you. Please apologise to Ginny for me.’ I turned to leave.

‘I wasn’t making it up, Mummy!’ Henry insisted. His lower lip was trembling as he fought back his tears. ‘Where’s James? He said I could come and play with him on Sunday. An’ it’s Sunday. He promised!’

‘I really do not know where James is, Henri,’ the woman said. She used the French version of his name. ‘He is outside in the woods somewhere.’ She then turned to me and added, ‘I am very pleased to meet you, Jacqui. Ginny has told us all about you.’

As if on cue, Ginny’s head appeared around the door. She was trying to hide her annoyance at my unannounced arrival behind a puzzled expression, but she wasn’t trying hard enough and I sensed her exasperation.

‘Hello, Ginny.’ I began, once again, to embarrassedly blurt out a rapid apology. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t realise that you were having a family gathering. Henry told me that James had invited him down here for the afternoon. I would have phoned to check, but I don’t have your number. I’m really sorry. We’ll just leave.’

‘James said I could come an’ play on his rope swing! Cos we dint go swimbling ‘esterday,’
insisted Henry stubbornly. Ginny’s expression softened as she stared down at an unrepentant and wet-eyed Henry.

‘You and James are very much alike, Henry,’ she said, sighing. She hunkered down and looked into Henry’s face. ‘James should not have invited you without asking me first, Henry, and he did not tell me about asking you to come here, so I’m a little bit cross with him. I suppose you can go and see him for a few minutes. James, and Al and Lily are with their cousins. They are playing at the swing, next to the stream. Victoire knows where they are, so she can take you. But you can’t stay long, Henry; I’m sorry.’

‘There’s no need, Ginny, we’ll just go…’ I began.

‘It’s fine, Jacqui,’ Ginny assured me. ‘It’s not your fault. Henry certainly thinks that he’s been invited. I’ll speak to James later, to find out what, exactly, he said. Victoire, would you show Henry where the other kids are playing, please?’

Victoire looked up at her mother, who nodded.

‘Yes, Aunt Ginny,’ Victoire said in perfect English. ‘Follow me, Henry.’

She trotted off obediently, leading Henry around the side of the house.

‘Audrey’s keeping an eye on the sauce for you, Fleur,’ Ginny said. Fleur sucked in a worried breath.

‘Pardon me,’ said Fleur. The dazzling smile she gave me as she excused herself allowed her to display a set of teeth which were whiter and more even than any toothpaste advertisement. She turned and floated gracefully back toward the kitchen, looking so glamorously unreal that I almost expected to hear a musical accompaniment.

Her performance seemed a little redundant to me, after all there were no men to impress. I wondered what Mike would make of her.

‘That was Fleur, my brother, Bill’s wife,’ said Ginny. She was grinning; she’d been watching me as I watched Fleur. ‘You get used to her, eventually,’ she added.

‘How many decades does it take?’ I asked.

Ginny chuckled. ‘Come inside for a few minutes, Jacqui; we’ve just made a pot of coffee. You’ve met Fleur. Now that you’re here, you might as well meet the family.’

I tried to protest, but Ginny insisted.

‘You’ll meet them all next weekend, and forewarned is forearmed, as they say. If you have a coffee with us, James and Henry will have a little time together before you have to leave. I’ll wait until after you’ve gone before I give James a piece of my mind,’ she said. ‘You’re right, Jacqui; this is a family party, and James had no right to ask anyone here, not even his new best friend. I wanted to have my family around for a meal, to show them the house before the housewarming party.’

‘I’m so sorry, Ginny,’ I said again. ‘But please don’t put all of the blame on James. I’m sure Henry played a part; he insisted on coming. I should have said no. I would have, but he was adamant, and to be fair to him, Henry did say something to me on Friday outside school. I wasn’t paying any attention because Annie was desperate for the loo and you were busy with the invitations and…’
‘It’s fine, Jacqui, don’t worry,’ Ginny declared. ‘It certainly sounds like something those two would cook up between themselves.’

I was grateful for her interruption; Mike says I talk rubbish when I panic and sometimes I think he’s right. I took a deep breath and collected my thoughts.

‘I would have phoned,’ I repeated. ‘But I don’t have a number for you.’

‘That’s easily rectified,’ said Ginny. ‘Come in and I’ll write my telephone number down for you.’

I followed her into the kitchen where five women were drinking coffee and gossiping. All conversation stopped when I entered. They stared at me, and I stared back.

Fleur had returned to the stove, where she was casting a careful eye over a large pot. Ginny’s mum, who was also at the stove, waved cheerily at me and smiled.

‘Hello, dear. The blackberries are nice and ripe now, aren’t they?’ Molly Weasley asked.

I nodded rather foolishly and wondered what on earth she was talking about. Then I remembered that she’d been discussing jam-making with me when I’d seen her more than a week earlier.

‘Yes,’ I said, grateful to have a topic of conversation. ‘How are the apples doing?’

‘Starting to fall, dear.’ Molly smiled. ‘It looks like Ginny and Harry will have a good crop.’

‘Everyone, this is Jacqui Charlton,’ said Ginny, cutting across her mother, who was obviously preparing for a long conversation about jam making. ‘Her son, Henry, goes to school with James, and it seems that we can’t keep them apart.’

I carefully examined the three women I hadn’t seen before.

An earnest-looking long-nosed woman sat at the kitchen table. Her red-brown hair was long, straight and tied into a ponytail; she wore wire-rimmed spectacles not unlike Harry’s. The woman’s very long dress was decidedly unfashionable, and she looked at me curiously. It was almost as if I were a creature from another planet.

At least they aren’t all like Fleur, I thought gratefully.

Standing immediately behind the bespectacled woman was a slender woman of average height whose brown hair was a wild mane. She wore black trousers, a white blouse, a bright purple cardigan and an expression of studious curiosity.

The third stranger was tall, elegant and black. The woman had ornately braided hair, and wore a brightly patterned dress and lots of bangles. She was perching on the edge of the kitchen table idly swinging a leg.

‘You know Mum, and you’ve just met Fleur,’ Ginny said. ‘These are the other Weasley wives, my sisters-in-law.’

‘Audrey…’

The bespectacled woman nodded a greeting and whispered an almost inaudible. ‘Hello.’

‘Angelina…’

‘Hello, Jacqui.’ The black woman stood, strode over and shook my hand firmly. ‘Welcome to the madhouse. We’re all hiding in the kitchen, grabbing a bit of peace and quiet while we can. We’ve
told the menfolk that we’re busy, but as we’ve left them in charge of the kids, it’s simply a matter of time before there’s a disaster.’

‘And finally, Hermione, whose birthday we celebrated yesterday,’ concluded Ginny.

The brown haired woman smiled. She, too, came over and shook my hand. When she moved, I noticed the huge cake on the workbench behind her. It was a massive rectangular slab and it had been iced to look like a book. Someone had dropped a tea towel over the top of the title and the spine. All I could read were the words “A History – Happy 30th Birthday Hermione”.

‘Hello, Jacqui,’ said Hermione. ‘Ginny has told us all about you and Henry.’

‘Happy thirtieth birthday for yesterday, Hermione,’ I said. ‘I think I’ve met your children, Rose and Hugo. Mrs—Molly—was looking after them, er … the last time I arrived unannounced.’ I felt myself blushing and there was another awkward silence.

Would you like a coffee, Jacqui?’ Ginny asked.

‘Yes, please,’ I said, feeling embarrassed and rather overwhelmed.

Ginny was pouring me a mug of coffee when the kitchen door burst open and a male voice said: ‘I’m in paradise. A room full of beautiful ladies. But where’s my little princess?’

I turned to the door and saw a powerfully built man in his late thirties. He wore a green t-shirt and faded blue jeans, his red hair was long and untidy, and he had the hands and muscles of a manual worker.

‘Victoire is outside, Charlie,’ said Fleur, while the other women chorused their hellos.

Charlie was striding purposefully around the table. He grabbed Audrey by the shoulders and kissed her full on the lips. My initial assumption was that she was his wife, but from her blushing, squealing reaction, it seemed not.

‘Good to see you, Audrey,’ he said. He dropped her, turned and moved determinedly toward Angelina, who threw open her arms and rushed to meet him. She flung her arms around him and sighed dramatically, collapsing into him.

‘Oh, Charles, darling Charles, George is such a bore; let’s run away together,’ she said. Angelina was a couple of inches taller than he was, and it was his turn to look startled until she burst out laughing. ‘Good to see you, Charlie; Ginny was worried that you wouldn’t make it,’ Angelina said as Molly Weasley shook her head at them. They hugged and kissed briefly.

Charlie released her and moved on to Hermione. ‘Happy birthday, Hermione,’ he said, there was an assessing look between them and then he leaned forward and she politely pecked his cheek.

‘Thanks, Charlie,’ she said as he handed her a carefully wrapped present. ‘I’ll open this later.’ She glanced meaningfully at me as she spoke.

Charlie strode rapidly toward me and I found myself being given a breathtaking hug.

‘Hello, lovely lady who I don’t know,’ said Charlie. ‘Do you work with…?’

‘Jacqui lives just up the valley, Charlie,’ Ginny interrupted. ‘Her son goes to school with James.’

‘Ah,’ said Charlie. He released me and re-examined me, an expression of curiosity and uncertainty
furrowed over his forehead.

While I was puzzling over the significance of the emphasis Ginny had used, and Charlie’s reaction to it, he said, ‘Hello, Jacqui, I’m Charlie, the prodigal Weasley.’ He winked at me and stepped past me to Fleur.

‘Ma belle, Fleur,’ he began.

‘You cannot speak French, Charlie; do not try,’ she interrupted him and then she bent forward, and lightly kissed his lips.

‘Nice place, little sister!’ he said. Ginny hugged and kissed him.

‘Thanks, Charlie, I’m glad you could make it,’ Ginny told him.

‘Good afternoon, Mother. You look more radiant every day,’ he finished. He grabbed Molly’s hand, bowed and kissed it.

Molly Weasley smiled indulgently at him, pulled him into a hug and then stepped back and examined him carefully.

‘Your hair needs cutting, Charlie,’ she announced.

‘If you cut it, I’ll just regrow it, Mum,’ he said. ‘Now, where’s my goddaughter?’

‘Playing in the stream with the other kids, I expect,’ said Ginny.

‘What about my brothers, and that speccy kid you married?’ Charlie asked.

‘I’ve just told you, Charlie. The kids are all playing in the stream,’ said Ginny.

‘Burn,’ I corrected her without thinking. Everyone fell silent and looked at me, all except Charlie, who for some reason examined his arms.

I was about to explain, but Ginny suddenly understood. ‘The stream is called Drakestone Burn,’ she stopped, allowing me to speak.

‘That was rude of me, sorry, Ginny. But it’s always been the burn, not the stream. I was raised between Spithope Burn and Hawks Burn. It’s a stupid thing to be picky about, but to me, it’s the burn. I’m interrupting, and you can call it what you like. I’ll shut up, sorry,’ I said, realising that I was probably making a fool of myself.

‘You need to learn the language, Ginny,’ said Angelina mischievously. ‘After all, you decided to move north.’

‘There’s nowt wrong with the north, Angelina,’ Audrey said firmly, surprising the others and revealing a Yorkshire accent I hadn’t picked up, because she’d only said one word.

‘You tell them, Audrey,’ Charlie grinned. ‘Perce would be proud of you!’

Audrey blushed, but I smiled gratefully at her.

‘There isn’t,’ I agreed. The others were laughing and I didn’t want to get into a silly north/south argument, so I hastily changed the subject. ‘How many kids is my Henry meeting? Are any of them yours, Audrey?’ I asked.
'There are…’ Audrey hesitated as she calculated.

‘Twelve,’ Hermione interrupted. ‘Nine Weasleys and three Potters. You’ve already met my two, Rose and Hugo, and so has your daughter, Annie.’

‘Mine are Molly and Lucy,’ said Audrey.

‘I’m guilty of Fred and Roxanne, but I plead extenuating circumstances,’ said Angelina, smiling.

‘Victoire, Dominique and Louis are my petit angels,’ added Fleur, who was now adding a large quantity of white wine to whatever was in the pot on the stove.

Ginny arrived at my side and handed me the mug of coffee she’d poured just before Charlie arrived. He made a hopeful face.

‘Help yourself, Charlie, it’s in the cafetière,’ Ginny told him.

‘Do you get together often?’ I asked Ginny. ‘A dozen kids and a similar number of adults, it’s no wonder you’ve got such a large kitchen table.’

I looked at the table and blinked. It seemed to be even bigger than I remembered. I was about to make a comment, but before I could speak, Hermione pounced on me.

‘School,’ she said forcefully. ‘Can I ask you a few questions about school, Jacqui? I went to school in Hampshire, and it seems to be different up here.’

Hermione was inquisitive and determined, and she seemed to retain everything I told her. I was left puzzled by some of her questions, but that’s because I wasn’t paying her as much attention as I should have been. On the other side of the table, Charlie was asking Ginny about Greyback.

I tried to listen to both conversations but failed. Ginny said something about Greyback having nothing to do with it, and that Harry now believed that it was a pure blood plot. At least, I thought that’s what she said. I glanced across at Ginny and Charlie, but I could hear no more; it was as if something was interfering with my hearing.

I gave up and returned my attention to Hermione. She wanted to know everything: class sizes, mixed age classes and what the boys were being taught. She seemed to know a lot more about the expected achievement levels at Key Stage One than I did, and she was a little surprised when I told her that I hadn’t thought about those tests at all.

‘Henry isn’t even five, Hermione; the tests are more than two years away,’ I told her. ‘I’m certainly not going to worry him about them now.’

Both Angelina and Ginny thought my remarks were funny but I from her expression, I suspected that I’d offended Hermione. I was about to apologise, but Ginny took my empty cup from my hand and asked, ‘Shall we go down to the burn and see the kids, Jacqui?’

Despite the teasing emphasis she used, I picked up the undercurrent of a polite hint in her words.

‘It’s time Henry and I were leaving,’ I said. I glanced at my watch; I’d already been at Drakeshaugh for more than half an hour.

‘Goodbye, everyone; I expect I’ll meet you all again next week,’ I said. ‘Oh, I almost forgot, Ginny, you mentioned a phone number.’
'I’ll do it now,’ Ginny said. She produced a notepad and a pencil from a kitchen drawer and scribbled something on it. I followed her from Drakeshaugh to a round of farewells and good wishes. Everyone was polite, but there was no doubt that they were glad to see me go. Charlie followed us out.

‘I’ll come with you,’ said Charlie. ‘I haven’t seen my princess yet.’

‘I hope that Hermione didn’t bore you,’ said Ginny as we walked across the yard and into the trees. ‘She can be a little intense sometimes, especially about education.’ She handed me the square of paper and I read the number.

\textit{Ginny: 44669 768837}

‘That’s an unusual phone number,’ I said. ‘Why doesn’t it start with a zero? If it’s a mobile number, shouldn’t it be oh-seven-something?’

Ginny simply shrugged.

‘The number was issued by Harry’s office; you’d better ask him,’ she said. ‘And please, whatever you do, do not give my telephone number to anyone else.’

We walked around the side of the house and towards the noise of children playing. A few stepping stones were set into the lawn; they led to a gap in the bushes which seemed to surround the entire wood. We entered the trees and the environment changed almost immediately.

The branches were swaying in the wind, casting dancing shadows across the rough and rather muddy track. The leaves were turning, and some were already blowing from the trees. We followed the track as it snaked its way through the woods. Charlie was keeping a couple of paces behind us. I had to turn and check, because he was moving surprisingly quietly.

‘I won’t call unannounced again, Ginny.’ I promised. ‘The next time Henry tells me he’s invited I’ll phone up and check.’

‘I’ll do the same,’ Ginny assured me. ‘You can give me your number at school tomorrow. I won’t remember it now.’

‘I’ve got pen and paper in the car,’ I said. ‘I’ll write it down for you before we leave.’

When we walked into the large clearing, my screaming son and an equally loud James were both dangling from the rope swing in a tangle of limbs. The rope was hanging from the stout branch of a horse chestnut tree, and the kids were being well supervised by half-a-dozen men.

I was struck by the astonishing number of redheads. More than half of the children and every adult male other than Harry had red hair, although some had more hair than others.

‘Here’s your mum, Henry,’ I heard Harry say. ‘It must be time for you to leave.’

‘Nooo…’ Henry wailed.

‘Mummy, no,’ James added his voice.

‘You can have a few minutes while I introduce Henry’s mum to your uncles,’ Ginny said.

‘Uncle Charlie,’ Victoire squealed excitedly as Charlie entered the clearing behind us. She left the others and ran into Charlie’s arms.
'Princess Victoire,’ he shouted, swinging her around and making her scream in delight.

The other children, apart from James and Henry, ran screaming in Victoire’s wake and Charlie was engulfed in a sea of small people, all of whom seemed to be demanding sweets and presents and, for some reason, galleons. As I turned my attention to the adults, I wondered if Charlie was a seaman.

Ginny’s brothers were a disparate bunch. Charlie was the shortest. The tallest, and most gangling, was involved in an arm-wavingly earnest discussion with Harry. Harry and the tall man were left to supervise James and Henry, who were still on the rope swing, while the other four moved to greet us.

As they strode towards me, I tried to determine which man belonged to which wife. I also tried not to stare at two of them: the one with the scarred face, and the one with the missing ear.

One of the others was easy; he was obviously Ginny’s dad. He was a thin, bespectacled and almost bald man, with only a fine fringe of red hair at the sides and back. He seemed to be very excited at the prospect of meeting me. Next to him was another balding and bespectacled man. I was struck by the resemblance between the younger man and his father. It seemed inconceivable that the younger balding man was Fleur’s husband, and it was almost as unlikely that he was Angelina’s. Hermione’s, I wondered?

‘Jacqui, this is my dad, Arthur Weasley,’ Ginny began.

‘It’s a pleasure to meet you, a real pleasure.’ Ginny’s dad beamed and shook my hand enthusiastically. ‘Did you drive here? In a motor car? With an engine?’

‘Er, yes,’ I stammered.

‘How exciting!’ he said. He looked so animated that I wondered if there was something wrong with him.

‘Dad,’ said Ginny warningly. ‘And this is Percy…’

‘Audrey’s husband,’ I said. I should have guessed from Percy’s rather odd clothing. ‘Hello Percy.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Jacqui.’ Percy shook my hand rather nervously.

‘My turn, Perce,’ the one-eared man said as he elbowed Percy aside. ‘Did you guess about Audrey, or were you told? I’m George; do you know who my missus is?’ George was the shortest of the brothers, apart from Charlie. This was the creator of the cleaning towel. He didn’t look like an inventor. He shook my hand warmly; I tried to concentrate on his cheery smile and ignore his missing ear, which kept drawing my eye. It wasn’t easy, but he seemed to be a jolly type of man, so I risked teasing him.

‘You’re married to Angelina, who thinks you’re boring and wants to run away with Charlie,’ I told him. He looked at me in stunned surprise for a second, and then he burst out laughing.

‘You had me there for a minute,’ he said. ‘I like you, Jacqui!’ He looked as though he meant it, too. ‘Charlie,’ George called. ‘Have you been trying to snog my missus again?’ He patted my shoulder, chuckled and strode over to Charlie, leaving me facing the tall, scar-faced man.

‘I’m Bill Weasley,’ he said. ‘James and your son certainly seem to have hit it off, don’t they? They remind me a bit of Ron and Harry, sticking together like glue, through thick and thin.’
I found him difficult to talk to and I didn’t know where to look. It was difficult not to stare at Bill’s scars; they reminded me of the claw marks on Harry’s chest. I tried to concentrate on the other side of his face and realised what a good-looking man he’d once been.

‘Ron?’ I asked.

‘That’s me, Ron Weasley,’ the final brother said as he shook my hand. ‘Except Harry and me were eleven when we first met, not four, Bill.’

Harry stood alongside him, holding both a surly James and a gloomy Henry by the hand. I looked at both Bill and Ron curiously. They were, I estimated, the youngest and oldest of Ginny’s brothers. Uncle Ron was Rose’s daddy, I remembered, so Bill must be Fleur’s husband.

‘It’s time to go, Henry,’ I told my son. He looked unhappy about it, but I caught his eye and glanced towards Harry and Ginny. Thankfully, for once, he caught my hint.

‘Thank you for lettin’ us stay and play, Mr an’ Mrs Potter,’ he said.

‘There’s only one of you, Henry. It’s me, not us,’ I corrected.

Henry shrugged.

‘You’re welcome, Henry,’ said Harry.

‘I’ll walk you back to your car, Jacqui, and get that phone number from you,’ said Ginny.

‘And it’s time you lot were getting inside; you need to get washed before dinner,’ said Harry.

Henry and I were followed back into the yard by the crowd of kids and dads, and everyone’s Uncle Charlie. I scribbled down our phone number for Ginny, thanked her and her family and drove out of the yard. I was halfway home when I realised that the blue Mini was the only other car in the yard, apart from Harry’s. They could not have all arrived in the Mini. How on earth had they all got there? I pondered the answer to that question all the way home, barely listening to Henry’s excited chattering. Harry could have collected them, I supposed, but Charlie arrived after me. How?
That evening, over Sunday dinner, Mike and I tried to discuss my latest visit to the Potters’ house. I wasn’t able to tell him much because Henry insisted on talking about the rope swing, and the woods, and the kids, and what fun he’d had. He loudly and enthusiastically confirmed the sheer size of Ginny’s family.

‘Fred ‘n Dominic is funny, ‘n Molly ‘n Victor is bossy; the others is all right,’ he said, firmly announcing his assessment of the kids. I thought back to the names I’d been told in the Drakeshaugh kitchen. Fred belonged to Angelina and George; Molly was Audrey’s, but the others? I racked my brains and smiled when I realised.

‘Victor?’ I asked Henry. I was certain that I knew who “Victor” was; I was fairly certain about “Dominic”, too.

‘The big girl,’ he told me. I smiled at Henry. Mike looked at me quizzically.

‘It’s Victoire, not Victor, and I think that Dominic is probably her sister, Dominique,’ I said. ‘They are French names, Henry; their mother is French.’

Henry shrugged dismissively; however, it was obvious that the information had piqued Mike’s interest. He gave me a curious look.

‘Their “Maman” is tall, blonde, and called Fleur.’ I answered my husband’s unspoken question.

‘Va-va-voom?’ he asked, raising his eyebrows.

‘Trés chic, and with a couple of extra va-va’s,’ I told him. He burst out laughing. I spent most of the meal trying, with Henry’s “help”, to tell him my impressions of Ginny’s family.

‘And Harry has no one?’ Mike asked when we’d finished.

‘No,’ I confirmed. ‘No parents, no brothers, no sisters. There’s a cousin, I think, but Harry is definitely outnumbered by Ginny’s lot. I think he originally met Ginny through her brother, Ron.’

We continued to chat after dinner, but we had to stop when the kids’ bedtime approached. While I bathed them, Mike tackled the kitchen. Once the kids had each been told a story and were tucked up and settled, I returned to the living room. Mike had been watching a football match, but he switched it off when I collapsed onto the sofa.

‘Another good weekend,’ he said.

‘Good? Purple vomit! And I gatecrashed a private family party at the Potters,’ I told him. He simply laughed.

‘That’s what I said, another good weekend,’ he repeated smugly. ‘Admit it, Jacqui; things are a lot livelier around here than they were before the Potters arrived. And you like it.’

‘I suppose I do, at least, most of it. But not the purple vomit,’ I told him. ‘I still haven’t forgiven you for giving Annie all that juice.’
‘What you need, my darling, is a drink,’ he said. He strolled through into the dining room and returned with the bottle of wine, a Sauvignon Blanc, which we’d opened with our roast chicken dinner. The bottle was still almost half full. Mike poured me an extremely generous glass and sat back in his armchair before pouring the remainder into his glass.

As we drank, I told him about Charlie’s arrival, and the mysterious lack of cars. Mike, of course, had a reasonable explanation. It was so obvious that I didn’t know why I hadn’t thought of it myself.

‘Charlie must’ve arrived by taxi,’ said Mike. ‘Perhaps they all did, unless Harry collected them. Didn’t you say that Ginny’s mum flew up here the other week? She lives in Devon, doesn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ I nodded.

‘Well, then, they either caught the Bristol to Newcastle plane or took a cross country train. Whichever they did, they must’ve come the rest of the way by taxi, unless Harry collected them.’ Mike spoke with absolute certainty. I must have looked disappointed because he burst out laughing.

‘What was your theory, Jacqui?’ he asked. ‘Do you think that they “beamed down” like on Star Trek? They came by taxi! It’s obvious.’ He slid from his armchair, knelt on the floor in front of me and put his hands on my shoulders. ‘Isn’t it?’ He looked into my eye and smiled.

‘I suppose it is, yes,’ I admitted.

He kissed my nose and teasingly told me, ‘It’s a good job you’ve got a clear-headed and sensible husband, Jacqui. All those books you read make you see a mystery even when there isn’t one.’

I went to bed early. Mike was right; it had been another interesting day, and a tiring one. The wine had gone to my head, too.

I didn’t see Harry the following morning; once again, James was already settled in the classroom when I got there. I’d hoped to speak to Harry because, over breakfast, I’d been worrying about the events of the previous afternoon. I’d arrived at Drakeshaugh unannounced twice, and both times, I’d interrupted something. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a guilty thought (“you weren’t invited”) wormed its way through my brain, making me feel uneasy.

As I walked out from the school, I decided that I needed to do something to apologise to Harry and Ginny. It wasn’t until I was driving back home with Annie that I decided what to do. I would bake.

‘Today, we’re going to make chocolate buns, Annie,’ I told her the moment we walked into the kitchen.

‘I likes chocklick bun,’ said Annie happily, clapping her hands and dancing.

‘And I’m going to give some to Mrs Potter when we see her at school this afternoon,’ I said.

‘Oh,’ said Annie, frowning. My daughter knew what she liked, and what she didn’t like; and she didn’t like the idea of sharing chocolate. But, honestly, who does?

‘I’ll make lots,’ I assured her.

Annie and I had an enjoyably messy morning. We made four dozen buns, although I had barely enough butter for the buttercream icing. It took me some time to tidy the kitchen and find a tin for the buns; by then, it was time for lunch. Afterwards, as a special treat for both of us, we scraped
both the cake mix and icing bowls clean. By the time we’d finished, Annie was up to her elbows in cake mixture and buttercream; she was sticky, but very happy.

When I carried her upstairs to clean her up, I discovered she’d somehow managed to get chocolate icing on her knickers (and it was a relief to realise that’s what it was). She was so sticky that I stripped her, put her in the bath, and found her a complete change of clothes. We had a splashing time, and spent ages playing with her bath toys. By the time I’d got her ready it was almost time for me to leave for school, and it was raining.

While I’d been in the bathroom, thick clouds had darkened the day, a bright morning had become a dull and dingy afternoon and the rain was relentlessly hurling itself against the windows. It was no weather for walking anywhere. I looked at the sky, at the tin of buns, and at the weather, and I decided to ring Ginny.

I was convinced that the phone number she’d given me wouldn’t work. I really didn’t expect to be connected; I don’t know why, unless it was because the number was so strange. Nevertheless, I punched the numbers into the handset and waited.

I didn’t get a ringing tone. There were several seconds of silence and then, just as I was about to hang up, a polite female voice said, ‘Connecting you now, please hold the line.’ Then, once again, there was utter silence. I waited uneasily for several more seconds before anything happened.

‘Hello, Jacqui,’ said Ginny.

‘Hi, Ginny,’ I spoke in a breathless rush. ‘I’m sorry for ringing, but it’s howing it down… I mean, chucking it down…’ (I decided it would be best to translate the word) ‘…with rain here, and I don’t suppose that it’s any different at Drakeshaugh. I wondered if you’d like a lift down to school. I can’t bring you back, of course; the car will be full with you, Al and Lily, never mind James and Henry, but at least we can wait outside school in the car, keep dry. Al could use Henry’s seat and his original baby seat is in our garage; it’s a bit grubby, but there’s nothing wrong with it. It should be fine for Lily; we aren’t going far after all.’

When I stopped speaking, there was another echoing silence.

‘Ginny?’ I said.

‘I’m still here,’ she said. ‘It’s nice of you to offer, Jacqui, very thoughtful of you to telephone…’

There was another pause while she considered my offer.

‘Will you be able to fit the buggy in your boot? Your car isn’t very big, is it?’ she said.

‘It’s big enough for a buggy. I’m sure that we can manage,’ I told her.

‘Okay, why not?’ said Ginny. ‘I’ll expect you in—how long—a quarter of an hour?’

‘That sounds about right,’ I said.

I bundled Annie into her raincoat, grabbed the cake tin, threw my Barbour jacket over my head and carried Annie out to the car. I got her into the passenger seat easily enough, but it took me a few minutes longer than I expected to fasten Henry’s old rear-facing baby seat behind Annie and clean the cobwebs from it. As a consequence, I was a little delayed in setting off for Drakeshaugh.

Annie and I splashed our way down the valley happily singing nursery rhymes. The landscape was a grey blur of rain and at its edges the road was a fast-flowing river. It was proper rain, bold rain,
the type rain which noisily lets you know that it’s out to soak you. Even with my wipers at their fastest setting, it was difficult to keep the windscreen clear. Personally, I prefer that sort of weather to those sneaky little showers and drizzle; they try to pretend that they’re not really going to get you wet.

When I pulled in to the gravel yard in front of Drakeshaugh, Ginny opened the back door and beckoned me inside. By the time I’d unstrapped Annie and collected the cake tin, she had vanished. I ran across to the open door, carrying Annie, ‘Wheeeeee’, under one arm. I had the cake tin in the other hand. Once inside the small entrance hall, I took off my coat, which was already dripping, and hung it on one of the hooks.

I closed the back door behind me, and rather cautiously, walked into the kitchen. Al and Lily were chasing each other around the table, laughing. They dashed up to Annie, shouting greetings.

Hi Jacqui,’ said Ginny over the racket. ‘I’m not quite ready, sorry. I had another call after yours and I’ve only just broken the connection.’

What an odd way to say “hung up”, I thought.

‘No problem,’ I said. ‘I’m usually very early for school; we have plenty of time.’ I noticed that Ginny was looking at the tin I was holding. ‘Oh, and I’ve made these for you. I interrupted your family gathering yesterday; I’m sorry. These are to apologise. You can give me the tin back any time. No rush.’

I handed it to Ginny. She gave a polite smile and opened it. The smell of chocolate escaped and filled the room; it was so powerful that it immediately attracted the kids’ attention.

‘Chocklick, my hellups Moomee, bacon,’ Annie mispronounced proudly.

Fortunately, Ginny had a mother’s ear and was able to decipher Annie’s statement without my help. ‘You helped your mummy when she was baking; what a clever girl,’ said Ginny. Annie beamed. ‘We like chocolate; thank you, Annie. And thank you, Jacqui; thank you very much. But there’s no need to apologise; James confessed. He did invite Henry, and he didn’t tell us. And thanks for the offer of a lift, too.’ She gave me a dazzingly grateful smile.

While Ginny fastened Al into his coat, I did the same for Lily. It took two trips to get the three kids strapped into the car and to get Ginny’s double buggy into the boot. While we worked, the rain continued to lash at us relentlessly.

As I drove down to the school, I asked Ginny how her family gathering had gone. We chatted about her family all the way down to the school.

It was still raining when I parked the car, so we simply stayed in it, sheltering from the rain and talking. I discovered that: Bill was a banker; Percy and his wife were civil servants; Ron and George were in business together, retail of some sort, and; Charlie worked abroad on some sort of animal conservation project; Ginny was so vague about the details of Charlie’s job that I suspected she didn’t really know. Charlie was home for the week. Ginny also confirmed that her family would, as I’d suspected, be helping her with the catering.

That was when the kids started appearing. With the rain, the confusion of getting Henry into the car, my keeping an eye on the Potter kids while Ginny unfolded her buggy and everything else that was going on, we didn’t have time for any more chat. I watched Ginny trudging off into the rain with a pang of guilt. They’d probably be soaked to the skin by the time they got home. But I simply couldn’t squeeze them all into the car. I knew that Ginny couldn’t drive. I wondered if, faced with
our weather, she would learn. The Potters were certainly wealthy enough to have a second car.

The following morning, I saw Harry only briefly.

‘Hi, Jacqui,’ he said as he dashed out from the school. I said ‘Hi,’ back, but then he was gone.

That evening was glorious: the sun was back and the previous day’s storm was no more than a memory, with the higher than usual river acting as a reminder. Ginny and I were discussing the party with some of the other mums, and Ginny was collecting acceptance letters from them, and from several kids.

Henry and James were two of the last to leave the school. They were, as always, side by side when they dashed up to us. Unusually, however, James ignored his mother and ran straight up to me.

‘Hello, Henry’s mum; has you got more of them chocolate buns?’ he asked.

‘James!’ Ginny pulled an apologetic face at me.

‘No, but I can bake more if you liked them, James,’ I told him. He nodded happily.

‘They were a big hit with the kids, Jacqui,’ Ginny told me politely, before staring at James in annoyance. ‘You can’t simply demand things from people, James,’ she told her son.

‘Wasn’t a demand, was compling meant,’ said James. ‘They was very nice.’

‘They were,’ Ginny agreed. ‘And I’m sure Jacqui appreciates your compliment, James. Poor Harry didn’t get home quickly enough, so he only got one.’

‘I’ll bake some more,’ I said. ‘But I’ll need to buy the ingredients. I’m glad you liked them, James. If the kids all liked them, I could even bake a big batch for your party, Ginny.’

‘Yay!’ shouted James.

‘That would be great, if you don’t mind. I think we have plenty of food, but Mum’s panicking, and if I tell her you’re helping, too…’ said Ginny, smiling. I knew what she meant, as my mother would be exactly the same. Ginny hesitated for a moment, and lowered her voice. ‘Are you doing anything on Thursday, Jacqui? Would you and Annie like to have lunch with us? We can discuss the party, and swimming, then.’

‘Yes, please,’ I squeaked. I suspected that there was rather too much enthusiasm in my voice.

We arranged that I’d arrive at noon, and we were still agreeing details when Mary arrived. She glared at me as she handed Ginny a pale blue envelope.

‘Thank you so much for the invitation, Ginny,’ said Mary. ‘My husband and I are very busy, but we’ve managed to find some time for you on Saturday.’

‘I’m honoured,’ said Ginny. There was no trace of sarcasm in her voice, but she perfectly mimicked Mary’s pompous tone. ‘I do hope that you didn’t have to cancel anything; after all, we aren’t important.’

I had a coughing fit. It was either that or burst out laughing, and I still wasn’t ready to laugh at Mary in public.

I told Mike what had happened as soon as he got home. I was so ridiculously excited by the invitation to lunch at Drakeshaugh that I dashed outside to tell him before he’d even finished
parking his car. He grabbed me around the waist and kissed me.

‘Great! Make friends, go out, enjoy yourself,’ he told me. ‘I love to see you happy, Jacqui; you’re gorgeous when you’re happy. I’m beginning to think we must have been in a bit of a rut.’

I kissed him back, but Henry arrived at the kitchen door and protested, so we had to part.

Wednesday dragged, although Ginny and I did manage to make arrangements for our trip to the swimming pool. When Thursday finally arrived it was another rainy day. I was ready to leave at eleven, but we’d agreed that I’d arrive at twelve.

I paced; I sat; I failed to read; I simply could not settle. Finally, I got angry with Annie over absolutely nothing and made her cry. It took me ages to calm her down, and by the time I did, it was almost twelve, and I was a few minutes late leaving.

When I reached Drakeshaugh, Ginny was once again waiting for me at the kitchen door. It was as though she’d known exactly when I would arrive. Annie had calmed down, and I’d been talking to her all of the way down the valley. She had somehow caught my excitement and she excitedly refused to be carried. We held hands and dashed into the house through a squally shower which flapped at our coats as we ran. More correctly, Annie ran; I only needed to do a brisk walk to keep up with her. We said our hellos to Ginny, took off our coats, and followed her into the warm, welcoming and surprisingly empty kitchen.

‘Where are Al and Lily?’ I asked.

‘They’re up in the lounge,’ Ginny told me. ‘One of my old school friends is looking after them. She will be at the party too. I wanted you to meet her first. She was one of my bridesmaids and she’s Lily’s godmother. I do hope that you’ll like her.’

For the first time since I’d met her, Ginny seemed to be rather nervous. ‘She’s called Luna Lovegood and she’s a… she’s… well… she’s… she’s … Luna.’ Ginny shrugged. It seemed that she’d finally decided that no further explanation was necessary, or perhaps possible, so she simply led Annie and me from the kitchen through the small hallway and up the stairs into the lounge.

‘And this,’ a voice sang, ‘is a Crumple-Horned Snorkack. No one has ever seen one, Lily, Al, but one day, I will.’

The woman, Luna, was sitting on the sofa, a large book on her lap. Al sat on one knee and Lily on the other. Luna’s feet were bare and her toenails were each painted a different colour. She wore brown paisley culottes and a yellow checked blouse, an interesting choice. Her blonde hair was piled in a bun and it was held in place by a stick of wood that was almost a foot long. She stared at me with wide, unblinking, grey eyes.

‘Lo, Henrysmum,’ said Al.

‘Hello, Al, and Lily, and hello,’ I said to the blonde. ‘You must be Luna, I’m Jacqui.’

‘Yes, Luna Lovegood, pleased to meet you. Jacqui, that’s an unusual name, isn’t it?’ she asked.

‘Not like yours,’ I told her, trying to keep my face straight.

‘Really?’ she said. ‘I’m surprised that you think so. I don’t know anyone else called Luna, and Daddy and Uncle Andy are the only Lovegoods I know.’

‘Irony is wasted on Luna, as is sarcasm,’ Ginny told me. ‘Honesty works.’
'Oh, were you trying to be funny?' Luna asked me.

'It seems I failed,' I told her.

'Yes,' Luna agreed. 'Perhaps you need more practice.'

Ginny burst out laughing, and so did I. I had no choice, really. It was obvious from her clothes and her conversation that Luna was one of those people for whom social conventions don’t exist.

'What’s a Snorkack?' I asked. 'I’ve never heard of it.' I looked curiously at the book on Luna’s lap, but I couldn’t make out the title.

'Oh,' said Luna. 'I was just telling Al and Lily a story, that’s all.'

'Ah,' I said. 'It’s like the Gruffalo; there are so many wonderful children’s stories, aren’t there?'

'A Gruffalo?' asked Luna.

'Gruffalo,' said Al. He jumped from Luna’s lap, dashed to a bookcase untidily stacked with colourful books and returned with that very book. ‘Read,’ he demanded.

‘Yay, Guffalluff!’ Annie agreed. Luna looked curiously at the book.

'It was part of Al’s Christmas present from Hermione’s parents, Luna,’ Ginny said. ‘Would you like to read it to the kids? Jacqui and I will get lunch ready, if that’s okay?'

‘This looks very interesting,’ said Luna, sounding excited. She lifted Lily from her knee, sat her on the floor and slid from the sofa to sit alongside her. Al and Annie sat too, and looked up expectantly at Luna. She opened the book, prodded the illustration, watched it, shrugged and began to read.

I went into the kitchen with Ginny and helped her prepare a salad and sandwiches.

‘First impressions?’ Ginny asked.

‘She ploughs her own furrow,’ I said. Ginny looked a little puzzled. ‘She goes her own way.’ I explained. ‘She strikes me as nice, but unconventional.’ I lowered my voice. ‘I’m not trying to be rude, but is she extremely clever, or is she simply eccentric?’

‘Both.’ Ginny laughed.

We called them down for lunch. Luna and Ginny chatted about who would be at the party on Saturday. Several names were mentioned: Dennis, Neville and Hannah, and several others. Luna seemed to know them all.

The rain stopped, so after lunch, we walked through the woods. Luna remained barefoot; her only concession to the cool breeze was to put on a blue and yellow cardigan which looked like it had been badly hand-knitted by a giant. When I said so, she shook her head and corrected me in a way only Luna could.

‘Only a half-giant,’ she said. ‘He’s called Rubeus.’

Luna was like that, I discovered. Her conversation crazily banged, chimed and bounced from topic to topic like the ball in a pinball machine. When we walked into the clearing next to Drakeshaugh Burn, Ginny made some flippant remark about the stream being a burn.
‘You didn’t study Ancient Runes, Ginny,’ said Luna disapprovingly. ‘If you had, you’d know that the word is perfectly acceptable. It’s derived from old English “burna”; it is a fresh water spring.’

Luna strode ahead of us, and Ginny turned to me and pulled a “that’s me told” face.

‘I’ve decided. After that remark, I like your friend Luna,’ I said, smiling. Ginny laughed, and so did I.

Luna, meanwhile, had stepped into the burn, cupped her hands in the water and was noisily slurping the water from her hands. ‘Good, fresh and cold,’ she announced.

Of course, once Luna had drunk from the stream, the kids had to drink too. Ginny joined them, but when offered, I declined.

‘The last time I drank from a burn I was thirteen,’ I said. ‘That was Spithope Burn, not far from my parent’s farm. Then I walked upstream and found a dead sheep in the water.’

‘Eugh!’ The kids all pulled faces.

‘Were you ill afterwards?’ Luna asked.

‘No,’ I admitted.

‘So the water was pure anyway,’ said Luna. ‘That’s a silly reason not to drink.’ It was my turn to pull a “that’s me told” face at Ginny. I gave in, scooped up some water and drank it. Luna was right; it was sweet, and so cold that it made my teeth tingle.

The kids all wanted to play on the rope swing. They needed careful supervision, especially Lily, who seemed to be completely fearless. We spent the afternoon playing with the kids and gossiping. The three kids seemed to be quite happy playing together. Al was gentle and quiet, not at all like his boisterous brother. It seemed to me that he was trying to look after the girls, too.

While the kids were playing, I took the opportunity to ask Ginny what she’d be wearing, and what Harry would be wearing. ‘Mike hates wearing a suit outside work,’ I said, worriedly.

‘We’re having a party, not a dinner party, Jacqui,’ Ginny reassured me. ‘Harry will be casual. You don’t think that anyone will turn up in evening dress or a ball gown, do you? We’ve invited the kids! I’m expecting at least one jelly or trifle related crisis and at least one temper tantrum.’

‘That may well be Mary,’ I said. Ginny laughed.

‘Just wear whatever you’re comfortable wearing,’ Ginny assured me. ‘There’s probably no need to buy something new.’

‘Probably?’ I asked. That single word alerted me. ‘What about you?’

‘I’ve bought a new dress,’ she admitted. ‘I’m the hostess, Jacqui; I want to look my best.’

‘I’m a guest; so do I,’ I said determinedly. ‘I’d thought about wearing trousers and a jacket; it’s practical. But … a new dress … I could probably persuade Mike. I’d have to go into town tomorrow, but I couldn’t take Annie into town. I’ll ask my mum…’

‘If you want to go shopping for a new dress tomorrow, Jacqui, you could leave Annie with me,’ Ginny offered. ‘Luna and I can look after three kids as easily as two.’

‘I couldn’t impose…’ I began.
‘Don’t be silly, Jacqui,’ said Ginny. ‘Would you like to come back again tomorrow, Annie?’

‘Yay,’ said Annie.

‘When do you need to leave to collect James, Ginny?’ Luna asked.

Ginny and I checked our watches.

‘Now,’ we chorused.

I half-heartedly tried to turn down Ginny’s babysitting offer as we hurriedly prepared to leave. Luna agreed to stay at Drakeshaugh and look after Al and Lily. I once again gave Ginny a lift down to school, and we discussed plans for the following day.

‘I’ll have to talk to Mike about it,’ I said. ‘Are you sure that you don’t mind?’

‘Jacqui,’ said Ginny seriously. ‘We haven’t known each other for long, but do you really think that I’d volunteer to do something if I didn’t want to do it?’

‘Thank you. I’ll telephone tonight and let you know,’ I promised.

‘Tell Mike that he owes you a new dress,’ Ginny suggested.

‘Purple vomit,’ I said immediately, and I was forced to tell Ginny the story.
A Breakdown, a Bike and a Barmy Blonde Again

That evening, I told Mike of my planned trip to the shops.

Ginny and Luna had agreed to look after Annie while I drove into Newcastle to buy a new outfit for the housewarming party. When I finished explaining why I needed new clothes, and who Luna was (and that took a lot of explaining), Mike asked me if I wanted to meet him for lunch. He told me that he was going to be in town himself because he had a meeting at one of the big solicitor’s offices on the Quayside.

The school run went to plan. Luna stayed at Drakeshaugh to look after Al and Lily so, after I dropped Henry at school, I took both Ginny and Annie back to Drakeshaugh. I turned down Ginny’s offer of a coffee, tempting though it was, and told her that I needed to get on my way. I said my goodbyes to Annie, who didn’t seem at all worried about me leaving her with Al and Lily, and drove straight into Newcastle. Somehow, I managed to find my way into one of the city centre car parks without getting lost in the one way system, and then I hit the shops.

My shopping trip was successful; I was very pleased with the floral-print godet skirt, matching camisole and jacket I’d bought. Mike phoned me, as he’d promised he would, when his meeting was over. We met at Grey’s Monument a little after noon. When I showed him the contents of my bags, Mike said he liked the outfit.

I protested that he hadn’t seen me wearing them. Mike laughed away my complaints, took my hand, and led me down the finest street in England: Grey Street. We turned off onto High Bridge and he took me to a little Italian place. It was a place we’d regularly visited before we were married, before we’d moved out of the city.

‘This is just like being on a date,’ Mike joked as we walked towards the café.

‘When’s the last time you took me out?’ I asked him.

He made a couple of suggestions.

‘Without the kids,’ I said.

‘Too long ago,’ he admitted. He made fun of himself and teased me too, because we soon realised that neither of us could remember the last time we’d been out to lunch, just the two of us.

Because I’d finished my shopping, we dallied over lunch, gossiping and even flirting a little. Eventually, it was time for me to leave. Mike was running late, too; he should have left and returned to his office at least half an hour before we finally parted. When we got back onto Grey Street, he grabbed me by the waist and kissed me.

‘Bye, gorgeous,’ he said, before he turned and walked downhill. I watched him strut down the road, and I smiled at him when he turned to wave to me. Then I crossed the road and headed for the car park.

The roads were quiet, and I managed to find my way out of the city without any problems. I made good time on my homeward journey and I was certain that I would have time to collect Annie before I met Henry at the school gates.
It didn’t work out that way.

I’d passed through Thropton and had turned onto the Sharperton road when it happened. I had just negotiated the first of two sharp bends, so fortunately, I wasn’t going particularly quickly when there was a loud bang and the car swerved towards the verge. I swore, using several words I definitely wouldn’t want Annie or Henry to hear, and then I wrestled with the steering wheel.

Time slowed. The car was making an awful noise, as though a wheel had fallen off. I fought to keep it in a straight line and touched the brakes gently. Because the car was trying to pull to the left, I was worried that braking hard might simply make me swerve into the fence.

I’d taken my right foot off the accelerator and slammed the left onto the clutch the moment I heard the bang and I was slowly rolling to a halt, but the second sharp bend was rapidly approaching and I didn’t really want to try to get round it. There was an untidy concrete track leading across the grass to a field gate and it was right on the bend. Using brakes and gears, I managed to bring the car to an untidy halt on the side of the road.

I switched off the engine and simply sat there, holding the steering wheel and shaking from head to foot. It seemed like I sat in absolute the silence forever, but it was probably no more than a minute before my tight chest reminded me that I needed to breathe. As the car filled with the sounds of me panting, I tried to reassure myself. I had managed to bring the car safely to a halt. Unfortunately my imagination was still accelerating, dangerously out of control. My head was filling with what-ifs, each more terrifying than the last; until, finally, I burst into tears. Don’t be silly, I scolded myself. I took several deep breaths and tried to calm down. It wasn’t easy.

I was still sobbing when I heard the motorbike. As the roar of the engine died down, I reached into the glovebox for a tissue. Half of me was desperate for it to be Harry, because I knew that he could—and would—try to help. The other half was hoping that it wasn’t, because I’d almost crashed the car and I’d been crying.

I looked in the mirror. The black bike had pulled to a halt directly behind me, and its red helmeted rider was dismounting. It was Harry. I fumbled for the car door, pushed it open, and staggered out. I almost fell, but Harry dashed forwards, grabbed my arm and steadied me.

‘You’re okay, Jacqui,’ he reassured me. ‘I’m on my way to school, I assume you are, too.’

‘I almost died,’ I sobbed, and the tears flowed again. Harry put an arm around my shoulders, reached into his pocket and produced a large white handkerchief.

‘No, you didn’t, Jacqui,’ he said firmly. There was an almost mischievous twinkle in his eyes as he continued, ‘If you had, you’d be almost dead, and you look very much alive to me. In fact, I don’t think anyone almost dies. Either you die, or you don’t. You didn’t, and there’s no use in worrying about something that didn’t happen. You’re a little shocked, but you’re okay, aren’t you?’

I nodded. ‘I was lucky,’ I said.

‘You deserve the credit, Jacqui; it wasn’t luck, it was you. You kept control of the car.’ His voice was calm and reassuring.

I blew my nose and wiped my tears on his handkerchief, and then I realised that Harry’s arm was still around my shoulder, and I was leaning in to him. I stood upright and he removed his arm.

‘Any idea what happened?’ he asked.

‘There was a bang, and the car swerved,’ I said.
Harry walked around the car, examining it carefully. ‘Your front nearside tyre is flat,’ he said. He gave me a self-depreciating smile. ‘I’m no expert, but I think that’s your problem, right there.’ He bent down to take a closer look and I followed him onto the verge. He pointed at some damaged rubber and the split in it. ‘It looks like the side wall split. It’s scuffed, as if it’s been…’

‘Oh, no!’ I put my head in my hands and groaned. ‘I hit a kerb on Monday, on my way to school. But I forgot all about it. Mike says I must tell him if there’s a problem with the car. I’ve probably damaged the wheel, too. It will probably cost a fortune to repair. He’ll kill me.’

‘He won’t,’ said Harry confidently. ‘If he’s got any sense, he’ll simply be happy that you’re okay, damn the car, and damn the expense.’ He stared at me; those remarkable green eyes of his seemed to bore into my head. ‘People are more important than property; you know that, and so does Mike, doesn’t he?’

‘Yes,’ I admitted.

‘Now, we need to be practical. Unfortunately, I don’t really know much about cars; I know that men are supposed to know these things…’ He lowered his voice and looked around, despite the fact that there was probably no one else for several miles around. ‘But, to be honest, cars and football are two things I’ve never been interested in. To some that makes me a failure as a man,’ Harry admitted. ‘Even so, it can’t be difficult to fix a flat tyre, I hope. I assume that you’ve got a spare somewhere. Is it in the boot?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Probably,’ I added uncertainly. ‘Unless it’s somewhere else, or there isn’t one.’

Harry raised an eyebrow, and I realised what I’d said.

‘Sorry.’ I laughed rather more than I should have done at my own foolishness. Nerves, I suppose. Harry simply waited until I stopped. ‘I should have simply said that I don’t know! I’m not much use, am I?’

‘You probably know at least as much about cars as I do, Jacqui,’ he assured me. ‘It will take us a while to change the wheel, assuming that there is a wheel to change.’ He pulled a battered-looking pocket watch from the pocket of his leather jacket. ‘Even if we both knew what we were doing, there’s no way we could change the wheel and be at school in time to collect the kids. I’d better contact Ginny and let her know, unless…’ He paused and nodded meaningfully to the bike.

‘I don’t have a helmet,’ I said, although part of me was screaming do it!

‘Ginny’s is strapped to the seat,’ Harry said.

I looked and realised that it was. I wondered why I hadn’t noticed it earlier.

‘I’m not dressed for it,’ I said hesitantly. Just do it; you know you want to, the voice in my head was becoming more insistent.

Under most circumstances, I would have said yes without any hesitation, but under most circumstances I’d be wearing trousers. Because I had been into town, because I was meeting Mike and shopping for clothes, I was dressed up for the occasion. The tan leather jacket I was wearing was far from new, but it was made for fashion, not practicality. Worse, I was wearing a knee-length pencil skirt.

‘You might have to sit side-saddle,’ Harry said. ‘But the footwear looks okay.’

I looked down at my feet and blushed. I’d been rather pleased with my “going out” outfit; when
he’d met me at the Monument, Mike had told me how nice I looked. Now, however, the effect was rather spoiled by the battered and well-worn blue trainers I was now wearing. They didn’t match anything else.

‘You know I’ve been in town shopping, Harry. I can’t drive in heels,’ I explained. ‘My smart shoes are in the car and…’

Harry was grinning broadly. He’d been teasing me.

‘It’s okay, Jacqui,’ he said. ‘You obviously aren’t dressed for a bike ride. I’ll contact Ginny and ask her to collect James and Henry.’

He reached into his jacket, and this time, he pulled out what looked like a smartphone. It was mirror-bright on one side, and it appeared to be a dark wood-effect on the other. He didn’t, however, dial a number. He simply touched the screen, said ‘Ginny’ and then held it to his ear. *I should really phone Mike, too,* I thought, but I didn’t.

‘Hi; oh, ear. Problems, Harry?’ Ginny asked. Her voice was very clear and it carried across to me. Harry’s phone must be voice activated, I realised.

‘I’ve had to stop to help Jacqui; we’re only about four miles from the school, but she has a flat tyre. It looks like we’re going to be late for the kids,’ Harry said.

While he spoke, I was looking at his bike. The voice in my head had taken control, and I was fantasising about a bike ride. I tried to push the idea aside. *I can’t go on the bike,* I told myself sternly, *not in this outfit.*

In order to distract myself, I opened the boot to look for the spare wheel. Lying there, where I’d thrown it the previous afternoon, was my old Barbour jacket. I reached into the pockets and found my gardening gloves. *Tight skirt,* my conscience reminded me.

‘You’re standing next to her, aren’t you?’ I heard Ginny ask.

‘Yes,’ he confirmed.

‘Hi, Ginny,’ I shouted, letting her know that I could hear her. ‘How’s Annie?’

‘Hi, Jacqui; she’s fine. Thanks for letting me know, Harry. Luna was going to walk down to the school anyway. She wants to see what it’s like. I’ll tell her to collect Henry as well as James. We’ll keep both Henry and Annie here until you…’ That’s when I cracked.

‘You can give me a lift,’ I told Harry. I held up the jacket and gloves.

‘Just a second, Ginny,’ Harry said. ‘Are you sure, Jacqui?’ He looked pointedly at my skirt.

I was already feeling the buzz of a bike ride; perhaps that’s what made me babble.

‘I first met Mike in Newcastle. It was a Saturday. I’d been at a swimming competition at City Pool and I’d gone into town with a couple of girlfriends during the lunch break. Mike just walked up to us and started talking to me. He was really nervous; he said he’d never done anything like that before. My friends teased him and tried to put him off, but he persevered. When they got bored and left us, he asked me out. I said yes and gave him my address.

‘Mike turned up at my flat the following day. He was on his bike. I was all dolled up and wearing a short skirt. He’d said that he’d take me to Whitley Bay for the day. I knew that he was a law
student and I thought he might be rich, have a flashy car, although I really expected that we’d be
taking the Metro. He hadn’t mentioned the bike.

‘It was his idea of a test; if I hadn’t gone with him, I don’t think I would’ve ever seen him again.
When he saw what I was wearing, Mike suggested that I change, but I was too stupid and stubborn
to agree. Instead, I found myself wearing my shortest skirt and perched on the back of the Aprilia
as he did a ton along the coast road. It was the best first date I’d ever had, and it was the last first
date I ever had!’ I paused for breath, thinking about what I’d said. ‘They’re probably always the
best ones, aren’t they?’ I observed.

‘I think they probably are, yes.’ Harry laughed and placed the phone back to his ear.

‘Did you hear all that, Ginny?’ he asked.

‘Oh, yes.’ Ginny couldn’t keep the laughter from her voice, either.

‘I’ll give Jacqui a lift to school, Ginny. We can decide what to do about her car later. It’s safe
enough where it is.’

While he was talking, I picked up my shopping and my shoes from the passenger floor well, put
them in the boot and locked my car. I pulled on the grubby wax cotton jacket, knowing that at least
my torso would be warm and dry if it rained, although one glance at the clear sky told me that was
unlikely. By the time I’d fastened my coat, Harry had ended the call.

He handed me Ginny’s helmet. I pulled it over my head and fastened it. Harry was watching,
making sure that I knew what I was doing. He seemed to be happy, because he swung himself onto
the bike, leapt up and kicked it into life. It really was a classic; not even a starter motor! He
fastened his helmet and jacket and pulled on his gloves. I donned my gardening gloves.

Harry pulled the bike upright and kicked up the side stand. Standing astride it, he leaned back and
pulled the pillion pegs into place for me. I hitched up my skirt a little, then a little more, all the
while cursing myself for my choice of clothing. Catching his eye, I made sure that he had the bike
balanced and was ready for my weight.

He nodded, so I stepped onto the footpeg, swung myself over behind him and sat. It was tricky. My
skirt was tight around my thighs even with the rear slit, which was under some strain. I hoped that
it wouldn’t rip. Harry tried to sit, but because of the skirt, he didn’t fit between my knees. I shuffled
right to the back of the seat, and Harry moved right to the front.

It was ridiculous, and I started to laugh. I had two options. Hitch the skirt higher, revealing more
leg than I’d done since I was a teenager, or ride with my knees forced tightly against Harry’s hips. I
shuffled, and pulled the skirt higher. Harry slid back and got into his riding position. I put my hands
on my knees, leaned forwards until our helmets touched and yelled ‘READY.’

I saw Harry jump in surprise.

‘Merl...’ he said, his voice surprisingly loud in my ears. ‘There’s an intercom built into the helmets,
Jacqui,’ he said quietly. ‘There’s no need to shout.’

‘Sorry,’ I said. We hadn’t even set off and I could already outgrin a Cheshire cat.

‘You know that your legs will get cold,’ he added. He still seemed to be trying to put me off.

‘By the time we were married, Mike had bought a Ducati,’ I said firmly. ‘For our honeymoon, we
rode across Europe on it. It can be colder than this in the Alps, even in the summer.’ I smiled at the
memory. ‘I’ve just thought of something else, Harry,’ I added. ‘Mrs Wilson keeps an eye on the school gate. She won’t let a stranger collect James and Henry. And they don’t come much stranger than Luna. We’d better go.’

‘Okay.’ Harry chuckled. He pulled in the clutch and kicked the bike into first gear, and as we roared off up the road, he rapidly and smoothly toed his way up through the gears.

I simply stayed behind him and enjoyed the ride. When we dropped down into Sharperton, he took the bends at speed, but smoothly. As we leaned steeply into the second bend, I glanced down at the road. We were skimming along only inches above it.

‘This is brilliant!’ I announced.

‘You’re a good pillion,’ Harry told me. ‘You’re like Ginny; you stick with me, lean with me. I took Hermione out once. She screamed and fought to stay upright at every bend. Never again!’ He shook his head.

‘Either trust the rider, or get off,’ I said. The words Mike had used when I’d climbed nervously behind him on our first date suddenly came back to me. That’s what I’d always done. I’d leaned when Mike leaned, moved the way he’d moved; anything else was fighting the rider, which was stupid.

As we sped toward Harbottle, I wondered why Harry would have agreed to take Hermione on his bike. She was his best friend’s wife, but she didn’t strike me as being the sort who would like motorcycling.

Harry slowed as we approached Harbottle, the bend and the school. I realised with some regret that my bike ride was almost over. It had been much too short. I’d forgotten the adrenalin rush, the sensation of true speed, which you simply don’t get when you’re enclosed in a big metal box.

‘I’d forgotten how much fun this is,’ I said. ‘It’s as close to flying as you can get.’

‘I suppose it is, yes,’ Harry said. ‘In fact, thinking about it, it certainly is.’ I couldn’t see his face, but from his voice, he seemed to be amused by my comment. I was still grinning like a lunatic; I knew that.

A bike isn’t practical, not with two kids. I remembered the discussions we’d had when we made the fateful decision to sell “the Duke”. A solicitor and a family man can’t ride a motorbike to an important meeting. We need a car; in fact, out here, we need two cars, one each. We can’t afford the bike, too. We don’t really need the bike, do we?

‘I wish we hadn’t sold our bike,’ I said sadly as we rode sedately past the school. I waved cheerily at Mary and her friends as we passed. I think that, for a few seconds, they must have thought I was Ginny. But I’m a lot bigger than Ginny, and Mary must have realised that it was me almost immediately, because her gang closed ranks, going into a disapproving huddle. I didn’t care.

Harry rolled the bike to a halt. He put his feet on the ground and waited. I faced my next problem. I have yet to discover a ladylike way to dismount from a motorbike whilst wearing a skirt, and this time, the skirt was too-tight and hitched embarrassingly high.

I did my best. I stood up on the pegs and swung my leg back, but my legs were cold and I was trying to keep my skirt down. I stumbled and tottered onto the path looking a lot less cool and calm than I’d have liked. If I’d been in my heels, I’m certain I’d have fallen. Fortunately, I managed to stay upright, but I had to readjust my skirt under the critical gaze of Mary and her friends.
By the time I’d pulled off my gloves and unfastened the helmet, Harry had turned off the engine, dismounted, and hauled the bike onto its main stand.

‘Thanks, Harry,’ I told him loudly as I handed him the helmet and automatically checked my hair in the bike’s mirror. No helmet line; I hadn’t been wearing it for long enough, unfortunately.

Pushing my gardening gloves into my pocket, I unfastened my Barbour jacket, shrugged it off and held it over my arm. As I walked towards the school gates, I could feel the stares. A susurrus of gossip hissed through the air and unspoken questions flew towards me. Mary glanced at my feet and said something which made her friends laugh.

I’d be expected to explain myself, I realised, but in my heart, I was still flying along on the back of the bike. Sod them! I decided that if they wanted to know, they would have to ask. I simply nodded politely and wondered where Harry was. He hadn’t followed me.

‘I don’t think the shoes match the outfit,’ Mary said. Some of her friends giggled.

‘Driving in high heels is stupid, don’t you think?’ I asked. The sharp intake of breath from Angela told me that I should have checked Mary’s feet before I spoke.

‘You weren’t driving,’ said Mary acidly.

‘I was,’ I said. ‘One of the tyres on the car blew out. I almost crashed, and I wouldn’t have got here in time if Harry hadn’t rescued me.’

‘Are you all right?’ Angela asked. Her obvious sympathy surprised me.

‘Yes, thanks,’ I told her.

I looked curiously at Mary, because the snappy comeback I’d been expecting hadn’t arrived. In fact, Mary had stopped looking at me. She was staring over my shoulder, and so were her friends. I turned to see what they were looking at. I should have realised. Luna was talking animatedly to Harry, her hands waving wildly as they approached.

‘Who on earth is that?’ Mary asked. ‘And what on earth is she wearing?’

It seemed fairly obvious to me what Luna was wearing. She wore baseball boots (one blue and one yellow) candy-striped dungarees over a yellow shirt and a claret-coloured smoking jacket that looked like it had come from a Victorian melodrama. It was an interesting choice for the school run, but I’d arrived wearing batty old trainers and a tatty jacket over my smart clothes. I wasn’t going to criticise. After all, Luna made me look normal.

‘Hello, Luna,’ I called.

‘Hello, Jacqui.’ Luna waved her arms in a wildly enthusiastic greeting. ‘I didn’t realise that Jacqui was short for Jacqueline. Ginny didn’t tell me until today. I think Jacqueline is a very nice name, but I think Ginevra is nice, too, and Ginny prefers Ginny.’

‘Mary was wondering what you are wearing,’ I said, while processing that latest snippet.

“Ginny isn’t Virginia,” Harry had said at the swimming pool. I’d assumed that he’d meant that she didn’t like the name, or she’d been christened Ginny. Harry, James, Lily, Ginevra, Albus. Some common names, some considerably less so.

My musings came to an abrupt halt. They were interrupted by Luna’s explanation to Mary.
‘These are called dungarees,’ Luna began. She was talking slowly and patiently, as though she thought Mary might not be able to follow. ‘They’re sort of like trousers, except they have these straps over your shoulders.’ To demonstrate, she gave one of the straps a tug. ‘And they have this bib-thing at the front. They’re very comfortable and have lots of pockets, which is useful.’

‘I know what they are,’ Mary snapped. ‘I was wondering why you chose to wear those … clothes,’ Mary sneered. She glared at me, but I simply thought about the bike ride, smiled, and watched Luna.

‘Why did I choose to wear these clothes?’ Luna asked, looking curiously at everyone. ‘I like wearing clothes, especially comfortable, colourful clothes. Also, for reasons no one has ever satisfactorily explained to me, it is not socially acceptable to be naked. Would it make you more comfortable if I took my clothes off?’ Luna’s expression was one of genuine concern for Mary’s welfare, and sanity.

‘She’s great, isn’t she?’ Harry whispered to me. He was watching Luna with open affection in his eyes.

‘I … I … of course not,’ Mary spluttered.

‘So, why are you unhappy that I’m wearing clothes?’ Luna asked.

‘I’m not,’ said Mary. She was beginning to crumble under Luna’s polite and cheerful questioning. Mary excelled at the snide put down, but Luna would continue to question, to ask why, until she got the truth. And Mary suddenly knew it. She was an expert at cutting remarks, but her remarks were always indirect or masked as polite interest. If she wanted to insult Luna, Mary would have to be both direct and rude. She liked being politely unpleasant, but she didn’t like direct unpleasantness.

‘I…’ Mary was lost for words. She stood there, open mouthed.

‘Oh, dear,’ said Luna. She reached forwards and vigorously flapped her hands around Mary’s head, as though swatting invisible insects. ‘Is that better?’ she asked solicitously.

‘Better?’ Mary asked.

‘You seem to be rather confused,’ said Luna.

‘I’m confused!’ Mary spluttered disbelievingly.

‘I’m glad you agree,’ Luna told her. I could see that Angela, still standing next to Mary, was struggling to keep her face straight. Some of Mary’s other friends had given up the fight.

Mary was saved by the arrival of the kids. Harry was suddenly surrounded by people confirming the time of his party, thanking him for the invitations and handing over last minute confirmations of their attendance. I couldn’t hear much of what was happening, because James and Henry were excitedly telling Luna and me about their day. By the time things quietened down, Mary had left.

As we walked up the road to Drakeshaugh, I finally plucked up the courage to phone Mike and tell him what had happened. Harry was proved right.

‘Sod the bloody car,’ Mike interrupted my apologies. ‘Are you okay, Jacques?’

‘I was a bit shook up when it happened, but I’m fine now.’
'Well, that’s all that matters, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘I’m going to leave work now. There’s nothing on
my desk that can’t wait until Monday. Do you want me to pick you up from Drakeshaugh, or has
Harry offered you a lift home?’

‘He hasn’t; just a second, Mike,’ I said. Ahead of me, Harry was holding Henry’s hand, and Luna
was hanging on to James. ‘Mike has offered to pick me up from Drakeshaugh, Harry, if that’s
okay.’

‘Fine, Jacqui, that’s not a problem.’

I passed the message on to Mike.

‘See you in three quarters of an hour,’ he told me.
Approximately three hundred miles south of Drakeshaugh at the other end of England, a bright blue Mini was being packed.

The enclosed and sheltered yard in which the car stood was paved in red brick. The bricks were old, possibly as old as the adjacent house, and they were carefully laid in a herringbone pattern. The yard was large enough to accommodate at least half a dozen vehicles, but the Mini stood alone.

At one side of the yard was a large house; its plaster walls were painted white and its roof was a thick straw thatch. A timber plaque affixed to the solid oak front door proclaimed the property to be “The Roost”. On the opposite side of the yard was a well-trimmed privet hedge which stood some eight feet tall. The top of the hedge was perfectly flat; it was as though someone had flown a broom at that particular height and magically sliced off all of the upward growing branches.

The only break in the hedge was a white wooden gate which led out from the yard and onto a rough track known as Green Lane. The track’s name doubled as its description; Green Lane was narrow, grassy and hemmed in by hedges for its entire length. From The Roost, it wound its way eastwards between fields for a little over a quarter of a mile, before joining Halfpenny Lane, in the village Oakford Fitzpayne, in the County of Dorset.

The Roost was the only house on Green Lane, and no-one drove to it, at least no-one other than the owner of the Mini (and, occasionally, her parents). It was as though the other residents of Oakford Fitzpayne had forgotten that The Roost existed. There was a very good reason for this. They had.

The Mini’s owner was using her wand to levitate a large trunk towards the open boot of her car. There was absolutely no way it would fit into the available space, but that obvious fact didn’t bother the woman. She was not alone in the yard. The Mini’s passenger door was open too, and a tall red-haired man was leaning into the back of the car; he was busy fastening two children into their car seats. Once that task was completed, he stepped out from the car and watched as his wife neatly fitted the trunk into the boot.

‘We’re spending one whole night away from home, Hermione,’ Ron Weasley said, somehow managing to keep the sarcasm from his voice. ‘Are you sure that you’ve packed enough stuff?’

Hermione pulled out a list from the pocket of her jeans and glanced anxiously at it. Ron wisely turned away from his wife before rolling his eyes despairingly.

‘There are four sets of swimming things in the bag in the car, Ron,’ began Hermione. ‘In the trunk I’ve got party clothes for this evening, nightclothes and three complete changes of clothes for tomorrow. I’ve also got buckets and spades, in case we go to the beach with Mum and Dad tomorrow. Rose has Teddy Edward and Hugo has Scarecrow-Sam. I’ve packed two cases of Dom Perignon, because we’ll need something to toast Harry and Ginny’s new home. The Muggle guests will expect some fizz, and Harry will have forgotten, because he has a lot other things on his mind. There are a dozen bottles of lemonade, too. I’ve made a dozen pizzas for the kids, and finally, there are fifty-seven tuna, mayonnaise and sweetcorn sandwiches in a preserving-box to keep them fresh,’ Hermione told him as she squeezed the trunk into the car and closed the boot lid. There was a noticeable and dangerously sharp edge to her final words.

‘You counted the sandwiches?’ asked Ron worriedly.
'I made sixty,' Hermione told him, her eyebrows meeting accusingly above her nose.

Ron ducked his head back inside the car. ‘Uh-oh, we’re in trouble, Rosie,’ he told his daughter. ‘You were right; Mummy counted the sandwiches.’ He straightened up and smiled at his wife. She was trying to be angry with him, but he’d had years of experience of that, and it was obvious from her expression that she wasn’t really trying very hard. He was safe. ‘They’re for a party, Hermione,’ he explained. ‘Rosie and I decided to test them; we wanted to make sure that they were tasty enough for Harry and Ginny’s guests, didn’t we?’

‘Tasty-tasty, dusty like Mummy,’ Rosie squeaked.

Hermione pulled a face as she tried not to smile. ‘She’s picking new words up very quickly, Ron. You’d better be very careful what you say in front of her.’

‘True,’ said Ron. ‘But you are tasty, Hermione. I tell you that all the time.’ He stepped up to her, gave her a casual hug, absent-mindedly bent forwards and kissed the top of her head.

She looked up at him in mock-exasperation and sighed. ‘If the kids are strapped in, Ron, it’s time we left.’

‘I’ll lock up,’ said Ron. He drew his wand and cast the usual protection spells over their home. Climbing into the passenger seat, he turned to Hermione. ‘I could drive,’ he offered, smiling. ‘I can, you know; I drove Dad’s car when I was twelve.’

‘And you crashed it into a tree,’ she reminded him. ‘We’re not going straight to Drakeshaugh remember, Ron. We’ll be driving on Muggle roads when we get there. You know that it’s illegal for you to drive on roads until you pass your Muggle driving test. So, if you want to drive the car, you know what you need to do! Take some lessons and ... pass ... your ... driving ... test.’ She forcefully emphasised every word.

‘I’ll try to find some time for lessons soon,’ he promised her half-heartedly.

‘You could easily find time, Ron, but I know you; you won’t. You’ve been saying “soon” since before we were married. You’ve been saying it for ... ten years, probably,’ she said. ‘Honestly, Ron, I won’t be surprised if Rose passes her driving test before you do! Now, fasten your seatbelt. It’s time we left.’

Ron grinned and obeyed. Hermione pulled a mirror from her jacket pocket and fastened it into the cradle on the dashboard. Satisfied that it was secure, she reached forwards and switched on the Invisibility Booster. The Mini vanished.

‘Ready, Rose, Hugo?’ she asked.

‘Yes, Mummy.’

She looked at the mirror and spoke. ‘Portkey Office.’

‘Mrs Weasley,’ a young woman’s face appeared in the mirror. ‘You have a Portkey booked for one o’clock, from Oakford Fitzpayne to the sky above Alnmouth. It is now twelve fifty-eight; are you ready to depart?’

‘We are, yes.’

‘Your Portkey is now logged and authorised. Enjoy your trip.’
‘Thank you. We will,’ Hermione said. She pulled out her wand, touched the steering wheel and said, ‘Portus.’

Ron felt the familiar jerk in his stomach. Hugo squeaked in surprise. Rosie said ‘Wheeee!’

Suddenly, they were in mid air, hovering above a river as it meandered its way across a wide and sandy beach into the sea.

‘Seaside,’ Rose squeaked excitedly as she peered out of the window. ‘And sand, lots ’n lots of sand!’

‘If we have time we might go to the seaside tomorrow, Rose; with Grammy and Dan-dad,’ said Hermione. ‘But now, we’re going to go to meet them at the swimming pool, and we’re going swimming with Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny.’

‘An’ Dames an’ Al an’ Lily,’ said Rose.

‘James,’ Hermione corrected.

‘Djames,’ said Rose, struggling to sound the “J”.

‘And Harry’s new Muggle friends, too. And Aunt Loony, probably,’ Ron added.

‘Luna,’ Hermione corrected him automatically.

‘That’s the road we want, Hermione.’ He pointed inland and to the north.

Hermione flew north eastwards until she reached the road. She dropped down until they were flying low above it. Waiting until there was no traffic in sight, she gently brought the car down onto the road and switched off the Invisibility Booster.

They continued to drive along unfamiliar roads, Ron with a Muggle roadmap on his lap. They soon found their way inland to the outskirts of Alnwick, the large town which was their destination. After only one wrong turning, and a very minor exchange of cross words between husband and wife, Ron successfully navigated them into the swimming pool car park.

‘There’s Uncle Harry,’ said Ron, pointing to the entrance as they drove through the car park.

‘An’ Dames-Djames an’ ‘is fren’ Hennery,’ said Rosie.

‘And that must be Henry’s dad,’ said Ron, pointing at the thickset man in the group, the only person he didn’t recognise.

Hermione pulled into a parking space. Ron grabbed the bag containing their swimming things and began to help Hugo from his car seat while Hermione unbuckled Rose.

‘I’ll just get in touch with Mum and Dad, let them know we’ve arrived,’ Hermione said.

‘I’m surprised that they want to watch the kids swimming, but I’m glad they’re here for the party. Harry and Ginny have invited a lot of Muggle neighbours. A few Muggles and Muggle-borns who know what’s really going on will help divert suspicion, I hope.’ Ron shook his head in disbelief. ‘I really don’t believe Harry and Ginny; they’re having a party in four hours, and they’ve decided to come to the swimming pool first. I know that they promised the kids, but…’

‘They missed out on swimming last weekend because it was my birthday, Ron. And Harry will almost certainly be at work all next weekend,’ Hermione reminded him.
'Full moon, I know,' said Ron. ‘But…’

‘We’ll only be here for an hour, Ron,’ said Hermione. ‘And we’ll be at Drakeshaugh only a few minutes later, unlike the Charltons, and Mum and Dad. They will have to drive, but we’ll have at least two hours at Drakeshaugh before the party starts; that’s definitely long enough to get changed and organised. Just before we left home I spoke to Ginny to confirm that your parents have arrived. She told me that your mum and Kreacher have both taken charge of the catering. Ginny was glad to be out of the way until one of them wins.’

‘There will never be a winner in that contest,’ said Ron. ‘That’s not a fight; it’s irresistible force and immovable object!’

‘Perhaps Fleur will be able to keep the peace,’ suggested Hermione, making her husband splutter with laughter. ‘You take Hugo and the bag, Ron. Rose, you stay with me for a moment. I’m going to talk to Grammy and Dan-dad; they’re going to Uncle Harry’s party so they’re staying in a hotel close by. We’ll be staying in the same hotel tonight, too.’

Rose nodded wisely. ‘I say hello to Grammy and Dan-dad with you, Mummy,’ she announced.

‘That’s right, Rose. Good girl,’ Hermione said. ‘They’re coming to watch you swim.

Ron shouldered the bag, grabbed Hugo’s hand and led his son across the car park. As they walked towards the pool, Ron took stock of Harry and Ginny’s new Muggle friends. Jacqui Charlton was about Audrey’s height; she was taller than Ginny and Hermione, but not as tall as Fleur or Angelina. She was a broad-shouldered woman whose straight dark-brown hair reached down to her collarbone. Her husband, Mike, was a six-footer, he too was broad-shouldered and was taller than Harry, but not quite as tall as Ron. Mike was a little paunchy and his short, straw-coloured hair was beginning to recede. The little girl, Annie, was in her father’s arms and her hair was fairer that his. The boy, James’s new friend Henry, was stocky and brown-haired, and he and James were whispering to each other.

‘Hello, Potters. Hi, Jacqui,’ said Ron. He was met by a chorus of hellos. Releasing Hugo into the clustering kids, Ron held out his hand to the straw-haired man. ‘You must be Jacqui’s husband, Mike. I’m Ron Weasley, Ginny’s brother.’

‘I can tell,’ Mike looked up at Ron, and then down at Ginny, who was almost a foot shorter than her brother. ‘Although—did they stretch you, or shrink her?’ Mike asked.

‘Michael!’ Jacqui snapped. ‘I’m so sorry, Ron,’ she said apologetically.

Ron simply laughed. ‘That’s okay. When you meet my mum and dad, you’ll understand, Mike.’ Ron saw Jacqui’s eyes light up in understanding. She, of course, had met them both, he remembered.

‘Yes, you will,’ Jacqui told her husband firmly. She was no longer looking at Ron, but instead looked over his shoulder.

‘Hello, everyone,’ said Hermione from behind Ron. ‘Mum and Dad will be here soon; they said we should just get changed.’

‘Mike, this is my wife, Hermione.’ Ron performed the introduction. Mike and Hermione shook hands and exchanged a polite greeting.

‘Swimble time,’ Henry and James reminded the adults.
‘Swimming time,’ Rose corrected them.

‘You’re right, it is. We should go and get changed,’ Harry agreed. ‘We need to leave, to get back to Drakeshaugh, in an hour. Do you know why, Rosie?’

‘Another party, but not Mummy’s birthday,’ said Rosie knowingly.

‘That’s my girl,’ said Ron proudly.

The three couples made their way to the changing rooms with a crowd of excited children. James was busily boasting about his swimming skills to Rose, but she was ignoring him and chattering to Al.

‘No Luna?’ Ron asked, looking around.

‘She’s helping Mum, and everyone else, with the catering,’ said Ginny. ‘We asked her if she’d like to come with us last night, when we were making final arrangements with Mike and Jacqui. She said no.’

‘She said that there were too many comicals in the water at a swimming pool,’ said Jacqui, smiling.

‘There’ll be one less comical…’ Ron and Mike began together. They stopped and grinned at each other.

Ron waved his hand, indicating that Mike should finish the sentence.

‘…if she isn’t in the water,’ Mike finished.

‘So, you’ve met Luna,’ Ron observed.

‘Yes, Jacqui got a flat tyre and I was forced to call at Drakeshaugh last night to rescue her and get her back to the car once I’d changed the wheel. That’s when we discussed plans for this swimming trip,’ Mike confirmed.

‘Good old Luna; she’s unique,’ said Ron.

‘We all are,’ said Jacqui.

‘But Luna’s the most unique-est person I’ve ever met,’ Mike added

Ron laughed and they entered the changing room. Mike grinned and seemed prepared to continue the conversation.

‘We should go and get changed,’ Harry reminded everyone. ‘We can’t stay for a long time today, kids.’

‘Party!’ James shouted. ‘An’ Uncle George’s fireworks!’ The other kids cheered.

By the time the families were changed and had herded their children onto the poolside, Hermione’s parents had arrived. While Hermione performed the introductions Ron had a hasty word with Harry.

‘You’re mad, Harry,’ said Ron. ‘You’re busy at work and it’s the full moon next weekend. Why on earth would you organise your housewarming party for today, and then arrange to go swimming, too?’
‘The party is this weekend because the full moon is next Sunday, Ron,’ Harry told him. ‘And the weekend afterwards, it’s James’s birthday. Once we’d decided to have a housewarming party, it was either this weekend or November! James likes swimming. It’s good for him; it’s good for us all, and I won’t be able to bring Ginny and the kids next weekend.’

‘How’s the case going?’ asked Ron in an undertone.

‘Not as badly as the press think. But not as well as I’d like,’ Harry began. He was about to say more, but the introductions were over and the kids, and the Charltons were ready to head into the pool.

Swimming in an enclosed public pool was a new experience for Ron. He’d been in pools before, but splashing around in an open air pool while on holiday wasn’t the same, especially as, on this occasion, Jacqui seemed to be taking charge. Harry and Ginny seemed to be okay with that and, to Ron’s surprise, Hermione was letting Jacqui take control. His wife was even taking advice from Jacqui.

‘Getting their faces into the water is really important, Hermione,’ Jacqui explained earnestly. ‘If you want them to swim and not to panic, they need to have confidence that they will float, and that opening their eyes in the water won’t do them any harm.’

While Jacqui, Ginny and Hermione were concentrating on the five younger kids, Harry and Mike had taken James and Henry out into the deeper water. Ron found himself without anything to do, so he simply floated at the edge of the pool and watched. Jacqui had suggested that James and Henry practise doing forward rolls, which, under the watchful eyes of their fathers, they were doing.

‘What on earth is the point of that?’ Ron called over to Harry. Harry merely shrugged and glanced at Jacqui.

Jacqui slid gracefully alongside Ron, and he was struck by how at home she appeared in the water.

‘I’ll show you, Ron,’ Jacqui told him. ‘Follow me.’ She rolled forwards off her feet and put her face into the water. With four quick strokes she sped away from him and into the middle of the pool. Feeling a little wary, he splashed his way clumsily behind her.

When he reached her, Jacqui was treading water. She was barely making a wave. Ron knew that he wouldn’t be so graceful. Fortunately, by standing on his tiptoes, he could still touch the bottom of the pool. Harry, James, Mike and Henry splashed over to join them. They were all treading water, even James, who was managing it quite well. Jacqui looked at the sides of the pool as if to get her bearings, before looking down at the thin line of darker tiles below her.

‘I’m a little out of practice,’ Jacqui apologised. ‘But you might want to watch this, Henry, and you too, James. This is why you need to learn how to do forward rolls.’

She waited until a couple of giggling teens got out of her way and glanced around to make certain that no one else was approaching. She set off at speed, doing a powerful freestyle as she swam rapidly towards the end of the pool. She made no attempt to slow down; in fact, she continued to accelerate. At the last minute, she rolled; her legs lifted out of the water and she seemed to twist. Suddenly, to Ron’s surprise, she was pushing off the wall and powering back towards them. She took two powerful underwater pulls, surfaced just in front of them, and pulled herself to a halt.

‘Wow, Mum,’ said Henry, impressed. ‘That was brilliant! I bet you can beat anyone in a race.’
‘That’s what the forward roll is for,’ said Jacqui a little breathlessly. ‘But I’m slow, Henry. I’m faster than your dad, but that’s not fast.\’

After her demonstration, Ron was happy to allow Jacqui to instruct Rose and Al in addition to her own children and James. He simply relaxed and watched the kids as they followed Jacqui’s instructions. Rose was soon enjoying herself, and so was Al. They even raced each other. To Ron’s disappointment, Al won.

When it was time to leave, Harry confirmed the plans with the Charltons.

‘We’re heading straight home, Mike,’ Harry said. ‘We’ll shower and change there, and we’ll see you at Drakeshaugh later. There’s no rush; just arrive when you can.’

‘Jacqui is keen to get there as soon as possible, before any of the other school mums,’ Mike Charlton muttered, as he lifted his daughter from the water and began to ease off her armbands.

The moment they climbed out from the water, Hermione’s parents announced their intention to depart.

‘We’ll go and see if we can help Molly,’ said Jean Granger cheerfully. ‘See you all soon. What clever children you are, and what a good teacher you are, Jacqui. Hermione was always scared of the water when she was small.’

Jacqui Charlton, obviously embarrassed by the praise, mumbled her thanks as she led her son into the changing area. The others followed closely behind.

The moment the Charltons disappeared into the shower area to get ready for the party, the Potters and Weasleys exchanged a knowing glance. Each family found a large cubicle. They were magically dried and dressed before there was any sign of the Charltons emerging from the showers. They shouted their goodbyes to be answered by shouted replies, and naked Henry, who trotted out to say goodbye to James.

‘See you soon, James,’ he yelled after them as the Potters and Weasleys left.

‘D’you mind if I travel with Harry?’ Ron asked both his wife and his sister as they left the pool and walked across the car park.

‘Fine,’ said Ginny, ‘You don’t mind, do you, Harry? That way, I’ll be there sooner. Hermione has a Portkey booked.’

‘Okay,’ Hermione agreed.

‘The flight is only fifteen minutes, Ginny,’ said Harry. ‘We won’t be far behind you.’

‘Are you still having problems with Lily?’ Hermione asked.

‘When did you last take her by Portkey?’ Ron added.

‘When we moved up here, last month,’ said Ginny. ‘I brought Lily and the boys to Drakeshaugh by Portkey. The Floo Network Authority was being inefficient about relocating our secure connection, so I had no choice. Lily puked everywhere and she was still unwell the following day.’

‘Some little ones simply don’t like it,’ said Hermione sympathetically.

‘Hugo doesn’t have a problem,’ said Ron, failing to keep the smugness from his voice.
‘I think we’ll have at least an hour to get ourselves organised before the Charltons will arrive at Drakeshaugh,’ said Harry evenly, ignoring his friend’s comment. ‘We’ll easily beat your mum and dad too, Hermione.’

‘Are the Charltons really intending to get showered and changed, ready for the party, at the pool?’ Hermione asked.

Harry nodded. ‘They’d have to drive past Drakeshaugh to go home and change and we told them last night that, if that’s what they wanted to do, it was fine. Jacqui has made a big batch of chocolate cakes for the kids, so she wants to be there before the other guests. It simply means that the magic will stop a little earlier. I’ve got the gate from the main road alarmed, so we’ll know when the Muggles are approaching. Jacqui doesn’t seem to think that it will be a problem to get ready here.’

‘Public showers,’ said Ron with a shudder. ‘Reminds me of school.’

‘Mike and Ginny told me about Jacqui’s flat tyre, Harry,’ said Hermione as they reached the cars. ‘She was lucky.’

‘I suppose she was, in a way. It’s a good thing I was flying home on the bike and saw her; if I hadn’t she might have been stuck for a while.’ He grinned at his friend. ‘I drove back down with Mike and we changed the tyre together. That was an interesting experience. Mike knows a lot more about Sirius’s bike than I do. He asked me all sorts of technical questions about it. And Jacqui doesn’t miss anything. We’re going to have to be very careful today, Hermione.’

‘Hermione has a lot of Muggle relatives, she knows how to behave and so do her parents. And Dennis and Lesley Creevey will help. Three Muggles know the truth, and there are several Muggle-borns who know how to behave.’ Ginny reminded her husband. ‘It’s time we left, Harry,’ He kissed her, and watched her climb into Hermione’s Mini before he set off.

‘How’s the investigation going, Harry?’ asked Ron the moment they were in the air.

Harry turned on a recording of nursery rhymes, waited until his children were singing along and then limited the noise to the back of the car before replying.

‘As I said, not as well as I’d like,’ he admitted. ‘Dacia Skoll has had a look at the victims and carried out a lot of tests. There is no saliva or any other human or animal material in the wounds, but the injuries certainly look like wolf bites. However,’ he added, pausing to emphasise the significance of his words, ‘although there is no other obvious cause of death, bleeding appears to have been minimal.’

‘So, they were killed first, and then mauled?’ asked Ron. ‘Was it the Killing Curse?’

‘We think so, Ron. The wounds are bad, but it looks very much like the Avada Kedavra, disguised by post-mortem bites. Dacia reckoned that someone had taken a cast of a wolf’s jaw and was using it to apply the bite injuries after death. She’s managed to recreate the jaw from the bite marks.’

‘Wolf, or werewolf?’ asked Ron eagerly. Harry grinned at his friend and chuckled.

‘Sometimes I think you want your old job back, retired-Auror Weasley,’ he said. ‘We can manage without you, you know.’

‘Wolf, or werewolf?’ Ron repeated.

‘It’s difficult to tell; you know that,’ said Harry. ‘But, actually, we know that it’s a werewolf.’
‘That’s ridiculous,’ said Ron. ‘A werewolf could, and would, simply bite the victims. Why take a cast of their own jaw? It gives you a lead, and proof. And the teeth can’t be from a dead werewolf, because they revert to human form when the moon sets.’

‘All true, Ron, at least it’s almost true. In fact, we managed to figure that out without your help. That’s why Polly and her team have been removed from the watch on Doxine Gray and moved to the Marvellous Magical Menagerie.’

‘That old museum in west London, the one with all of the stuffed magical creatures?’ asked Ron. ‘Mum and Dad took Ginny and me there when were little. It was rubbish. The dragon was okay, I suppose, but the rest of the stuff looked like it had been there forever.’

That’s because it had, Ron. Most of it dates back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when laws, and sensibilities, were different. There is a two-hundred-year-old stuffed werewolf on display. Amber Skoll knew that, and she told me about it, during the case discussions. Amber is really annoyed that it’s still there, so is her mum.’

‘I’m surprised Dacia didn’t demand its removal,’ said Ron.

‘She did,’ Harry told him. ‘Amber and Dacia both want it removed. Lavender will too when they tell her. It’s like stuffing a person and putting them on display.’

‘Creepy,’ Ron agreed.

‘We don’t know who the werewolf was, but she was killed in 1776, preserved before moonset and stuffed.’

‘Nasty,’ said Ron.

‘And, unfortunately, she’s going to have to stay there until we solve this case. I sent Amber and Aloysius Webb over to check it out. Webb decided that it would be a good idea to go in incognito. He was right. They managed to get a cast of the jaws, and they match the wounds. A werewolf who’s been dead for two-hundred-and-fifty years is guilty of mauling our victims.’

‘Sounds like you’re doing okay to me,’ said Ron, impressed.

‘I’m now confident that it isn’t a werewolf, Ron. You were right, it’s simply someone who is trying to blame the werewolves, but we’ll be mounting a raid on Doxine Gray on Monday anyway.’

‘Why?’

‘The stuffed werewolf is inside a glass display cabinet, Ron. Al and Amber spoke to the director, a man called Hereward Wallace. There are only two dozen people working at the Menagerie, and only eight of them have access to the display cases. We now have nine suspects.

‘Nine?’

‘I’m not discounting the director. Mr Wallace was investigated and cleared after the battle. But our files say “insufficient evidence”, not “cleared of all charges.” I have two Aurors assigned to watch each one of the nine, but we’re raiding Doxine’s place to throw the real suspects off the scent.’

‘Good luck, mate.’

‘We’re here, kids,’ Harry announced, and he brought the car down into the yard outside Drakeshaugh and switched off the Invisibility Booster.
Arrivals

Henry was chattering excitedly even before we’d driven out from the car park. As we made our way towards Drakeshaugh he asked dozens of questions. I tried to respond sensibly, but Mike talked nonsense to him.

‘Many peoples will be there?’ Henry demanded.

‘I’ve no idea, Henry,’ I told him. ‘Ginny has five brothers…’

‘Proper peoples, not grown-ups,’ said Henry forcefully.

‘He’s finally spotted that we aren’t proper peoples, Mummy,’ Mike said. ‘We’re really Purple People-Eaters from Pluto, Henry, so now you’re in trouble.’

‘What?’ Henry asked. ‘You’re silly Daddy!’

‘There will be at least two dozen children, Henry, probably more,’ I said, ignoring my husband and doing a quick calculation. The Potter kids plus their cousins made an even dozen, and I knew that there would be at least the same number from school.

‘What’s a dozen?’ Henry asked.

‘It’s what you get when you add a half-dozen to another half-dozen,’ Mike told him.

‘It’s another way of saying twelve, Henry,’ I said.

‘Why didn’t you just say twelve?’ Henry asked.

‘Because Mammy doesn’t think you can count to twelve,’ Mike said. ‘And besides, Mammy doesn’t know the score.’

‘What score?’ Henry asked.

‘A score is a trio of half-dozens plus a duo,’ said Mike immediately. He’d obviously been thinking about that one.

‘You are very, very, silly, Daddy!’ said Henry firmly.

I was in full agreement with Henry, but I didn’t say so. I decided to shut up and leave my husband to explain himself. It was one of those stupid, bantering conversations where Mike used lots of words that Henry didn’t know. It made the journey pass quickly, but Henry was much too young to understand even half of what Mike was saying. My son was baffled and my head was spinning when we pulled to a halt at the gate.

‘Nearly there!’ Henry announced excitedly, his confusion forgotten.

I pushed the gate open for Mike and stood aside to allow him to drive through onto the track. My new skirt flapped and slapped against my legs. The wind was a northerly, and as it blew down the valley, its blustery, skin-chilling gusts brought with them a faint reminder of the Arctic. Wondering what the weather might hold for the party, I looked up. The few clouds scattered across the azure sky were high and white. The wind would add a chill to the day, but the afternoon promised to be a
dry and sunny one. After sunset, however, the temperature would probably drop quickly, especially if the wind remained.

As I strolled back to the car after closing the gate, I suddenly became aware that I was as nervous and excited as Henry; I was simply better at hiding it. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been to a party, a real party, where I would meet new people. Proper people, not children, I thought to myself with a smile. I was still grinning to myself when I climbed back into the car, and Mike gave me a very nice smile in return.

‘We’re very early,’ he told me as, for the second time in two days, he drove up the track to Drakeshaugh. ‘The invitation said five, and it’s not much after four.’ I was surprised at how worried he sounded.

‘They’re expecting us to be early, Mike,’ I told him. ‘I agreed it with Ginny yesterday while you were away fixing the car with Harry, and I confirmed it again at the pool. I’ve got five dozen chocolate buns to deliver, remember?’ I panicked, suddenly realising how many people would be there. ‘Five dozen won’t be enough! I should have made more,’ I added.

‘I’m sure that they won’t run out of food, Jacqui,’ he assured me.

As we approached the gates into the yard, I noticed two people in the distance. They were standing a little further up the forestry track and gazing out over the fields towards the Drake Stone. They looked over their shoulders at us when they heard the car, but I lost sight of them as Mike swung into the Potters’ yard and we scrunched over the gravel.

Harry, looking very smart in black trousers and a pale green casual shirt, was waiting at the open front door as we drove in. I looked along the house. The kitchen door, the only door I’d ever used, was firmly closed.

He waved to us, and gestured that we should park alongside the four cars which were already there. Hermione’s Mini was parked next to Harry’s Range Rover. On the other side of the Mini was a large silver Audi. Next to that was a tiny, open-topped two-seater sports car; it was bottle-green with a white nose, and a white stripe up the centre of the bonnet.

‘Harry’s showered and changed already,’ Mike observed as he parked next to the little green car. ‘They must have really flown here.’

‘We showered and changed at the pool and drove here,’ I reminded him. ‘They drove here and showered and changed. It’s the same thing, but opposite.’

He chuckled. ‘Another reason why I love you,’ he told me, much to my surprise. ‘How many women would be prepared to get showered, changed and ready for a party in a swimming pool changing room?’

‘Anyone who started swimming competitively when they were ten,’ I told him, smiling. ‘But it’s nice to be appreciated. Steph, Nix and I used to do it all the time, and not just for parties. After all, you never know who you’ll meet when you’re wandering the city streets during lunch break.’

Mike laughed, reached over the gear lever, and squeezed my right leg just above my knee.

I started to open the car door. ‘Careful with the door, Jacqui,’ Mike warned me. He nodded at the little green two-seater. ‘That’s a kit-car, a Caterham Seven. I reckon that it’s at least twenty grand’s worth, and it will definitely be someone’s pride and joy. Whose is it, do you think?’

‘It’s a car, Mike,’ I said. ‘A tin box with a wheel in each corner, that’s what you used to call them.’
'That bike ride yesterday really got you, didn’t it?’ he chuckled. His hand was still on my leg, preventing me from getting out. When I turned to face him he gently stroked my cheek with his free hand, leaned forwards, and kissed me. It was no more than a gentle brushing of lips, but it was a pleasant surprise. It was also too much for Henry.

‘Come on,’ said our son impatiently. ‘We’re here! Get me out!’ He was desperately struggling with his seatbelt.


Mike released me and winked. We climbed out and released our struggling kids from their seats. The Potter children, closely followed by Ron and Hermione’s two, dashed noisily across the yard to greet us. Henry and Annie ran to meet them midway. Harry was strolling behind the kids, smiling his welcome at us.

‘Hello again,’ he called.

‘Hello, Harry,’ I shouted back, trying to make myself heard over the excited chattering of seven children.

As I looked towards the cluster of under-fives, Ginny emerged from the door behind Harry. Mike whistled under his breath when he saw her.

‘Blimey,’ he said quietly. ‘She’s almost as good-looking as you are, my darling.’

‘Two compliments in as many minutes,’ I told him. ‘But flattery will get you nowhere, and lies certainly won’t. She’s absolutely stunning, Mike, and you know it.’

Ginny’s waist length hair was unbound. As she walked towards us a sudden gust caught it and her red mane rippled sideways, glowing and flowing like bright lava in the afternoon sunlight.

‘Hello, Charltons,’ Ginny called out from behind her husband.

Ginny was wearing an emerald green cap-sleeved sheath dress. It pretended to be plain and simple, but it deceived. It was a classic, and it was perfect for her. The little green dress hugged and complimented her like the very best of friends. I had no doubt that she’d be the centre of attention, and I was instantly proved correct.

When he heard her voice, Harry looked over his shoulder. The moment he saw the vision that was his wife, he forgot all about us, turned, strode back and kissed her.

As I watched them kiss, Mike slipped his arm around my waist and pulled me sideways until we were hip to hip.

‘You know your problem, Jacqui?’ he said. ‘You just can’t take a compliment. Mike Charlton married a stunner. I think you’re beautiful, so just this once, let me be nice to you without complaining about it.’ He bent forward and clumsily kissed my nose.

I really hate it when he teases me, but I didn’t reply, because by then, we were being watched by two other people. The couple I’d seen further up the track had just walked in through the gate.

The man was short, wiry and almost boyish-looking. He wasn’t much taller than Ginny, and because Ginny was, like me, in heels, it seemed likely that even she would be looking down on him. If the man was small, then the spiky-blonde-haired woman he was with was tiny; or, at least, she was tiny in most directions. She was only a fraction over five feet tall, but her belly looked like
a balloon which was about to burst. It has always seemed to me that small women invariably appear to be much more pregnant than larger ones, and she was massively pregnant.

‘Come and see what you’ve got to look forward to, Dennis,’ Ginny shouted across. The man, Dennis, presumably, was watching the rabble of under-fives with some alarm, and when the other Weasley kids (all except “Victor” I noticed) came tumbling from the house, his alarm turned to obvious panic.

‘Is that yours?’ Mike asked Dennis, ignoring the kids and indicating the open topped car.

‘Yes, but it’s getting to be a little impractical,’ he said. He gently stroked the woman’s belly by way of explanation.

‘This is Mike and Jacqui Charlton,’ Harry called, his arm still around Ginny’s waist. He indicated us as he performed the introductions. ‘And this is Dennis Creevey and his wife, Lesley.’

‘Lovely country,’ said Dennis enthusiastically. ‘A lot closer to my parents’ house than I expected, too. That’s why we’re so early.’

‘No,’ his wife said. ‘We’re early because of the breakneck speed you drive everywhere, Den.’

He simply grinned. ‘We’ll have to come back here for a walk sometime, Les,’ he said as they strolled towards us.

‘I won’t be walking very far for a while, remember,’ she said, looking down at her bump. ‘It would be nice to walk to that stone, or climb Cheviot, but I really don’t want to give birth up there.’

‘When are you due?’ I asked.

‘Not for another six weeks,’ she said. ‘But I already feel like I’m about to explode. I don’t know if I’ll last that long. I hope that I do. I’ve got a lot to do in the office before I finish work.’

‘You’re still working?’ I asked. ‘What do you do?’

‘I work for a planning consultancy,’ she told me. ‘I’m dealing with a big housing development in Dorking. I’d like to get it approved before I leave. What about you?’

‘I haven’t worked since Henry was born,’ I admitted. ‘Before that I was in a call centre, for British Gas, but they outsourced us to India while I was pregnant, so I didn’t have a job to go back to.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘Don’t be,’ I said. ‘It was a long commute to work, and I probably wouldn’t have gone back anyway. Besides, while I was on maternity leave, Mike was made a partner in his company. We’re managing nicely on his money, and I’m watching my children grow up. To be honest, I don’t miss my job.’

Harry and Ginny were herding the kids back to the house. I found our two kids in the tumult and identified them to Lesley. As I did so, Mike and Dennis left us. They strolled over to the car and began examining it closely.

‘Boys and toys,’ Lesley said, smiling at me. I turned and watched Mike and Dennis as they examined his car.

‘Nice paintwork. British Racing Green?’ asked Mike.
‘Of course,’ said Dennis, grinning. ‘It’s the only colour to have, isn’t it?’

‘Did you build it yourself?’

‘Yeah, I always wanted to build a car from scratch, and the kit made it easy for me,’ Dennis told my husband. ‘It took me a year to do it. It’s a Roadsport 175—that’s brake-horse—the engine is a two-litre Cosworth. I’ve had it up to a hundred and thirty.’

‘I used to ride a Duke—a Ducati—Multistrada,’ Mike told him, sounding a little jealous. ‘Twelve-hundred cc, and it only pulled one-fifty, but I reckon it would still…’

‘Beat this? Probably,’ said Dennis. ‘What was the top end?’

‘Dunno. I had it up to one-forty on the Autobahn.’ Mike smiled, mollified.

‘Apart from speed, I have no idea what they are talking about,’ I told Lesley. I was already bored with their conversation.

‘Just nod and say yes,’ she replied. ‘That’s what I do.’

Harry and Ginny had managed to get the kids through the front door. I was prepared to follow, but Mike and Dennis weren’t moving. They were closely examining the car. Their conversation was full of technical talk and kerbside weights and nought-to-sixties.

‘Perhaps we should leave them to drool and go inside,’ Lesley suggested. She leaned back, rubbed the back of her hips and twisted. It seemed to me that she needed to take the weight off her legs.

‘Good idea,’ I said. We left our men and strolled towards the open front door. ‘Have you known the Potters for long?’ I asked.

‘A few years,’ she told me. ‘But they’re Den’s friends more than mine. He’s known them for a long time. He works for Harry; he has done since he left school. And he’s a good friend of Ginny’s brother, George. George was best man at our wedding.’

‘Really?’ I said, stepping aside to allow her to be the first to walk through the small wooden porch and into the Potter’s living room.

‘Yes, I … bloody hell,’ she said as she stepped inside. I too was astonished, but I simply looked around in stunned silence. I hadn’t been back inside the huge living room since my first visit almost three weeks earlier.

The Potters, it seemed to me, had been living in their kitchen, which was itself impressively large, but it was dwarfed by the huge space we had just entered. I had been in the converted barn before, but at the time it had been cluttered with boxes. Now, it was simply a huge space. Lesley and I stood in the doorway and stared.

Three of the walls were rough stone, one of those being the wall we’d just entered through. To our right was the outer gable wall. What must once have been the barn doors was now a huge glazed arch, giving views over the Drakestone and the Cheviots. The wall opposite was broken by three narrow slit windows and an open door which, I suspected, led out to the large patio area I’d seen from the French windows in the kitchen.

The wall to our left connected the barn to the converted farmhouse which formed the bulk of the Potter’s home; it was plastered and painted white. Since my previous visit it had been decorated. Someone had hand-painted remarkably accurate portraits of Harry, Ginny and their children on the
wall next to the fireplace. Above the smiling faces were the words “The Potters” and below, the words “Drakeshaugh, 2009”.

‘Luna,’ said Lesley as she, too, stared at the portraits. ‘She’s good, isn’t she?’

‘Very,’ I agreed. So, Luna was an arty type. It should have been obvious from her choice of clothing.

Next to the portraits was the fireplace, in which a log fire was burning. On the other side of the fireplace to the portraits was an open door, which I identified as the door which led down to the kitchen. Finally, against the side wall was the half flight of stairs which led up to the bedrooms. The door at the top of the stairs was closed.

Two sofas and four armchairs were clustered around the fireplace, and several long wooden benches were set out along the side walls. I turned my attention back to the other end of the room. Four large and laden trestle tables were set out in front of the arched window.

I had never seen so much food, and there was still room for more. Three tables contained savouries; pies, pizzas, cold meats, cheeses, sandwiches and a lot of different breads. There were French batons, ciabattas, baps and stotties.

On the central of the three savoury tables was a huge, cauldron-like pot, resting on a hot plate. Fleur Weasley was the only person in the room. She was wearing a scoop-neck ankle-length summer dress and her fine blonde hair was in an elaborate pile in top of her head. She was fussing over the cauldron, but she turned to greet us. I could still hear Harry, Ginny and the kids; it sounded as though they were outside, on the patio.

‘Allo, Lesley. Bonjour, Jacqui,’ said Fleur. ‘The little children are all outside. Bill, Charlie and George are looking after them while we finish in here. You have the pain au chocolat, Jacqui, yes?’

‘Ah,’ I said, suddenly worried. ‘That’s a direct translation, Fleur. But what I have are not pain au chocolat.’

‘This is a good thing,’ Fleur smiled. ‘I, myself, have made pain au chocolat, clafoutis aux cerises and this.’ She indicated the cauldron.

‘And I helped, Maman,’ said Victoire proudly from the other end of the room. Fleur’s eldest had arrived from the door leading to the kitchen; she was carefully carrying a tray of pain au chocolat. Victoire was wearing a dress very similar in style to her mother’s and she had flowers woven into her own ornate coiffure. She looked like a fairy princess.

‘And did you help with the—whatever that is?’ I asked Victoire, indicating the cauldron.

‘They are moules marinières,’ Victoire told me very seriously. ‘I chopped the onions until they made me cry, and then Papa and Uncle Charlie helped me.’

Victoire was followed into the room by Angelina, who wore tight white trousers and an explosively colourful blouse. She was balancing a pizza on each hand. ‘Hello, fatty,’ she said cheerfully to Lesley. I was shocked, until I heard Lesley laugh.

‘Don’t you start,’ Lesley said. ‘I get enough fat jokes from that lunatic husband of yours.’

‘Ignore him. That’s what I do,’ said Angelina. ‘But if he’s really annoying you, knee him in the crotch; it’s the only thing that shuts him up, and it works every time. You’re looking great, Les. I
know an excellent weight loss programme; it’s called giving birth. The bad news is, it hurts like hell and the weight doesn’t all drop off with the baby.’

‘Too right it doesn’t,’ I muttered to Lesley.

Angelina flashed me a bright smile. ‘Hello, Jacqui,’ she added. ‘Still turning up here? Us crazy Weasleys haven’t put you off yet?’

‘A little craziness is a good thing,’ I said, but I wondered what on earth it would be like in George and Angelina’s home. More than just a little crazy, I expected.

Angelina had been followed into the room by Audrey, who had undergone a major transformation since the last time I’d seen her. She was wearing a short skirt and a tight sweater. She was a lot more fashionable and showing a lot more leg than the last time I’d seen her. She had a lot of leg to show, too. Audrey was carrying a large plate which was piled high with squares of brown cake. Lesley and I watched as the procession of food passed us, and the gaps on the table were filled.

‘Parkin,’ I said. I recognised the smell the moment Audrey walked past us. She gave me a dazzling smile and nodded.

‘Real Yorkshire parkin; Mam’s recipe,’ she said.

‘Hi, Jacqui,’ said Hermione, who was carrying a huge plate of sandwiches. She had changed from the clothes she’d been wearing at the pool, and had tied her hair back.

‘Hello, ladies,’ my husband said as he walked into the room behind me. He slipped an arm around me and pulled my hip onto his.

‘Hello, Weasleys,’ Dennis added as he stepped alongside Lesley and took her hand.

‘Have you finished discussing who has the biggest bore?’ Lesley asked her husband. He and Mike grinned.

The Weasley wives greeted Dennis like an old friend. They welcomed Mike cheerfully enough too, but I decided that I’d better perform the introductions anyway.

‘This is my husband, Mike,’ I said to everyone. ‘You know Hermione, Mike. Meet Fleur, Audrey and Angelina, Ginny’s other sisters-in-law; and this is Bill and Fleur’s daughter, Victoire.’

‘Hello, Victoire. Hello everyone,’ Mike said. ‘What can I say but wow!’ Angelina gave him an odd look, and he explained. ‘The food and the room … very impressive. I’ve brought your cakes in from the boot, Jacqui. Where do you want them?’

‘I’ve brought an empty plate for them, Mike,’ said Luna, who had just entered the room with Harry and Ginny. All three were carrying even more food. Mike and I walked over to the table, and Luna helped us to arrange my definitely paltry contribution on the desserts table. Angelina, meanwhile, had strolled across to talk to the Creeveys. She towered over them.

‘I hope Harry’s got you on light duties, Den,’ she said. ‘Little daddy Dennis! Looking forward to it?’

I didn’t catch what was said next, because there was a sudden influx of people.

‘We, er, hired a mini-bus for this lot,’ said Harry by way of explanation as a dozen adults and half that number of children strolled in through the front door.
Harry took it upon himself to carry out the introductions, and with bewildering speed, we met the newcomers. I’d met one of them previously, but they were all people who Harry described as “very old friends”. It was obvious to me that we were the only outsiders in the room. Ron, Hermione and Angelina plainly knew the new arrivals very well. Fleur and Audrey appeared to know them too.

Terry Boot was the first to say hello. He added that he hoped that he had been forgiven for startling me at our first meeting. I assured him that he was. He then introduced me to his wife, Fenella; a bespectacled black-haired woman with a rather prominent nose, she was almost as tall as Terry. She smiled and gave me a whispered hello, but then they both fell silent.

The next couple were Trudi and Michael Corner. When Harry introduced them, he told me that, like Terry and Dennis, Trudi also worked for him. She was a sturdy, well-muscled woman with short-cropped dark hair who had, it appeared, made no attempt to dress for the party. She wore combat trousers, a vest top and a pair of very solid-looking boots. Her husband could not have been less like her. He was a long-haired and bearded refugee from some long-forgotten hippy commune, and he wore a rather shabby old pinstripe suit over a bright blue t-shirt. He smiled vaguely at me, but his mind was obviously on other things.

I soon found out what. It became obvious that Terry and Michael were old friends. Michael seemed very keen to tell Terry that he’s just heard from someone called Anthony, who was in Russia. I wondered why they hadn’t discussed it on the mini-bus. They were acting as though they had only just met.

Dean and Frankie Thomas were Londoners. Dean made some crack to Mike about Newcastle United being in the Championship league, and Mike responded with the fact that the Magpies were, so far, unbeaten. When he discovered that Dean was a West Ham fan, Mike countered with a comment about West Ham’s appalling performance in the Premiership. They were yet to win a game. I immediately lost Mike to a football discussion, and Frankie rolled her eyes in despair at her husband. We left them to it as Frankie introduced us to their two sons, six-year-old Bradley and three-year-old Ethan.

Seamus Finnigan was a sandy-haired Irishman. His wife, Sinead, was also Irish. They had, flown across especially for the party. Sinead was carrying their eighteen-month-old daughter, Siân, on her hip. The Finnigans and the Thomases were obviously good friends and I found myself pushed out of a conversation between Seamus, Sinead and Frankie. As Mike and Dean were still happily talking football, Harry introduced me to the final two couples.

Parindra and Parvati Rathod were both doctors. They were an immaculately dressed and friendly couple who had two children. The girl, Rani, was dark and pretty, and only a few months younger than Henry; the boy, Haresh, was a serious-faced child who looked to be a little older than Annie. Unlike Frankie Thomas, who was keeping her kids close, the Rathods were quite happy to release their children and send them off to join the others outside.

The Longbottoms, Neville and Hannah, were simply lovely. Both were solidly-built, fair-haired and round-faced, and it was no surprise that the chubby, four-week old baby, Florence, who was sleeping peacefully in her mother’s arms, was also round-faced and fair. Hermione, Ginny, Parvati and Audrey all joined me in cooing over the bonny wee baby. This allowed Neville to offload the weird looking cactus-like plant he was carrying on Harry. I’d never seen anything quite like it.

‘Housewarming present, mate,’ Neville told Harry. ‘It won’t take much looking after. Because I know what you’re like. You won’t look after it!’

‘Thanks, Prof,’ Harry told him. ‘I’ll put this in the study, in case it gets damaged.’ Harry obviously wasn’t a gardener, because he handled the plant as though it might explode. Prof? I wondered. I
didn’t have the opportunity to ask.

‘The first car has just arrived,’ called Ron. ‘I hope that everyone is ready.’
Nosh and Natter

There was a sudden change in the atmosphere. An expectant hush fell over the room and everyone looked towards the door. Somehow, Ron’s final word, “ready,” seemed to be filled with much more serious connotations than simply “the food’s on the table and the house is tidy.” For some reason I was reminded of one of my mother’s favourite films, *The Sting*.

Harry took Ginny’s hand, and they strolled casually towards their open front door to greet the first arrivals. Before they reached it Amanda Berry, in a very short and figure-hugging dress, tripped daintily into the room with her two children at her side.

I checked my watch. It was exactly ten to five. From Amanda’s surprised expression, I was certain that she had expected to be the Potters’ first guest, and that she would have them to herself for a few minutes. The cavernous and impressive living room was enough to create a sense of wonder in anyone. When also faced with more than half of Ginny’s family, and a similar number of “old friends”, the usually self-confident Amanda was reduced to an inarticulate stutter.

‘Oh, er, I…I, um, I was going to apologise for being a few minutes early.’ Amanda told Ginny, as she rapidly regained her composure. ‘But I see that I’m far from the first to arrive.’ She spotted me, the lone familiar face among the horde of strangers, and gave me a smile which seemed to say “I don’t like you much, but I know you.” Harry and Ginny greeted her warmly, and then introduced her to everyone else.

There was no sign of her husband, and I realised that I’d never actually seen him. In response to a question from Ginny, Amanda told us that he worked on the rigs, and was currently in the middle of the North Sea.

I felt a little sorry for Amanda. She was, after all, facing a roomful of total strangers, every one of whom seemed to be very interested in everything she was saying. Daniel and Phoebe, Amanda’s two children, were staying close to their mother and looking nervously around the room. The only other kids in the room, apart from Siân Finnigan and the Longbottoms’ baby, were Dean and Frankie’s two boys and Victoire Weasley.

Daniel, his hands stuffed deep into his pockets, was slouching untidily and gazing curiously at Bradley and Ethan Thomas. The two little Thomas boys were looking back shyly. Daniel’s big sister, Phoebe, who was in a bright blue party dress, had engaged Victoire in a staring-down-the-nose contest. They were sizing each other up with that attempt at aloof seriousness which girls who have almost, or only just, reached a double-figure age seem to think makes them appear more mature.

As I watched Phoebe and Victoire trying to decide whether or not to deign to talk to each other, I realised rather guiltily that I’d forgotten my own children. They had dashed off with the Potter and Weasley kids, and I hadn’t given them a thought since. I was wondering whether to check on them when the noise levels in the room suddenly rose. I saw Amanda’s eyes once again widen and I looked over my shoulder to see Audrey herding the missing Weasley men, all of the children, and several other adults, into the room. Despite the sudden influx, the room was still nowhere near full.

James and Henry dashed across the room and dragged Daniel Berry away from his mother. One glance at my son told me that he was perfectly happy, and that he would not thank me if I fussed over him. He and James were side by side and laughing.
While James and Henry were talking to Daniel, George and Angelina’s son, Fred, and another boy had wandered over to talk to Dean and Frankie’s two boys. The second boy had a tousled mop of untidy red-blond hair and already muddy dungarees. Fred, too, was muddy.

‘Oh, Dominique,’ I heard Fleur murmur despairingly. Curious, I followed her eyes and realised that the dirty dungaree-wearer wasn’t in fact, a boy. At that age it’s often difficult to tell, but I was amazed that Fleur’s younger daughter had been allowed to have such short hair, and wear such boyish clothes. Bill, however, had followed the kids across the room. He happily ruffled Dominique’s hair and spoke to Frankie Thomas. Within moments the two Thomas boys went over to join the other children.

I sought out Annie. She was happily tagging along with the younger kids, the toddlers and preschoolers. She was alongside Al, Lily, Rose and Hugo Weasley, Haresh Rathod, and a girl who could only belong to George and Angelina. I fought for the girl’s name … Roxanne.

The younger kids were being watched over by Ginny’s parents, Hermione’s parents, and a tall, imperious-looking woman whose thick black hair was streaked with silver. To assuage my guilt, I strolled over to make certain Annie was happy. I knew that, unlike Henry, she would always be happy to see me.

‘Hello again,’ I said, smiling at Molly and Arthur Weasley, and John and Jean Granger before crouching down in front of my daughter. ‘Are you okay, Annie?’ I asked.

‘Es, we’gonnaplaygamesoon, Mammy,’ she told me excitedly. ‘Inna big forest!’

‘That’s nice,’ I told her.

‘Harry and Ginny have organised a treasure hunt and other games for the children, Jacqui,’ Molly told me.

‘So, you’re Jacqui,’ the tall woman said brusquely.

I looked up into her heavily hooded dark eyes. She gazed inscrutably down at me through long lashes.

‘I wondered…’ she said no more, but her eyes darted away from me and I knew, without looking, that her dismissive gaze had momentarily rested on Amanda.

‘I … yes … Jacqui Charlton,’ I said. I held out my hand to the woman, and it was very firmly shaken.

She was, I estimated, in her mid fifties. She wore a smart wrap dress in green and white, and an aloof expression.

‘Andromeda Tonks,’ the woman told me, before turning her attention back to Ginny’s mother. ‘These things can be so difficult, you know, Molly,’ said Andromeda. She sounded rather irritated. ‘I can remember one occasion when we invited Ted’s family to our place.’ She shook her head sadly and glanced meaningfully towards me. ‘I’d best say no more.’

Annoyed by the woman’s attitude, I fussed over Annie, Al and Lily, for a few minutes. They seemed to be happy enough. I assured Annie that I would not be far away, and then took my leave, still wondering who on earth Andromeda Tonks was.

By the time I’d found Mike, who was still talking football with Dean Thomas, more cars had arrived. I listened to Mike’s football conversation for a few minutes, but soon got bored and simply
moved aside and watched as everyone else arrived. Within the next fifteen confusing and increasingly crowded minutes, the other local families entered, looked around in surprise, spoke to Harry and Ginny, and then greeted the people they knew.

Amanda was certainly glad to see some more familiar faces. When Mary arrived, at a little after ten past, she scuttled over to her friend’s side. I watched Mary and Amanda as their eyes flicked around the room. Their gaze lingered longest on the people I was sure they would be calling “the ethnics”, although they also stared at long-haired Michael, who was still waving his hands in an excited discussion with Terry Boot.

Mary Saville was at her elegant best. She wore a smart black dress, and her hair was an ornate pile which must have taken her hairdresser hours. I was suddenly self-conscious about my own hastily washed hair. I’d managed to remove the smell of the swimming pool, and I’d brushed and blow-dried it, but that was all.

Mary’s husband, Robert, was a round-faced and balding man who sported a combover. His belly had long ago ensured that he would never again be able to see his belt, and it was doubtful that he’d be able to fasten the jacket he was wearing. Like Michael Corner, he wore a suit, but there the resemblance ended. Robert’s suit was expensive, his shirt and tie bright and colourful. Even so, long-haired Michael managed to look more stylish in a shabby old suit than Robert did in an obviously expensive one.

Robert Saville was one of those men who could easily manage to look unkempt, even when wearing a smart business suit. It was a skill which many men, including my father, possessed. But at least my father didn’t sport a ridiculous hairstyle.

I’d seen Mary’s husband at the school gates a couple of times, but he’d never got out of the car. All I knew was that he owned and ran a haulage business which he’d built up from nothing. According to the gossip, he was as self-important as a self-made-man could be. He muttered something to Mary, and she looked over towards me, obviously identifying me to him. I smiled at them, and then pointedly turned my attention to our hosts.

Harry and Ginny were still standing side by side at the door and greeting the final few arrivals, talking to children and parents alike. By about quarter past, it was obvious that the last of their guests had arrived. After a short conversation with Harry and Ginny, the last arrivals, a ruddy faced and weather-beaten farmer, his wife, and their two young kids strolled into the centre of the room. I recognised the little girl as one of the kids who arrived by bus from one of the farms up the dale.

All I knew about her was what I’d learned from Henry: she sat at the same table as Henry and James, she was called Jo, and she was a girl. Henry seemed to think that any more information, even a surname, was unnecessary.

The room was filling with the buzz of dozens of conversations as friends both old and new met and mingled. As I watched, I noticed that Phoebe Berry had been joined by Mary’s daughter, Helen, and that now both girls were busily staring at Victoire Weasley. I was amused to realise that, with almost identical expressions, their mothers were now sizing up Fleur. Robert Saville and a few of the other men were obviously smitten by the elegant French blonde. Some of them were also casting glances towards Ginny. Mary’s husband’s head was swivelling as he tried to watch them both.

As I continued to observe the crowds, I was startled by an arm sliding around my waist.

‘Hello, gorgeous,’ my husband said. ‘Old Bobby Saville’s never been subtle, has he?’
‘He’s trying to decide which of the two is most beautiful,’ I said.

‘A mistake many people make,’ said Mike knowledgeably. ‘There is absolutely no point. You might as well ask: which is most beautiful; a lioness, a single rose, or an MV Augusta F3?’

I stared up at him, trying to reconcile my usually down to earth husband with this half-baked romantic. He grinned stupidly.

‘What on earth are you talking about, Mike?’ I asked.

‘Beauty is different things, my darling,’ he told me. I wondered if he’d been drinking. ‘Fleur is a fragrant and delicate rose, although I suspect she has thorns, the sharpest being that scarily scarred husband of hers; Ginny is the graceful lioness, and I know she has claws; and you…’

‘I’m a motorbike!’ I said, unaccountably annoyed. I saw the wicked gleam in his eye. ‘Don’t you dare make a ride joke, Michael Charlton!’ I hissed, feeling myself blushing.

He laughed. ‘Sleek, powerful and exciting,’ he told me. I smiled. ‘But needing to be steered,’ he added. I slapped his arm, and then remembered something else he’d said.

‘Bobby Saville?’ I asked. ‘Do you know Mary’s husband?’

‘We’ve done some contract work for him; at least, we’ve done some work for S.T.S. … Saville Transport Services,’ Mike told me. ‘I should have realised Mary was his wife. Bobby is a difficult man to deal with, but he’s a real character. I could tell you some stories…’

‘Quiet,’ George bellowed at the top of his voice. The conversations all stopped and a startled silence descended. ‘Our host and hostess want to say a few words,’ George announced.

Everyone turned to face Harry and Ginny, but before they could speak James, obviously in answer to a question from Henry, knowledgeably said, ‘He means my Mummy and Daddy.’

Harry and Ginny were standing in front of the fireplace. Harry’s hand was around his wife and resting easily on her shoulder; Ginny’s arm encircled her husband’s waist. They looked happy, and their relaxed contentment seemed to percolate through the crowd. They drew everyone’s eye, captivating us as they waited for the laughter brought about by their son’s remark to die down.

‘Thank you, James,’ said Harry.

‘Wuz just splainin’ fo’ Henry, Daddy,’ said James.

‘We guessed,’ said Harry. He looked around the room, watching us all. ‘Hello, all. Ginny and I would like to thank you for coming,’ Harry began. He was halted by a gentle squeeze from Ginny.

‘Sorry, Harry,’ Ginny interrupted. ‘This isn’t going to be a smooth speech, folks. I can see a strange young man skulking around outside our front door. For some reason he seems unwilling to enter.’ She turned toward the still open front door and raised her voice. ‘Don’t worry about interrupting Harry, Rolf,’ she called. She turned to Luna and winked.

‘Rolf!’ Luna dashed across to the door.

‘Luna’s got a boyfriend! Luna’s got… Oof!’ George Weasley’s childish chant was halted when Angelina elbowed him in the ribs. Dean, Seamus and Ron, who had begun to join in, were similarly silenced.
The young man who entered was no taller than me. He was fair of skin, fair of hair, and barely out of his teens. He was wearing a pair of blue jeans, a dress shirt, a colourful cravat, and an old fashioned leather bomber jacket. It seemed to me that Luna had found herself a kindred spirit. From his dress, Rolf appeared to be as eccentric as she was.

‘I’m sorry I’m late, sir,’ he began, addressing Harry.

‘For goodness sake, Rolf,’ said Luna. ‘It’s only Harry, there’s no need to call him sir! Sorry for the interruption, Harry. Please continue, you and Ginny can tell us how nice it is to see us all.’ She motioned for him to continue.

‘Thanks,’ Harry smiled. ‘Luna has pretty much summarised my speech. I only wanted to say thank you all for coming. Ginny and I would like to welcome you all: family, and friends old and new, to Drakeshaugh, to our new home.’

‘Yes, welcome, everyone. Make yourselves at home,’ said Ginny. ‘One other thing, because I’ve already been asked, I’ll tell you that the loos are at the top of the stairs, and also at the bottom of the stairs.’ Ginny waved an arm towards the corner of the room.

‘Also, we’ve organised some games for the kids outside, but that’s for later,’ said Harry.

‘But first, as you can see, there is plenty of food, and drinks, too,’ added Ginny seamlessly. They were remarkably good at it. I got the impression that they could finish each others sentences. ‘Please, help yourselves. The buffet is open. Make sure that you get there before Ron does!’ The Potters’ friends and family all laughed.

At Ginny’s final words, people had begun to move forwards. As an orderly queue began to form, I found myself being dragged into it by my always hungry husband. We ended up in front of Parindra and Parvati Rathod, and behind the Dean and Frankie Thomas. Mary and her husband were in front of Dean and Frankie.

‘Have you known the Potters for long?’ Mary asked Frankie, doing her very best to sound polite. ‘Where did you meet them?’

‘I, er,’ Frankie began, but Dean took over.

‘Harry and I went to school together,’ Dean began. He stepped sideways and turned so that he could see me, too, caught my eye, and grinned at me. ‘Harry doesn’t like to admit it…’ he continued, looking around conspiratorially. I wondered what on earth he was going to say. ‘We’re all public schoolboys. I hope you won’t think badly of us, just because we went to a posh school, to the same posh school. I shared a dormitory with Harry, Ron, Seamus and Neville for years, and we’ve kept in touch ever since.’ He gave Mary a gleaming smile. ‘I suppose that you could say that we’re Harry’s “old boy network”.’

‘And old girls,’ Parvati supplied from behind me. ‘I was in the same year as Harry and Dean and the others, too.’

‘That reminds me,’ Dean said. ‘Where’s Padma?’

‘She’s working, Dean,’ she said. ‘She’s looking after the RANDOM system for Michael. She’s trying to fix it, and it needs to be watched constantly.’ Parvati turned to Mike and me. ‘Padma is my twin,’ she explained. ‘She’s a … scientist … she works with Michael.’

‘An Unspeakably good one, just like Michael,’ said Dean.
Parvati glared at him.

‘RANDOM system?’ my husband asked. ‘Will it help us win the National Lottery?’

‘It’s a…computery thing,’ Parvati stopped. ‘Only Padma can explain it.’

‘Or Michael?’ my husband asked.

‘Yes, but don’t ask him, please,’ Parvati begged.

‘Not unless you really want a boring lecture on probability theory, predictions, and the randomness of human behaviour,’ said Dean. ‘There are only two other people in the room who have any idea what he’s talking about.’

I followed Dean’s gaze as he looked at Michael and Terry, who were still involved in an intense discussion. Terry’s wife had abandoned them, and was now talking to Luna and her boyfriend. Michael’s wife, too, had left them to it. She stood alone in the centre of the room, silently watching everyone. I remembered that Ginny had told me Terry was one of the cleverest people she knew.

Dean then looked towards the Longbottoms. Ron’s wife was with them, busily cooing over their baby daughter.

‘Terry Boot, and Professor Longbottom?’ I guessed. Dean and Parvati both burst out laughing.

‘Neville?’ Dean chuckled. ‘No, Neville’s a plant man, a herb … alist. Hermione is the Arithma … the mathematical genius.’

‘The all-round genius,’ Parvati said. ‘She was always top of the class, Hermione.’

As we continued to shuffle closer to the food, Parvati looked over to Trudi Corner. She strode over.

‘Problem, Parvati?’ she asked.

‘No, but I mentioned that Padma is busy helping Michael with the RANDOM system, Trudi,’ Parvati admitted.

The short-haired woman stared at us. I was struck by how physically fit she looked. She appeared to be bounding with energy.

‘It’s a computer system,’ Trudi told us. ‘Related Abstractions of Non-deterministic Distributions to an Ordered Mean … RANDOM. I don’t fully understand it. Michael is the mathematician, not me. It can be used to make predictions, or, at least, determine probabilities. We’re hoping, Harry is hoping, that it will help us.’

‘Clutching at straws,’ sneered Robert Saville. ‘Wasting taxpayers’ money.’

‘Using every resource available to us,’ said Trudi. ‘We’ve had some success with the RANDOM system in the past. It can see patterns and probabilities which even the cleverest of people can’t. Even if all it does is tell us where not to look, it will be useful. The system can certainly outthink an idiot who doesn’t know what he’s talking about.’ She glared at Bobby Saville. ‘I’m not sure that you can waste money if you’re trying to save lives. After all, how much is a life worth?’

Trudi spoke mildly, but she had subtly changed her stance; she was a weapon, loaded and ready to fire. Robert Saville stared angrily at her, his face reddening.

‘Let’s all calm down, shall we?’ Mike suggested. ‘Hello, Bobby. I’m Mike Charlton, I dealt with
your appeal to the Traffic Commissioners, remember?’

Trudi turned and left us, and Mike successfully diverted Bobby’s anti-government diatribe towards a subject he knew well, the bureaucrats who monitored his business. We had almost reached the table when a voice called from the doorway.

‘Hello everyone, sorry we’re late. Come along, Mark, don’t dawdle.’

The woman who swanned into the room wasn’t very tall; her husband, however, was almost Ron’s height. *Mark,* I thought, *where have I heard that name before?* The woman’s curly brown hair tumbled over her shoulders and cascaded down her back as though she’d stepped from a pre-Raphaelite painting. She wore a knee-length pink lace dress and a “look at me, everyone” smile.

The man, Mark, was thin and angular and almost nondescript. He was, however, attracting the most attention, at least the bundle of pink frills he was carrying was.

‘Lavender, when did you get out of hospital? How are you?’ Parvati called, waving wildly.

Lavender tapped toward us on pink platform shoes, and Parvati’s shout finally brought forth a memory. The lacy pink creature who was now embracing Parvati as “her bestest friend in the world”, and petulantly ordering her husband to “let Parvati see little Violet, Marky, let her hold her,” was, in fact, Harry’s werewolf expert. I looked at her again. She seemed like a very unlikely werewolf expert to me. But, I reminded myself, Harry also employed a Goth named Polly, and Dennis Creevey, a little man who looked like he’d blow away in a strong breeze.

It was, however, impossible to dislike a baby. I gave in, and I, too, cooed over the tiny, pink-faced newborn. Amazingly, so did Mary. We left the queue, along with Parvati and her friend, giving instructions to our husbands to collect food for us, too. Mike and Bobby discussed business, and Parindra and the Thomases discussed kids, while they all filled plates from the laden tables.

It didn’t take me long to realise that Lavender was one of those mothers who seemed to be unable to understand that other people have had babies too. She insisted on telling us things we already knew, and was astonished that we’d had the same experiences with our own newborns. When Mark and Lavender Moon left us to greet the Potters, and the Longbottoms and their equally new baby, I found myself exchanging an exasperated glance with Mary.

Mike arrived with two plates, each filled with mountains of delicious home-cooked food.

‘The kids are all served, and they’re eating outside,’ Mike told me. As people began to eat, the room quietened down. Mike and I found a seat next to Dennis and Lesley Creevey. As we ate, my curiosity got the better of me.

‘Does that woman,’ I nodded towards the Potters, Longbottoms and Moons, ‘Lavender, really work for Harry?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ Dennis assured me. ‘She’ll be a miss. She’ll be away for at least nine months, on maternity leave.’ He looked at my face and laughed. ‘Lavender may not look it, but she’s as tough as they come. Everyone always underestimates her,’ he said. ‘You really wouldn’t believe some of the things she’s done.’

I pressed Dennis, but he would not say any more. I watched the kids as they scampered in and out getting seconds, and dessert, and trampling mud in from outside.

We had eaten, and Mike had gone back for seconds, when there was one of those sudden lulls in the conversation, the loud buzz dropped to a low hum in which everyone could hear my son’s
voice as he loudly asked a question.

‘What happened to your ear, Uncle George?’ Henry said. The silence in the room was suddenly absolute. I cringed, and, like everyone else, I stared at George Weasley, wondering how he’d react. Henry was with James and Daniel Barry, and the three boys were staring at George Weasley, who was sitting between his wife, and Fleur. I wondered whether there was a hole I could hide in.

George’s jaw dropped, his eyes widened, and his eyebrows shot up as he pantomimed surprise. ‘It hasn’t fallen off, has it?’ he asked. He cautiously raised his hand and tugged at his ear. ‘It’s still there,’ he said, wiping imaginary sweat from his forehead. ‘Are you trying to trick me, Henry?’

‘Not that ear,’ said Henry with all the exasperation he could muster. ‘I meant the other one.’

George handed his plate to his wife, slid off the bench, and hunkered down in front of my son. He stared into his eyes. The room remained silent, but George paid us no attention. He was concentrating on Henry and, like everyone else, I realised that I was now watching a performance.

‘You can’t fool me, Henry,’ said George, looking very serious. ‘This is the only ear I have.’ He tugged it again.

‘But why?’ Henry asked, unwilling to be put off. I blamed Mike; no matter how preposterous Mike’s answers, Henry had learned that, if he wanted an answer, he had to persevere.

‘Well,’ said George. ‘It’s a long story, and it starts the way all good stories start. Do you want to hear it?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Henry, nodding vigorously. I took a crumb of comfort from the fact that Henry had remembered to say please. Across the room, the other children were nodding and moving towards George. Ginny, however, was glaring at her brother; he caught her gaze and winked at her.

‘Once upon a time,’ George began, ‘I had two ears, just like you.’ He reached forwards and tugged first Henry’s right ear, and then his left. There was a tinkling noise, and a ten pence coin fell to the floor.

‘Wow!’ George cried. ‘You’ve got a magic ear, Henry, just like I had.’

‘What?’ asked Henry. ‘How’d you do that?’ He twisted around to follow the path of the coin as it rolled across the floor.

Daniel Barry was quickest; he stepped forwards and snatched the coin. ‘Mine,’ he announced triumphantly. I realised that Henry was about to argue. So did George. He peered into Henry’s ear.

‘It looks like there are a lot more coins there, Henry,’ George said, diverting him. ‘Hold your hand here.’ He guided Henry’s left hand up to just below his left ear and held it there with his right hand. With his left hand, George reached around behind Henry’s head. He took hold of Henry’s earlobe and tugged. A small coin fell into Henry’s hand.

‘Don’t move,’ George warned as Henry began to hop excitedly from foot to foot. Henry instantly stopped moving, I had never seen him stand so still. George continued; a tug, a coin, a tug, a coin, on and on until Henry’s little hand was full of coins. When George stopped, Henry carefully lowered his hand and examined the pile of coins. The entire room applauded.

‘Nice one, George,’ Ron called.

‘How’d you do that?’ Henry asked again.
‘I didn’t do anything, Henry,’ said George, once again peering into Henry’s ear. ‘You have an ear that’s completely full of money, just like I had. There is still a lot more in there!’ He looked around the room, caught my eye, and grinned wickedly. I realised what was coming next.

‘Would you like to get some more?’ asked George.

‘Yes, please,’ said Henry.

‘Well, there’s an easy way to get it all out,’ George said. ‘Does anyone have a knife?’

‘No!’ Henry shouted, covering his ear with his empty hand.

‘No?’ asked George. ‘Are you sure, Henry?’

Henry nodded, an awkward thing to do while clasping one hand to his ear while trying not to drop any of the coins in the other.

‘You’re probably wise,’ said George seriously. ‘If you chop it off, you will only get curious little boys asking you what happened to it, and…’ George looked down and I, along with everyone else noticed a black lace hanging from Henry’s pocket. George tugged at the lace, and pulled out a small leather drawstring bag.

‘That’s useful,’ said George. ‘You can keep your money in this bag. Do you always keep a money bag in your pocket, Henry? Is it to keep all the money when it falls out of your ear?’

Henry looked at the bag, and at the collection of coins in his hand.

‘Not my bag. You’re doing magic,’ said Henry wisely.

‘Actually, Henry,’ said George confidentially. ‘What I’m doing is called prestidigitation, which is a much more impressive word. Can you say it?’

‘It,’ said Henry promptly, thanks to Mike’s constant teasing. George roared with laughter.

‘Well done, Henry, and thank you,’ said George. He helped Henry to place the coins into the bag, stood and took a bow, receiving his well-deserved round of applause with a flourish. I began moving towards my son before the applause died down.

‘George Weasley, card tricks, conjuring and confusion, a speciality,’ he called. ‘Thank you, and now… I’ve always wanted to try one of the bigger tricks. Ladies, step forwards if you’re prepared to let me saw you in half.’ He turned to face me. ‘Jacqui!’

I stopped midstride, but it was too late. ‘No!’ I said, holding my hands up in horror.

He smiled. ‘Gotcha,’ he said. I joined in the laughter.

George walked across and hugged me. ‘Serves you right,’ he said. ‘I haven’t forgotten that crack you made about Charlie and Angelina the other week.’

‘I can’t let Henry keep your money,’ I said.

‘Of course you can,’ he said, ‘I don’t want it back.’ He put his hands on my shoulders and stared into my eyes. ‘James set him up, I know that, but he called me Uncle George, and I liked that, too. It’s nice to be a crazy uncle. So Henry can keep the money, and the money bag. And, because I still haven’t answered his question and I know he’ll ask you later… When I was young and stupid I thought that I’d live forever. I volunteered for a dangerous job. I ended up in a fight, and that’s
when I lost my ear.’

His eyes blazed, and suddenly I was looking at a different person. ‘I’d do it again,’ he said with an almost insane passion. ‘In fact, I’d give my other ear, and a limb or two, if I could change just one part of the past.’ He grinned manically, and my worry must have shown on my face.

‘Sorry, Jacqui,’ he apologised. ‘I’m not often like that, not any more, but … well… It’s at times like this that I miss … Never mind.’ He gave me an apologetic look. ‘I’m off to play with the other kids. That always cheers me up.’ He turned on his heels and left me wondering what on earth he was talking about.
Fireworks

Fireworks

I was concerned and a little confused by George’s final outburst, but as I had no idea what to say to him, I simply let him leave. As I watched him walk outside into the garden, I studied the slump of his shoulders. It seemed obvious that he was haunted by some past event, and it appeared to be associated with the loss of his ear. I wondered whether, despite George’s jokes and tricks, Henry’s question had been the trigger.

Mike was at my side the moment George left. ‘Are you okay, Jacques?’ my husband asked me. ‘For a moment there, I thought that he was going to burst into tears. Or explode.’

‘Something’s bothering him,’ I said. ‘But I’ve no idea what it is, not really.’

Still worried about him, I peered out through the open door. George’s demeanour had changed again. He was back to normal, at least, as normal as any of the Potters’ friends and family were. He’d sat down at a large picnic table on the patio and pulled out a pack of cards. The moment he did so, he was surrounded by laughing and shouting children. George the entertainer was back, and the kids were avidly watching his flamboyant card-shuffling.

‘He said that playing with kids cheers him up,’ I told Mike. ‘He looks okay, now.’

‘Yeah,’ Mike agreed. ‘He’s really good at magic, isn’t he?’

‘Yes, although I wouldn’t want him to try to saw me in half.’

‘Neither would I,’ Mike told me.

‘I hope he’ll be okay,’ I said, peering out into the garden.

‘Don’t worry about my George, Jacqui. I don’t,’ said Angelina reassuringly as she appeared behind us. ‘He gets a little depressed sometimes, but the bad days aren’t frequent, and the moments pass quickly. He’ll be okay.’

Mike, Angelina and I stood in the doorway and watched as Harry, Ginny, and George began to organise the children. George was giving each of the children a card. They were, in theory, being randomly sorted into teams based on the card. As I watched, I saw that James and Henry were each brandishing an ace, signifying that they had been placed in the same team. I suspected that their pairing was not by chance; after all, it seemed to me that George could easily fix the cards and, therefore, the teams.

The Potters had prepared several games in the woods and while George dealt out the cards, Harry and Ginny explained their plans to the kids. They paid particular attention to James and Henry’s classmates.

As I watched the cluster of kids, I realised that Victoire wasn’t with the other children, and neither were Phoebe Berry or Helen Saville. The three girls were a little older than the other children but only by a couple of years. I turned my head, and saw that all three were still in the living room. They were standing in a huddle, gossiping. They had obviously decided that they were too mature to join in with outdoor games. As I watched then, Bill strolled over and spoke to his daughter. He appeared to be attempting to persuade Victoire to join the younger kids. She lifted her nose in the air and shook her head with the determination of someone preparing to have a tantrum if she didn’t
get her own way. Bill left the girls alone, and I returned my gaze to the younger kids.

Once the kids had been split into teams, Harry, Ginny and George handed control over to Molly. I listened as she carefully explained that there were coloured ribbons hanging on trees throughout the woods. The teams were being asked to find ribbons of a specific colour and there was a prize for the winning team; Ginny was showing the kids a large box of chocolates while her mum was talking. Molly was assisted by her husband, Hermione’s parents, and the mysterious Andromeda. I was surprised how remarkably relaxed Andromeda was around the children.

‘You’re very well organised,’ I said to Angelina.

‘Do you think so?’ she asked. ‘I’ll let you into a secret, Jacqui; it’s all an illusion. We’re like swans on a lake. It looks like we’re gliding along serenely but underwater, where you can’t see, there’s a lot of frantic paddling going on.’

I laughed. Everything certainly seemed to be going smoothly, although Dominique, her hands thrust deep into the pockets of her dungarees, was eyeing James’s school friends suspiciously. The Weasley children were clustered together and were chattering happily amongst themselves. The stocky, dark and freckled Fred was laughing with the slender and fair Louis. Roxanne was earnestly explaining something to Lily and Hugo.

‘Your two seem to get along really well with their cousins. Do you meet up often?’ I asked.

‘All the time,’ said Angelina. ‘Once a fortnight, Molly invites everyone around for Sunday lunch. Charlie isn’t often there, of course, and he spoils all of the kids rotten when he does turn up. He loves to play with them. Charlie will be out there in the woods somewhere, right now, keeping an eye on them all. But Molly and Arthur see most of us, and we see each other every few of weeks. I really don’t know how Molly does it, especially now that she has a dozen grandchildren as well as her children and all us in-laws. But she’s always had a lot of kids around her. Two are enough for me. I’ve no idea how she managed to cope with seven.’

‘Seven?’ I asked, surprised. I’d thought I had Ginny’s family sorted. She had five older brothers; Bill, Charlie, Percy, George, and Ron.

Angelina gave me a look I couldn’t make out, it seemed to be halfway between regret and annoyance. She realised that she’d given something away, but the sharpness of her glance told me that I was prying into things which she did not really want to talk about.

‘George was a twin; his brother … died,’ said Angelina shortly. Her expression made it clear that she was not going to say more. It seemed that the wound was still raw, even for her. I said nothing, I had dozens of questions, but it was obvious that they would not be welcomed. Instead, I again looked outside, trying to find my own children.

Annie was obviously enjoying herself with Rose and Al, and Henry and James were surrounded by a huddle of classmates and cousins. Molly was talking earnestly to them all. Whatever she was saying, it was holding their attention, and I was happy to leave them to get on with it.

‘She is wonderful with the little ones, isn’t she?’ I said to Angelina, nodding towards her mother-in-law and returning to a safer subject. She smiled, partly, I thought, in thanks for the fact that I hadn’t pressed her about George’s twin.

‘Yes. I don’t know what we’d do without her,’ she said. ‘A grandmother who is prepared to look after her grandchildren while we’re all at work is priceless.’
‘She doesn’t look after all of them, does she?’ I asked, astonished.

‘No, only half of them, and even then she doesn’t have them all at the same time,’ said Angelina. ‘I think that twelve might be too many, even for Molly. Most days she has four. She has Rose and Hugo four days a week, Fred and Roxy for three days, and Molly and Lucy for two.’ Angelina leaned towards me conspiratorially and whispered, ‘To be honest, I think that Molly was a little upset when Fleur decided to give up work and look after her three. And then Ginny went and did the same thing.’

‘Harry and Ginny live a long way from the rest of you now,’ I said, surprised. ‘And they used to live in London, so there’s no way Ginny could drop off the kids in Devon, is there? The rest of you must all live very close to each other to be able to use Molly as a babysitter.’

‘Yes, we must, mustn’t we?’ said Angelina. For some reason she looked a little panicked by my observation. ‘Excuse me, I need to check something with the family,’ she added, and she went off to talk to Audrey, Percy, Ron, and Hermione. Almost as soon as she started talking, they all looked across at me. It was obvious that I was the topic of their conversation.

‘She’s a bit intense, isn’t she?’ said Mike.

‘Is she?’ I said. ‘I think this party has been a bit of a strain on them all. Ginny organised it very quickly. She’s dragged her family all the way up north for two weekends in a row.’ As I spoke, I was struck by a sudden worry. ‘Oh, no! I’ll bet that she was simply going to have a quiet family housewarming party last weekend, and that’s all. I hope that she didn’t organise this simply because of your flippant suggestion at the barbecue, Mike. I hope that they aren’t blaming us for forcing them to have a party.’

‘That’s silly, Jacqui,’ Mike assured me. ‘I’ve only known Ginny a few weeks and so have you. But do you really think that we could pressure her into doing something she didn’t want to do?’ He put his arm around my shoulder and hugged me.

‘I suppose you’re right,’ I said fretfully. Then I thought seriously about it. ‘No, I know you’re right,’ I admitted, slipping my arm around his waist. He kissed the side of my head, and then began to chuckle.

‘Talking about people who do exactly what they want…’ Mike said. He gently pulled me around so that I was facing into the room and he nodded across to the opposite wall. Luna and her very young man were talking to Mary and Robert Saville. They had the Savilles backed against the wall, and both Luna and Rolf were waving their arms as they spoke. Mary looked absolutely terrified. Robert was merely bewildered.

‘Do you think we should go and help?’ I asked Mike.

‘Don’t bother,’ a male voice said from over my shoulder. ‘Take it from me, Luna doesn’t need any help.’

Mike burst out laughing, and I turned to face Ron and Hermione.

‘Are you enjoying yourselves?’ Hermione asked.

‘Yes, thanks,’ I said. ‘Are you?’

‘We always do,’ said Ron. ‘Especially at parties like this where we can offload the little monsters onto my Mum and Dad and talk to grown-ups.’
‘Ron!’ scolded Hermione.

‘Grown-ups? Speak for yourself,’ said Mike.

Ron chuckled. ‘Yeah, when the kids aren’t around, we don’t have to act all sensible and mature, do we?’ he asked. My husband grinned and squeezed my bottom.

‘Mike,’ I hissed, mortified. He simply laughed.

‘You never act “all sensible and mature”, Ron,’ said Hermione. ‘But it is nice and relaxing to know that the grandparents are looking after them.’

‘And Mrs Tonks, whoever she is,’ I added.

Hermione smiled. ‘Andromeda Tonks is our adopted Aunt,’ she said. ‘Adopted by Harry first, and then Ginny, and the rest of the Weasleys. Over the years, she’s become part of the family. She lost her husband eleven years ago, and her daughter and son-in-law only a few weeks later. Andromeda was left to bring up her grandson, Teddy, alone.’

‘Poor woman,’ I said, reassessing my opinion of her in light of this information. Perhaps her brusqueness was her shield.

‘Yes,’ Hermione agreed. ‘Teddy was only a few months old when his parents … died, and Harry is Teddy’s godfather. He’s done his best to help her.’

‘Teddy?’ I asked, looking out into the garden. The kids, however, had scattered into the trees and there was no one in sight. ‘Is he here?’

‘No, and he’s very unhappy because he isn’t,’ Hermione told me. ‘He’s never been to visit Harry’s new house, and now everyone else in his adopted family has. Teddy is eleven, and he went off to boarding school in September. Andromeda won’t admit it, but she misses him.’

Mike had been silent, pondering everything he’d heard.

‘You seem to have had a rough time, all of you,’ he said sympathetically. ‘Harry’s parents were killed when he was little. Mrs Tonks’s family were killed, and George’s twin died, too! That’s a lot of deaths. And then there’s Harry’s scars, and George’s ear, and your brother Bill, and at the pool I noticed some strange scars on your arms, Ron. It’s … ow … bloody hell, Jacqui.’

My, ‘Sorry,’ was addressed more to Ron and Hermione than to Mike. They had looked more and more concerned as my oafish husband listed all of the misfortunes which had befallen Harry and Ginny’s family.

The, ‘Mike,’ that followed immediately after my apology was said between clenched teeth as I glared at him. ‘Did I accidentally dig my heel into your foot?’ I added. He had the good grace to look embarrassed. Sometimes, when he’s nervous, he lets his mouth run away.

‘Yeah, well, we had a rough few years, but that’s all in the past,’ said Ron firmly.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I began again.

‘Don’t be,’ Hermione assured me, putting on a brave face. ‘That was years ago, these days, things are okay.’

‘Only okay?’ asked Ron. He grinned at me and threw an arm around his wife. ‘I thought this was
our “happily ever after”, Hermione. Aren’t you happy? What can I do to make you happy?”

Hermione rolled her eyes despairingly, but she still hugged him and gave me a contented smile.

‘I hope you’re paying attention, Mike,’ I said, I put my hands on my hips and gave him a mock glare. ‘Why aren’t you trying to make me happy?’

‘Because you are happy, Jacqui,’ he told me. ‘You’re happier than you’ve been for ages. You love the bustle and the chatter, and you like watching the kids enjoy themselves. And here’s Henry back.’

We all looked out of the door and watched as Henry handed a ribbon to Andromeda Tonks, turned, and ran back into the forest.

That was when it happened.

There was a loud shriek from behind us. The comforting background murmur of dozens of conversations halted instantly, and everyone turned and stared at the source of the noise. Phoebe Berry was crying. It was obvious why. She was covered in trifle. It looked like someone had upended the unfinished bowl of trifle over her head. The obvious culprit was Victoire, who was looking worriedly at her parents. But it was impossible, because Victoire was standing next to the window and the trifle had been several yards away at the other end of the table.

Harry, Ginny, Bill, Fleur, Mary and Amanda dashed across and tried to make sense of the arguments and counter arguments the three girls were making. Victoire claimed that Phoebe had called her names, Phoebe claimed that Victoire had called her names, and that someone had thrown the trifle at her. Interestingly, Phoebe didn’t blame Victoire. Helen Saville, who had been standing next to the other two girls, claimed that the trifle had flown off the table all by itself.

One result of the commotion was that Robert and Mary Saville managed to escape from Luna and Rolf. Mary strode over and gave her daughter a stern talking to, telling her not to make up silly stories. Unfortunately, she only succeeded in making Helen cry. Harry, in an attempt to calm things down, led all three Savilles downstairs into the kitchen.

To my surprise, Fleur followed Harry, but she soon returned. Fleur was carrying what looked like the magenta cloth I’d seen the day I’d first met Ginny, or something very like it. It seemed to soak up the mess from the floor with remarkable ease.

While all this was going on, Ginny took both Phoebe and her mother upstairs to clean up. Victoire, too, was led away. She was taken outside by Bill. It seemed to me that, rather like the Savilles, Bill was angrier with his daughter than was appropriate. After all, Victoire couldn’t possibly have thrown it.

The mess was cleaned up quickly, but the peculiar incident was the talking point for some time. Ron and Hermione tried to simply dismiss it as “one of those things”, but exactly how the trifle and Phoebe had managed to meet without anyone being responsible was a mystery. I watched Bill return without Victoire. She had “decided to help Uncle Charlie organise the little kids.” At least, that’s what he told Fleur.

Despite much questioning, no one admitted to throwing the trifle, and when someone flippantly suggested a ghost, Luna disagreed. Luna believed in ghosts—something which didn’t surprise anyone in the room—but she “knew” that they were incapable of picking things up. Of course, being Luna, she had an alternative theory. It was her opinion that the incident had happened simply because the girls were not being very nice to each other. Luna was firmly of the belief that, if
people were nice, things like that wouldn’t happen. Something I could agree with. But then she blamed a poltergeist; a creature which, she claimed, was spontaneously created whenever children argued. That was when she lost me, and everyone else.

‘I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again,’ Ron whispered to me as the excitement finally began to die down. ‘Luna is bonkers, but in a really great way.’

‘She’s certainly got a very active imagination,’ I said.

As things returned to normal, Hermione again began questioning us about schools and schooling. It was quite some time before she finally ran out of questions, but by then we’d been joined by Percy and Audrey. Percy, who—it seemed to me—had a tendency to pontificate, wanted to discuss some Ministry contract with Ron, so Mike and I made our excuses and began to move around the room.

We spoke to several of the parents of Henry’s classmates and finally managed to identify the parents of Jo and Catriona, the two five-year-old girls who shared a table with Henry and James. While we were talking to them, Ginny, Amanda and Phoebe returned. So did Harry, but he was alone. There was no sign of the Savilles.

Harry had a quick word with Ginny, Amanda, and Phoebe and then strode over to join us.

‘What’s happened to the Savilles?’ Jo’s mum asked Harry.

‘They said that they had to leave,’ Harry told her. To me, his shrug appeared to say “but I didn’t believe them”. He looked candidly into Jo’s mum’s eyes. ‘They had another appointment, apparently. I tried to persuade them to stay, but young Helen Saville wasn’t happy. Helen is a little older than the other kids, apart from Phoebe and Victoire, and she has decided that this place is haunted. I couldn’t persuade her to stay, but I think—I hope—that I’ve persuaded her parents to let it rest.’

I was about to ask Harry what he thought had happened during the trifle incident, but the pink and fragrant Lavender arrived. Her eyes were full of fire and the tottering and feminine flounce she’d used when she’d arrived had turned into a prowling lope. She looked more like a wild beast than a pampered princess.

‘Trudi has just told me, Harry,’ began Lavender angrily. ‘It’s inhuman. I don’t care about the bloody case; you can’t leave a body…’

‘Not here, Lavender,’ Harry told her sharply. ‘Come with me, we can discuss this in private.’ He gave us an apologetic glance as he led the fuming Lavender away from us and back down the stairs to the kitchen.

The moment Harry left Amanda Berry and her daughter joined us. She greeted us like long-lost friends and began singing Ginny’s praises.

‘Ginny is a miracle-worker,’ she told us. Her opinion was based on the fact that Ginny had somehow managed to clean and dry Phoebe’s party dress while Amanda had been helping Phoebe to clean up. It was also obvious that Amanda was bursting to tell us something.

‘The master bedroom is really magnificent. Ginny let Phoebe and I use the en suite to tidy up,’ Amanda told us in a confidential tone. ‘Have you seen it, Jacqui?’ she asked, almost gloatingly. Her smile told me that she was certain that I had not, and that, finally, she knew something about the Potters that I didn’t. I politely acknowledged the fact.

‘They have a huge four-poster bed with curtains and everything,’ said Amanda gleefully. Mike
took my hand and gave it a calming squeeze. ‘There are lots of photographs on the walls too. There’s one of a huge castle and one of Harry’s parents, too. He looks a lot like his dad. The en suite is massive. The bath is easily big enough for two, isn’t it, Pheobe?’

‘Yes, Mummy,’ Phoebe confirmed.

We listened to Amanda for some time as she continued to compliment Ginny, and politely tell me about the décor and photographs. She did not really have a lot to say, but she certainly made the most of the fact that she’d seen a part of the house which I had not. While she was speaking, I saw Lavender return, but there was no sign of Harry. It was some time before Amanda finally ran out of things to tell us. When she did, I made my excuses and dragged Mike across the room to join another little group.

George and Angelina, and Lavender Moon and her husband, were talking to Dennis and Lesley Creevey. Angelina was terrifying poor Lesley with tales of the birth of her eldest, Fred, which had involved cutting and pulling. At the same time George was winding Dennis up with graphic descriptions of blood and gore. Lavender, meanwhile, was piling on the misery by talking about her own, recent, birthing problems. It seemed that a long healed scar had been causing her problems, and at a little over eight months, it began to split. Little Violet, I discovered, had arrived prematurely via an emergency Caesarean section. Mark Moon, who was still carrying Violet, did little more than look anxious and nod in agreement. As I listened, I could see how worried Lesley was becoming.

‘I had no problems at all, Lesley,’ I said, trying to be a calming influence. ‘Most births are straightforward, you know. I didn’t even see a doctor. We opted for a home birth and hired a birthing pool.’

‘So did Hermione,’ said Angelina.

‘We talked about a home birth,’ said Lesley. Dennis nodded in agreement. ‘But the midwife persuaded us to go to hospital because it will be my first,’ she told me.

‘My midwife was a bit concerned when I insisted on a home birth for Henry. She gave the same reason,’ I said. ‘First child and all that! But I put up a fight. She gave in because we were living in town at the time, so it was only a short ride from the RVI—the Royal Victoria Infirmary,’ I explained when she looked puzzled. ‘Our midwife admitted that there is no real risk in a home birth.’"

‘No risk at all?’ asked Dennis worriedly, and I realised that although Lesley was keen on a home birth, he was not.

‘Well, sometimes there are problems,’ I told him. ‘But I did the research,’ I turned to his wife. ‘So long as you’re getting your check-ups, and provided that you’re fit and healthy, which it seems to me you are, Lesley, you aren’t likely to have any problems.’

‘We’re only fifteen minutes from Queen Charlotte’s, Dennis,’ said Lesley.

I glanced at Mike and, for once, he realised what I wanted him to say.

‘I was like you, Dennis,’ Mike admitted. ‘I was worried about the idea of a home birth, but it was great.’ He was grinning like a lunatic at the memories. ‘It’s so much less clinical. And the midwife made me feel useful. I reckon that if we’d been in the hospital, I’d have been standing around like a spare prick at a wedding. Instead, I filled the pool, helped Jacqui, and did whatever the midwife asked me to do. Jacqui did all of the hard work, of course, as usual.’ He grinned and hugged me.
‘She swore like a trooper, too. Very creative, she was. It was great. We never saw the inside of a hospital.’

‘Everything went okay?’ Dennis asked.

‘Henry took his time,’ I admitted. ‘And it wasn’t exactly pain free, but the midwife will bring a canister of Entonox with her. It can’t have been bad because we did it the second time, too. I was in and out of the pool several times with Henry, but then, you really don’t know what to expect when it’s your first. Annie was very quick. Out almost before we knew it.’

‘She was born with hair the colour of Harry’s,’ said Mike wistfully. ‘It was very long, too. Within two days it all fell out and she was as bald as a coot for weeks, poor little thing. When it grew back, she was a blonde.’

‘So don’t listen to George,’ I said.

‘Spoilsport,’ said George. He and the others had been listening in silence to my description. ‘A man’s got to be allowed to wind up his friends, you know.’

‘But not tae the point you’re worrying the Mum-to-be,’ said Lavender’s husband forcefully. He pulled his wife in close to him. ‘I’m bloody glad we got tae St Mungo’s in time, and the hospital is always an option if there’s a problem.’

‘My lovely Emmsy,’ Lavender simpered, throwing her arms around his waist and battem her eyelashes at him.

George pretended to vomit. Angelina merely rolled her eyes. Mark and Lavender ignored them.

‘Yes, but…’ George began. He got no further because the kids returned.

As I looked out through the still open door, I realised that it was dusk. I checked my watch and discovered that it was a little after seven in the evening, almost Annie’s bedtime. The hours had flown over!

The children all streamed back inside, chattering happily and all proudly clutching bags of sweets. Several of them looked a little untidy and most of them tracked mud into room, but Harry and Ginny, who had been handing out the sweets, didn’t appear to be bothered.

Like everyone else in the place, Mike and I found ourselves listening to our children as they described their adventures in the woods. They had played several games, including what—given the number of kids involved—must have been a completely chaotic game of musical bumps.

Henry had collared me, and he would not shut up. He was gabbling away, nineteen-to-the-dozen, and I could barely follow what he was telling me. “Him’n James” had got lost; they had been on a great adventure; they had got lots of sweeties; and they had climbed a tree.

I could not get a word in edgeways.

Annie, meanwhile, was treating Mike to a similar outpouring of excitement. And she was even less intelligible than her brother.

Ron Weasley rapped loudly on one of the tables. He was obviously preparing to make an announcement, and everyone fell silent and turned to face him.

‘Just in case anyone doesn’t know, I’m Ron Weasley, the best looking of Ginny’s brothers…’
His brothers and their wives noisily disagreed.

‘And I’ve known Harry for years. On behalf of everyone, I’d just like to say thanks to Harry and Ginny for inviting us here today.’

Everyone began to clap, but he motioned us into silence.

‘I’d also like to wish them a happy and prosperous future in their new home here in the far north. And I think that it’s about time that we toasted them. There’s champagne for the grown-ups and juice for the kids. Please, help yourselves to a glass.’ Ron motioned to the stairs to the kitchen where the Corners, the Creeveys, Victoire, Phoebe Berry, and Luna and her boyfriend stood with trays laden with drinks.

There was a good natured scramble towards the drinks, and soon, everyone was holding a glass. Hermione was ushering Harry, Ginny, and their children across the room towards Ron.

‘To the Potters, may all your days be happy ones,’ said Ron.

‘The Potters,’ we all chorused.

‘Thanks, Ron,’ Harry began. Ginny stepped alongside him and took his hand.

‘Yes, thanks Ron, and thank you all for coming,’ Ginny said. ‘We hope that you’ve enjoyed yourselves, especially the children. Have you?’

The kids began to cheer, and we all joined in. Unfortunately, the noise disturbed both Violet Moon and Florence Longbottom, and the two babies began to howl unhappily. Their parents took the babies out, heading down to the kitchen.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ said Harry. ‘As we’ve just been noisily reminded, there are some very small children here. Some of you, I know, will be anxious to leave. However, Ron has just told me that he and George have brought some fireworks along with them. So we’ll be rounding the evening off with a firework display.’

‘Yay! Weasleys’ Wildfire Whiz-bangs,’ James shouted. ‘Bestest inna world.’ He was jumping with excitement.

James wasn’t wrong. The display was louder and more colourful than anything I’d ever seen before, better, even, than the professional display I’d seen at the Millennium. Ron and George were treated to an ovation when they finally returned from the woods.

After the fireworks, the party seemed to have naturally reached its end. The kids, especially the littlest ones, like Lily and Annie, were flagging. The Moons and the Longbottoms had left before the fireworks, and several other families were preparing to leave. I tried to persuade Ginny to let me help tidy up, but she was adamant that she could manage.

‘Harry will help, once he’s got the kids to bed,’ she said. ‘And so will the family. It’s a party, Jacqui, you don’t tidy up after someone else’s party.’

‘But you help your friends,’ Mike told her. ‘I’m capable of wielding a tea towel, too.’

‘Not with Annie asleep in your arms, you’re not,’ Ginny told him. ‘But thanks for the offer, and thanks for making us welcome.’ She hugged Mike, hugged me and strolled outside to wave off some of the departing guests.
Dennis Creevey was standing in the darkness by his car, chatting to several dads about it. His wife loomed out of the darkness, politely thanked Ginny, and then hugged me.

‘Thank you Jacqui,’ she whispered. ‘Thanks for what you said. You’ve no idea how wonderful it is to have a normal conversation with normal people.’

With that, she waddled over to her husband and clambered cumbersomely into the little sports car. They waved cheerfully, and Dennis roared off into the night.

‘What a nice couple,’ I said.

‘It’s time we left, too, Jacqui,’ Mike told me. He nodded towards Henry, whose eyes were heavy. Annie was already asleep in his arms.
I was lying on my chest, relaxing in the baking hot sun. With a soft massaging motion, Mike was gently spreading sun cream on my bare back. Relaxed and happy, I basked in somnolent bliss.

My pleasure was interrupted by a loud crash. The noise was only feet from where I was lying. Mike’s hands vanished. I rolled onto my side and opened my eyes to investigate the noise.

I was bewildered to discover that, instead of the Kefalonian beach I was expecting to see stretching out before me, I could see nothing more exotic than our bedroom door and our pyjama-clad son. The door was still reverberating from its impact against the dressing table. Henry stood in the doorway and stared at me. It was obvious that he hadn’t meant to burst through the door quite as noisily as he had done.

‘Oops,’ he uttered contritely, using his favourite word of apology. ‘Hungry. Want breakfast,’ he added loudly as justification. His shrill voice confirmed the fact that I was not, in fact, enjoying a holiday in the sun with my boyfriend but was back in the real world; the world in which Mike and I were ten years older and had a lot less freedom.

As a final confirmation that this was, in fact, reality, Mike’s only acknowledgement of our son’s presence was an unintelligible grunt of greeting. My husband didn’t make any attempt to move. It was, of course, my turn to do the early shift; even so, I was illogically annoyed by the fact that the thoughtful attentiveness of dream-Mike had not made the leap to wakefulness alongside me.

Mike had been the early riser on Saturday morning; nevertheless, the knowledge that he could stay in bed rankled with me. I sighed, rolled over, and looked at the clock next to me. To my surprise it was a little after nine, almost two hours after Henry usually rose.

‘Okay, Henry,’ I said, yawning.

Still half asleep, I pulled back the duvet and sat up in bed.

‘Eeew! You’ve got no ’jamas on, Mammy,’ he told me.

He was right, of course. The moment I’d sat up, I’d remembered. I hastily pulled up the duvet and covered my chest.

‘I was very hot last night,’ I told him, searching for an excuse.

‘Too right you were,’ Mike agreed in a low and lust-filled whisper. Suddenly, instantly, he’d decided that he would wake up after all, and that he’d be a pest. His hand slid across the bed onto my thigh and squeezed.

‘You go and find your dressing gown and slippers for me, Henry,’ I told our son as I firmly removed Mike’s hand from my leg. ‘I’ll be through in a minute to help you. What would you like for breakfast?’

‘Toast an’ marmarmarmarmalade,’ he told me.

‘You need to learn when to stop saying marmalade, Henry,’ Mike told him.
'Marmarmarmarmarmalade,' said Henry. He sang it to the tune of the Beach Boy’s Barbara Ann, and as he danced out from our bedroom, Mike chuckled.

‘That must be your fault,’ I accused.

‘Sure is,’ he said in a pathetic attempt at an American accent. ‘A man’s gotta have a bit of fun with his kids, babe.’

‘Idiot,’ I told him as I rolled out of bed. Shivering in the cool room, I began rifling through my underwear drawer.

‘I’d like some tea and toast, too,’ said Mike hopefully. I turned and stared angrily at him, my clean underwear still in my hand.

‘Get up and get your own breakfast,’ I told him.

He simply looked me up and down, popped his eyes, and wolf-whistled.

‘Bloody hell, you’re gorgeous,’ he said. ‘What on earth did you see in me?’

Probably because of my dream, my mind flew back to the very dishy young man who’d taken me on a two week holiday to Skala. He had wined and dined and pampered me. And he had good-naturedly allowed me to swim in the almost magically warm and clear Ionian Sea every day. The memory made my heart skip a beat, and I almost complimented him. However, before I could formulate a reply, Annie toddled in through the door rubbing her eyes. Unlike her brother, she ignored my nakedness.

‘Buddy ell, zit time for get up now?’ Annie asked.

I tried to be cross with Mike, but he simply burst out laughing.

‘Come and give your Daddy a good morning kiss, lovely little Annie,’ he said, sliding to the edge of the bed and pointing to his cheek.

As I hastily dressed, I watched Annie approach her dad. She reached out a pudgy little hand, touched his cheek, and withdrew it immediately.

‘No kiss, Daddy, ’cos you’re all scratchy,’ she told him.

Laughing, he grabbed her around the waist, lifted her onto the bed, and began tickling her. I left the room to the noise of Annie’s delighted laughter and went into Henry’s bedroom. He was struggling to dress himself, so I gave him a helping hand.

‘Joo fink,’ Henry began the moment his head emerged through the neck-hole of his sweatshirt. ‘Joo fink ’at we could have fireworks like ’at on my birfday at Bonfire night?’ he asked. ‘They was the bestest fireworks ever.’

‘Do I think that we could have fireworks like that?’ I said. He nodded so vigorously that his entire body shook with the effort. ‘They were very good, weren’t they, Henry?’

‘They was brilliant,’ he told me.

‘They were brilliant.’ I corrected him.

‘In every sense of the word,’ said Mike as he carried Annie into Henry’s room. ‘Brilliantly good and brilliantly bright and sparkling,’ he explained to a puzzled-looking Henry. ‘I’ve never seen
anything like them, not even at a professional display, Henry. I asked Harry about them last night. He said that Ron and George manufacture fireworks. We can ask Harry and Ginny when we see them. We might be able to get some in time for your birthday bonfire.’

‘If they are not too expensive, and if they’re for sale to the general public,’ I added before Mike made a promise that we couldn’t keep. ‘They might be restricted to professional displays only. We might not be able to buy them. We’ll see what we can do, Henry, okay?’

‘Yay,’ Henry clapped his hands and danced with joy.

‘Good morning, gorgeous,’ Mike said, slipping an arm around my waist, drawing me close, and kissing my cheek. ‘I’ll get Annie ready, shall I?’

‘Thanks, Mike,’ I said.

He smiled and winked at me, just the way he’d done when we were younger, and I simply had to turn and hug him.

‘Hungry,’ Henry reminded me, grabbing my hand and pulling it off Mike’s back. I took Henry’s hand, gave Mike an apologetic smile, and led our son downstairs.

I was still busy buttering Henry’s toast and keeping an eye on my porridge when Mike and Annie arrived. Annie was squirming in Mike’s arms as he tried to scratch her cheek with his bristly chin.

‘Stoppit, stoppit, Daddy.’ She squealed and squirmed, but was happy to be fussled over.

‘Would you like some porridge, Annie?’ I asked.

‘Ess, peas,’ she said, nodding.

Mike sat her at the table and then filled the kettle.

‘I think I’ll join you,’ Mike said, pouring more milk and oats into the pan and stirring the porridge. ‘What have we got planned for today, Mammy? Annie asked me, and I didn’t know.’

I shrugged. ‘To be honest, other than roast pork for Sunday dinner, I hadn’t really thought about today. I didn’t think much beyond the party,’ I said. ‘What would you like to do today, Annie?’

‘Go Drake-soff an’ play,’ she said promptly.

‘Yeah,’ agreed Henry, instantly. My heart sank.

‘I’m sorry,’ I told them. ‘We can’t, not today. I’m sure that James’s Mummy and Daddy will be busy. They have relatives staying with them, and friends probably. We can’t simply turn up unannounced.’ I paused. ‘Again,’ I added guiltily.

‘We could go across to Thrunton, for a nice walk,’ suggested Mike. ‘We could explore the woods. We could take sandwiches and have a picnic lunch.’

‘Yeah,’ Annie agreed.

‘S’pose,’ said Henry gracelessly.

‘Great,’ Mike told them. ‘After we’ve had breakfast and got washed and done our teeth, Mammy can…’
‘Mammy can make the beds and get Henry’s uniform and Daddy’s shirts into the washing machine ready for another ordinary week,’ I said firmly as I handed Henry his toast and marmalade. ‘And then she can tidy up the house while Daddy clears away the breakfast things and makes the sandwiches.’

Mike made a pot of tea, scraped the thick and glutinous porridge into three bowls, and brought them across to the kitchen table. As he placed a bowl in front of me, he kissed me on the temple.

‘Life goes on,’ said Mike, speaking to all of us, and mirroring my own thoughts. ‘We had a good time yesterday, but we can’t party every day.’

‘Why?’ Henry asked.

‘Because that would be boring,’ Mike told him.

‘Wouldn’t!’ Henry told us firmly. ‘Party was great. We had lots of games and stuff and we ran and hid and we beat Dom and Molly and Fred inna treasure hunt, and Dom was cross.’

‘Dominique.’ I corrected him.

‘Everyone else says Dom,’ he countered firmly.

‘The party was great,’ said Mike. ‘In fact, it was a great night from start to finish.’ He winked at me.

‘All you did was talk,’ Henry told his father dismissively. I saw the mischief in Mike’s eyes.

‘We were having fun all night, in a very grown-up way, Henry,’ I told him before Mike could say anything else. ‘Would you like to have a cup of tea, Henry?’ I asked as Mike chuckled.

Henry shook his head, but Annie announced that she wanted a cup, so I poured her a very milky one and tested it to make certain that it wasn’t too hot. As we ate, we continued to chat about the party.

Henry confidently told us that Victoire had thrown trifle over Phoebe Berry. When I told him that she couldn’t have, because she’d been standing right next to Phoebe when it happened, Henry claimed that Victoire had admitted to James that she’d done it. She’d apparently told James that she’d done it by magic. I looked at my husband and rolled my eyes.

‘I think that Victoire just likes being the centre of attention,’ I told Henry. ‘I think she was telling James a story.’

‘Someone must have thrown it,’ said Mike. ‘If it wasn’t Victoire, I wonder who it was.’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t suppose we’ll ever find out.’

‘Harry knows a lot of odd people, doesn’t he?’ asked Mike. ‘I didn’t get the chance to tell you last night, but that hippy bloke—the one with the wife who looked like she should be in the SAS…’

‘Michael Corner,’ I supplied the name.

‘Yeah, him,’ Mike told me. ‘He spent most of the night talking to the big bloke with less hair than me,’ Mike ran his hand through his thinning locks. ‘The one who looked like a prop forward…’

‘Terry Boot,’ I said.
‘Yeah. Hey, he’s the guy you met the first time you went to Drakeshaugh, isn’t he?’ Mike asked.

‘Yes.’ I nodded.

‘I wish I’d realised. I’d have said something about him frightening you!’ he said regretfully. ‘Well. I was talking to Den Creevey about his car. He’s a really nice bloke—fit as a lop, you know, he’s a fell runner—and he knows his engines. Anyway, next to us, Michael was getting really wound up about something. Him and Terry were talking about probabilities and maths and stuff. It was way over my head, but Michael was getting worried about some computer programme he was using; he was convinced that it wasn’t working properly, and he wanted Terry to take a look at his calculations. Then, that Lavender woman wandered over and told him that he might as well use Tarot cards, astrology, or tea leaves since they were just as accurate as his silly machine, and he got really twitchy. He was convinced that it was a plot and that everyone was trying to make him look stupid. For a minute I thought that his missus was going to clock Lavender.’

‘What happened next?’ I asked, curious. I’d already begun calling the rather nervy and odd Michael “the boffin” in my head, and I was curious about what, exactly, he was doing for Harry. From what I’d overheard, it was some form of crime analysis.

Mike shrugged, ‘I don’t know. Dennis dragged me over to speak to Ron’s wife’s parents. They’re both dentists. Did you know?’

I sighed; it was typical of Mike that he only had half a story.

‘If we’re going out for a picnic lunch, it’s time we got organised,’ I said. ‘Come along, kids, let’s get hands, faces, and teeth done.’ Annie slid from her chair; Henry, rather reluctantly, did the same.

‘Okay,’ said Mike. ‘I’ll do the dishes and then start on the food. What would you like in your sandwiches, Henry?’

Mike missed my urgent head-shake and managed to finish the question before realising that I’d been trying to stop him.

‘Salt’n’vinegar crisps wiff ketchup,’ Henry said, as I’d known he would.

Mike pulled an apologetic face at me and, with a single raised eyebrow, silently mimed an enquiry. I made an unhappy face in reply, but nodded, and Mike correctly interpreted my answer.

‘Just this once, as a special treat,’ Mike told him. He glanced at Annie, and this time looked at me for confirmation before speaking. I nodded again.

‘And what would you like, Annie?’ he asked.

‘Tease and martyr,’ she said promptly. Bewildered by her answer, Mike again silently asked me for help, but I simply smirked and left him to figure it out for himself.

‘Cheese and tomato,’ said Mike triumphantly after about half a minute.

‘Tease and martyr,’ Annie confirmed.

‘I’ll have the same as Annie,’ I said. ‘There’s some Redesdale and some Nettle left in the fridge, Annie likes the Nettle, I’ll have whatever’s left; I’m easy.’ I ignored Mike’s leer and left him in charge of the kitchen. ‘Come on kids, wash time.’

An hour later, the kids were playing in the back garden, but I was still busy. I’d tidied the kids’
rooms and made the beds. I had just picked up a pile of dirty laundry to bring downstairs, the last of my chores, when I heard a car drawing to a halt. When I looked out of the window, I saw the Potters big black Range Rover. The passenger door opened, and Ginny jumped out. Panicking, I threw the laundry onto our bed, closed the door, and dashed downstairs.

I hoped that Mike had finished washing up the breakfast dishes and making the sandwiches. With any luck, the kitchen would be tidy. I had no idea whether or not the house was presentable because I hadn’t been down to check.

The moment the kids had gone out to play on the swing and the trampoline, Mike had put a CD, CSI:Ambleside, in the player. I’d bought him the Half Man Half Biscuit CD for his birthday over a year ago. I wasn’t particularly fond of it, and several tracks definitely weren’t child friendly, but Mike had always been a fan of the band, and it was the CD he always played when he was in a good mood.

As I clattered hastily down the stairs to the front door, I could hear Mike singing along.

‘Twmpa, Twmpa, you’re gonna need a jumper. It gets a bit chilly on top of Lord Hereford’s Knob.’

The doorbell rang the moment I reached the bottom of the stairs. I shouted to Mike, but he didn’t seem to hear me over the music.

‘Hello, Ginny,’ I said, pulling open the door before the bell’s ring had faded. Ginny looked startled by the speed I’d opened it.

‘I was in the bedroom, and I saw you arrive,’ I explained.

Ginny was carrying a canvas shopping bag, but Harry was still sitting in the car with the kids. He waved cheerfully, as did the three little Potters. I smiled and waved back, realising that they weren’t coming in.

‘Tonight he’ll be sitting on top of Lord Hereford’s Knob,’ sang Mike as the song came to an abrupt halt.

‘Mike,’ I yelled, taking my chance in the momentary silence. ‘We’ve got visitors.’ The music was immediately turned off.

‘Sorry Ginny,’ I said. ‘Half Man Half Biscuit. Mike’s been a fan since—forever, I think.’

‘Half what?’ Ginny stared at me blankly.

‘It’s the name of the band,’ I explained. ‘Four Lads Who Shook The Wirral.’

It was obvious that I was only succeeding in making Ginny even more confused, but if it weren’t for Mike, I don’t suppose I’d have heard of them, either.

‘Sorry, where are my manners. Come in, please, Ginny,’ I said. I glanced over my shoulder and realised that the living room was a mess. I hoped that I’d been right in assuming that this wasn’t really an unannounced visit. Though if it were, I realised, I could hardly complain.

‘Thanks, but no, thank you. We’re on our way to Alnwick,’ said Ginny.

‘Who? Oh, hi Ginny,’ Mike said behind me. ‘You, er, you didn’t hear me singing, did you?’

‘About Lord Hereford’s Knob,’ said Ginny straight faced.
‘Ah,’ said Mike. ‘It’s a mountain in Wales, honest.’

‘If that’s all the song’s about, then it’s a complete waste of a good double-entendre,’ Ginny told him.

‘I’ll tell the kids you’re here, shall I?’ said Mike, stifling a laugh. ‘They’re out the back.’

‘No!’ ordered Ginny firmly. She widened her eyes as though her own words had startled her. ‘Sorry, Mike, that sounded ruder than I intended. It’s just that if our kids see your kids, they’ll want to stay, and they can’t.’

‘That’s okay, Ginny,’ I said.

‘We know what you mean,’ Mike added, nodding sympathetically.

‘Ron and Hermione spent the night in a hotel in Alnwick with Hermione’s folks,’ said Ginny. ‘The Grangers are staying for a few more days because they’ve never been up to this part of the country before. But I wanted to return these to you.’ She lifted my cake tins from the bag and handed them over to me. ‘And we wanted to give you this, too.’ She handed us a bottle of champagne and two bars of chocolate. ‘Ron and Hermione brought the champagne for us. They brought too much, but they refused to take it back. We’ve got half a dozen unopened bottles, so we thought we’d give you one. There were lots of chocolate bars left too, so we thought … well, the kids can’t have champagne. It’s just to say thanks for all your help.’

‘Help?’ I asked. ‘What did we do to help?’

‘You made us welcome, Jacqui. You helped us to settle into our new home,’ she said gratefully. ‘And Henry helped James feel happy at school.’

Overcome, I hugged her. ‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘But I think that James helped Henry, too.’

Ginny lowered her voice conspiratorially, despite the fact that there was no one around. ‘We thought that we might give Amanda a bottle of champagne too, because of the accident with Phoebe.’

‘Accident?’ asked Mike, sounding surprised by Ginny’s choice of words.

‘If someone actually threw the trifle, we haven’t been able to discover who it was,’ said Ginny. ‘No one seems to have actually seen anything. I thought it would be best to simply call it an accident and forget about it. I hope that Amanda agrees.’

‘I’m sure she will,’ I assured her. I wondered whether to tell her about Victoire’s ridiculous claim but decided against it. ‘Are you sure that you won’t come in for a minute, Ginny?’

‘No, thanks for the offer, but we really should be going,’ Ginny told me. ‘Would you like to come for coffee one morning next week? Not tomorrow, because Rolf and Luna are leaving for Sweden and, well, Luna! And Rolf!’

I smiled. No further explanation was needed.

‘Would Wednesday be okay for you?,’ Ginny asked. ‘You can come straight over after you drop Henry at school.’

‘Wednesday will be great, thank you, Ginny,’ I said. ‘I’ll bring more chocolate buns.’
‘There’s no need,’ Ginny protested. ‘You’ve been generous enough.’

‘Unlike you,’ I told her as I waved the bottle of champagne at her. I’d seen the label; it wasn’t cheap fizzy plonk; it was Dom Perignon.

She laughed. ‘That would be nice, thanks,’ she said. ‘I’d better go. Bye.’ With that, she turned and walked down the path to the car. Mike and I stood and waved them off, and then suffered the wrath of Henry when he discovered that James had been here and we hadn’t told him.

He began his sulk while we got ready to leave and managed to keep it up until we reached Thrunton. Fortunately, the sights and sounds of the woods finally brought him out of it.

After we returned from our picnic and walk, I began preparing our Sunday dinner. As I stood in the kitchen peeling parsnips in preparation for the roasting tray, I was struck by the sheer number of smells assailing me. The usual smells of parsnips, carrots fresh from the vegetable plot, apple sauce, and roasting pork were competing with the smell of poster paints and glue.

Behind me, Henry was making a thank you card for the Potters, and he was determined to paint it “hisself”. Annie, not to be outdone, was also attempting to make her own card. She had graciously decided that Daddy could help her “a little bit”. The process seemed to involve them both laughing a lot and getting covered in glue and glitter.

After finishing the parsnips, and before starting on the potatoes, I strolled over to inspect their handiwork. Mike had carefully written the words “Thank you” for Henry to copy. Henry had started big, and the letters had got smaller and smaller as he realised that he was running out of space. Nevertheless, the end result was impressive, and very crowded. He’d drawn a spodge of green trees and brown trunks, with lots of stick people running through the trees. In the corner of the card he’d drawn a round-faced person whose smile filled more than half of the head, leaving little room for eyes and nose. When I asked, he explained that it was, “Me, I’m very happy”.

Mike and Annie had manufactured a card covered in sparkling glitter and several shiny stars. It was, they assured me, lots of lovely fireworks.

I didn’t see Harry on Monday morning. James was already in the classroom when I arrived at school. He ran across to greet us the moment we arrived. I said hello to James, but he wasn’t interested in talking to me. He insisted on telling Henry that he’d been to the seaside the day before and that he’d played in the dunes with his cousins.

Henry wanted to tell James about our walk, so I left them chattering away to each other. It wasn’t until I was driving home that I realised I still had the cards Henry and Annie had made. I had no choice but to keep them and deliver them to the Potters at the end of the school day.

Monday afternoon had a decidedly autumnal feel about it. The brisk breeze was depositing leaves in its wake, and there was the promise of a squally shower in the air. Although I was early, Ginny had arrived before me, but Al and Lily were nowhere to be seen. Annie and I arrived just in time to see Ginny present an ecstatic Amanda with a bottle of champagne. Mary looked on with grim-faced displeasure.

‘Were you at the Potter’s party?’ one of the other mums asked me before I reached Ginny.

When I answered in the affirmative, she said, ‘Mary was telling us how dreadful it was, but Amanda seemed less certain, and then Ginny arrived.’

‘It wasn’t dreadful at all,’ I said confidently. ‘Harry and Ginny have a nice family and friends.'
Some of them are a bit odd, like Luna—the blonde woman who was with Ginny last week. Everyone was very pleasant. The food was all homemade and fresh and delicious. It’s true that Amanda’s daughter had a mishap with some trifle, but apart from that, it was a wonderful afternoon and evening.’

I soon found myself surrounded by most of the mums who formed Mary’s usual clique. They were all curious to hear my version of events. I tried to keep a close eye on Mary while I talked, but Ginny seemed to have captured the attention of Amanda, and they were chatting like old friends. I felt a twinge of jealousy; Ginny was my friend. Mary glanced at me but she didn’t look happy, and seemed unwilling to leave Amanda alone with Ginny.

The fireworks were a huge talking point, particularly for the mums who lived nearby. They had all seen them in the sky above Drakeshaugh and had been very impressed by them, particularly the finale. Somehow, George and Ron had managed to launch a “tribute” to Harry and Ginny. One exploding rocket had fallen in a shower of bright red, giving the impression of Ginny’s hair. Two others had formed silver circles in the sky, each surrounding a bright green light, in a remarkable approximation of Harry’s spectacles and eyes.

By the time the school bell rang, I’d learned from some of the other mums, parents of kids who weren’t in Henry’s class, that Mary and her husband had been far from happy. From what they said, it seemed that Mary had told them that the party had been full of coloureds, weirdos, hippies, and badly behaved children. I shook my head in disbelief. ‘Coloureds!’ I said, trying to indicate my distaste for the term. ‘That would be a very nice married couple, both doctors, one of Ginny’s sister’s-in-law, and an old school friend of Harry’s and his wife. As for the rest, Luna and her boyfriend, and a beardy IT guy, were all lovely. Mary left early, I’ve no idea why.’

A quiet, mousy woman standing at the back of the cluster of mums said, ‘She was probably annoyed that she wasn’t the centre of attention.’ Her words were sharp and a little spiteful. Everyone fell silent, and the woman looked a little embarrassed. ‘Sorry,’ she muttered. ‘I don’t know what came over me.’

‘An outbreak of truthfulness,’ one of the other mums said. Everyone laughed rather nervously and looked warily across to Mary. She noticed and frowned at us, but the kids were coming out and our gossiping was ended as the group was splintered by the arrival of our kids.

‘Has you gived James’s mummy my card?’ Henry asked when he arrived at my side. I was forced to admit that I hadn’t.

‘Why don’t you give it to her?’ I suggested, pulling it from my bag.

‘My give mine,’ Annie demanded, so I gave her the card and allowed her to lead me across to Ginny.

By the time Annie and I reached her, Ginny was already fussing over Henry and praising his card.

‘My make one an’ all,’ Annie announced, thrusting it towards Ginny. ‘Daddy helped. A bit.’

Thank you, Annie,’ said Ginny. She looked over Annie’s head and smiled at me. ‘And thanks, Jacqui.’

‘It was nothing to do with me. It was Henry’s idea to make a thank you card,’ I said. ‘And Mike helped Annie with hers.’

‘And these are wonderful cards, thank you, Henry and Annie,’ Ginny said. ‘Are these fireworks on
your card, Annie? Did you like the fireworks?"

‘Yes,’ said Annie.

‘I’d like Uncle George’s fireworks for my birthday,’ Henry said.

‘You have fireworks on your birthday?’ Ginny asked him.

‘We always have fireworks for Henry’s birthday,’ I explained. ‘Henry was born on Guy Fawkes night, we don’t have much choice. We loved those fireworks, Ginny. Does your brother sell them?’

‘Yes, but not to … just anybody … They’re special. But I’ll speak to George and Ron; I’m sure that we can get you something.’

‘Yay!’ shouted Henry. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’

‘I need to be getting back,’ said Ginny. ‘I’ve left Luna and Rolf in charge of Al and Lily, but they really need to leave. They’re supposed to be in Sweden for a conference, and it starts in an hour.’
As I drove Henry to school on Tuesday morning, I saw Ginny on the road ahead. She was walking towards us, away from the school, and had almost reached the lane leading back to Drakeshaugh. I wasn’t late, so she must have been very early; arriving at the school as it opened. Ginny was pushing the buggy containing Al and Lily up the hill. I tooted as I approached them, and all three gave me a cheerful wave as I passed.

I was a little surprised to see Ginny doing the morning school run, as I’d become used to the Potters’ routine. Apart from the very first day, Harry regularly dropped James off in the morning before driving to work.

After a day spent dealing with a very crabby Annie, I drove back down to school that afternoon to collect Henry. Annie, whose crabbiness I had put down to the fact that her back teeth were finally coming through, fell asleep in the car. After I’d parked, I spotted Ginny’s unmistakeable hair in the crowd of mums by the gate. Because of the way they usually shared the school run, I had expected to see Harry. I wondered where he was, and my curiosity got the better of me. Also, I wanted to confirm that I was still expected for coffee the following day.

In a moment of madness I decided that it would be a good idea to carry my still sleeping daughter down to the school gate. My attempt to lift Annie from her car seat without disturbing her failed, of course, and she woke up feeling fractious. She wailed, moaned and squirmed in my arms, desperate to get back to sleep, but I convinced myself that I’d be able to calm her.

Ginny was speaking to several of the other mums when I arrived at the gates. Mary was not among them; she was still pointedly ignoring Ginny. As I strolled over to join the group I was struggling with Annie, trying to persuade her to quieten down. Unfortunately, when I attempted to join in the conversation, my daughter decided to show me who was boss by having a tantrum.

The only thing Ginny managed to tell me was that she’d heard from Luna and Rolf, and that they had arrived safely in Stockholm. Apparently the taxi taking Rolf and Luna to the airport had arrived minutes after Ginny had returned to Drakeshaugh. Ginny was obviously embarrassed by her slip the previous day, when she’d said Sweden instead of airport: so embarrassed, in fact, that she felt the need to tell me the flight times.

Annie was wailing in my ear, so I missed most of Ginny’s detailed explanation, but I really wasn’t that interested. Annie was proving particularly peevish, and I could see that her antics were annoying some of the other mums. They weren’t doing my temper much good either, so I moved to one side and tried to calm her. She was still mewling when Henry and James arrived. Deciding that the best thing was to get her home, I confirmed with Ginny that we were still meeting for coffee the following morning, noted Mary’s frown of disapproval when she overheard, and left.

As I drove home, Annie again fell asleep. When I pulled into the yard I wisely left her in her car seat. I kept an eye on her through the kitchen window while I prepared the vegetables, and rescued her when she finally stirred. She was a different girl when she finally woke, and she “helped” me to set the table for our evening meal while Henry watched CBeebies.

Over our meal, Henry told us that James was cross, because his Mummy had made him hide some of his toys.
‘Hide them?’ I asked. Why?

‘Because you’re gonna visit termorra,’ Henry told me.

I was strangely comforted by the fact that, like me, Ginny felt the need to tidy her house before visitors. I was so cheerful during the evening that, after we had put the kids to bed, Mike began to tease me. He joked that it was obvious that my upcoming “day out with a girlfriend” was much more important to me than he was.

‘True,’ I told him. ‘The kids come first, and then Ginny, and then my Mum, then Dad, and then my sister, and then there is Auntie…’ I got no further, because he picked up a cushion and threw it at me. What followed was our first cushion fight in years. It was a bit muffled, because we didn’t want to wake the kids, but we were giggling like children when we finally went to bed.

I was still in a good mood when I drove down to school on Wednesday morning. The weather was bright and clear. It was almost unseasonably warm for the last day of September, hardly an Indian summer, but certainly warm and pleasant. The sky was the palest of blues, and the clouds were faint wisps of white. Henry, who was sitting behind me, was happily chattering, telling me some long and complicated story about a nasty, greasy-haired wizard who had, according to James, chopped off James’s Uncle George’s ear. I smiled and nodded, and said, ‘I see,’ in all the right places, all the while wondering how many different crazy stories about his missing ear George had told his nephews and nieces.

When I reached the school, I pulled up directly behind Harry’s Range Rover. He was wearing the white shirt, grey tie, and black trousers he always seemed to wear to work. In deference to the warm weather, the long black coat was missing.

Harry was lifting James out of the car when I arrived, and I gave them both a cheery wave. James waved back, but Harry’s response was a cursory, almost curt, nod of recognition.

Hi, Harry, hello, James,’ I called cheerfully as I freed both Annie and Henry from their seats. Harry was slow to answer. He looked tense, and a little impatient.

‘Hello, Jacqui. Ginny’s expecting you, she should be ready by now,’ he said, sounding a little exasperated. He picked up James’s school bag, turned on his heels and walked rapidly towards the school. ‘Come along, James. Don’t dawdle,’ he ordered, reaching out his hand. James glanced over his shoulder at Henry, but took Harry’s hand and trotted obediently alongside his father.

I said nothing, but simply swept Annie into my arms and hurried Henry along the path towards the school gates. I decided not to mention Henry’s crazy story about George’s ear, as there was an air about Harry which worried me. He was obviously moody, and he seemed to be under a lot of pressure. I chivvied Henry along. He didn’t need much encouragement, as he wanted to catch up to James.

As we dashed after Harry, I finally realised what was bugging him, and my heart lurched. My biggest worry of the day had been about what I should wear during my visit to Drakeshaugh; Harry had a killer to catch. I tried, and failed, to remember when the moon was next full, when the Sheffield killer would strike again.

‘Do you want me to take James into school, Harry?’ I asked when we caught up to Harry just inside the gates. ‘I’m sure that you’re very busy. Do you need to get to work?’

‘No, thanks, I… Yes, I do, really. Would you mind?’ he asked hesitantly.
He was torn between the desire to ensure that his son was safely ensconced in class, and a need to get to work.

‘Not at all,’ I assured him. ‘Is that okay, James?’

James nodded, and the relief on Harry’s face was plain to see. I wondered what difference five minutes would make.

‘Thanks, Jacqui,’ he said. He crouched down and turned his attention to James. ‘Henry’s mum will make sure you’re okay, James. You have a good day at school, okay?’ Harry hugged his eldest, ruffled his hair, and stood.

‘I hopes you catches the bad man, Daddy,’ James said seriously.

‘So do I, James. So do I,’ replied Harry sincerely. ‘Be good, bye.’ With that, he turned and strode rapidly out from the school.

I herded the kids into the classroom, hung up both Henry’s and James’s coats for them, and looked in on them to make sure that they were both settled at their table. James was telling Henry another story, this one was about the man his daddy was going to catch, a man who, James explained in all seriousness, was “just pretending” to be a werewolf.

‘Of course he’s just pretending, because werewolves aren’t real,’ I assured Henry.

James opened his mouth, and for a moment I thought that he was going to contradict me. Instead he closed his mouth with a clatter of teeth and stared at me. James screwed up his face and gave a shrug which seemed to start at his fingertips and ripple up his arms before reaching his shoulders like a breaking wave. The extravagant shrug, and James’s disdainful look, told me that I was dealing with a boy who certainly knew more about werewolves than a mere adult like me. I smiled at him, marvelling at the certainty of childhood. After saying goodbye to the boys, I took Annie by the hand, and left to make my way to Drakeshaugh.

Ginny, who was wearing khaki shorts and a green t-shirt, was standing in the yard when I arrived. She was holding Al and Lily firmly by the hand. The two younger Potter children began to jump and wave the moment I drove through the open gate and into the yard. As I parked I noticed another change to the place. A brand new coop and run had been installed since the party, and inside the stained wood barrier half-a-dozen buff Orpingtons clucked and pecked.

Ginny released her two youngest children the moment I had switched off the engine. They were alongside the car when I opened the door and, even before Annie’s feet had touched the ground they were busy telling her the exciting news.

‘We got hens, Annie,’ Al shouted the moment I opened my door. ‘Look!’ He helpfully pointed in the direction of the coop.

Annie, however, was not impressed. She looked across at the coop warily.

‘Hello, Jacqui,’ said Ginny, as I placed Annie on the ground between Al and Lily. ‘Al has already told you the latest exciting news from the Potter family.’

‘Hello, Ginny,’ I said, ‘Orpingtons. A good choice, particularly if you’re going to keep them outside over the winter. When did you get them?’

‘Sunday,’ Ginny said. ‘Mum and Dad have always kept chickens, and Harry was quite keen when Mum suggested it. And you’re right, they are Orpingtons; you know your hens.’
'I'm a farmer’s daughter. I know my sheep, too. I’m a woman of many talents. I can tell you the difference between a Cheviot and a Border Leicester,’ I told her, laughing. ‘I don’t know why, but I assumed that you were both townies,’ I added apologetically. ‘I know you’re from Devon, but I also know that you both moved here from central London. I simply—well, you’re obviously a country girl. Have the hens settled? Are you getting any eggs yet?’ As I spoke the two Potter children took Annie’s hands and led her towards the henhouse.

‘I was brought up in rural Devon,’ Ginny said. ‘Harry was… Well, let’s just say he didn’t see much of the countryside while he was growing up.’ She frowned in thought for a moment, and then brightened up. ‘Yes, Harry and I lived in London after we married, but only because that’s where his house was. Now we’re here, I think that we should have moved out of the city sooner. Harry loved The Burrow—Mum and Dad’s house—and this place is a lot like it, but it’s better, because it’s ours. It’s perfect for the kids. We got our first egg yesterday, and we’re about to find out whether there are any today.’

‘Me-me-me!’ Lily squealed.

‘I’ll collect the eggs,’ said Ginny firmly. ‘We don’t want the chickens to think that your little girl’s fingers are fat juicy worms, Lilyloo. They might gobble them up.’

Annie whimpered, curled her hands into fists, and took a step backwards. Ginny pulled an apologetic face “Sorry” she mouthed, before whispering, ‘Lily is likely to drop, or crush, any eggs we find.’

‘They’re only hens, Annie,’ I reassured my daughter as she continued to look hesitantly towards the birds. ‘Granddad Wake has hens, too, remember? That’s where the eggs come from.’

Still a little uncertain, Annie nodded. She, along with Al and Lily, gazed warily through the fence at the birds. I pointed out the slightly different sizes and colours to my daughter and tried to make her feel at ease as Ginny carried out a rapid and efficient search for eggs.

‘Three!’ she said, lifting up three decent sized brown eggs and showing them to the kids. ‘That’s better than yesterday. You could each have a boiled egg for lunch. Would you like that, Annie?’

‘An’ solders,’ Annie said, nodding.

‘Lunch?’ I said. ‘I didn’t realise that we were staying for lunch, Ginny. You invited me for coffee. I thought…’

‘Do you have other plans?’ Ginny asked as she led us past the outbuilding which housed Harry’s bike.

‘Housework,’ I told her. ‘And playing with Annie.’

‘You can play with Annie here,’ said Ginny. ‘And housework can wait, can’t it?’

‘I suppose so,’ I said.

We rounded the corner and reached the large, sheltered lawn. On the lawn were a wooden slide, two tricycles, and a large box which, on closer inspection, I discovered contained a collection of soft toys and balls.

‘Want Raggedy Maggie,’ said Annie.

‘Raggedy Maggie is at home, Annie,’ I reminded her. ‘But there are lots of other toys here. I’m
sure you’ll find something to play with.’

Al, Annie and Lily wandered across the lawn and began to play. Ginny and I sat on the bench by the back door, watching the kids, and gossiping.

I told her about my parents, and about growing up in the border hills. She told me about her family, and I discovered that Harry had been a regular visitor to Ginny’s parents’ house since he was twelve. Ginny was, it seemed to me, in a confiding mood, so I reciprocated. I told her all about Mike and me, from how we first met to the day we moved to Lintzgarth. Ginny admitted that she and Harry had first kissed when she was fifteen.

‘We’ve been together ever since,’ she said cheerfully.

We chatted about holidays, kids, and motorbikes. Ginny told me that the first time she’d ever been on the back of Harry’s bike they had travelled from her parents’ house in Devon to visit Harry’s aunt and uncle in Surrey, and had then ridden all the way to Newcastle to visit Harry’s cousin.

‘All in one day?’ I asked, astonished. ‘Mike broke me in gently. We did no more than thirty miles on our first date. I’m surprised you ever tried it again. Three hundred miles as a pillion is a very long way for your first ride. Even when Mike and I rode around Europe, I found that the excitement wore off after two or three hours.’

‘I was getting a bit fed up by the time we got there,’ Ginny admitted. ‘But there is something exhilarating about hanging on to your bloke and flying over the ground at speed, isn’t there?’

‘Yes,’ I agreed, grinning. ‘There certainly is.’

We played with the kids in the sunshine, and fed them juice and cake while we drank our mid-morning coffee. The three little ones played well together. Al was gentle with the girls, and rather quiet. He was nothing like Henry, and from what I’d seen of James, Al was nothing like his brother, either. When Ginny went inside to prepare lunch, I simply sat in the sunshine and watched the children play.

We all ate our lunch at the table on the patio. The kids had soft boiled eggs with toast soldiers, as Annie had requested. Ginny had baked a red onion focaccia to complement our salad. It smelled wonderful, and both Al and Annie decided that they would try it; they declared it acceptable. I thought it was delicious, and I asked Ginny for the recipe. We were still finishing our salad when Al, very politely, asked if he could leave the table. Annie and Lily followed suit, and they were allowed to leave and return to the garden. The kids were on their best behaviour, the weather was perfect, and Ginny and I were having a good gossip. It seemed almost too good to be true.

‘Are we still okay to go swimming on Saturday?’ I asked innocently.

Ginny’s face fell. She shrugged helplessly. ‘I honestly don’t know, Jacqui,’ she said. ‘James is very keen to go. He and Henry seem to have been talking about it, making arrangements. Al has asked me, too. But…’ Ginny stared into my eyes, and I could see the worry etched across her face. The curtain of normality was suddenly drawn back, revealing the anxiety hidden behind it. Ginny’s face, and Harry’s behaviour, sparked something, and I finally realised what it was.

‘Harry’s case,’ I said. ‘Something has gone wrong, hasn’t it? When I saw him this morning I could tell that he was…’ I hesitated, unwilling to use the first word—stroppy—which came to mind.

‘He was furious when he left here this morning,’ Ginny supplied. ‘He’s not good at hiding it, is he? I hope he wasn’t rude to you.’
‘No,’ I assured her. ‘What’s happened?’ I realised what I was asking, and hastily added, ‘You don’t have to tell me.’

Ginny hesitated. ‘Don’t tell anyone else,’ she said. ‘Not even Mike.’

‘Okay,’ I agreed.

‘Harry was at work for over twelve hours yesterday, organising surveillance on Gaheris… Bother, please forget that I told you that name …on a prime suspect. When he finally got back, late last night, I made him promise that he would take James to school this morning. I needed to make sure that everything was ready for your arrival. This morning, during breakfast, Harry got an urgent call to say that they had lost the suspect. He was seen walking in to his place of work, but then he vanished.’

‘If he’s a prime suspect, why didn’t they simply arrest him?’ I asked.

Ginny curled her lip angrily. ‘Because Gah… Damn! Because the suspect is very well connected, he’s…’ She hesitated for a moment, and decided to continue. ‘He’s the brother of Harry’s predecessor, so the Minister wants a cast iron case before Harry makes a move. Unfortunately, at the moment there is no evidence at all against him. He doesn’t have an alibi for the two previous killings, and he’s involved on the periphery of the case, but…’ Ginny shrugged, and threw out her arms in a gesture of helplessness.

I waited, and after a few seconds Ginny continued.

‘Harry isn’t convinced of his guilt,’ said Ginny. She stared at me, almost daring me to ask why, but I didn’t push. ‘Everyone is trying to force Harry to concentrate on this one man. He doesn’t want to. Harry is really good at his job,’ she added staunchly. ‘I know he’s not perfect, but after all these years, they should listen to him.’

‘So,’ I said. ‘Unless they manage to find this Gaheris…’

Ginny glared, so I tried again.

‘Unless they find this suspect, Harry will be working on Saturday,’ I said. ‘And you don’t drive.’

‘Yes.’ Ginny nodded. ‘The moon is full in the early hours of Sunday morning. So from dusk on Saturday dusk until dawn on Sunday is going to be the critical time. I expect that by now Harry will have cancelled all leave for his staff, and he’ll be getting ready for a busy weekend. James was really looking forward to going to the pool, but…’

‘We can take you,’ I volunteered. ‘I know that Harry will be busy, and you’ll be worried, I expect. But that’s no reason to disrupt the kids’ lives, is it? We’ve got two cars. Mike and I can take you and all of the kids easily enough.’ I stared into Ginny’s troubled face. ‘Or, if you need to be here for Harry, we can simply take your kids, or even just James. Whatever you think is best. Just ask, and we’ll help.’

‘Thanks, Jacqui.’ Ginny reached across the table and squeezed my arm in gratitude. ‘Now, did you want that focaccia recipe?’

With that, Ginny signalled that the serious conversation was over, and that there would be no more talk about Harry’s case. She gave me the recipe and we spent the afternoon being normal, playing with the children and gossiping about friends, family, and their housewarming party. That was when I finally remembered to ask Ginny about buying fireworks for Henry’s birthday party.
‘Henry was born on Guy Fawkes night,’ I explained. ‘On his first birthday he was a bit scared of the fireworks, so I told him that everyone was celebrating his birthday. Now, he expects fireworks every year, and your brothers’ display at your housewarming party was brilliant.’

‘I’ll speak to Ron and George,’ Ginny promised. ‘We should be able to get you something reasonably spectacular, and reasonably priced.’

By two o’clock we’d decided that there was little point in me returning home, so I stayed at Drakeshaugh for another hour, until just before school closed. I gave Ginny, and the kids, a lift down to school to collect Henry and James. When we arrived, Mary finally made her move.

‘Full moon is Saturday night, Mrs Potter,’ Mary boomed. ‘I hope that your husband is doing his job.’

‘He is,’ said Ginny.

‘So, we can expect an arrest in the next few days, can we?’ Mary asked.

‘I am not going to make a promise I can’t keep, Mrs Saville,’ Ginny told her.

‘It would be terrible if someone else died, wouldn’t it?’ said Mary, pressing her attack.

‘It is always terrible when someone dies,’ Ginny snapped. ‘I know that, and Harry knows it, too!’

‘If anyone else dies, Mary,’ I said firmly. ‘Then the guilty person is the killer, this “werewolf” character. It certainly won’t be Harry’s fault!’

Al, who had been listening to the conversation, burst into tears, and Ginny turned to tend to her son. I saw a glint of triumph in Mary’s eyes, but ignored it, and crouched down to help Ginny. My friend had just calmed her son and dried his tears when the kids began to pour out of the classroom. Mary collected her daughter, Helen, and strode haughtily away as Ginny and I listened to our sons plans for Saturday, and exchanged a worried glance.

That evening, I broke my promise to Ginny. After extracting a solemn promise from Mike that he wouldn’t breathe a word to anyone, I told him everything.

‘Not a soul, Michael,’ I ordered. ‘Or else.’

‘Cross my heart and hope to die,’ he assured me. We spent much of the evening discussing, not the case, but how we could get everyone to the pool.

The following morning Mike came back into our bedroom before going to work. It was something he never did. He always gave me an extra half hour in bed, because there was no need for me to be up as early as he was.

‘Sorry, Jacques,’ he said. ‘But I think that you’d better come downstairs now. It’s the headlines on the Breakfast News, and forewarned is forearmed.’

‘What?’ I mumbled stupidly.

‘A young couple have gone missing in Sheffield,’ he said. ‘The police believe that they may have been kidnapped by “The Werewolf” and they have issued a photograph of a man they want to
interview in connection with the crimes. He’s called Gaheris Robards, and he’s a museum curator in his sixties. He looks pretty harmless to me, but they are saying that he’s armed and extremely dangerous.’
Interlude: Bad Moon on the Rise

As he watched his departing son, Harry decided that, in addition to his many other failings, he wasn’t even a very good father.

Jacqui had offered to help, he reminded himself. She was perfectly capable of assisting James with his jacket and settling him in the classroom. But what had he gained? He might, possibly, get to his office five minutes earlier than he would otherwise have done. With a sour feeling of regret churning inside his chest, he realised that his protestations about having to make the school run were, as Ginny had told him during their argument, ridiculous. It seemed to him that, recently, every decision he made was wrong.

Harry started to follow his son, but James, Henry and Jacqui were oblivious to his continued presence at the school gates. He vacillated for a moment, and changed his mind again. He’d already said his goodbyes. As Henry’s mum herded them up towards the school, the two boys were chattering happily to each other. There was no backward look from James but, despite the fact that his son was entirely unaware of the action, Harry waved goodbye to his eldest.

As he strode over to his car, his son’s indifference to his departure, his sense of failure as a father, the Daily Prophet headline and the news from his office filled his head with gloomy thoughts and recent memories.

Harry closed the connection, replaced the mirror in his pocket and stared at the Prophet’s headline: CLUELESS: Potter flounders as the full moon approaches.

He picked up his coat. ‘I have to go, Ginny,’ he said. ‘You can take James to school.’

‘I can’t, sorry, Harry,’ Ginny told him quietly.

‘You have to. It’s an emergency,’ he replied sharply, standing and preparing to leave. Ginny scowled and she, too, stood. A silence fell across the kitchen table, and Harry was aware that his children had picked up the mood of their parents, and were watching carefully.

‘It is not an emergency,’ Ginny told him. Her voice was level and reasonable, but he could see the annoyance simmering in her eyes. She grabbed his arm, preventing him from leaving. ‘Your people have lost a suspect, not you. They lost him, they can bl…inking well find him! You know how much time it will take for me to make this place Muggle-friendly. I will be busy from the moment you leave with James. No one’s life is in immediate danger, is it?’

‘But…’

‘No buts, Harry. I’m not cancelling Jacqui’s visit at the last minute because of an Auror Office crisis. Another half hour won’t make any difference to you!’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘And you don’t know that it will, Harry.’

‘Don’t be silly, Ginny…’ As he spoke those words his wife’s annoyance boiled up into anger. Her bared teeth stopped him in mid sentence.
She released him. ‘Silly? Me? This is my fault, is it?’ she snapped sarcastically. ‘Work is obviously all-important. Fine, be like that. You must leave now, must you? Oh... Stuff it! Just go, bu...bog off and do what you want! Don’t mind us, we’ll cope without you, won’t we kids?’

Harry clenched his teeth and took a deep breath. He looked first at his incensed wife and then at his confused kids. Al was close to tears; he hated this sort of unpleasantness. Although Harry wanted to argue, he didn’t want to do so in front of the children, and Ginny knew it. He was trapped, and she knew it. Her tactics made him seethe, but he backed down.

‘Sorry, Al,’ Harry said, turning back to the table and ruffling his younger son’s hair. He returned his gaze to his wife, furious that she had won, and forced himself to smile. ‘Okay, Ginny, I’ll take James to school.’ He turned to face his son, who was wolfing down a bowl of cornflakes with Weasley-like haste. ‘Come on, big boy, Daddy needs to leave.’

‘Have you cleaned your teeth, James?’ Ginny asked sternly. Harry clenched his jaw, but said nothing.

Climbing into the Range Rover, Harry pulled the mirror from the inside pocket of his coat and placed it in the cradle on the dashboard. As he fastened his seatbelt, Harry saw Amanda Berry chivvying her rather reluctant son and daughter towards the school. He tried to give Amanda a friendly wave, but his heart wasn’t in it. It was immaterial, as she didn’t seem to notice him; she certainly didn’t return his perfunctory wave.

Starting the car, he put it into gear and drove out of the village. The moment the road was clear he switched on the Invisibility Booster, pulled the car into the air, and tapped the mirror.

‘Portkey Office,’ he said.

‘Good morning, Mr Potter,’ said the round-faced woman in the mirror. ‘The Auror-priority Portkey to your Ministry parking space is authorised. You may depart when ready.’

‘Thank you,’ Harry said. He brought the car to a halt in midair and pulled on the handbrake. Drawing his wand, he touched the steering wheel, said, ‘Portus,’ and experienced the familiar lurch as he instantly moved some three hundred miles to the south.

The blue glow of the Portkey had barely faded when Harry opened the car door. His nostrils twitched as he climbed out into fume-filled London air which was noticeably different from the fresh country air he’d just left behind. Hurrying through the dingy car park, Harry strode out onto the street. The main entrance to the Ministry had been relocated onto a side street between the Strand and Covent Garden, and it was directly across the road from the car park.

Following several other Ministry employees through the magically hidden entrance, Harry entered a wide hallway. On both sides of the hall, dozens of Floo connections were flashing and flaring as witches and wizards arrived from all across the country. Directly ahead of him, beyond the flickering fireplaces, a line of two dozen dark wood security arches, each one wide enough for one person, stretched from wall to wall. The only way to enter the Ministry atrium, which was visible through the apparently unobstructed arches, was to pass beneath them. On the wall above them, a sign glowed in bold blue letters: “Warning, Mapped Area Ahead”.

There was a long queue at the two left hand arches, both of which were marked “Visitors”. Ministry employees streamed, unhindered, through the others. As Harry approached the arches he noticed a tanned, long-nosed wizard in the visitors’ queue. Everything about the man, from the tension in his stance to his impatiently tapping foot, indicated that he considered himself to be much too important to wait his turn.
Almost immediately, Harry was proved right. He watched the man leave the visitors queue and move across to the next arch. He wasn’t the only one who noticed, and there was a subtle shift in the flow of office workers as they moved to avoid the arch the man was approaching.

Harry didn’t warn the man, nor did anyone else. It was policy not to. It was a test of the system, and a lesson to anyone else in the visitors’ queue. The moment the man entered the arch the security shutters dropped, just as they should. A babble of excited comments sprang up from the people in the queue.

‘Perseus Packman, you are not a Ministry employee and your use of arch twenty-two is unauthorised,’ a female voice announced firmly. ‘Please deposit your wand into the slot on your right and remain where you are. You will experience several minutes delay while a security check is carried out. Thank you for your patience.’

Harry walked through an unused arch some distance from the incident. ‘Harry James Potter,’ he spoke his name clearly, and passed straight through into the Atrium.

‘Morning, Mr Potter,’ said one of the two blue-robed security witches who, with wands drawn, were slowly making their way towards the sealed arch in which Mr Packman was detained.

‘Morning,’ Harry replied.

He vaguely recognised the young woman, but he could not remember her name. As he continued towards the lifts, Harry tried to remember why the security witch seemed so familiar to him. She was several years younger than him, so he didn’t know her from school. He was almost at the lifts when he finally identified her; she was an Auror applicant, one of many who had failed the preliminary Auror interview. He remembered her because she had been spectacularly inept. She had been “killed” within fifteen seconds of the start of the initial practical assessment, a record.

As he remembered the incident, Harry wondered what sort of qualifications the building security staff needed. They were not employed by Magical Law Enforcement but instead, like all service staff, were part of the Ministry Maintenance Section, an almost ignored division of the Minister’s Office. His musings were, however, interrupted by a shout.

‘Over here, Harry!’

He looked up to see Trudi Corner holding a lift door open for him. The crop-haired young witch was glaring at a balding middle-aged wizard who was attempting to enter it ahead of Harry. The wizard registered Trudi’s Auror uniform and slowed down, and then her words hit him, too. He glanced over his shoulder and, upon seeing the Head Auror approaching, hastily stepped aside. When Harry entered the lift, Trudi immediately released the door and pushed the button to take them to level two.

‘Morning, Trudi,’ said Harry. ‘Michael,’ he nodded at Trudi’s husband and then looked at the only other occupant of the lift.

‘This is my, um, er, my assistant, Jason Jones,’ said Michael. ‘He’s been helping me to refine the – the System.’

‘Jason.’ Harry nodded a greeting.

‘Hello, Mr Potter,’ Jason said hesitantly. ‘Most people call me Jay,’ he added. The baby-faced young wizard was no taller than Dennis Creevey and was, it seemed to Harry, to be barely out of his teens.
‘It wasn’t our fault, Harry,’ said Trudi. ‘Polly’s rechecking the map, but she’s certain that the map creation spells were all done correctly.’

‘We’ll talk in the office,’ Harry told her. He turned to Michael. ‘You left a message to say that you no longer think that Robards is responsible. He’s the fifth suspect which the RANDOM System has suggested, is there something wrong with it?’

‘We think that it’s a problem with the probability curves,’ said Michael, turning to Jay, who eagerly nodded his confirmation. ‘I have been using a standard multivariate normal distribution, but I now believe that the curve is slewed. The perpetrator doesn’t fall into normal parameters. He, or she, doesn’t fall within the normal deviate.’

Jay chuckled, and Harry looked at him curiously.

‘Arithmancy joke,’ the young wizard explained. ‘The person you are looking for isn’t a normal deviate, he isn’t a normal serial killer, not in any sense of the word.’

Not for the first time, Harry wished that he had Hermione to translate for him. The complexity of Michael’s Arithmantic probability calculator was completely beyond his grasp, and Michael, for all his intelligence, found it difficult to explain the intricacies of his predictor.

‘I’ll send Terry down to see you, Michael,’ said Harry. ‘You can explain the problem to him.’

‘I just did, weren’t you listening?’ Michael asked him, puzzled.

‘Perhaps I could explain in less technical language, Mr Potter,’ said Jay eagerly. ‘I could come to your office and…’

‘I think I’ll be very busy today, Jay,’ said Harry. ‘Some other time, perhaps.’

‘Any time,’ said the baby-faced young man earnestly as the lift came to a halt at level two.

‘Bye, Michael, see you later,’ said Trudi, kissing her husband’s heavily bearded cheek.

‘Are you meeting the Minister?’ Harry asked, realising that Michael and Jay were heading to the first floor, away from their office in the Department of Mysteries.

‘No, we’re going to the Central Administration Office,’ said Jay.

‘Yes, Administration,’ Michael confirmed. He was pulling anxiously on his beard, and was so distracted that he almost seemed to be under a Confundus Charm.

Harry waited for the lift doors to close before turning to Trudi and asking, ‘Is Michael okay?’

Trudi shook her head. ‘No,’ she admitted. ‘I think it’s the RANDOM System, he’s probably simply puzzling out some Arithmancy problem in his head. Using the System puts him under a lot of strain, Harry. I tell him that we’re pursuing other lines of enquiry, but…’ She shrugged helplessly.

Harry nodded. ‘I know what effect using it has, Trudi,’ he said quietly. ‘That’s why I don’t often involve Michael in an investigation. The first time we used it Terry explained “the data dilemma,” as Michael calls it, to me.’ He smiled wryly at Trudi. ‘Michael isn’t very good at layman’s language, Terry is.’

‘True,’ she admitted. ‘I took Arithmancy to NEWT level, and I got an “Outstanding,”’ but usually I have no idea what he’s talking about. All I know is that the System provides more accurate
predictions with every additional piece of information. Unfortunately that means that the more people who are killed, the better the System gets at tracking the killer. Michael hates it, you know. He doesn’t like thinking about death and dark magic, about what we investigate, and he really doesn’t like it when bad things happen. Unfortunately, the System needs the bad things, and he needs to report them accurately. The thought of people hurting each other, people dying, drives him crazy. He puts himself under tremendous pressure to get it right. If he fails, and someone dies, he feels responsible.’

‘He’s not the only one,’ said Harry with passion. ‘I wish I knew why the Muggle Monitoring Service didn’t contact us after the first death. Lavender, Polly and Dennis would have immediately realised that we were dealing with a werewolf attack.’

‘Except that we aren’t looking for a werewolf, not any more,’ Trudi reminded him as they walked through the main Magical Law Office towards the Auror Office. She lowered her voice. ‘I know that Lavender’s a friend of yours, Harry, but she’d have taken the werewolf connection personally; you know she would. It’s probably a good thing that she’s on maternity leave.’

‘But we’d have had another month,’ said Harry. ‘We might not have found the killer after the first death, but we didn’t even begin our investigation until the second. I hate to say it, but we’re running out of options, the RANDOM System is our best chance to prevent another death.’

‘I would never have met Michael if he hadn’t invented it,’ said Trudi thoughtfully. ‘But sometimes, I wish he’d never come up with the Arithmantic formula for predictions.’ Trudi Corner looked helplessly up at Harry. ‘Related Abstractions of Non-deterministic Distributions to an Ordered Mean! Despite the name, the System is anything but RANDOM, except this time.’

‘What do you mean?’ Harry asked.

‘Michael was trying to tell you that he doesn’t think that the System is working properly. For a while he was convinced that he’d somehow entered faulty information, but now he’s not sure. He thinks that the killer isn’t what we first thought. He’s removed the werewolf parameters, and it’s coming up with a completely different set of predictions. You know that it can only point to trends, possibilities, but even so, he thinks that it’s getting less accurate, not more,’ Trudi admitted. ‘Michael doesn’t know why, and he hates being unable to solve an Arithmancy problem.’

Harry nodded sympathetically and decided that it was time to return to the real world investigations, the things he could control and understand. ‘So, what went wrong at the Marvellous Magical Menagerie?’

‘We’ll get a full report to you this morning. I hope that Polly has started it. She’s been here for an hour, but Dennis and I stayed behind to double check the site,’ said Trudi anxiously. ‘We watched Gaheris Robards enter the museum grounds by the side gate. He seemed a little on edge, so Polly, Colin and I stayed outside the grounds, just in case he checked to see if there was anyone invisible in the area.’ Trudi sounded worried, so Harry nodded encouragingly.

‘It sounds like you followed standard procedures,’ he assured her. He stepped forwards, opened the door leading into the Auror Office, and motioned for her to go first. She acknowledged the gesture with the briefest of smiles and they walked into the large open office.

‘We wouldn’t have lost him if Mr Brick had given authorisation for us to Map the grounds as well as the building,’ said Trudi.

‘As Head of D.M.L.E., he’s supposed to keep the use of covert Mapping to a minimum. Use only in exceptional circumstances, over the smallest area,’ Harry reminded her.
‘Thanks to Mrs Weasley and her “invasion of privacy” concerns,’ Trudi complained.

‘If you want to argue with Hermione, go right ahead,’ Harry told her. ‘It didn’t get me anywhere.’ He smiled at the memory; although he hadn’t been smiling at the time.

‘Sorry, it’s just… we lost him,’ said Trudi angrily. ‘The grounds weren’t Mapped, so we stationed ourselves at the gates and waited for him to enter the building. We waited for ten minutes, but he didn’t appear on the Map. We gave him another couple of minutes, and then Polly ordered us in. We checked the grounds but he wasn’t there, and according to the Map he hadn’t gone into the museum, either. We went in to double-check. The Map was registering us, so we knew that it was working, but no one had seen him. The grounds are covered by an Anti-Apparition spell and the Floo connection is inside the building. I know it’s impossible, but he didn’t enter the Mapped area, and he didn’t leave the grounds. He simply vanished.’

‘He could have hidden himself in the grounds and sneaked out when you went to look for him.’

Trudi shook her head emphatically, ‘We checked the grounds as we entered, and we put alarm spells on both of the the gates.’

‘I want a full report on my desk within the hour,’ Harry told her. ‘And I’ll schedule a debriefing with you all once I’ve read the report.’

‘I’ll tell Polly,’ said Trudi as she strode over to her desk. Harry continued through to his own private office at the far end of the room.

‘Morning, Martha,’ he said to his secretary as he entered the outer office. ‘What else has gone wrong?’

Martha Nicholson was a tall, skinny, bespectacled woman in her early fifties. Her wild brown hair was, as usual, tied back with a colourful bow. She looked up from the papers she’d been sorting through and flashed him a half-hearted smile.

‘Good morning, Harry,’ Martha said. She ignored his question. ‘Mrs Skoll and Mrs Boot want to see you in the Imaging Room immediately, if not sooner. Also, the Minister’s Office has scheduled a meeting for you. You’re to meet Minister Shacklebolt at ten.’

‘I don’t know why. I don’t have anything to tell him,’ said Harry gloomily. ‘Anything else?’

‘You had a meeting with the Dark Forces Defence League at two. They wanted to discuss the werewolf menace. I tried to cancel it, but they weren’t happy. I managed to persuade Mr Brick, through his secretary, that the complaints relate to general Law Enforcement matters, not matters for the Auror Office. The League seem to be a little happier now that their concerns about the werewolf legislation have been passed to the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. However, Mr Brick is “too busy” so he has passed them down to his Deputy. She has agreed to meet them.’ She looked straight into his eyes. ‘I’ve advised building security to provide additional security in the vicinity of Mrs Weasley’s office.’

‘Hermione won’t need it,’ said Harry.

‘It’s not for her,’ said Martha, a twinkle in her eyes. Harry chuckled, but Martha glanced back at the diary on her desk, and pressed on. ‘Also, one of the other Mrs Weasleys has a meeting with the Sheriff of Wessex at three. She asked if you could attend, but I told her no.’

‘What is the meeting about?’ Harry asked.
‘There have been several assaults on werewolves in Wessex. Most fairly minor, but one young woman ended up in St Mungo’s. The local werewolves claim that the Sheriff’s investigations have been cursory, so they approached the Sentient Entities Rights Office and they’ve asked Mrs Weasley to investigate. One of the complainants alleges that a Sheriff’s Bailiff was involved in the assaults.’

‘Tell Angelina that I’ll try to attend, but it will depend in how things go with the Minister,’ said Harry. He paused and then shook his head. ‘Forget that. Try to contact Hamish Campbell – the Sheriff of Alba – and ask if he could attend the meeting. I appreciate that it’s short notice. And ask if he’s prepared to allow Senior Bailiff Moon to carry out an independent investigation of the conduct of the Wessex Sheriff’s Office. Tell Hamish that, if he agrees, I’ll clear it with the Minister when I see him. Hopefully the threat of an external investigation will be enough. If not, and Sheriff Appleton of Wessex won’t put a stop to the attacks on werewolves, Mark will put a stop to the Sheriff.’

Martha nodded. ‘I’ll contact the Edinburgh Sheriff’s Office immediately, Harry, and I’ll schedule the mission debriefing with Aurors Protheroe, Creevey and Corner for eleven. You should be finished with the Minister by then.’

‘Thanks, Martha,’ said Harry. ‘It’s going to be another busy day. I’ll go and see Dacia and Fenella now.’

After shrugging off his coat and hanging it on the stand behind Martha’s desk, Harry turned and headed back out into the main office. He walked diagonally across it, towards a frosted glass door on which the words “Specialist Auror Services” had been etched.

As he walked across the room Harry realised that he could do nothing until Polly’s team had prepared their report. His annoyance, and his argument, had been pointless, Ginny had been right; he could easily have taken James to school. Shaking his head in exasperation at himself, Harry pulled open the door and stepped into the bright yellow corridor. To left and right were doorways leading to the various specialist offices. He walked past doors marked Muggle Liaison Officer, Healer Team, and Analysis Unit, to the door marked Imager Section. When he entered, Terry Boot’s black-haired wife looked up and blinked at him from behind her fashionable, thick-lensed spectacles.

There were two desks in the small office. The second one was unoccupied, and remarkably tidy. Fenella Boot’s desk, however, was cluttered with vials, stacks of photographic paper, a large wooden box which appeared to be almost full of clay, and a poseable jointed wooden mannequin of the type used by artists. The mannequin was sitting on the edge of the box.

‘Morning Fenella,’ he said. ‘Martha said that you, and Dacia, wanted to see me. Is Dacia in the Imaging Room?’ He glanced at the door behind Fenella.

‘Hello, Harry.’ Fenella’s high-pitched little-girl voice was, as usual, barely above a whisper. Picking up her wand from her desk, she stood. ‘Yes, Dacia and I have—well—this case seems to be getting more complicated.’

Stifling a groan at her words, Harry allowed her to lead him through the door. They stepped into the outdoors, into a large area of woodland. Harry found himself in a familiar grassy clearing where a middle-aged witch who wore the green robes of a Healer was standing over a corpse.

‘Morning, Harry,’ Dacia Skoll, the Auror Office’s Senior Healer said the moment Harry followed Fenella into the room. ‘I’ve spent two days experimenting and taking another look at the bodies of the victims. We’ve got something for you, but you’re not going to like it.’ She scowled in
frustration as she spoke. ‘I wish the Muggles wouldn’t cut up dead people the way they do. It doesn’t make things easy for me. Why don’t you tell him, Fenella. After all, you spotted it first.’

‘This is the woodland off Grimesthorpe Road,’ Fenella began. ‘And that’s the second victim…’

‘Eleanor Fearn, age twenty-three, born and raised in the city. She worked as a waitress in one of the city centre cafés,’ said Harry dismissively. ‘I know, Fenella, I’ve seen this before. I was there when you Imaged the scene, remember?’

Fenella, who was a couple of inches taller than Harry, slumped and her lower lip quivered. Before he could apologise Harry found himself face to face with his Senior Healer. Dacia’s wild, tawny-brown hair was, as usual, tied back into a bun, but she was shaking with anger and several hairs had sprung free making her look rather wild.

‘Of course we know you were there,’ Dacia snapped. ‘Do you really think that we would call you here to see something you’ve already seen? I don’t suppose that Fenella has told you how much time and effort she’s put into reconstructing the other crime scene.’

‘The other crime scene?’ asked Harry. He stared at the two women. ‘We weren’t notified about the first death. We don’t have an Image, only the police photographs.’

‘We do now,’ said Dacia. ‘We’ll get to that later. First, just take a good look at the scene.’ Dacia gestured towards the body. ‘No blood, Harry, remember? Even the Muggles know that she was killed elsewhere and placed here. But the question was when? We’ve all assumed that it was within a few hours of her death, because rigor hadn’t begun when the body was found. Just look at the scene again, see if you can see what Fenella saw.’ She gestured at the ground, at the magical recreation of the crime scene.

Harry decided that it would be wise to humour the still angry Healer, so he peered down at the bitten and ravaged corpse of the young woman. Even though it was merely an Image, a three-dimensional representation, it was a reminder to Harry of the urgency of his job. He spent several minutes examining the scene carefully.

The body was supine, displaying numerous wounds to the torso and neck. Her left arm was by her side, the right flung out. Her out-flung hand was lying palm uppermost, and it was pressed surprisingly deeply into the soft ground.

‘Did someone stand on her hand? Push it into the ground?’ he asked.

Dacia shook her head, turned, and nodded to Fenella. The Imager waved her wand, and the body vanished.

‘Right hand, back of head, and both heels,’ said Dacia, pointing to four strangely deep indentations in the grass and mud. ‘Now, show him the other scene, Fenella.’

Fenella waved her wand and Harry found himself in another open grassy area, looking at a different corpse. It was an odd scene as, unlike the first Image, there were black cracks and gaps in the sky above. In addition, the grass and the trees were unnaturally rigid.

‘This is Chelsea Park, in Nether Edge,’ said Fenella quietly. ‘Bobbie got copies of all of the crime scene photographs the Muggle police took, and I recreated the scene from them.’ She paused, looked in frustration at the scene, and didn’t notice Harry’s amazed expression. ‘I know that it’s not very good,’ she said apologetically.

‘It’s brilliant, Fenela,’ Harry told her. She shrugged dismissively.
'There are gaps in the Image, and I can't get the timing right. The grass is flickering instead of moving naturally in the wind, and that pigeon, well…' As she pointed to a bird which was flickering in and out of existence in the sky beneath oddly static clouds, her expression was one of frustration and despair.

'I didn’t think this was possible,’ said Harry. ‘It’s brilliant, Fenella. We’ve got all the details we need to be able to look at this scene carefully.’

'It’s kind of you to say so, Harry,’ said Fenella, disbelievingly. ‘I think that the ground around the actual scene is accurate. The Muggles took lots and lots of photographs of the body, enough for me to be able to convert all of their funny little unmoving photographs into this Image. Unfortunately, the Muggles didn’t take many photographs containing the sky, or distant objects.’

'It probably doesn’t matter, Fenella,’ he told her. Fenella shook her head forcefully.

'It might!’ she said earnestly. 'The first time I made an image of a crime scene for you…'

'I said: photograph everything, because it’s impossible to know what’s important, and what isn’t,’ Harry acknowledged, realising why Fenella was unhappy with her achievement.

Dacia Skoll stepped forwards, and pointed to the bloodstained corpse on the grass. ‘Jamie McLuckie, Scottish, mid-forties, homeless and, judging by the state of his liver, an alcoholic. Neither you, nor the Muggle police, have found any connection between at all between poor Jamie and the second victim. This is a secluded corner of the park, but even so it’s surprising that the body wasn’t found for several days after his death. Take a good look at him.

Harry did as he was asked. The man’s body was in an entirely different position to the woman’s. His legs were bent, his left foot under his right calf. His arms were bent, but at his sides. Harry checked. The indentations under the man’s left foot and left elbow were surprisingly deep.

'Strange,’ said Harry.

‘Fenella spotted the indentations in the image of the second crime scene,’ said Dacia. ‘I asked if the first crime scene was the same, so Fenella recreated it for me, using Muggle photographs and creating an Image from them. You were impressed. You should be. No one has ever created a magical image from a collection of Muggle photographs. Fenella was told that it wasn’t possible, but she did it anyway.’ The bespectacled woman blushed at the praise.

‘I was only trying to help,’ she protested over Harry’s compliments.

It was obvious to Harry that both Fenella and Dacia thought that they were onto something. ‘What’s your explanation for the marks?’ he asked them.

‘Like I said, you won’t like it,’ Dacia said. Fenella gave a wide-eyed and very worried-looking nod of agreement and dismissed the image. Dacia opened the door and led the way back into Fenella’s office. ‘We’ll do the second scene,’ she told Fenella.

Dacia picked up the mannequin, straightened it, and stood it on the table while Fenella passed her wand over the tray full of clay, reshaping it into the twisting undulations of an open area of parkland. Dacia then pointed a finger at the mannequin’s chest.

‘Killing Curse,’ Dacia said. She pushed the mannequin and after it had clattered onto the desk, she twisted the limbs into a good approximation of the position of the corpse. Picking up her wand, she drew it across the body, making red marks across the torso and head. ‘Fake werewolf attack,’ explained Dacia. ‘We’re now certain that the marks were made post mortem, although the lack of
defence wounds made that extremely likely. The Muggle dead-person doctors…’

‘Pathologists,’ interjected Harry.

‘Yes, them,’ said Dacia. ‘I’ve seen their reports, and they agree with me. They base it on the way
the blood settled in the body, and various other tests. Their report made interesting reading. They
have several useful ways to find stuff out without using magic. However, I’m now convinced that
they have time of death wrong.’ She pointed at the mannequin. ‘Here we have the body in its
original location, the scene of the murder. Notice that we have a body lying on a completely flat
surface. Now watch this.’ Dacia raised her wand, ‘Duro,’ she said. The mannequin immediately
turned to stone.

Using her wand to levitate the mannequin, Dacia placed it carefully onto the clay. Harry peered at
the mannequin. It was not resting on the ground; instead, it was supported at four points.

‘Right hand, back of head, and both heels,’ Fenella said. ‘The entire weight of the body was resting
on four relatively small areas; we think that’s what caused the depressions.’

‘I’ve been experimenting on dead rats,’ said Dacia. ‘Obviously, the Duro spell doesn’t work on
living creatures, but dead ones are completely preserved by it. Although a body doesn’t age after
death, it certainly changes. But the spell stops everything, including the post-mortem changes. The
effects of death simply restart the moment the spell is ended. My rat experiments have confirmed
it. We based the time of death on body temperature and the onset of rigor mortis. But…’ She
shrugged helplessly. ‘Finite Incantatem’ she said, and the mannequin returned to its original
wooden form.

Harry swore. ‘You think that they were killed earlier, and then they were turned to stone…’ Dacia
held up a hand, forestalling Harry’s question.

‘And when the spell was ended, they returned to dead flesh,’ Dacia continued. ‘Of course, at that
moment the body would collapse onto the ground. But, because the process of death had been
halted I can’t tell you when they died. It could have been minutes, hours, or days before the
estimated time of death I gave you in my original report.’

‘So, all of the people we’ve eliminated because they had alibis for the estimated times of death are
now back on the suspects list,’ said Harry helplessly. ‘Gaheris Robards was the only person who
had access to the werewolf jaw and who didn’t have an alibi for the times of the murder. Now we
need to look at everyone in the Marvellous Magical Menagerie again. Gaheris always seemed a
very unlikely suspect to me. Luna said that he’s one of the nicest men she’s ever met.’

‘That’s because he listened to her politely when she talked about Snorcacks,’ said Fenella.

‘True, but Luna’s usually right about people,’ said Harry. ‘She’d be an asset to the Office, but…’
He shrugged helplessly.

‘The only thing which puzzles me,’ said Dacia. ‘And I’ve only just thought about it now, is why
transport the body as a statue? Why not remove the spell and then move it.’

‘Perhaps he doesn’t like blood,’ said Fenella.

‘A squeamish killer,’ said Harry thoughtfully. ‘The Killing Curse is almost clinical, but it still
results in death. It’s almost as though the killer is two or three people. One doing the killing,
another ripping the body, and a third moving it to the place where it is found. It’s no wonder that
we are having problems, and so is Michael. I’m beginning to think Ron was right. The victims
aren’t important; at least, they aren’t important to the killer. He doesn’t care who he kills, it’s all about how we are reacting to the deaths. So far we’ve had assaults on werewolves, and questions about me, and about Kingsley’s suitability as Minister…” He paused, ‘Who else knows about this?’

‘I’ve told Terry,’ said Fenella. ‘He asked me why I was working late.’

‘I haven’t even discussed my ideas with Amber,’ said Dacia.

‘Good. I want to keep this information quiet for the moment. I’ll have to tell at least two squads of Aurors, and Michael of course, but no one else.’ said Harry firmly. ‘You’ve given me a lot to think about,’ he added ruefully.

‘Sorry,’ said Fenella.

‘Don’t be, Fenella,’ he told her as he hurried from the room. ‘Well done, both of you. I’ve got a lot to do. I’ll send a squad to Sheffield to find out what the Muggle police know about the last movements of the victims, and to make further investigations. At least we know that The Prophet has no reason to try to blame the killings on a werewolf.’

‘It would be nice if we could tell them,’ said Dacia vehemently.

‘I’m beginning to think that someone is passing confidential information to the killer,’ said Harry. ‘And if there is more than one person involved in the killings, then we could be looking for someone inside the Ministry.’

The Auror Office Conference Room was a windowless box protected by dozens of anti-eavesdropping spells. Harry sat at the head of the conference table and surveyed the seven faces staring at him. He wondered if one of them could be plotting against him.

He’d appointed over half of them, and the others had fought in the Battle, and proved trustworthy over many years. Perhaps this was part of the plan, he thought. Perhaps, along with everything else, the killer was trying to make him suspect his staff. Nevertheless, he had already made his decision. He had to trust them all.

Auror Squad Beta, the squad from which the Muggle Interface Team was constituted, had been reorganised only weeks before the murder investigations had begun, but they seemed to be working well together. With Susan and Camelia likely to be in Transylvania for some time, and Lavender on maternity leave, Harry had been left with no alternative but to make major changes to the squad.

To Harry’s left were the white team: Senior Auror Aloysius Webb, a shabby, grey-haired and mournful-looking man in his late fifties, and Aurors Len Lister and Stan Cresswell, both young and keen. To his right were the black team: Lead Auror Polly Protheroe, and Aurors Trudi Corner and Dennis Creevey. At the end of the table sat Trainee Auror Ellie Cattermole, the tiny, dark-haired girl seemed to be astonished that she was being sent on a mission into the Muggle world.

‘So, now you know everything I know,’ Harry told them as he completed the briefing. ‘I’m putting Terry’s squad onto the re-investigation of the staff of the Magical Menagerie.’ He turned to the squad leader. ‘I know you did a good job at the Menagerie, Al, and you to, Polly,’ he added, turning to Al’s deputy. ‘But I want Terry’s squad to take a fresh look at all of the suspects.’ Harry turned his attention to the trainee.

‘Ellie,’ he began. ‘You haven’t worked with our Muggle Liaison Officer, Bobbie Wood, have you?’
'No, sir,' the girl said.

'She’s expecting you. You will be Detective Constable Cattermole, and you’ll be working with Bobbie to sift through the evidence the Muggles are gathering. She’s Detective Chief Inspector Wood, not Bobbie, so remember to call her boss, or ma’am. Report your findings to Aloysius; he’ll be your mission supervisor. As for the rest of you, you all know Bobbie. So far as the Muggles know, she’s in charge of the “profiling team” sent up from London, so don’t do anything to jeopardise her cover.’

'We’re not stupid, Harry,’ Polly protested.

'I know,' Harry admitted. ‘Polly, I want you, Trudi and Dennis to concentrate on the victims. Find out everything you can about them. We really need to know exactly when they vanished, and remember that the Muggle police don’t know that time of death is no longer certain. Al, I want your team to check up on, and investigate, any MisPer reports that the local police are dealing with.’

'Missing Persons reports,’ Aloysius Webb grumbled an explanation to his confused companions.

'Our next victim may vanish today,’ said Harry. ‘What worries me is that he or she may already have vanished. If Dacia is right the victim may already be dead and turned to stone. It’s possible that we’re already too late, but let’s assume that we aren’t. Good luck.’

'Thanks, Harry,’ said Polly. Al Webb gave a nod of acknowledgement, and with that, the Aurors left.

The moment they did so, Martha Nicholson marched in, carrying a tray. ‘It’s ten past two, and you haven’t eaten since breakfast, Harry,’ she announced. ‘Apparently you left in such a hurry this morning that you forgot to collect your sandwiches. Ginny sent a message, and this, an hour ago.’ She placed the tray in front of him. ‘It’s red onion focaccia and a salad. I’ve made you some coffee, too. You aren’t leaving this room until you’ve eaten. And Ginny says that I’m to tell you “dinner at six o’clock, don’t be late, I’m making a treacle tart.” She insisted that I repeat the message verbatim.’

Harry smiled. He now knew that Ginny, too, was regretting the words they had exchanged that morning.

'Thanks Martha,’ he said as he began eating.

'Oh, and I’ve spoken to Sheriff Campbell. He will attend the three o’clock meeting in your place,’ said Martha. ‘He said that you’ve enough on your plate without having to deal with a Sheriff who hates werewolves.’
Harry’s car was at the end of the long line of vehicles snaking away from the school and James was standing next to it, looking up at his father. As I slowed down to park directly behind the Range Rover, James spotted me and dashed up the road towards us. Harry, who had his phone to his ear, immediately shouted a warning to his son.

Fortunately, James heeded his father’s words and he slid to a halt, waiting impatiently on the path until I’d parked the car. The moment I turned off the engine he dashed forwards, shouting and waving to Henry through the window. My son, desperate to be with his friend, was struggling to escape from his car seat. Annie stared at the boy outside the car, sniffed, and said, ‘Dames.’

‘James, silly,’ Henry told her. He gave her a despairing shake of his head which I recognised as my own.

As I walked around my car and stepped onto the footpath, James moved back to allow me to open the passenger door.

‘Hello, James,’ I said.

‘Hello, Henry’s mummy,’ he replied cheerfully as I opened the door and pulled the seat forward. ‘We’re gonna go swimming wiff you on Sat’day.’

‘Are you?’ I asked as I leaned into the car to release Henry, who was trying, unsuccessfuiy, to unbuckle himself.

‘Hurry up, Mummy,’ my son said impatiently.

‘This will be easier if you just sit still for a moment,’ I told him crossly. To my surprise, he moved his hands and stopped squirming, making my job simple. The moment I freed Henry, he squeezed past me and scrambled out from the car. James was immediately at his side.

‘Keep on the path,’ I reminded the boys as I climbed into the car and unfastened Annie’s harness.

The two boys acknowledged my instructions with a nod, and began to make their way towards the school gates. They were already engrossed in a rapid and excited conversation. I lifted Annie from the car and tried to settle her on my hip, but she struggled and protested. She wanted to be on the ground, so I put her down and picked up Henry’s bag and coat. Taking Annie’s hand I led her slowly towards the school gates.

Harry, who had just replaced his phone in his trouser pocket, was lifting James’ coat from the back seat of his car. He spoke to the boys as they passed him, but didn’t follow them. Instead, he waited for Annie and me to reach him. As I approached I noticed that he looked rather tense, but that was only to be expected.

‘Morning Jacqui,’ Harry said as he closed the rear door of the Range Rover.

‘Hello, Harry,’ I said.

‘Bordig, bordig,’ Annie squeaked snottily, waving at Harry.
‘Morning, Annie,’ said Harry, beaming down at her and returning her wave.

‘Annie,’ she agreed happily.

After I’d found a tissue, and made Annie blow her nose, we followed our sons into school. The boys were some distance ahead.

‘Sorry about yesterday,’ said Harry quietly.

‘There’s nothing to apologise for,’ I assured him. ‘I can’t begin to comprehend the pressure you must be under. The cop-shows always make catching murderers look easy, Inspector Barnaby can do it in a couple of hours, less when you take out the adverts! But this is real life. You must be very busy, and under a lot of pressure.’

‘I am,’ he agreed solemnly. Harry seemed lost in thought, but as we walked on, my curiosity got the better of me.

‘Yesterday, when Ginny and I were in the garden, she accidentally let slip about your prime suspect,’ I said. ‘I saw the news this morning. Ginny asked me not to say anything about Gaheris Robards, and I wouldn’t have. But this morning his picture was on Breakfast News, so it can’t be a secret any longer.’

Harry simply gave a weary shrug.

‘At least you know who you’re looking for,’ I continued. ‘And, now, so does everyone else. Are you close to finding him? Or can’t you say?’

Harry’s face fell into a frown and his eyes blazed. He took a deep breath, and spoke. ‘Ginny and I talked about the case last night.’ He hesitated.

‘You don’t have to tell me anything, Harry,’ I told him, regretting my curiosity. ‘I’m curious, obviously, but…’

‘The case is now political,’ Harry admitted, frowning. ‘Decisions are being made above my head.’ He didn’t add “and I think they’re wrong”, but it wasn’t necessary; it was obvious in the tone of his voice.

‘Robards is not my prime suspect, in fact I’m worried that he may simply be another victim,’ Harry continued firmly. ‘And I’m afraid that there may already be two more.’ His face creased on annoyance and worry. ‘The order to release his name was given by the Minister.’ He shrugged and continued. Harry was staring into the distance, and it seemed to me that he wasn’t really talking to me, but simply thinking aloud. ‘It might work. And it will certainly give the real killer one less disguise to use. But, from yesterday, I no longer have a prime suspect. I can’t say more than that, but I’m going to Sheffield, and I’m likely to be very busy for the next few days. I might not get home.’ He paused. ‘About Saturday …’

‘The offer still stands,’ I assured him. ‘Mike and I discussed it last night. You’re going to be away, and I’m sure you’d like the kids to be kept busy over the weekend, so we’d be happy to help. Anyway, James has already told Henry that he’s coming swimming with us. Mike can take the boys, and I can take Ginny and the girls.’

‘I told James he could go if you agreed to take him,’ said Harry, shaking his head in annoyance. ‘He shouldn’t have said anything. I’m sorry about him assuming things.’

‘Don’t be,’ I told him ‘When the kids get an idea fixed in their heads, they can go on and on about
it until they drive everyone mad. Sometimes it’s easiest to simply do what they want. A few weeks ago Henry managed to persuade me that James had invited him to Drakeshaugh, and we arrived unannounced, remember? You should have told us to bug… to go away, but you didn’t. I owe you.’

Harry chuckled at my slip. ‘James had invited him. He simply “forgot” to tell us. You don’t owe us anything, Jacqui,’ he said firmly. ‘I hope that we’re not going to start keeping account of good turns. But I am extremely grateful. I expect I’ll be in Sheffield, or London, for most of the weekend and I don’t want to leave Ginny alone with the kids.’

I must have given him a look, because he shook his head and laughed.

‘That sounds like I don’t trust her, doesn’t it? She can cope, of course, but I doubt I’ll be around much, and James is really keen on going swimming with Henry, and…’ He stopped, turned to face me, and gave me an appreciative look. ‘Thank you, and thank Mike, too,’ he said. ‘I’ll let Ginny know, and she can discuss details with you this afternoon.’

‘Do you want to leave?’ I asked. ‘It’s a long drive to Sheffield. We can sort the boys out, can’t we Annie?’

‘Sort boys,’ Annie agreed.

‘I’m sure you can, Annie,’ Harry told her. ‘But a couple of minutes won’t make any difference, Jacqui. I can…’

‘Harry!’ a vaguely familiar female voice called from Harry’s pocket.

He rolled his eyes, gave me an apologetic look, hauled out his phone, lifted it to his ear and said, ‘Morning, Polly.’

I immediately pictured the broad-shouldered Goth I’d met in the sports centre car park a few weeks earlier.

‘Wotcher, boss,’ Polly Protheroe said. ‘Hope I’m not interrupting anything, but you’d best get here sharpish-like. Big Den’s located the site, and you won’t like what we’ve found here. Fenella and Dacia have just arrived with all the gear and we’ve contacted Spider. He’s at the Sheffield central nick, but he’s on his way… Here he is now… We’ve decided not to tell the coppers yet…’

They were the final words I heard.

Although desperately I wanted to listen in I knew that I shouldn’t so, while Polly Protheroe was talking, I reached over and lifted James’ coat from Harry’s hand. He rather reluctantly released it, and I waved goodbye to him. He gave me a wave, and an apologetic look, then turned away to take the call in private.

Henry and James were already in the classroom, and sitting at their table. It didn’t take me long to ensure that they were settled. It took me only a few minutes, but when I walked slowly out from the school, Annie still trotting at my side, there was no sign of Harry. I walked down to the gate and looked up the street to where Harry’s car had been parked. It was gone.

‘He’s left, looking worried. He’s probably fighting to keep his job,’ said Mary smugly as she strode past me, heading for her own car, a sleek, black BMW.

‘I’m sure he’s worried about the potential victims, not his job,’ I said confidently. I was forced to address Mary’s back, as she didn’t stop walking. She didn’t even break stride, she simply shrugged
dismissively to assure me that my riposte hadn’t troubled her.

‘Not job,’ Annie confirmed loudly.

‘Good girl, Annie. You tell her,’ I said, smiling down at my daughter.

‘Yes,’ she confirmed, nodding so wildly that it seemed likely her head would fall off. ‘I tells her.’

Annie and I had a good day; it was clear and bright, so we spent most of our time in the garden. In the morning, I mowed the lawn, Annie following behind me with an empty toy pushchair, making lawnmower noises. After lunch she bounced on the trampoline and played with Raggedy Maggie while I weeded the borders, and the vegetable plot. I had almost finished when she decided that she wanted to help me. Her “assistance” slowed me down considerably.

I was wondering whether it was time to stop weeding, and get ready to leave for school, when I heard the phone ringing. Grabbing Annie and lifting her into my arms, I carried her inside, deposited her on the kitchen floor, and kicked off my muddy garden clogs. By the time I reached the phone, the answer machine had begun. I found myself talking over Mike saying: “Hello, the Charltons aren’t in, leave a message after the beep and we’ll get back to you, unless you’re an annoying automated message like me.”

‘Hello,’ I said as Mike rambled on in the background. ‘I was in the garden, sorry.’

‘Jacqui?’ Ginny asked. She sounded confused. ‘Is that really you?’

As Ginny said my name, Mike finally finished talking and the beep sounded.

‘Yes it’s me,’ I said. ‘Sorry, I was in the garden and I wasn’t quick enough.’

‘Quick enough?’ queried Ginny.

‘Quick enough to pick up before the answer machine kicked in,’ I explained. ‘What can I do for you, Ginny?’

‘You’ve been in the garden,’ Ginny said. Her tone told me that she’d rather I’d been doing something else.

‘Yes, I was weeding,’ I admitted, unsure where the conversation was going.

‘So, you haven’t been watching the telly-vision,’ she said disappointedly. From her tone, I wondered if she thought that I spent all day watching television. Then I remembered that the Potters didn’t own one, and the morning headlines.

‘I don’t watch much daytime telly. What have I missed?’ I asked, suddenly concerned. ‘What’s happened, Ginny?’

‘Harry called me this morning. They’ve found two more bodies in Sheffield,’ Ginny told me sadly.

‘Oh, no!’ I said. Annie, who had been happily running around the kitchen depositing the mud from her wellies all over the clean tiles, seemed to pick up something from my tone. She stood in attentive and worried silence, watching me speak. ‘Is it the young couple who were reported missing on this morning’s news?’ I asked.

As I spoke, Annie examined her muddy hands and decided that it would be a good idea to wipe them on her t-shirt. I grimaced, and waved at her, silently trying to stop her. It didn’t work.
‘Yes,’ said Ginny. ‘I was wondering if the news had broken. Harry said that the Mu… that the police had been informed and they were going to hold a press conference.’

‘Hang on.’ I transferred the phone to my left hand, picked up the remote control, and turned on the kitchen television. ‘I’ll check now,’ I told her as I flicked through the programme guide to find BBC News 24.

‘We are just receiving an update from our reporter in Sheffield,’ the announcer said. ‘We’ll go live to the press conference at Police Headquarters. Sophie…’

‘It’s on now,’ I said. ‘Just hang on a minute, Ginny.’

I could hear Ginny’s breathing as I listened to the news bulletin. The image cut from the reporter and a camera panned around the room before coming to rest on the police Superintendent in charge of the case. As it did so, I briefly saw Harry. He was next to a wall, talking to crop-haired Trudi Corner. Like Harry, Trudi was in a long black coat. They both looked tense.

I’d been listening to the policeman for a few minutes when Ginny spoke. ‘What’s happening?’ she asked.

‘I’ve just seen Harry and Trudi Corner,’ I said. ‘But only for a second, when the camera panned over them. The police haven’t really said much: “the bodies of a man and a woman, both in their late teens, have been found in an empty industrial unit in the Burngreave area of Sheffield.” And, other than the fact that they are “undertaking urgent enquiries”, that’s about it. They are refusing to confirm that the bodies are of that young couple named this morning. But that’s to be expected, isn’t it?’

‘Is it?’ Ginny asked.

‘Yes,’ I told her, wondering why she didn’t know. ‘They can’t, and won’t, confirm anything until they’ve contacted next of kin and had the—the bodies formally identified.’ I said.

The Superintendent began taking questions, so I tried to listen and talk at the same time.

‘The reporters are asking whether it’s the same killer,’ I said. ‘The police say “all available evidence indicates that it is”. The BBC have asked who found the bodies, and why they were killed before the full moon. The police said that the bodies were found because of a new lead, and that investigations are continuing. I really don’t think they are going to say anything else, Ginny. How’s Harry? Have you heard from him? Why have they found two bodies now? The full moon isn’t until Saturday night, and that’s when the other victims were killed, isn’t it?’

‘That’s what everybody thought, until yesterday,’ said Ginny. ‘Harry’s fine, thanks for asking. They had a breakthrough this morning, but...’

‘At the school gates, he got a call from that... from Polly Protheroe,’ I said. ‘Oh no... She was telling him, wasn’t she? I heard her say something about “Big Den” and “you won’t like it”’.

‘Big Den is Polly’s nickname for Dennis Creevey,’ said Ginny. ‘He made the breakthrough, and he, Polly, and Trudi found the bodies.’ There was sadness in her voice as she spoke the final word. ‘Harry hoped...’

‘So did I. I’m sure everyone hoped, Ginny,’ I said. ‘But I’m certain Harry’s people did their best, and they aren’t the ones doing the killing. But now it’s been on the news, and someone at the school gates is bound to have heard about it. There will be a lot of gossip and questions. What do you want me to do, Ginny? You don’t have to go. I could collect James and bring him back to
Drakeshaugh for you.’

‘Do you really think I’m frightened of anything Mary Saville might say to me?’ asked Ginny fiercely.

‘No, not at all,’ I protested, realising I’d misjudged her mood. ‘It’s just—well—you’ll have Al and Lily with you; an argument with Mary might upset them.’

‘You’re right,’ said Ginny. She paused. ‘Would you come here and look after them? I’ll walk down and collect Henry and James and bring them back here, if that’s okay.’

‘I suppose so,’ I said hesitantly.

‘Is there a problem?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I assured her. ‘Not really,’ I corrected myself. ‘Except, if I’m honest, I’d like to be a spectator,’ I admitted.

Ginny laughed. ‘But, you’ll do it anyway?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ I told her. I looked up at the kitchen clock. ‘I’d better get ready to leave. I’ll get to Drakeshaugh as quickly as I can. Bye, Ginny.’

‘Bye, Jacqui.’

‘Right, Annie,’ I said. ‘We’re going to Drakeshaugh.’

‘Yay,’ she said.

‘After we’ve washed your hands and changed your t-shirt. You are a dirty little girl.’

‘Well,’ I said, as Ginny turned to give a final wave before vanished over the crest. ‘What shall we do now?’

Al, Annie and Lily looked uncertainly at each other. ‘Make a train track, please,’ Al suggested.

‘Twain,’ Lily agreed.

‘A train track?’ I asked. ‘You’ll have to show me, Al.’

He led me into the cavernous living room, and I suddenly realised what an honour I’d been granted. I was alone in Drakeshaugh. Well, not actually alone, because the kids were with me, but Ginny had trusted me enough to leave me in her house, with her kids. I could make an excuse to the kids, and snoop. I wouldn’t of course, but for a moment I fantasised about exploring the house. Then I felt guilty about even considering doing such a thing. And then I had a paranoid panic about the entire house being subjected to hidden camera surveillance.

‘There,’ said Al, bringing me back to reality. He pointed to a large wooden box at the rear of the living room, at the end next to the large windows. The living room was almost like two rooms. The sofas and chairs were clustered around the fireplace, and the area around them was tidy. The, much larger, rear of the room was cluttered with toys and bricks I had to watch my feet as I made my way towards the box.

‘Shouldn’t we tidy some of these other toys away, before we get anything else out?’ I asked.
‘No, ’s alright,’ said Al. ‘Mummy does it wiffa wave of a wand, when we’s gonna bed.’

‘Good old Mummy,’ I said, trying to keep the sarcasm from my voice.

The place was a lot less tidy than I like, so I had to fight an urge to disagree. I reminded myself that I was a guest, and shouldn’t interfere in Ginny’s household arrangements. If she wanted to spend hours tidying up after the kids were in bed, it was up to her. Deciding not to press it, I lifted the box lid, and helped Al, Annie and Lily lift out the sections of wooden railway track. We were all kneeling on the floor assembling a long and complex track when Harry’s voice rang out over the room.

‘Ginny.’ His voice was clear and it sounded close. I looked in the direction of the sound, expecting to see him, but the room was empty.

‘Daddy,’ said Al. He stood, trotted towards a mirror hanging on the wall, and looked hopefully up at it. It had certainly sounded to me as if Harry’s voice had come from somewhere near the mirror.

‘Daddy’s not here, Al,’ I said. ‘And he certainly isn’t in the mirror.’

Al ignored me. ‘Mummy gone school, Daddy,’ he told the mirror. He got no reply, of course, and after a minute he turned and walked back to me.

‘Daddy very busy,’ he told me sadly.

‘He is, Al,’ I agreed, giving him a hug. ‘Shall we finish making the train track?’

He nodded, and we got back to work. Lily found a wooden carriage and simply pushed it back and forth along the completed section of track while Annie, Al and I fitted bridges and points and even a turntable into the wooden rails winding their way across the floor.

When we had used the last piece of track, Al trotted back to the box and picked out a bright red steam train. As he carefully connected a couple of carriages to it, he patiently explained to me that the train was taking Teddy to school.

‘Whose Teddy?’ I asked. ‘Is your Teddy going to school, Al? He must be a very clever bear.’

Al looked at me as though I was mad. ‘Not Teddy bear,’ he told me. ‘Just Teddy!’ His face creased and his eyebrows narrowed. I watched as he tried to work out how to explain something which was plainly obvious to him to an uncomprehending adult.

‘Is Teddy a person?’ I asked as the door opened and Ginny ushered James and Henry into the room. Al nodded.

‘Yes. Hello, Mummy,’ he said, sounding relieved.

‘Hi, Ginny,’ I said.

‘Hello Jacqui. Teddy Lupin is Harry’s godson,’ Ginny called from the door. ‘You’ve made a train to take Teddy to school, haven’t you Al?’

He nodded enthusiastically, and I suddenly understood. I remembered the rather imperious woman with the unusual name (Anastasia Tonks?) I’d met at the Potter’s housewarming party.

‘Oh, yes,’ I said. ‘I remember meeting his grandmother last weekend. How did it go at the school gates?’
Ginny grinned. ‘Do you have time for a cuppa?’ she asked.

I checked my watch; it was almost quarter past four, the time I’d usually be arriving home. I hadn’t given our dinner a thought, there was nothing prepared, and Mike would be home a little after six. However, I was desperate to hear what Ginny had to say. Deciding that I’d simply grab something from the freezer, I nodded.

‘Yes, thanks. I’ve got plenty of time,’ I lied.

‘Great, I’ll go and make a pot of tea, and I’ll bring some juice for the kids,’ said Ginny. Before heading for the kitchen, she turned to James, who was whispering something to Henry. ‘James Potter,’ she said firmly. ‘If you want to go swimming on Saturday, neither you, nor Henry will destroy Al’s train track. Not even accidentally.’

James opened his eyes wide, and set his face into something which he obviously hoped was an expression of innocence. Unfortunately, his attempt to pretend that he’d never even considered doing such a thing was blatantly false.

I stared accusingly at Henry, who looked at the floor and did his “you’ve caught me” foot shuffle. ‘Best behaviour, Henry,’ I told him. He nodded, as did James, and they walked over to join the younger kids.

Ginny soon returned, and after supervising the kids with their juice, she and I settled into the armchairs, each nursing a steaming mug of tea. The kids were playing happily behind us.

‘Well?’ I asked.

‘Mary is not my friend,’ she said. ‘But it seems that a lot of the others are getting sick of her, too.’

‘Really?’ I said.

Ginny nodded. ‘When I arrived she was telling everyone what a tragedy it was. The moment she saw me, she turned up the volume. “Two young people brutally murdered,” she said, “and whose fault was it?” I didn’t have time to say anything. One of the women standing close to her said, “The person who killed them, of course.” and most people agreed with her.’

‘Crikey! Do you know who it was?’ I asked.

‘She was at the party, but I’ve forgotten her name,’ said Ginny apologetically. ‘She’s short, even smaller than I am, and dark haired. I think she might be called Sarah.’

‘Sara Hutchinson,’ I said promptly. ‘Her daughter is a year older than the boys and she’s got another one who Annie’s age.’

‘I was going to thank her, but Harry called,’ said Ginny.

‘I heard his voice here, while you were out,’ I interrupted her as I remembered. ‘Al was really funny about it. He walked up to the mirror on the wall and tried to talk to his daddy.’

Ginny’s mouth formed an “O”, and she was silent for a moment. ‘That’s because, it’s because… You heard Harry say my name, didn’t you?’

I nodded, and drank some of my tea.

‘Our mobile phones, mine and Harry’s, are linked to the house phone, which is in my study,’ she
said. ‘And there’s a microphone behind the mirror, and it relays the ringing tone from the house telephone in here.’

‘I think you mean a speaker, not a microphone,’ I told her, smiling. ‘Unless you’ve got the place bugged.’

‘Speaker, yes,’ she said, looking a little confused. ‘Sorry Jacqui, I’m not concentrating. I was thinking about Harry’s phone call. He told me that they’ve finally got a break in the case. It looks like the place Dennis found is the killer’s lair. They found a lot of stuff there, and they think they’re close to finding Robards. Because my ringing tone is Harry saying my name, everyone outside school knew I’d been speaking to him. When I’d finished the … Sara … asked me if I had any news, so I told them they’d got a break. Sara was pleased. Mary didn’t know what to say, but she didn’t look happy.’

‘I can imagine it. Face like a bulldog chewing a wasp,’ I suggested, and Ginny laughed.

‘Good one,’ she said. ‘There’s not much more to tell you, Jacqui. That’s when the kids came out. Mary grabbed her daughter and scarpered, and everyone wanted to wish Harry luck.’

‘It’s probably down to hard work, not luck. How is he?’ I asked. ‘Happier than he was this morning, I expect.’

‘He’s still got a lot to do,’ Ginny told me. ‘And he likes to keep control of things. I don’t think I’ll see much of him for the next few days. And that reminds me... About Saturday...’

‘Harry’s already asked,’ I said. ‘Mike and I can take you swimming, we’ve already discussed it.’

‘Thanks, Jacqui,’ said Ginny. ‘You can all come to dinner when we get back.’

‘There’s no need,’ I protested.

‘You’re going to have to pick us up, and drop us off,’ she reminded me. ‘So you can stay for a meal, too, unless you have other plans.’

‘No other plans,’ said Henry eagerly. ‘We can come after swimbling, can’t we?’

‘We’ll see,’ I said. I checked my watch, and gulped down the last of my tea. ‘We’ll have to go home now, Henry. I need to make dinner. Will pizza and chips be okay?’
Mike was a regular viewer of the Ten O’Clock News; I preferred to avoid it.

Usually, after we’d put the kids to bed, Mike and I sat and watched television together. When the news came on, I left Mike to watch alone. While he did so, I tidied up, made his sandwiches for work, and set the kitchen table for breakfast.

That night, however, Mike helped me in the kitchen. As we worked I told Mike about my day. When I’d finished my recap he, like me, wanted to hear the latest news. We were finished in the kitchen by nine o’clock, so I made us a cup of tea and we settled down to watch a very interesting BBC4 documentary on Darwin. The moment the credits rolled, an hour later, we switched across to BBC1. We chatted briefly as the continuity announcer told us who was appearing on Question Time, but when the News theme blared out, we fell silent.

The “Werewolf Murders” were, as I’d expected, the top story. There was a brief clip of the press conference. It showed the police Superintendent speaking, but there was no sound. Over the images, the studio newsreader gave a swift summary of the morning’s events.

‘We’ll go to Sheffield for the latest update,’ the newsreader said, looking across to the screen at his side. ‘Sophie.’

The studio shot was replaced by an image of a blonde woman standing in a dimly lit street. She was obviously in a run-down industrial area, but in the gloom of night only a small section of white wall, the shadowy figures of two uniformed police officers, and an open door were visible.

‘Thanks, Huw,’ said the blonde woman.

‘They’ve cut Harry’s one second of fame just to go live to the scene,’ Mike observed. ‘Sometimes I wonder why they bother with these outside broadcasts, especially in the dark!’

‘Shhh,’ I hissed as the reporter continued.

‘I’m standing in Scorby Street, in the Burngreave area of Sheffield, where Police have cordoned off the small industrial unit behind me. This, we’ve been told, is the place where two bodies were discovered earlier today.

‘A police spokesman has recently confirmed that the bodies discovered inside this building were those of Caitlin Satterley and Jack Tuffnell, the young couple reported missing yesterday. Next of kin have been informed.’ The reporter continued gravely as a photograph of the victims, their arms around each other, appeared in the corner of the screen.

They look so young,’ I whispered sadly.

‘Both nineteen,’ Mike said gruffly. He took my hand, and gently squeezed it.

‘This was the scene when I arrived earlier today,’ the reporter said.

The victims’ photo remained on the screen, but the scene changed to show footage of the police at work several hours earlier. Even in broad daylight, the place was gloomy. The, mostly cobbled, street had been poorly patched with tarmac and the shabby brick buildings were the battered and
grubby remnants of Sheffield’s once proud history as the city of steel.

The building which the press, and several members of the public, were watching was a white painted brick box whose windows were protected by once blue steel shutters. The original colours were barely visible, as shutters and walls were covered in graffiti. The paintwork on the sign above the open door was faded and peeling to the point of complete illegibility. Even the “To Let” sign affixed high up on the wall looked like it had been there for so many years it had forgotten its purpose. Scenes of crime officers in one-piece blue suits and face masks were scurrying in and out through the entrance while other officers were kept a watchful eye on the boundaries of the taped-off area.

‘The mother of Caitlin Satterley has released this brief statement,’ the reporter told us as we watched the images from the afternoon.

‘Caitlin was a hardworking and loving daughter who had recently started work as a hairdresser. She will be much missed by us, and by her younger brother and sister. She and Jack Tuffnell had been together since school, and were planning to get a place together next year.

‘The grieving parents of Mr Tuffnell have made no comment, and refused all requests for interview, as have South Yorkshire Police,’ the reporter continued. ‘However, a little over two hours ago, I spoke to Detective Chief Inspector Roberta Wood, from Scotland Yard’s offender profiling unit.’

My stomach churned with feelings of grief for the family, and worries for Harry. From what I knew of him, from the way I’d seen him react, I was certain that Harry would be taking these deaths hard. It seemed to me that he was the sort of person who blamed himself when things went wrong.

There was another scene change, and the reporter was back in shot. This time she was facing a tall woman with short-cropped dark hair. The woman wore a smart black trouser suit, and a long coat very similar to the one Harry wore to work. I watched her with interest, trying to decide whether she was slightly overweight or in the early stages of pregnancy.

‘Inspector,’ the reporter asked. ‘What led you to this site?’

‘We had reason to believe that we were looking for someone who kidnapped their victims, killed them, and disposed of them later,’ the woman said cautiously. It was obvious from her accent that she was a Londoner. ‘South Yorkshire police have been aware from the first that the first two victims were not killed at the locations where they were discovered. We’ve been working to discover the site where murders were committed.’

‘And have you found it?’

‘It’s too early to be certain,’ the Inspector said cautiously. ‘But a member of my staff identified this as a likely area, and when we began a check, he and his colleagues discovered the bodies.’

‘What can you tell me about your prime suspect Gaheris Robards?’

Detective Inspector Wood’s mouth twitched in annoyance, but only for a second. ‘Mr Robards is missing, and we believe that he may have information pertinent to our enquiries,’ said guardedly. ‘We have never described him as a prime suspect. The press release said that we wanted question Mr Robards regarding these deaths. We do, but as a witness, not a suspect.’

‘What else can you tell us about him?’
‘Nothing,’ the policewoman said.

‘That’s weird,’ Mike muttered.

‘The killer has been dubbed “the Werewolf”, because the earlier killings took place on the night of the full moon,’ the reporter continued. ‘Can you confirm that the latest victims were killed in the same way?’

‘Yes.’

‘But the full moon is still two nights away. Can you be certain that this is the work of “the Werewolf”?’

‘All indications are that this is the work of the same person, or persons,’ the police woman said slowly.

‘You believe that there is more than one killer?’

‘I can’t answer that question either, I’m afraid.’

‘Were Caitlin Satterley and Jack Tuffnell killed before the full moon because the police publicised their disappearance?’

‘This is an ongoing enquiry, and I can’t speculate. As yet we have no accurate information regarding time of death.’

‘Has…’

‘No more questions, sorry.’

With that, Chief Inspector Wood turned and walked away.

‘Hey!’ Mike said. ‘Look…’

‘I saw them,’ I told him. ‘Shhh!’

‘Police and forensic experts remain at the site,’ the reporter continued as the camera went back to the pitch-black live shot of the scene. Alongside her, superimposed in the corner of the screen, was the photograph of Gaheris Robards which had been in every newspaper that morning. ‘Since my interview with Inspector Wood the police have refused all requests for interviews. In the meantime, speculation continues. Who is Gaheris Robards? Is he killer, victim, or witness? Do the police know? We have been unable to trace Mr Robards and, despite requests for information, we have not been contacted by anyone who knows this man. Other than a name and a photograph, the police have provided no information about him.

‘Many questions remain. Is this, in fact, the lair of the so-called Werewolf? If it is, then why has he attacked before the night of the full moon? If the killer has changed his modus operandi, do the police have a month before the next attack, or has that, too changed? One thing is certain, the werewolf remains at large. We’ll keep you updated with any development. Now, back to Huw in the studio.’

‘Thanks Sophie,’ the newsreader said as the almost clinical studio reappeared. ‘In other news, the Middle East…’

I stopped listening. ‘When the camera panned to follow that police woman…’ I began.
'Yeah, Dennis Creevey, the mad professor’s wife, and that scary goth woman who ambushed Harry outside the pool were all walking out from the crime scene,’ Mike said.

‘Trudi Corner and Polly Protheroe,’ I said.

‘I wish I had your memory for names,’ Mike told me. ‘Harry’s team are all over this case, aren’t they? I wonder who this Robards is? It’s strange that the press haven’t been able to find anyone who knows him. You’d think one of his neighbours would want to be on the telly. D’you think there’s a terrorist angle?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ I said. ‘But Ginny’s already told me that Harry doesn’t think this Robards bloke is the killer.

‘Gaheris,’ said Mike, smiling. ‘He’s probably been framed by his half-brother, Mordred.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I asked.

‘Gawain, Agravaine, Gaheris and… and the other one, were brothers. They were Knights of the Round Table,’ Mike said. ‘Gareth! That’s the other one. Mordred was their half-brother, he was also Arthur’s illegitimate, and incestuous, son.’

‘It’s two-thousand and nine, Mike!’ I reminded him, shaking my head in disbelief. ‘I doubt this has anything to do with the Knights of the Round Table. I’m going to wash up the cups, and then I’m going to bed.’

October had arrived, and the new month brought with it a distinct change in the weather. The following morning, Friday, was decidedly autumnal. The pale sun was trying to make its presence felt, but with very little success. The westerly wind was doing its job; the roadside verges were no longer green, wind-blown leaves blanketed them in shades of ochre, vermillion, and umber. The year’s relentless march towards the dark days of winter had already almost bared the trees.

I passed Ginny as I drove down to school with Henry and Annie. Like the first day I’d seen her, she had all three kids with her. Al and Lily were in the buggy, and she was holding James firmly by the hand. Unlike that day, a mere month earlier, she wasn’t in shorts and a t-shirt. This time the red-haired woman I saw was in thick black tights, a grey duffel coat, and a dark green beret.

I remembered that first encounter with a smile. A lot had happened since then. I tooted and waved as I passed the Potters. Ginny let go of the buggy for a moment and gave me a very brief wave. It couldn’t last long, as the buggy veered towards the verge the moment she released it. As James was waving enough for everyone, it didn’t matter.

A couple of the other mums who’d been at Harry’s party approached me the moment I opened the car door. It seemed that I wasn’t the only one who’d spotted Harry, and some of his party guests, on the national news.

I was able to confirm that I, too, had seen Dennis and “that woman who wore combat trousers at the party”. I was also able to tell them that the woman with spiky hair was called Polly Protheroe, and that she was also on Harry’s staff. I got no further, because Ginny arrived, and all attention immediately diverted to her. Besieged by questions, she caught my eye and gave me a “what’s going on” look.

‘There was an interview with a police woman, an Inspector Wood, on the news last night,’ I told Ginny. Her eyes lit up in recognition of the name. ‘Dennis, Mrs Corner and, er, Polly were in the background.’
‘That’s no surprise,’ Ginny said. There was a sad look in her eyes as she continued. ‘Den and Trudi found the killer’s hideout and, unfortunately, the bodies. Polly is their boss, and Bobbie Wood is Harry’s police liaison.’

More questions poured forth from the crowd. James tried to join in the conversation, but his only contribution was to tell Henry that the two bodies had already been turned to stone when Dennis and the others found them. I was at a loss as to how he could have come up with such a crazy story. So, apparently, was Ginny.

‘That’s enough, James,’ she said. ‘Harry’s in Sheffield,’ she continued when James fell silent. ‘I really don’t know any more than you do. In fact I probably know less, because we don’t own a television.’ Despite her protestations, the cross-examination continued.

‘I spoke to Harry last night,’ Ginny told us. ‘He was hoping that they’d find the missing couple alive, unfortunately, they were too late. The only good news is that, thanks to Dennis, Harry thinks that they finally have a breakthrough. That really is all I know, honest. And I need to get James into school.’

She began to push the buggy containing Al and Lily through the crowd. Henry and James trailed in her wake, so I picked up Annie and followed them.

‘I thought my days of being mobbed by crowds were behind me,’ Ginny murmured to me.

‘Mobbed by crowds?’ I asked.

Ginny sighed and shook her head ruefully. ‘I, er, I played er, hockey before the kids came along. There were often crowds, fans, you know—autograph hunters—waiting for us after the games.’

‘Really?’ I asked.

She nodded, and shrugged. ‘It was years ago, forget it,’ she said.

By mutual agreement I looked after Al, Lily and Annie while Ginny made certain that the boys were settled in their class. She took her time and, as a consequence, the crowds had gone by the time we left school. Ginny made it clear that she didn’t want to talk about her hockey career, or about the case, so instead we discussed arrangements for our trip to the swimming pool the following day. As we parted I once again found myself apologising for being unable to offer Ginny a lift home.

‘Don’t worry,’ she assured me. ‘Drakeshaugh isn’t far, and I enjoy the walk. I really do need to take more exercise.’

‘So do I,’ I admitted. ‘I kid myself that going swimming once a week is enough, but it isn’t. Particularly as all I really do in the pool is stand around and watch the kids.’

We said our goodbyes, and I watched her pushing Al and Lily up the road.

‘Bye bye, Al ‘n’ Lily,’ Annie yelled after them.

I watched the lunchtime news but—other than heartrending pleas for information by the parents of the killer’s latest victims, which I found extremely difficult to watch—there was nothing new.

I wanted my car to be pristine for the trip to the pool, so Annie and I spent the afternoon cleaning it inside and out. While I worked, I brooded about the crimes. The dead couple were in their teens.
They had left school, and were both working, but nineteen! I couldn’t begin to imagine what their parents were feeling.

Probably because of the lack of any new information, there were very few questions at the school gates that evening. Mary, however, couldn’t resist making a comment.

‘What, exactly, is your husband doing?’ she asked Ginny scornfully.

‘His best,’ said Ginny with exaggerated politeness. ‘He always does.’

Mike and I again watched the news that night, but the Middle East had edged its way to the top of the bulletin, and the reports about Harry’s case said almost nothing new. The police confirmed that the two latest victims had been dead for some time. In fact, it had been discovered that they had been killed before they had been reported missing, long before their disappearance had made the news.

‘I suppose that’s one less thing for Mary to complain about,’ Mike told me.

‘It’s no consolation to their parents,’ I snapped. ‘They’re dead, Mike. I hope Harry catches this monster soon.’

‘I’m not sure Harry’s really in charge,’ Mike said. ‘I like him, Jacques, but sometimes I wonder if he’s not trying to make himself sound a bit more important than he really is. His team are specialists from London, that’s all. It’s the local coppers, South Yorkshire Police, who’ll be leading the investigation.’

‘Unless Harry’s team are more than that,’ I said thoughtfully. ‘They seem to be pretty heavily involved in this case for some reason, and Ginny told me that it was Dennis, not the local police, who discovered the killer’s lair.’

‘That’s interesting,’ said Mike thoughtfully. ‘Particularly as whoever is doing this must know the area. You’d need to know Sheffield pretty well to find that place, and to know where to dump the bodies.’

‘True,’ I admitted. ‘And Dennis is a Weardale lad, from the west of County Durham. I wonder how he managed to outthink the locals.’

The only new information in the report was a comment saying that police were now “extremely concerned for the safety” of Gaheris Robards.

The following morning, Mike and I argued about his car. I wanted to clean it, because he’d be taking James and Al to the pool in it. Mike pooh-poohed me, claiming that it was fine. I took one look inside, disagreed, and started shouting at him. It was a stupid and petty argument, made worse because the kids were watching us.

‘Okay, Jacques, okay!’ Mike held up his hands in surrender. ‘I’m not going to argue with you. You know what I think, but if you’re desperate to clean my car, go ahead. I won’t stop you. Come on kids, we’ll go inside and pack your swimming bags.’ I clenched my teeth, and forced myself not to continue the argument.

Mike often ate his lunch on the move, and it showed. As I vacuumed the seats, and the floor wells, my anger began to dissipate. I wasn’t really angry with Mike, I realised. It was Harry’s case. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. It was becoming an obsession.
I’d welcomed the opportunity to make new friends. Mike was right; we were in a bit of a rut. But a nice, quiet, ordinary couple would have done. Instead we’d found a secretive government agent and I was getting swept up by the extraordinary events which surrounded Harry and Ginny Potter. Why couldn’t the parents of Henry’s new friend be a bit more normal?

Harry’s job isn’t normal,’ I thought to myself. He’s not a car salesman, or a solicitor. I don’t suppose anyone who does—whatever it is Harry does—can be completely normal. Sometimes, the job must take over.

I remembered our two previous trips to the pool, and Harry’s scars. He seemed nice enough, and he was always polite, but those scars told a different story. He’d obviously lived a dangerous life. Ginny’s family had their secrets, too, as Mike had crassly pointed out at the Potter’s party. Ron’s arms, Bill’s face, George’s ear, Charlie’s burns, and George’s dead twin. It was as if the families had enlisted together, served together, and fought together.

It was the juxtaposition, I realised; that was what bothered me. The normal, family life: the trips to the pool; the friendly visits to each other’s homes; the kids playing together; that was what I expected from the parents of Henry’s new best friend. It should all be perfectly normal. But Harry’s job wasn’t normal; it was, or at least had been, dangerous, and the danger had rubbed off on him.

“You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your kid’s friends.” I remembered my mother’s words of advice from when Henry had started school. During that first term Henry hadn’t really hit it off with anyone, and I’d forgotten Mum’s words. “You have to take the rough with the smooth. Like Clara,” she’d added, laughing.

I had laughed with her.

Mum had never liked Clara, she was flirty and flighty and tarty, and her parents lived in a rough council estate on the west side of Alnwick. She was a better swimmer than I was. Clockwork Clara, Mum had always called her, because of the precise rhythm of her freestyle arm stroke. Despite our arguments, and the trouble she got me into, I would always be indebted to Clara. “We’ve got an hour and a half before the afternoon session starts,” Clara told Ellie and me. “Let’s go down Northumberland Street and check out the talent.”

If it hadn’t been for Clara persuading Ellie and me to leave the pool, I would never have met my husband.

If James and Henry hadn’t immediately hit it off at the school gates, Ginny would simply be one of those school gate mums I nodded to politely, nothing more. My life would still be humdrum, and Henry wouldn’t spend every evening talking about “James ‘n’ me.”

If only…

My mother’s words rang in my ears: “If ifs and ands were pots and pans, there'd be no work for tinkers’ hands,”

‘It’s fate,’ I said to myself as I dusted the dashboard of the big car.

‘Turning philosophical on me, are you?’ Mike asked from behind me.

I hadn’t heard him approach, and his voice made me jump. I hit my head on the roof of his car, though not hard. When I slid backwards out of the car and turned to face him, I was prepared to shout at him again. But my annoyance abated instantly. He’d brought me a cuppa, and a plateful of
chocolate digestives.

‘It’s a bit cold out here,’ he said as he handed me the mug. ‘We could always eat the biscuits in the car.’

‘No, Mike,’ I protested ‘I’ve just cleaned it!’

As he spoke he picked up one of the digestives, and bit into it. There was a cheeky glint in his eye as the crumbs dropped down onto the gravel drive.

‘Stop winding me up, you evil sod,’ I told him. I tried not to smile, but he saw me fail.

‘Made you smile,’ he said. ‘You’re sorted, aren’t you? I can tell! It wasn’t really the cleaning you needed. What you really needed was a think. What, exactly, is fate?’

‘Us meeting the Potters; me meeting you,’ I said. ‘If Clara hadn’t persuaded us to leave the pool... If Henry and James... I think I was just getting a bit worried about... Us and the Potters... Well... It’s fate, we should embrace it.

‘I’m always up for a bit of embracing,’ he told me.

I laughed.

‘You’re especially gorgeous when you’re happy! When’s the last time I told you I love you? Oh, I’ve just done it! Michael loves Jacqueline!’

‘Oh shut up, you idiot,’ I said. ‘We’re not teenagers anymore.’

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘But we can still act like it occasionally. It won’t actually hurt us, you know. Take these.’

He handed me the plate of biscuits and immediately cupped my cheeks in his hands, leaned forwards, and kissed me lightly on the lips. I couldn’t do anything about it, because he’d cleverly filled both my hands.

‘You’re a sneaky evil sod,’ I said when he released me. ‘But I love you, too.’

‘Irresistible, aren’t I?’ he asked.

‘Don’t push it,’ I warned.

He grinned. ‘I won’t, I’ll go and check on the kids,’ he told me.

By the time I’d finished my tea and biscuits and polished the inside of the windscreen it was almost noon. As I’d continued to work I’d concluded that I should accept the Potters for who they were, and not pester them for answers about a distant killer.

When I walked into the kitchen I found Mike busy making lunch. While I’d been working on the car the supermarket had made a delivery. He was slicing the loaf of tiger bread I’d ordered, and Annie was carefully placing the slices onto four plates. After I’d washed my hands, I carved several slices of honey-roast ham and Redesdale cheese. I then added some pease pudding to three of the plates. Not Henry’s, because he didn’t like it.

Henry was in the living room, watching the Sarah Jane Adventures. He refused to come into the kitchen to eat with us. Rather than make him sulk, I agreed that we would all join him in front of the telly.
We set off for the pool earlier than usual, because Mike knew that we’d have to transfer Ginny’s child seats into our cars. He strapped Henry into his car, and I strapped Annie into mine, and we set off for Drakeshaugh.

Ginny and the kids were ready for us. I helped her carry the swimming bags to the cars while Mike sorted out the child seats. It didn’t take him long, and within minutes I was following Mike’s car down the road towards the pool. Henry and James were in the back of Mike’s car—the boy’s car—as Henry had christened it, and Al was in the front. I’d put Lily into the back of my car, next to Annie.

The two girls were as good as gold. I put a nursery rhymes CD into the player. It was one which Henry had decided was “only for babies, and girls;” so Annie only listened to it when her brother wasn’t in the car. She was soon singing happily. Lily was trying to join in, although she didn’t seem to know the words.

After my morning’s contemplation, I had decided to try to keep my curiosity in check. I didn’t ask Ginny any questions about Harry, or the case. Instead, for most of the journey, we discussed swimming, the kids, and the pool.

‘You haven’t asked me about the case,’ Ginny said as we approached Alnwick.

‘I’m trying not to be nosy,’ I admitted. ‘And, to be honest, Ginny, it’s beginning to bother me. It’s a bit close, you know? I mean, it’s not physically close, Sheffield’s a long way away—halfway to London—but I feel involved somehow.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Ginny sympathetically. ‘Harry gets wrapped up in his cases, particularly the big ones. When it’s something like this he needs to talk, and I need to listen. That’s why there are times when I wish we hadn’t told everyone what he does.’

‘That’s my fault, sorry,’ I said. ‘I asked about Sheffield the first time I met him. It was rude of me.’

‘We were strangers, newcomers, and you were curious,’ said Ginny.

‘I was,’ I admitted. I sighed sadly. ‘But Harry had no choice, really. Henry and James are friends, and I’d like to think that we’re friends, too.’

‘I’d like to think so, too,’ Ginny assured me.

‘Well then,’ I said. ‘Harry had to say something, didn’t he? Friends might not tell each other everything, but they don’t actually lie, particularly not about ordinary things like jobs, do they?’

Ginny’s silence lasted longer than I expected. ‘I can think of a few situations where they might,’ she said carefully; ‘to keep the friends safe, for example.’
Stranger at Drakeshaugh

Henry and James were on their best behaviour, and both boys were listening carefully to my instructions. I was trying to make the drills and exercises fun for them, and it seemed to be working. They were trying to outdo each other, but they were obviously having fun, too. It was a joy to teach them, and it was so much easier than dealing with Henry alone.

Until the end of the session, when I allowed the boys some time to play, I was alone in the main pool. Ginny and Mike were in the small pool with Lily, Annie and Al. This gave me plenty of time to ponder Ginny’s remarks about secrets. It seemed to me that she had all but admitted that she, and by default Harry, were keeping things from us.

I reminded myself that Harry had already admitted that his job was covered by the Official Secrets Act. He probably shouldn’t even tell Ginny about some of the stuff he was dealing with. Although I hadn’t known them long, I’d known them long enough to realise that they were a couple who shared everything.

Did it matter if there were secrets, I wondered? Our kids got along well together. So, I believed, did Ginny and I. She had invited us back to Drakeshaugh for a meal that evening. If she didn’t like us, she’d have made an excuse and not even come swimming. If James had insisted—and I knew that Henry would have—she could even have come up with a reason why James alone could come with us.

I cursed myself for my continued uncertainty. Mike has always said that I was a glass-half-empty girl.

We were slipping into a routine, I assured myself. The Saturday trip to the pool, which for some time had been a feature of the Charlton family weekend was, it seemed, turning into a Charlton/Potter event. James certainly appeared to be enjoying himself in the water. He was becoming more and more confident, and Al was desperate to join the big boys.

‘You’re both doing really well,’ I told them as our swimming session drew to a close.

After we’d dried and changed, we headed back to the cars.

‘What’s for tea, please, James’ Mum?’ Henry asked as we walked across the car park.

‘Tea?’ asked Ginny worriedly. ‘I’m making dinner, Henry. There’s a Lancashire hotpot in the oven. I hope you like it.’

‘It’s yummy,’ James told Henry.

‘Tea and dinner are interchangeable terms for an evening meal, Ginny,’ I explained. ‘I think it’s a northern thing, but I’m not sure. Rest assured, if you try serving Henry a “high tea” of cucumber sandwiches, cake and a cup of Darjeeling tea, he won’t be happy.

‘My like cuppa tea, an’ cake,’ Annie assured us earnestly. Her father grinned at her words, opened his boot, took our swimming bags from us, and put them all into the back of his car.

‘Come on, my team,’ Mike announced when he closed the boot. ‘The sooner we get back to Drakeshaugh, the sooner we’ll eat.’ The boys trotted obediently across to Mike’s car. I was about
to reprimand him, but Ginny caught my eye and winked at me.

‘That’s not true,’ said Ginny sternly. ‘The hotpot will be ready at half past five, and no sooner.’ She waved an admonishing finger at him. ‘You can’t rush good food, Mike!’

‘Sorry, Ginny,’ he said worriedly.

I laughed at his discomfort.

‘Are you two winding me up?’ he asked.

‘Possibly,’ Ginny grinned. ‘But if your Henry is like my James, then he’ll take you at your word, and I’ll be asked “is dinner ready” constantly until it finally is.’

‘Point taken,’ said Mike, smiling. ‘It was probably wishful thinking on my part, too. See you at Drakeshaugh.’ He got into his car, and Ginny and I got into mine.

‘Thanks for everything, Jacqui,’ Ginny said as we pulled out of the car park. ‘The kids expect to see their daddy at weekends, and so do I. Unfortunately, I’m afraid that we won’t see much of him for the next few days. They were all really looking forward to the trip to the pool, even Lily; so thank you for making it happen.’

‘Fanks,’ Lily confirmed from behind us.

‘Annie likes swims an’ all,’ Annie added.

‘You’re most welcome, Lily; and you do indeed, Annie,’ I said before turning back to Ginny. ‘It must be hard for you,’ I observed as I reversed out of the parking space. ‘At least Mike keeps fairly regular hours. Does Harry often have to work weekends, or stay away overnight?’

‘It’s actually very rare,’ Ginny told me. ‘Before we were married, and before he was promoted, it was different; he was often called away at a moment’s notice. But even then we had a rule, no more than two nights away from home. Thankfully, things are a lot quieter these days. Big cases which require his full attention, like this current one, are mercifully rare.’

‘Hmm.’ I hummed in acknowledgement and understanding, switched on the nursery rhymes CD, and we began the drive back to Drakeshaugh. For the first mile or so, as we drove through Alnwick, Ginny said nothing. I checked my mirror, to make sure that Mike was still following us. He was, of course. We were out on the moorland when the girls, who had been chattering happily in the back of my car, fell silent. When they did, Ginny spoke.

‘Harry thinks Gaheris Robards has been kidnapped, or killed,’ she said quietly. ‘This hasn’t been in any of the papers, Jacqui, but all of the victims did have bite marks on them; and they were wolf bites. Harry’s team actually managed to identify the wolf from the bite marks, and a few hairs.’

‘A real wolf; and they found it?’ I shook my head as I heard myself. My astonishment made me sound like I’d inhaled helium.

‘It was a stuffed wolf, long dead. And it was on display in a museum where Robards was a curator. After the second killing, everything seemed to point towards Robards being involved. He’s a childless widower who lives alone, and he didn’t have an alibi for the killings. But Harry wasn’t convinced. That didn’t matter to his bosses…’ She paused. ‘I don’t know why I’m telling you this, Jacqui, please don’t tell anyone else.’

‘I won’t,’ I promised. ‘Not even Mike, if you don’t want me to.’
'Best not,' said Ginny. Her tone became confiding. ‘I’d normally talk to Hermione about this, but Ron’s taken her off to Marrakech for four days, just the two of them. It was her birthday, her thirtieth, a few weeks ago. Rosie and Hugo have already spent a couple of days with Hermione’s parents, and now they’re spending a couple of days with mine.’

‘Marrakech, how exotic,’ I said.

‘It was a surprise birthday present. Hermione didn’t know anything about it until Wednesday evening. They left early on Thursday.’

‘That’s romantic,’ I said wistfully.

‘It’s astonishing,’ said Ginny. I could hear the amusement in her voice. ‘Romantic isn’t a word which springs immediately to mind when I think of Ron.’

‘You confide in Hermione. Are you and she close?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ Ginny admitted. ‘She—and Luna—were probably my first real close girl friends. I’ve known them since I was eleven. But Luna’s away too, and Hermione doesn’t know what’s been happening over the past few days. Ron will try to keep her away from the papers, because it’s the only way he can be sure she’ll relax.’

‘A stuffed wolf,’ I murmured thoughtfully, while wondering how Hermione, or Luna, would deal with Ginny’s confidences.

Hermione Weasley, from the little I’d seen of her, seemed to be an intense, intelligent, and inquisitive woman. I was certain that, were Ginny discussing the case with her and not me, Hermione would be firing all sorts of awkward questions at her. Luna’s theories, I was equally certain, would definitely revolve around the idea that werewolves really existed. I smiled to myself but, as I was neither as forthright as Hermione nor as eccentric as Luna, I remained silent.

‘The stuffed wolf sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it?’ observed Ginny.

‘Everything about this case is odd,’ I said. ‘Because of the nature of the killings, a death every full moon, the police and the papers started off by assuming that this is a serial killer. A lunatic, with the emphasis on Luna.’ Realising what I’d said, I hastily added, ‘As in the moon, not your Luna!’

‘I know what you meant,’ Ginny assured me.

‘But the victims were bitten by a fake wolf, which is bizarre,’ I continued. ‘And then there were the demands, which were even more bizarre, if that’s possible. “Free Greyback!” What does that even mean? That reminds me! Since the weekend we first met, there’s been no mention of this Greyback, whoever he is. It’s been a month since he was mentioned. I wonder why? It’s as if the entire country has forgotten all about him. Are Harry’s bosses simply keeping his name out of the papers?’

Ginny said nothing. It seemed to me that she was waiting to see what else I came up with.

‘The Greyback incident made me wonder if someone was using the deaths as blackmail, or terrorism, which is very strange,’ I said, ‘And even if it were true, why suddenly kill two people rather than one? Overpowering two youngsters can’t have been easy. And then why frame an elderly museum curator? Perhaps the victims are immaterial, perhaps the killer has a grudge against Robards and is trying to frame him.’

‘That’s what Harry’s boss thinks, too.’ The relief in Ginny’s voice was obvious. ‘He’s got most of
Harry’s staff chasing down Robard’s enemies.’

‘But, Robards has gone missing, why? Either Harry’s wrong, and he is the killer, or he’s dead,’ I said, as my second thoughts arrived with a vengeance. ‘But if he’s dead, then the killer doesn’t need to frame him, so why were that young couple killed? Robard’s involvement must be a coincidence, and the killer has kidnapped, or killed him to put everyone off the scent, to make people think he really is the killer.’

Ginny sighed. ‘That’s what Harry said, too. He’s had an argument with his boss about it. I hoped that Kingsley would be right, because that would mean we’re coming to the end of this. But it was a ridiculous hope! I was almost certain Harry was right; he usually is about this sort of thing. It’s nice to have someone agree with us.’

‘I read a lot of murder mysteries, Ginny,’ I admitted. ‘And I watch a lot of crime drama on the television, too. But I’m no expert, so you’d best take everything I say with a pinch of salt. I know enough to know that Waking the Dead is gloomy and unreal, but I still enjoy watching it. I think it’s the puzzles I like in crime dramas, and Harry’s case is certainly a puzzle.’ I laughed to myself. ‘Perhaps Grace Foley could give you some insight into the killer’s mind,’ I suggested.

‘Who’s Grace Foley?’ Ginny asked seriously.

‘Sorry Ginny, she’s a fictional character, a forensic psychologist, I think they call her,’ I explained. ‘I forgot that you don’t own a telly.’

‘What do you think?’ Ginny asked.

I shrugged. ‘I’ll do my best to theorise for you, but I’m no expert.’ I paused and thought before continuing. ‘It’s the why’s, isn’t it? Harry knows where the victims were killed, and how they were killed. Motive is the key! Without it, he can’t figure out who he’s looking for.’ I stopped, and tutted to myself. ‘Listen to me; you’d think I knew what I was talking about.’

‘Go on, please,’ said Ginny. ‘Lily and Annie are napping. We probably won’t get another chance to talk.’

I glanced in my mirror, and realised that Ginny was correct; the swim had apparently exhausted our daughters. I turned off the nursery rhyme CD.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘If I’m going to play detective, here are my questions for Harry. Why a wolf? Why on earth would anyone choose to kill someone and then try to make it look like a wolf did it, on a full moon night?’

‘Good question.’

‘Why choose those particular victims? It’s not like the killer is going for blondes, or down and outs.’

‘I can answer that. It’s simply circumstance. Each of the victims was walking through that part of Sheffield on the evening when they were abducted and killed. Once Harry’s team discovered that they’d been killed elsewhere, they started looking to see if the first two victims had anything in common. Unfortunately, it wasn’t until that poor young couple disappeared, two days ago, that Dennis and Bobbie had enough information to figure out that all four of the victims had all passed through the same area. That’s when they started searching for a base of operations,’ said Ginny. Her voice was hushed as she imparted that information.

‘So, you found the killer’s hunting ground, and then his lair. I wonder what he will do now that his
base has been found. Will he move elsewhere? Or is that the only part of Sheffield where he feels safe? Abducting someone can’t be easy. Surely he must be local?’ I asked. ‘Stop me if I’m boring you, or going off on a tangent, Ginny. I could speculate for hours.’

‘You’re fine,’ she assured me.

‘What about this mysterious Greyback?’ I asked. ‘As I said, he hasn’t been mentioned recently. Even if he exists, I don’t suppose that the government would release him. But why does the killer want him freed? Is the killer a friend of Greyback?’

‘Not so far as Harry knows,’ said Ginny. ‘Greyback’s “known associates” are in jail or dead.’

‘So, Greyback exists!’ I said. ‘And he’s in jail. What did he do?’

‘He killed people,’ Ginny said. ‘But do not tell anyone I told you. He’s… Well, if you look for that name, or his crimes, you won’t find it. It was, um, classified.’

I filed away that piece of information very carefully.

‘Perhaps a member of the one of victims’ families wants him out of jail. Perhaps this person wants Greyback free so that he can kill him. Some people still believe in the death penalty, in an eye for an eye. Or am I being stupid?’

‘I hope not,’ said Ginny firmly. ‘Harry’s just put a team on that, too. Unfortunately, Greyback killed several people.’

I didn’t answer, because we’d reached the crossroads with the Wooler road, and I needed to concentrate on getting across the main road. I’d just negotiated the junction when Annie woke up.

‘We still go Drake-soff?’ she asked.

‘That’s right,’ Ginny told her. ‘You’re coming to Drakeshaugh for dinner. Is that okay?’

‘Yay,’ my daughter confirmed. ‘Good. Let’s sing.’

‘What do you want to sing?’ Ginny asked.

Annie didn’t answer; she simply burst into song, ‘Bobby Shafto’s gone to sea, Silver buckles at his knee…’ and woke up Lily.

Fortunately, Lily was unperturbed by my daughter’s screeching, and she, Ginny and I sang all of the way through Rothbury and Thropton. Strangely neither Ginny, nor her daughter, were familiar with most of the songs we sang.

‘Nearly home’ said Annie happily as we left the Elsdon road. She was gazing out at the Cheviots, which were to our left.

‘Home,’ Lily agreed.

I’d just negotiated “the bends”, the place now imprinted in my mind as the spot where my tyre had blown out, when I saw a woman in the road ahead. She wore jeans, cowboy boots, and a bright red puffer jacket with the hood pulled up. She was, foolishly, walking on the left side of the road, her back to the traffic. She was limping a little too. From her shuffling gait it seemed to me that I was looking at someone who’d been walking for a long time.

‘Where on earth has she come from?’ I wondered aloud as I pulled past her.
I tried to catch a glimpse of her as we passed but I couldn’t. Ginny turned sideways in her seat, leaned forwards and took a good look at the stranger as we passed. As a consequence, I didn’t get a look at her face.

‘She’s quite young,’ Ginny said. ‘Early twenties I’d say. But I don’t recognise her.’

‘That’s not surprising,’ I said. ‘She’s much too young to have kids at school. I wonder where she’s going, and where she’s come from.’ My mind went into overdrive, and I began to speculate.

‘Who knows,’ said Ginny, glancing over her shoulder. ‘Mike has passed her, too.’

‘I’d have offered her a lift, if we’d had the room,’ I said. ‘And the way Mike has the seats arranged in his car, well, she’d have to squeeze in between Henry and James.’

‘It’s not a good idea to come between Henry and James,’ Ginny observed.

I chuckled and nodded. ‘Thick as thieves,’ I agreed.

Ginny again looked over her shoulder.

‘I’m sure she’ll be okay, Ginny,’ I said reassuringly. ‘The bus from Newcastle terminates at Thropton. She’s probably a local, simply walking the last few miles home. I don’t know everyone in the valley. In fact, apart from our immediate neighbours, I don’t really know any of the families without kids. I suppose a lot of them will have kids, but they’ll have left home.’

‘So, you think she’s probably a local coming to visit her parents?’ Ginny asked.

‘What else could she be? At this time of the year we still get a few hikers and some mountain bikers, but she’s not dressed for walking.’

It wasn’t long before we arrived at Drakeshaugh. Ginny climbed out and opened the gate, and waved me through. She waited for Mike to follow me before closing the gate. Mike drove past and continued up to Drakeshaugh as Ginny trotted up to re-join me.

By the time we reached the yard Mike had already released the boys from his car. Henry, James and Al were in a huddle near the kitchen door, doubtless planning something. Mike was carrying Ginny’s bags, and loitering uncertainly midway between the front door and the kitchen door.

‘Kitchen,’ called Ginny cheerfully as she lifted Lily out from her seat. I’d just placed Annie on the ground when the three boys approached me. Henry took the lead.

‘Can we go an’ play inna forest?’ he asked. I looked at Ginny. She nodded.

‘An’ me,’ Annie demanded.

‘Me, me,’ Lily squeaked.

‘I need to check on dinner, Lily,’ Ginny told her daughter.

‘If you want someone to look after the kids, I’ll do it,’ Mike volunteered cheerfully. ‘I’d like to take a look at this rope swing Henry keeps chuntering on about.’

‘Thanks, Mike,’ said Ginny gratefully. She moved closer to Mike and lowered her voice. ‘Lily will tell you that she’s a big girl and can manage the swing all by herself,’ she muttered. Her eyes told him it wasn’t true.
‘Understood,’ Mike replied. ‘I’ll keep an eye on her.’

‘Thanks,’ Ginny gave him a grateful smile, took the bag full of wet towels and costumes from his hand, and led me towards the house. Mike gave me a wave, winked, and followed five happily chattering kids past the chicken coop and into the trees.

After hanging her coat on one of the pegs in the small hall, Ginny opened a door which, on all of my previous visits had been firmly closed, and placed the swimming bag inside. As I found a peg for my own coat, I got the briefest of glimpses into the room. It looked like a study. All I saw was a large and very old fashioned-looking desk, on which were an inkwell and quill.

‘Just go through,’ said Ginny, nodding towards the kitchen door as she closed the study door.

I did so. The table was already set for eight people, and the room was filled with a faint aroma of food.

‘Is there anything I can do?’ I asked. ‘Do you need any help with dinner? Shall I put on the kettle?’

‘Thanks, Jacqui, but I’m sure I’m organised,’ she told me as she followed us into the room. ‘I was going to put the kettle on, myself. Do you want tea?’

‘Yes, please,’ I said. ‘Mike will certainly want one. If you don’t need a hand in here, I’ll take it to him when it’s made.’

Even before I’d finished speaking Ginny had filled the kettle and placed it on the stove. She opened a cupboard, and pulled out a medium sized teapot, a caddy, and three mugs. I smiled, and she correctly interpreted my thoughts.

‘Yes,’ she confirmed. ‘I’ve finally got everything put away. It’s all exactly where I want it.’ She then picked up a pair of oven gloves and opened the oven door. When she lifted the lid of the earthenware casserole dish, the aroma of stewing lamb, no longer restrained, wafted across the room.

‘That smells great,’ I told her.

‘Mum always puts lambs’ kidneys in with the meat,’ Ginny said. ‘I do the same. Will Henry and Annie be okay with kidneys?’

‘Sounds like the recipe my mum gave to me,’ I assured her. ‘Henry can be a bit fussy. But I’ve yet to find anything Annie won’t eat.’

‘Great. Everything’s on time, it will be ready in an hour,’ Ginny told me. She replaced the lid, closed the door, and stood. That was when my stomach gurgled.

‘Hungry?’ Ginny asked.

‘A little,’ I admitted. ‘But don’t worry, I can last another hour.’

‘I did some baking this morning,’ Ginny offered. She lifted the lid from a biscuit barrel and tipped it forwards, allowing me to look inside. ‘Ginger snaps,’ she said. ‘Or…’ she lifted the lid from a white enamel bread bin, ‘freshly baked bread buns.’

‘All this home cooking, you put me to shame,’ I said. The smells of bread and ginger intermingled with the smell of dinner, and my stomach growled. ‘I’m sure that a cuppa will be enough to see me through to dinner time.’ Even as I spoke, the kettle began to sing.
'I’ll put some buns, and biscuits onto a plate and you can take them out to Mike and the kids. If you change your mind, you can help yourself and I’ll never know,’ said Ginny with a smile as she busied herself making the tea.

A few minutes later I found myself walking across the yard carrying a tray containing: a jug of “pumpkin juice” (an orange coloured drink which Ginny told me her kids really liked); five small earthenware beakers for the juice; a plate containing half-a-dozen ginger snaps; another containing half-a-dozen bread buns; and, a mug of tea.

The rope swing was easy to find, I simply homed in on the sounds of excited children. I was surrounded the moment they saw me. Because I was worried that the kids wouldn’t eat the meal Ginny was preparing, I tore three of the buns in half, and only allowed them to have half a bun. They all, Mike included, took a ginger snap.

To my surprise the Potter kids seemed to be used to drinking pumpkin juice. All three of them encouraged my two to try it. Henry and Annie each took a sip, and declared it “okay.”

‘No biscuits left for you,’ said Mike, grinning as he waved his biscuit under my nose. ‘Still, you’ve got three buns to scoff on your way back to the house.’ He bit into his half of the bun he was sharing with Annie.

‘There’s a barrel full of ginger snaps in the kitchen, right next to my cuppa,’ I informed him smugly.

‘This home-made bun is good,’ he mumbled, taking a sip of tea and swallowing. ‘And Ginny bakes ginger snaps, too! Who’d have thought.’

‘Don’t you dare make any ginger jokes,’ I warned him. ‘I’ll leave the tray here, Mike, so you can bring everything else back with you.’ To make certain the kids didn’t eat too much, I took the plate of buns from the tray and turned to leave. ‘We’ll give you a shout in about twenty minutes, that way you’ll all have time to wash your hands before dinner.’

‘Just been inna pool!’ Henry protested.

‘Just been inna mud, you little scruff,’ his father told him firmly.

I walked past the chicken coop, stepped out into the yard, and stopped in surprise. The girl in the red puffer jacket was shuffling across the gravel, heading towards Ginny’s front door. She froze the second she saw me. My sudden appearance had certainly startled her.

‘Hello,’ I said.

The girl said nothing, she simply stared. I stared back. I’d definitely never seen her before. She was, I thought, in her late teens or, possibly, her early twenties. She was taller than Ginny, but not as tall as me; her face was pale, and her dark-ringed, frightened eyes were nervously scanning her surroundings. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a stick, which she pointed at me.

‘Who’re you?’ she demanded. ‘You’re not Ginny Potter.’

‘I’m Jacqui Charlton,’ I told her as I took a couple of steps forwards. My eyes weren’t deceiving me. She hadn’t pulled out a knife, or even a cosh. She was attempting to threaten me with a slender stick rather like a conductor’s baton. I again looked into her face, wondering if I’d see any signs of madness. ‘I’m a friend of Ginny’s,’ I explained. ‘She’s inside; do you want to talk to her? Who are you?’
‘I don’t know,’ she said dazedly. She stared longingly at the plate I carried. ‘I’m starving, Missus, any chance o’ one o’ yon bread cakes?’

_Bread cakes._ I thought, _she said bread cakes, not baps, or buns, or rolls, but bread cakes!_ I knew that expression, it was an exclusively Yorkshire word-use. Her accent was Yorkshire, the more she said, the more certain I was. It was south Yorkshire, and south Yorkshire’s biggest city was Sheffield. I was both pleased and terrified by my deductions. When we’d first met I’d impressed Ginny by identifying her West Country accent. I was not, however, about to mention the word Sheffield to this mysterious young woman.
There was a desperate expression on the young woman’s face. As I looked into her worryingly blank eyes, I wondered if there was something seriously wrong with her.

She’d told me that she didn’t know who she was. My knowledge of amnesia was restricted to what I’d read in crime fiction, so I knew that everything I knew was almost certainly inaccurate. Was she suffering from a head injury? Perhaps it was a mental, not a physical trauma? A desperation brought on by amnesia might, possibly, explain why she was trying to threaten me with a stick.

‘You really don’t know who you are?’ I asked, as I cautiously took another step towards her.

The girl in the red puffer jacket shook her head. ‘Who are you, and where are Harry and Ginny Potter?’ she demanded. She raised the stick higher and pointed it at me threateningly. My suspicions were confirmed, she was obviously suffering some form of severe mental anguish. I stopped moving, because I didn’t want to upset or confuse her.

I tried to formulate a suitable calming response, but before I could even think a rapidly spinning bright red ball, about a foot in diameter, hurtled out from the kitchen door. I’d noticed that the door was open, but somehow I’d failed to see Ginny standing there. With a painful-sounding thud, the red ball hit the girl on her right hand and knocked the stick from it. She squealed in pain.

The still spinning ball bounced upwards before falling gracefully to the ground. Given its size, and the speed at which Ginny had thrown it, the way in which the ball seemed to float gently to the ground was surprising. It almost seemed to be moving in slow motion. As my attention had been focused on the startled young woman, I assumed that it was simply an optical illusion.

‘Ginny Potter is right here,’ my friend hissed angrily. ‘And Harry Potter will be here very soon, too.’

Still whimpering and rubbing her hand, the girl turned towards this new voice. She stared in stunned surprise at Ginny. It seemed to me that the girl recognised Ginny, but from Ginny’s expression, it was apparent that the opposite wasn’t true. The girl stared, her expression was the open-mouthed awe of a fan meeting someone famous. Ginny took the opportunity to stride rapidly up to the girl and place her foot on the stick. The girl gave a fear-filled squeak. She was obviously very attached to the thing, another sign she was delusional.

‘Please don’t break it,’ the girl begged.

‘Then don’t threaten my friend,’ Ginny said firmly. Her next words were obviously for my benefit; although despite that, she did not take her eyes off the young woman, not even for an instant. ‘Don’t worry, Jacqui, Harry’s just been on the telephone, he’ll be home in about ten minutes.’

‘If you need him, Mike is even closer,’ I said staunchly, knowing that one shout from me would bring my husband running. ‘Do you want me to call for him?’ I wondered why Ginny had emphasised the word telephone, but the girl was taking up most of my attention.

‘I think we’re okay, thanks, Jacqui,’ said Ginny, still staring at the girl. ‘You aren’t going to cause any trouble in front of my neighbour, are you?’

‘Neighbour! Is she a...’ the girl began. She stared at Mike’s car, and at mine, then stared at Ginny
in surprise. Ginny had her back to me, but I could tell from the way her hair rippled that she’d
given a brief nod. The girl lapsed into silence, gave me a curious glance, and then appeared to
dismiss me from her mind.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Potter, I didn’t know. I didn’t recognise her, so thought this might be a trap or…’
She shrugged helplessly. ‘I didn’t know what else to do or where else to go.’

‘We’ll start again,’ said Ginny, magnanimously. ‘You can start by telling me who you are, what
you want, and how you got this address?’

The girl’s face fell. ‘You don’t know me, either?’ she asked. ‘I thought… I hoped that I might be
called Trudi Corner.’

‘You’re not,’ I said in surprise.

The girl stared at me. ‘She knows Trudi Corner?’ The astonishment in her voice would have been
obvious even to Henry.

‘I wouldn’t say “knows,” I’ve met her once,’ I said, walking forwards to join them.

‘You can pick that up,’ Ginny told the girl as I closed on them. She took her foot off the stick. ‘But
put it away and don’t try anything stupid.’

The girl bent down and picked up the stick. She hastily pushed it back into her coat pocket before I
reached them. As I approached, she assessed me, a cat-curious expression on her face.

‘Sorry if I, erm, frightened you, erm, Jacqui,’ the girl told me.

‘You didn’t,’ I told her.

She slumped in despair. From the way she was blinking, it looked as though she was attempting to
prevent tears from flowing.

‘You’re not lying, are you? You really don’t know who I am?’ she asked us desperately. ‘But, I
don’t understand. If I’m not Trudi Corner, why did I find this hidden inside my boot?’

Reaching into the back pocket of her jeans, she carefully pulled out a carefully folded piece of
thick parchment. As she began to unfold it, both Ginny and I recognised it.

That was the first time I heard Ginny really swear. She was pretty good at it.

The girl held up the parchment for us to read.

Harry, Ginny, James, Albus, and Lily now live at:
Drakeshaugh, Harbottle, Coquetdale, Northumberland.
We’d like to invite:
Michael and Trudi Corner
to join us at 5:00pm on Saturday 26th September 2009
as we welcome new neighbours, old friends, and family to our new home.
No gifts, please.
We look forward to seeing you.

‘Where in Mer… Where did you get that?’ Ginny demanded angrily.

‘I told you, I found it inside my boot,’ the girl protested. She began to sob.
‘You said you were hungry, would you like a bread cake?’ I asked her.

The girl nodded eagerly.

‘You’ve come from Sheffield, haven’t you?’ I asked her. She nodded again.

Ginny gasped, and thrust her hand into the pocket of her jeans. I assumed that she was looking for her phone. ‘Have you walked all of the way?’ Ginny asked.

‘Not all the way, no,’ she told Ginny. ‘But how did you know where I came from?’ the girl asked me.

Surprise had momentarily stopped the tears from flowing, but they remained in her eyes, barely held in check by the dam of her eyelids. I offered her the plate. She took a bun, demolished it in two hastily chewed mouthfuls, and reached for a second one. ‘Ta muchly,’ she mumbled.

‘Nowt’s the bother,’ I told her, smiling.

I turned to Ginny; she gave me a brief quizzical glance, but continued to watch the girl like a hawk.

‘Bread cakes, that’s what gave you away,’ I told the girl. ‘That’s what they call bread buns in Sheffield, and that’s what you called them when you saw me. You’re a Yorkshire lass. You don’t have much of an accent, but it’s still there, and it comes out when you’re worried.’

‘Aye,’ the girl gave me a rather watery smile.

We were already close, but Ginny moved forwards until she was almost toe to toe with the girl and stared up into her eyes. ‘What’s the first thing you remember?’ she asked.

‘Wunning,’ the girl mumbled as she hastily swallowed her second bun. She appeared to be caught in Ginny’s gaze, almost hypnotised. ‘I was running, but I didn’t know why I was running, so I stopped. When I looked round, there was an old man lying on the ground. He was struggling with someone else, a much younger man. I wanted go back and help the old man, but he shouted “Keep running!” so I ran.’

‘Where was this?’ Ginny asked.

‘Burngreave, in Sheffield,’ the girl said, confirming my deduction. ‘I was frightened and confused, and I couldn’t remember anything, so I ran! Whoever the old man was fighting didn’t chase me, but I kept running until I got into the city centre.’

Ginny stepped back. The girl blinked and dabbed at the corner of her eyes with her cuff.

‘And?’ Ginny asked.

‘I didn’t know what to do so I, erm,’ she gave me a wary look and turned her attention back to Ginny. ‘I sneaked into a hotel, and found an empty room.’

‘Why didn’t you go to the police?’ I asked her, my disapproval obvious in my voice.

She looked at me as if I were mad. ‘I didn’t know who I was! I was tired and frightened and I couldn’t remember anything! So, I found a room. I needed somewhere to hide while I gathered my thoughts.’ The girl’s lips quivered and the tears once again welled up in her eyes. ‘I was tired and my feet were sore and it was late, it was after midnight.’

She sniffled and stared earnestly into Ginny’s eyes. ‘I went for a shower, and when I took off my
boots, I found that invitation pushed inside. I thought—I hoped—that I might be Trudi Corner. But that didn’t help, because I didn’t know who Trudi Corner was or where she lived. When I started thinking about things... about what was going on... when I was in the shower... I got really frightened. I didn’t know who the old man was, or the other man, the younger man, either. I spent the night in the room, but I didn’t sleep. I just wondered and worried.’

After a long pause, she continued. ‘I thought about trying to find out who Trudi was, and where she lived. But then I persuaded myself that the man I’d been running away from was Michael. I didn’t know. I still don’t know. All I had was your address, and although I’d forgotten almost everything about myself, I knew who Harry and Ginny Potter were. I came here, because I hoped that Mr Potter could help me.’

‘He will,’ Ginny promised. ‘Come inside, we’ll soon find out what your name is.’ Taking the girl by the elbow, she led her into the house. As they walked towards the door, Ginny scanned the area. She even looked up into the sky. I followed behind, wondering whether Harry’s murder mystery had come to visit.

Once inside, Ginny opened the door to the study and led the girl inside. Opening a drawer in the desk, she pulled out a piece of parchment and began to unfold it. Feeling a little uncomfortable, I waited at the door. One glance confirmed what I’d thought I’d seen previously, there was a quill and inkwell on the desk. I looked around the room.

The only window was behind the desk. There was a large wooden chest on the floor and the walls were covered with photographs and paintings; for an instant, I thought that they were moving. I stared.

One of the paintings was of a couple in their late sixties and, from his appearance, it was obvious that the bespectacled man with unruly hair was a relative of Harry’s. For a second I thought he’d turned to look at me. I was staring at him, wondering what I’d just seen. I suppose that, like many painting, his eyes simply appeared to be staring at me. Then I heard a noise which sounded like someone clearing their throat. It, too, appeared to come from the painting. Ginny glanced at the painting, seemed to follow the man’s gaze, and realised I was standing in the doorway.

‘Your cup of tea is in the kitchen, Jacqui,’ Ginny reminded me. Her words were polite, but firm, and her hint wasn’t exactly lightweight. I took it and left her to look after our unexpected visitor. As I turned away, the study door closed despite the fact that Ginny had been nowhere near it.

My tea was still warm, but not hot. I leaned against the bench, drank it quickly, and looked out of the window, pondering the implications of the sudden arrival of the girl. A killer pretending to be a wolf, and now the sudden arrival of a woman in a red hood! I was living in a fairy tale.

Mike had been right; the Potters had certainly enlivened our lives.

I had almost finished my tea; I was thinking back over my discussion with Ginny on the way back from the pool, and our unexpected visitor, when Harry’s car drove into the yard. He’d obviously been travelling fast, which wasn’t surprising, but he wasn’t alone in the car, which was. The car was heading straight towards the red ball, which Ginny had forgotten to pick up. Putting down my mug, I hurried towards the back door.

‘Harry’s here, Ginny,’ I shouted through the study door as I opened the door into the yard.

‘Thanks, Jacqui,’ she called. The door opened. ‘Wait here, Frances,’ Ginny told the girl, who was sitting in an upright chair at the desk. The girl, Frances, nodded.
I wondered how Ginny had discovered Little Red Riding Hood’s name. Ginny’s uninvited guest had removed her coat, and there was no visible sign of a head injury. Leaving Frances in the study, Ginny followed me out into the yard in time to see Harry and his companions hastily disembark.

All wore the same long black coats and alert expressions which I’d first seen on Terry Boot and his young companion when I’d first encountered them. The male was a skinny six-footer in his forties; his goatee didn’t disguise his lack of a proper chin. The smaller of the two women was barely out of her teens; she was slightly built, raven-haired, red-lipped, and deathly pale. The taller woman was, I thought, about my age; she was blonde, thin, and rather austere-looking.

‘Everything okay?’ Harry asked Ginny anxiously.

‘Fine,’ Ginny assured him. ‘Her name is Frances Sidebotham, she’s from Sheffield, she’s lost her memory, and she found us because she had Michael and Trudi’s invitation to our housewarming party hidden in her boot.’

‘Frances Sidebotham.’ Harry pondered the name, and then recognition flashed in his eyes. ‘Ministry Security!’ he announced.

Harry’s colleagues were all looking at me warily. I was about to introduce myself when Harry noticed.

‘This isn’t Frances, this is our neighbour, Jacqui Charlton,’ he told the trio.

Ginny looked at me, grinned, and turned to the blonde woman. ‘Yes, this is my new friend, Jacqui. Jacqui, this is Susan Bones and her team. I’ve put Frances in the study, she’s safe there,’ Ginny informed them. The trio relaxed their guard. ‘I’m surprised to see you all here. I thought you three were still in Tra… in Romania,’ she added.

‘Just got back.’ Susan’s voice was as severe and clipped as her hair. ‘Closed the case yesterday.’ She turned to Harry. ‘We should interview this woman immediately, Harry.’

Her words were lost in the tumult almost before they left her mouth, because the kids arrived, shouting and squealing.

‘Daddy!’ Al shouted excitedly.

‘Daddy, Daddy!’ Lily echoed from some distance behind her brother.

‘Quid-ish,’ said James, running towards the red ball.

‘Wha’d’yer say?’ Henry asked him curiously.

‘Lots o’ peoples,’ Annie observed carefully.

‘We’s gone an’ swimmled wiff Annie an’ Lily, an’ everyone,’ Al told his dad as the kids continued to close. ‘An’ I didn’t get drowned! Not once.’

The Potter kids dashed across the yard towards us, closely followed by my two. My husband, who was carrying the tray of drinks, brought up the rear. Harry swept Al into his arms and made a fuss of him. Ginny scooped up the ball before James could reach it.

‘No more games! Dinner is almost ready, James,’ she said.

‘Hi, Al, and hello, little Lily-loo,’ Harry said as his daughter arrived and wrapped her arms around
his leg.

‘Hello, Harry,’ Mike said. ‘Were we expecting you? I hope you warned Ginny that you were coming to dinner and bringing extra guests.’ He turned to the strangers. ‘Some of these kids are mine,’ he told them cheerfully. ‘You’ll have to figure out which ones for yourself. They’ve got me reet discombobulated.’

‘Wait until they hit their teens,’ the man with the goatee said. ‘My eldest is...’

‘We have a suspect to interview,’ Susan said brusquely, trying to bring the man back to the matter at hand.

‘Suspect?’ asked Mike. He looked at me. ‘What’s going on?’

‘It’s nothing, really, Mike,’ Ginny began.

‘Do you remember passing Little Red Riding Hood on the road?’ I asked him at the same time as Ginny spoke. When he nodded, I said, ‘She’s here.’

‘Really?’ Henry asked. ‘Really real Little Red Riding Hood? Fort it’s just a story.’

‘Red who, what story?’ James asked.

I could see that the slim blonde was becoming exasperated. Her boss, who still held his younger son, had now hunkered down to talk to Lily, and the mysterious girl in the study—Frances Sidebotham, I reminded myself—seemed all but forgotten in the chaos created by the kids. Fortunately, Ginny took charge.

‘Kids—and Mike and Jacqui—dinner is almost ready. I’d like you all inside, now. Kids, go and wash your hands for dinner. And can everyone who’s been to the rope swing please take off your muddy shoes off before you go into the kitchen.’ Lily stretched her hands up at her father in an unmistakeable gesture. ‘No, Lily, Daddy won’t carry you. He has work to do!’ Ginny added.

‘Hungry!’ James decided. He and Henry dashed into the house. Al freed himself from his father’s grip and ran after the two older boys; Ginny sighed and gave chase.

‘Shoes off!’ she reminded them.

Mike was holding Annie’s hand and following close behind Ginny.

‘I think Mike is hungry, too,’ I told Harry as we walked towards the door. Despite Ginny’s words, Harry had picked up his daughter and was carrying her towards the door. ‘Would you like me to take Lily?’

‘Is that okay?’ Harry wasn’t asking me, I realised, but the little red-head in his arms.

Lily assessed me carefully and nodded. Harry chucked her chin, kissed her forehead, and passed her over. Looking into the hallway, I realised that it was full of kids struggling with their shoes. I decided to wait outside, and to remove Lily’s before we entered. They had buckles, so it wasn’t easy.

‘Let me help,’ the raven-haired girl offered.

‘Shouldn’t you be going to speak to Ginny’s uninvited guest?’ I asked.

Harry had squeezed past the kids and opened the study door. He was ushering Susan and the
goatee man into the study.

‘Probably,’ she admitted, but she helped me anyway. As she deftly pulled off one of Lily’s shoes, her hand briefly touched mine. It was like being brushed by an icicle.

‘You’re cold,’ I said, shivering from her touch.

‘I have very poor circulation,’ she said. ‘It’s my curse,’ she added, giving me a sharp-toothed smile.

Harry looked across at us, and directed a quizzical gaze towards the raven-haired girl. In response, she tilted her head towards the door.

‘Ginny!’ he called.

‘What?’ Ginny asked, lifting her head. She was crouched in the floor next to the door into the kitchen, helping Al to remove his shoes.

‘Camelia?’

There was an assessing look between Harry and his wife; it was followed by a moment’s silence before Ginny replied. ‘Oh yeah! Okay.’

‘Come in, Camelia,’ Harry told the girl.

‘Nice to meet you, Jacqui,’ Camelia said. ‘But now, I must go to work.’ She handed me Lily’s shoes, smiled again, and threaded her way through the crowded hall and into the study.

Camelia’s English was perfect, almost too perfect. There wasn’t even the slightest trace of an accent, but there was something about the precise way she spoke which made me think that she wasn’t British. I guessed that she was Eastern European, possibly from one of the former Soviet States. Perhaps that explained her hesitation at the door; perhaps it was a cultural thing. Why else would she wait to be invited in? It was such an old-fashioned attitude.

I spent the next few minutes in the Potter’s cloakroom with Mike, Annie, and Lily. While we were digging the mud from underneath the girls’ fingernails, I tried to tell my husband what had been happening on.

‘Blimey,’ Mike said. ‘It’s lucky Harry was almost home.’

‘And even luckier that he had three colleagues with him,’ I said, wonderingly. ‘It’s like magic, incredible! A stranger arrives here, and Harry turns up with three of his people only minutes later. Why on earth was he bringing them here?’

‘Coincidence!’ said Mike. ‘Or, perhaps he does it all the time,’ he added teasingly.

‘Huh,’ I snorted dismissively. ‘Don’t you ever try that with me, Mike. You can’t simply bring three workmates home without letting me know.’

‘I know,’ he said, grinning. ‘You need three days advance warning so you can plan and panic, and clean the house from top to bottom at least twice.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ I snapped, knowing he was right.

I was still wondering about Harry’s remarkably rapid arrival when Mike and I carried Annie and Lily back into the kitchen. The more I thought about it, the more peculiar it all seemed. I
encountered a mysterious stranger in the grounds of Drakeshaugh, and Harry “just happened” to be on his way home with three obviously capable colleagues. Unbelievable though it was, what could it be but another fortunate coincidence? Equally as puzzling, I realised, was the way in which Ginny had, almost instantly, been able to discover the girl’s name.

Mike and I sat the girls on booster seats before finding places for ourselves. A steaming casserole dish full of hotpot was on the table. The three boys were already sitting at the table, shuffling impatiently, and waiting to be fed. Ginny was putting the plates on the table. An extra place had been set for Harry, who was looking down into his telephone. As I placed Lily in her seat, I tried to listen to Harry’s phone conversation.

‘Kilmarnock?’ Harry asked, glancing across at me. ‘That sounds good. It should be far enough from Sheffield. Thanks, Justin. Send the address to Susan. They were going to head north after they’d dropped me off here.’

‘Sit down, please,’ Ginny told me. I did, but I kept listening to Harry.

‘My pleasure, old boy.’ The voice emanating from Harry’s phone was extremely well-spoken, almost certainly public school posh. ‘I’ll do it now, and I’ll send the invoice through the usual channels. I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me who you want to hide, are you?’

‘No,’ said Harry cheerfully. ‘What time is it where you are? I’m sorry I got you out of bed for this.’

‘It’s a good thing you did. It’s ten a.m. here in Portland. I forgot to set my alarm and I have an investor’s meeting at eleven. I’ll see you at the reunion next weekend, if you can make it. Chow.’

‘Hungry!’ James reminded his mother.

‘Do I have time to go upstairs and get changed before we eat?’ Harry asked.

‘If you’re quick,’ Ginny told him. As he hurried from the room, she lifted Henry’s plate and served him some hotpot. ‘Here you are, Henry,’ she said.

James gave a moan of hunger and looked covetously at Henry’s plate. ‘Guests first,’ his mother said firmly as she placed the next plate in front of Annie.

‘Ignore me, and serve James—and Al and Lily,’ said Mike. ‘I wouldn’t want your kids to starve to death on my account.’

‘They won’t,’ said Ginny with a smile. Nevertheless, she served the kids first.

We were all sitting and eating when Harry returned to the kitchen. He was eagerly heading for the table, but he didn’t reach it. Seconds after he entered, the door into the hall opened and Susan walked in.

‘We’re ready to leave, Harry,’ she said. ‘Nothing I’ve tried has ... jogged ... Frances’s memory. Dominic and I will drive her to the safe house. Once we’re there, I’ll contact Mosby from the Obli...’ She stopped mid-sentence and glanced at Mike and me before continuing. ‘I won’t make a formal request. The fewer people who know about this, the better.’

‘Mosby?’ Harry asked.

‘We need an expert; I trust Mosby,’ Susan said.

‘What about Ministry security? Have you checked...’
‘It’s six o’clock on Saturday evening, Harry,’ Susan said. ‘I planned to ask Camelia to go in tomorrow. I’ll be in touch later, when we reach our destination.’ She again looked at me.

‘Do you want something to eat before you leave, Susan?’ Ginny asked.

‘No thanks, Ginny,’ the blonde said. She looked at the kids, and at Mike and me. ‘You have guests. We won’t intrude.’

‘I thought that’s what you’d say,’ said Ginny. She stood, walked over to the wooden breadboard on the kitchen bench, and picked up a large paper bag. ‘I’ve made some sandwiches for your journey. I know that Frances is hungry; I don’t think she’s eaten much, if anything, today.’

For a moment I thought that Susan was going to refuse, but, after a moment’s hesitation, she took the bag. ‘Thanks, Ginny,’ said Susan gratefully. She turned to her boss. ‘We’ll get the car back to you tomorrow, Harry. Goodbye.’ With that, she was gone.

‘I’ll see you out,’ Harry called, following her to the door.

‘Sorry about this, Jacqui,’ apologised Ginny. ‘This was supposed to be a quiet, family day.’

‘We’re getting used to you,’ said Mike, laughing. ‘But, really, Ginny, it was never going to be quiet. Five kids and quiet? Impossible! We can take a forgetful stranger and yet more mysterious people in black overcoats in our stride, can’t we, Jacqui?’

‘Yes,’ I assured Ginny. ‘Any idea who Frances is, or whether she’s involved in Harry’s case?’

‘That reminds me, I haven’t even seen this mystery woman,’ Mike added. He craned his neck to look out of the kitchen window.

‘Harry recognised her,’ Ginny admitted. ‘She works at the Ministry. I’ve no doubt that finding out how she got the invitation and what she knows will be a priority for Susan’s team.’

‘Surely Michael and Trudi will know how she got their invitation,’ I said eagerly. ‘They may know a lot more about her, too.’

‘They might,’ said Harry as he re-entered the room. Ginny immediately began to serve him some food. ‘But we don’t talk about work at the dinner table. I try not to bring work home at all,’ he added firmly.

‘You didn’t,’ I said. ‘Work arrived unannounced.’

‘True,’ said Harry. ‘But now it’s left.’

With those words it was clear to me that there would be no further discussion about the mysterious Frances Sidebotham. I’d intended to ask about Harry’s staff, particularly about the origins of Camelia, but I knew that it would be pointless. I searched for a new subject to break the silence, but I didn’t need to as Mike beat me to it.

‘This hotpot is great, Ginny,’ he told her.

The talk turned to food, and to our trip to the pool. Both James and Al wanted to tell their father what he’d missed at the pool and—with interruptions from Henry, Annie, and Lily, and explanations from Ginny—they were still remembering things to tell their dad when I helped Ginny to clear the table. James broke off his detailed explanation of my attempts to teach him the breaststroke leg kick in order to ask his mother a very important question.
‘What’s for pudding?’

‘Eve’s pudding and custard, James,’ Ginny told him.

‘Great,’ said Mike.

‘He’ll be moving in with you next,’ I murmured to Ginny as I stacked the dirty plates in the sink.
‘Mike’s favourite meat is lamb, and he’s very fond of anything containing cooked apples. Has he been dropping hints?’

Ginny laughed, and shook her head.

Dessert was soon served, and almost as quickly, it was over. Ginny refused my offer to help her with the enormous pile of dirty dishes. Instead she drove everyone out from the kitchen and up into their enormous living room. She joined us after a few minutes, having made a pot of tea. By the time she arrived with the laden tray, the kids were rummaging through the building bricks and soft toys at the back of the room. They were playing happily together, so I left them to it. Mike and I sat on the larger of the two black leather sofas. Ginny joined Harry on the smaller one.

As the sun set, casting long shadows through the room, the kids continued to shout and play. Harry, Ginny, Mike, and I sat around the blazing fire, talking motorbikes and holidays. As the room got darker, the lights came on automatically, a new innovation Harry told us. Despite Mike’s questions, Harry was a little vague on the technical details.

It was almost nine-thirty when we finally left. We’d talked for hours about all sorts of things, but not the werewolf case. I’d been enjoying myself and had lost track of time. When I realised how late it was, I suggested that we leave immediately. The boys protested; the girls did not. Lily was almost asleep, and so was Annie. We hastily gathered up our kids and prepared to leave. I took charge of Annie, leaving Mike to deal with a loudly protesting Henry.

‘He’s over-tired, sorry,’ I told Ginny as I strapped Annie into her car seat. She smiled, nodded, and pointed to Lily, who had fallen asleep in Harry’s arms.

‘Thanks for a great day, Jacqui. You, too, Mike,’ said Ginny.

‘Thanks for the meal,’ Mike told her.

I added my own compliments to my husband’s words.

The Potters watched us leave, waving until we’d driven out onto the lane. It took only moments for Annie to fall asleep.

I followed Mike down to the gate which led out onto the main road. He pulled aside, opened the gate, and waved me through it. As I turned onto the valley road, a cloud of bats fluttered in front of the full moon.

When I arrived home, and unlocked the door, there were bats swooping through the field opposite. I’d seen bats before, of course, but never in so large a swarm.
Detective Inspector Roberta A. Wood stared out from her fourth floor hotel room window. Below her lay Sheffield Town Hall and the Peace Gardens. It was quarter to nine on Sunday morning, and the almost empty streets reflected that fact. The few folk who were out and about were all wrapped up warmly. As she buttoned up her blouse, she watched coats flap and brown leaves skitter across the paths.

The sky was bright and almost cloudless, and the pale sun was moving slowly up through the sky. It seemed that the night of the full moon—the Hunter’s Moon—had, as they’d hoped passed without further incident, as the anticipated killing had happened days earlier.

Bobbie had been worried. The latest victims had been discovered before the killer had had time to place them; perhaps he would kill again, simply to make a point.

The “Werewolf Murders”—they’d have to find a new name, she realised—was now the Auror Office’s biggest murder case in years. When the vampire known as Red Jack had landed in Whitby five years earlier, he’d managed to kill ten—nine muggles and a witch—before she, Susan, and Lavender had stopped him, permanently. In the years since, their biggest case had been a triple-murder. Bobbie thought back to the vampire case, remembered her despair as the body count had continued to rise, and shivered.

There were now four deaths, but with the killer still on the loose that number could easily rise. And it could rise quickly, especially if the killer continued to target two victims instead of one. Bobbie’s determination to catch whoever, or whatever, was responsible burned like lava in her veins. All she could do was work hard to make sure that four didn’t become five, or six, or more. They had to catch the killer before anyone else died. But they’d promised themselves that when they were first called in, and then there had been only two victims.

Running her fingers through her short, tousled, brown hair, Bobbie sighed and turned away from the window. Taking a blue and gold scarf, her Puddlemere United woolly hat, and a pair of leather gloves from her wardrobe, she placed them on top of the Auror-issue hex-proof coat that was lying ready on her bed.

Her hotel was centrally located. It was close to the crime scenes, and no great distance from South Yorkshire Police’s central police station. Unfortunately, the Wizarding World worked to different jurisdictions; the Magical world’s Sheriffs’ Offices were all based on borders that had become obsolete in the Muggle world more than a millennium earlier. Consequently, the Aurors were operating out of the York Sheriff’s office, sixty miles away.

They could just as easily have been operating from London, Bobbie reminded herself. Harry had moved their centre of operations to the “Office of the Sheriff of Deira” solely for her benefit. For the Aurors, the location didn’t matter.

She’d been half-listening to the television news as she’d stared out of the window. Fortunately, the headlines were routinely political. There had been nothing new about the case, simply a report about “no more incidents” overnight. It was always useful to know what her fellow Muggles knew, or, what they thought they knew.

Bobbie hadn’t really expected to hear anything on the news. She was confident that, if there had
been any developments in the Muggle investigation, the local police would have contacted her. Her
Auror colleagues would normally have contacted her, too, but the Muggle Interface Team knew
that her husband had Apparated up from Piddletrenthide the moment his Quidditch match ended.
Because of the case, she’d missed his last three games, and she’d missed him. Last night, for the
first time in a week, he’d spent the night with her. That was reason enough for her colleagues to
ensure that she finally had a night off.

Moving to the foot of the bed, Bobbie noted the time. It was time to leave, so she switched off the
television and walked over to the bathroom door. Her husband was completely incapable of taking
a quick shower.

‘My meeting’s at ten, Ollie, and it’s in York,’ she called through the bathroom door. ‘I need to get
down for breakfast now!’

‘On my way,’ he called. The bathroom door opened within seconds, and he emerged wearing only
a pair of black briefs. ‘Sorry, Rab,’ he told her as he dried his hair with his wand. His smile
banished her annoyance. ‘Just give me a minute, okay?’

Bobbie nodded, sat on the edge of the bed, and watched him dress. ‘Will you get some time off
after the meeting?’ he asked, hastily pulling on a pair of clean socks and picking up the trousers
he’d been wearing the previous evening.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘With luck I should be back by noon. We could go out into the Peak District and
find a pub for Sunday lunch. Dennis says this is a beautiful part of the country, he suggested we
should climb Kinder Scout, but...’

‘But?’

‘But Dennis runs up mountains for fun, and I don’t. When I get back from the meeting, I’m be off
duty until ten tomorrow, when I have to go into the police incident room.’ As he pulled on his
trousers, and picked up the shirt he’d been wearing the previous evening, she shook her head and
gently scolded him. ‘You could have brought a change of clothes with you, Ollie.’

‘I brought clean underpants and socks. I’ll Apparate home and get a few more things when you
leave for York, if you want me to stay over again tonight,’ he offered, pulling on his shirt.

‘Of course I do,’ she told him. Standing, she stepped over to him and gently ran her hand down his
bare chest. ‘I’d come home every night, if I wasn’t stuck almost two hundred and fifty miles from
the cottage.’

‘I know,’ her husband assured her. Turning to face her, he picked up his shirt. ‘It’s a lot easier for
me to Apparate up here than it is for you to fly home, Rabbie-girl. We don’t want to take any
unnecessary risks, do we?’ His large hands gently caressed her swelling stomach, and he kissed her.

‘We’d better go,’ she reminded him.

The moment Bobbie opened the hotel room door, the door to the room diagonally opposite also
opened. To Bobbie’s surprise, Trainee Auror Ellie Cattermole peered out. The trainee’s hand was
inside her jacket, almost certainly holding onto her wand. Bobbie smiled at the teenager.

‘Morning, Mrs Wood,’ she said. ‘And, Mr Wood,’ she added rather breathlessly as Bobbie’s
husband finished buttoning his shirt.

‘Is Stan in there with you?’ Bobbie asked.
Ellie blushed scarlet and shook her head wildly. ‘No,’ she protested. ‘He... Well... I... No, it’s... It’s not like that, Mrs Wood. Auror Cresswell was supposed to be here, but he wanted to go back to London last night; he said he had a date. I volunteered to stay here, to take over from him. Senior Auror Webb said it was okay, as your husband was with you. He said that setting up Surveillance Charms would be good practice for me, especially if I was going to be your, your, er...’

‘My minder,’ Bobbie said, smiling. ‘Don’t worry, Ellie, I know how much Al Webb worries about me. After all, even after all these years, I’m still the poor defenceless Muggle! Have you had breakfast yet?’

The tiny, dark-haired girl shook her head.

‘Then why don’t you join us?’ Bobbie asked.

‘Thank you,’ Ellie said.

‘I’m sure Ollie will give you his autograph, too,’ Bobbie said.

‘Puddlemere fan, are you?’ her husband asked.

Ellie nodded, and burbled an incomprehensible reply.

‘Ollie, meet trainee Auror Ellie Cattermole.’

‘Cattermole...’ he said slowly. ‘Are you related to the Tornado’s Seeker, Maisie?’

‘How many times do I have to tell you? Call me Bobbie,’ Bobbie said as they walked through the car park towards the black Range Rover. ‘We’re all on first name terms in the Auror Office, Ellie. We’re a team, we rely on each other.’

‘Yes, Mrs... Bobbie,’ Ellie said. ‘But, Mr... Oliver... he doesn’t call you Bobbie; over breakfast he was calling you Rabbie.’

‘Sometimes it’s Rab, or Rabbie-girl,’ said Bobbie, smiling. ‘You pay attention, that’s good. Ollie’s the only person who uses those names. I’m Roberta, and you’re Eleanor. You get Ellie, and I get Bobbie, I always have. But Ollie is a Scot, so... It started as a joke.’ Bobbie grinned at the girl’s puzzled expression, but didn’t expand on her explanation. ‘You should call Harry by his first name, too.’

‘Auror Prother...’ Ellie stopped. ‘Polly said I should never call him Harry.’

‘She did, did she?’ Bobbie smiled. ‘There are only two people in the office who call Harry “Sir”, or “Mr Potter”, Polly, and Lavender Moon,’ Bobbie told the trainee. ‘And they only do it because they know how much it irritates him,’ Bobbie added as she unlocked the car and climbed into the driver’s seat.

‘Seatbelt,’ she reminded the trainee.

Ellie obediently buckled herself in and waited. Bobbie looked at her passenger and realised that her young companion had no idea what was expected of her.

‘See that pole over there?’ Bobbie asked, pointing at the slender steel column in the corner of the car park.

‘Yes,’ Ellie replied.
'That thing at the top is a CCTV camera; it’s watching the car park. Can you discreetly disable it, or conjure a hood over it, something—anything—to hide our departure?'

Ellie pulled out her wand and looked around the car park. An empty supermarket-branded plastic bag was being blown across the ground. The trainee directed her wand at it, and the bag fluttered as if caught in a sudden gust of wind. It slowly rose into the air twisting in the wind and finally covered the lens.

Bobbie checked the area, making sure that no one was within sight, turned on the car’s invisibility booster, and pulled up on the steering wheel. The car rose vertically from its parking space.

‘Thanks, Ellie. You can get rid of the bag now,’ said Bobbie as the invisible car continued its ascent.

‘Okay.’

Ellie flicked her wand. The bag fluttered back towards the ground, landing neatly into a litter bin.

Bobbie set the compass for York and put her foot down. Ellie yelped.

‘Is this your first time in one of the flying cars?’ Bobbie asked.

‘Yes,’ said Ellie. ‘I only left school in July. I started in the Auror Office three weeks later.’

‘Two months on the job, and you’re already in the field! Harry wasn’t kidding when he said he was putting everyone he could onto this case. If, when you qualify, you end up working with me in the Muggle Interface Team you’ll use these cars all the time,’ Bobbie said. ‘It’s the quickest, and easiest, way to get to a crime scene without making the local police suspicious.’

Ellie peered out of the window. ‘How fast are we going?’ she asked.

The top speed on the ground is one-forty miles per hour. It’s the same in the air. It’s something to do with…’

‘The inbuilt Portkey enchantment,’ said Ellie, filling in for Bobbie’s hesitation. ‘The entire vehicle will have been enchanted to fly. Normally, speed wouldn’t be an issue. But because of Tobin’s Portkey Law, all other movements of the Portkeyed object are restricted. Because of the Portkey, the car can be Enchanted to fly or to move magically fast, but not both.’

‘It’s something like that. I’ll take your word for it,’ Bobbie said as they sped towards York. ‘Speed isn’t usually an issue, because we’d just use the Portkey on the car, but…’ She shrugged. ‘I’m pregnant, and the Healers advise pregnant women against the use of both Apparition and Portkeys. Are you okay? You look a little nervous. Does flying worry you?’

‘Flying doesn’t bother me at all,’ Ellie said. ‘I played Chaser for Ravenclaw, but…’ she shrugged and looked nervously down at the ground before finally admitting her worry. ‘This isn’t a broom! Can I ask—this meeting we’re going too—what’s it for?’

‘On big cases like this, Harry likes to know everything,’ Bobbie said. ‘He wants to see the crime scene, and he’ll be expecting updates from everyone.’

‘Oh,’ said Ellie worriedly.

‘Don’t be frightened of him,’ Bobbie advised. ‘Just tell him what you think, but be prepared to explain your reasoning. And whatever you do, don’t bullshit, or make excuses.’
‘Um… Right,’ Ellie said. ‘Do you know where we’re going? Have you ever been to the York Sheriff’s Office?’

‘Susan, Lavender, and I were based there for a few weeks when the vampire arrived in Whitby,’ said Bobbie.

‘Oh,’ Ellie said again. ‘Have you… did you use the RANDOM system in that case?’

‘We tried, but it wasn’t much use,’ Bobbie admitted. ‘There were too many variables. We didn’t know enough about vampires. But it’s proving less reliable than ever in this case.’

‘Do you… do you trust Mr Corner?’ Ellie asked hesitantly.

‘He fought in the Battle, Ellie. He’s Dumbledore’s Army, and you know what that means. Plus he’s married to an Auror,’ said Bobbie. ‘Harry trusts him. But why do you ask? If you’ve got suspicions, don’t keep them to yourself.’

‘It’s just, well…’ Ellie leaned forward to make certain she had Bobbie’s full attention. ‘Everybody says his predictions have been inaccurate. But that’s not right! Inaccurate is the wrong word! It would have been bad enough if the system had simply been inaccurate. It hasn’t, it’s been misleading. Mr… Harry has put a lot of people on this case, but half of them have been checking the alibis of various werewolves, and now they’re in London researching Mr Robards, simply because the RANDOM system. The only people to have made a breakthrough are you and the rest of the Muggle Interface Team. And you’ve been working with the Muggle police, following the evidence, not the predictions.’

Bobbie sat in silence and pondered the teenager’s words. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘We’ll tell Harry. No, you’ll tell Harry.

‘But Mrs Corner will be there!’ Ellie protested.

Bobbie and Ellie walked into the meeting room to discover that they were the last to arrive. Three trios of Aurors, three specialists, and Harry were all waiting for them.

‘Morning, Harry; morning all,’ said Bobbie cheerfully. She’d checked her watch before entering; it was two minutes to ten so they weren’t late.

‘Morning everyone, hello, Mr Webb,’ Ellie mumbled as she walked over to take her place alongside Aloysius Webb. Webb acknowledged her with a doleful nod. Bobbie moved to join Polly Protheroe, Trudi Corner, and Dennis Creevey, the current members of the Muggle Interface Team.

At the front of the room, Harry checked his battered old pocket watch. ‘It’s not quite ten, but everyone’s here,’ he announced. ‘Let’s get started.’ His assessing eyes passed over everyone in the room, hesitating for a moment on the Muggle Interface Team.

‘We now have four dead Muggles,’ Harry announced grimly. ‘Thanks to Fenella, Dacia, and Anne in Specialist Services,’ he gave the three women a grateful nod, ‘and to Bobbie and the Muggle Interface Team’—he turned to acknowledge them—‘we now know a lot more about our killer. Now not even the craziest of the Daily Prophet’s editorials can continue to claim that the killings were carried out by a werewolf.’ He looked across at the three specialists. ‘Fenella, can you show us the crime scenes, please. Everyone, I want you all to take a careful look at all three scenes, particularly the latest site.’

Pushing her thick black-rimmed glasses up her long nose, Fenella Boot silently lifted the tripod on
which her Projector—a complex sphere covered in lenses and mirrors—was mounted and walked into the centre of the room. After carefully setting up the tripod, she tapped the Projector with her wand. The tripod inverted and flew up to the ceiling where it stood, arrogantly ignoring the requirements of gravitational law. Fenella pointed her wand at the Projector. The meeting room, and the tripod, flickered and vanished. Bobbie, and everyone else, found themselves standing in the flickering and disjointed image of the first crime scene.

‘The image may be a little unstable,’ whispered Fenella apologetically. ‘The fixed projector in the office is better than this portable one.’

‘It’ll be fine, Fenella,’ Harry told her. Then the discussion began.

When the image was finally changed to show the third crime scene, Al Webb’s team, Terry’s team, and Harry himself began a careful examination of it.

Bobbie and the Muggle Interface Team all stepped back into the wall of the image. They had been inside the actual place, carried out the original examination, and seen the bodies in situ, so they allowed the others to take in the scene. Caitlin Satterley and Jack Tuffnell, the latest victims, lay on the floor. Ellie looked down at the bodies and shuddered. Despite the fact that they’d been turned to stone, the wounds were very visible. After allowing the others to take a look around the scene, Harry beckoned Bobbie and the Muggle Interface Team forwards.

‘Polly, Bobbie,’ Harry ordered.

As the two women stepped into the centre of the image, Bobbie looked across at Polly. The tall goth’s mouth creased into a knowing smile, and Bobbie was transported back to the first time they’d met; the day when Polly, Susan, and Lavender had walked into Buckingham Palace Road Police Station had changed her life forever. A lot had happened since. Lavender was married, a mother, and apparently happy. Susan had married and separated. Polly, after a long sojourn in New Zealand, had returned unchanged, apart from the addition of several more tattoos, an eyebrow piercing, and a nose stud.

‘Another year, another case,’ Polly told Bobbie before turning to face the other Aurors. ‘Welcome to the werewolf’s lair,’ she told them. Somehow sensing her boss’s glare, Polly glanced across at Harry. ‘I know he’s not a werewolf, but that’s what the press are calling him.’

‘We aren’t,’ said Harry firmly, shaking his head.

For a moment, Bobbie thought that Polly would argue, but the Auror Office’s Senior Healer, Dacia Skoll, noisily cleared her throat, Polly glanced over at the woman, surrendered and began again.

‘Yeah, you’re right; sorry Dace. Welcome to the killer’s lair. We found it using basic Magical Law procedures, the stuff that any Sheriff’s Bailiff should know, and what Bobbie calls “good, honest coppering.” You tell ’em, Bobbie.’

‘We were ahead of the local Police in finding the lair, but only because—unlike them—we knew that the first two victims had been killed before the full moon and then petrified,’ Bobbie began. ‘Of course we alerted the Muggles the moment Ellie found that two people were missing; we need to keep the police on our side.’ Bobbie turned to the trainee. ‘You did a good job wading through their missing person’s reports, Ellie, thanks.’ Ellie gave a modest smile. ‘Unfortunately, we were too late to save them,’ Bobbie concluded sadly.

‘You could never have saved them, Bobbie,’ the Healer, Dacia, interjected. ‘They were killed the moment they went missing. By the time their parents had reported their disappearance to the police they’d already been dead for hours and, as you can see, they’d been petrified, too.’ The Healer
looked around at all of the assembled Aurors. ‘You all thought you had time to save them. You didn’t, so don’t blame yourselves for failing.’

‘The only good thing to come out of this is that Polly’s team managed to find this place,’ Bobbie continued, indicating the magical image in which they stood.

It was a shell of a building. Once, long ago, it must have been a vehicle repair garage. There was a plank covered pit in the centre of the concrete floor that had caused much excitement when Polly, Dennis, and Trudi had entered the place. The pit had, however, contained only cobwebs and ancient oil stains. A couple of wooden benches lined the walls. They, too, were stained with oil and they bore the gouge marks and scratched graffiti of a well-used workplace.

‘This is the place where all four victims were killed,’ Polly said. ‘The fact that we’ve found it must be causing the killer some problems. But it will cause us problems too, because—if he intends to continue killing—he’s going to have to change the way, and where, he operates.’

‘How did you find this place?’ asked Ellie nervously. The young trainee, barely out of school, had begun to raise her hand before asking the question and had only just managed to stop herself. Some of the older Aurors were smiling indulgently at the youngster.

‘That’s easy, Ellie,’ Polly said. ‘We knew the general area to search because of the work you and Bobbie did with the local rozzers.’

‘Even without the magical complications, the police were struggling to make sense of the case,’ Bobbie told the trainee. ‘Apart from their injuries, the first two victims had nothing in common. Jamie McLuckie was a middle-aged homeless man; Eleanor Fearn was young and female with her own flat and a steady job. The police were aware of McLuckie, and they’d tried to get him into a shelter, but he always walked out. He was known to sleep rough in the local parks in the Burngreave area. Eleanor Fearn didn’t work anywhere near Burngreave, or where her body was found. But early last week the police finally managed to extract some information from her phone.’

‘The police couldn’t understand why her mobile phone wouldn’t work,’ Dennis Creevey interjected. ‘We think that it was damaged when she, and it, was petrified and then turned back again.’

‘Their tech guys finally got into her text messages on Monday, and they found a boyfriend. He was their suspect for a while, but we checked; he’s a Muggle, a welder.’ Bobbie looked at the faces of the few Purebloods in the room. ‘He makes a living by melting bits of metal together,’ she said by way of explanation. It didn’t help, the confusion simply grew.

‘It really isn’t important,’ Dennis Creevey interjected. ‘But if anyone really wants to know, ask me later. I did a lot of wand-welding while I was building the Caterham... my car.’

‘He’s innocent, so like Den says, it’s not important,’ Bobbie agreed. ‘But I realised that the route from her workplace to his flat took her through Burngreave, and so did the police. I volunteered to have my people look at the location for them. When—a couple of days later—Ellie found the missing couple, we realised that they would have been walking through Burngreave when they vanished. The location was definitely the link between the victims, and we quickly managed to narrow it down to a fairly small area, a triangle with sides about a mile long. So I told Polly, and...’

‘And, to finally answer your question, Ellie,’ Polly took up the tale. ‘How did we find them? It wasn’t difficult. The Killing Curse leaves traces. You’ve only been with us for a few weeks. The forensics part of your course is at least six months away. When you work with Anne, and the rest of the Analysis Unit, you’ll find out all about it. The simple version is that, provided you get close
enough, a well-tuned Dark Detector will pick up traces of Dark Magic. The Darker the spell, the
more powerful the trace, and the longer it takes for the traces to fade. Four killing curses over a
nine week period leaves a pretty obvious signature, believe me! Big Den, Trudi, and me split the
area into a grid and got out our Dark Detectors. It didn’t take long for Den to get a hit on this
building. He called us up, and we all went in.’

‘Based on the readings, it looks like all of the victims were somehow lured inside the building and
killed the moment they were out of sight,’ Dennis added.

‘There was nothing magical in the place, just the trace of the Killing Curse,’ Polly continued.
‘Anne’s tests show that all four spells were cast by the same wand. We’re dealing with a cold-
blooded Muggle-killer who’s now taken four lives. There’s no sign of any other Dark Magic
spells.’

Anne White, the dark-haired, bespectacled, and sturdily built Head of the Analysis Unit stepped
forwards. ‘That’s not quite true, Polly,’ she said quietly. ‘I got to look at the two latest victims a lot
sooner than we got access to the others. Dacia and examined them this morning. I found indications
of the Imperius Curse on both bodies.’

‘But nothing else?’ Polly asked the question that had no doubt been at the back of every Auror’s
mind. ‘No one is trying to turn themselves into another Dork Lord, are they?’

‘Definitely not,’ Anne said. ‘We can be sure, because the act of killing is an integral part of that
spell, and we’d certainly be able to find traces of it.’

‘What spell are you talking about?’ asked Ellie.

‘Classified, sorry,’ said Polly. ‘That’s information for fully qualified Aurors only, Harry’s rules.’

Harry nodded. ‘I’ll tell you myself when you pass your final exams, Ellie,’ he told her.

‘Why did you go in?’ asked Terry Boot. ‘Why not lie in wait for him?’

‘Four recent Killing Curses, Terry! Two of them only a few days old!’ said Trudi Corner angrily.
‘We had to see what was inside. We knew there was no one alive in the place, but there might have
been something, a clue. We were trying to save two lives. We failed but... Bloody hell, we couldn’t
just sacrifice them, could we?’

Terry looked startled by the ferocity of her outburst, but said nothing.

‘I gave the order to check the place,’ Polly told Terry firmly. ‘But we’re not stupid, we all checked
for other spells. We found, and disabled, four different types of alarm spell, but we all missed the
fifth.’

‘Whoever we’re dealing with is very accomplished,’ Trudi said. ‘I’ve never seen anything like that
alarm spell before. Anne and I are still working on a way to detect it.’

‘It’s regrettable, Terry,’ said Harry. ‘But our first priority was to find these two.’ He indicated the
figures on the floor. ‘And we did.’ He turned to address everyone. ‘Now you all know where we
are. Anyone got any suggestions or theories?’ Harry asked.

‘I know that you don’t think he’s the killer, Harry, but,’ Trudi Corner lifted her hand and raised a
finger for every point she made. ‘Gaheris Robards believes that his family were killed by
werewolves; the RANDOM System has identified him as a prime suspect; he had access to the
werewolf jaw used to fake the wounds, and he’s missing. That’s four reasons why finding him
should be our top priority. We’re not looking hard enough.’ She glared at Terry.

‘Gaheris is one priority, Trudi,’ Harry told her. ‘Terry’s team are doing their best, but it isn’t easy
to find people who want to stay lost.’ He looked down, a wry smile on his lips. ‘And there were
times when I was thankful for that fact,’ he added quietly.

‘Despite the publicity in the Muggle and Magical press, there haven’t been any sightings,’ Terry
said mildly. ‘I know what the System says, Trudi, and I know that you’re worried about Michael;
he’s working himself into the ground. I’m his friend, remember? But we can’t put everyone onto
looking for Robards.’

‘And we won’t,’ said Harry firmly. ‘Gaheris Robards has a motive, I suppose, but it’s tenuous at
best. Why would he wait more than forty years to take his revenge on Greyback? Why would he
kill innocent Muggles? And why would he ask for Greyback’s release?

‘In order to kill him, of course,’ said Trudi.

‘Gaheris’ brother was Head Auror, Trudi,’ Harry said. ‘If he’d wanted revenge he could have done
it years ago! If someone can find some evidence to convince me that, three months ago, something
happened to Gaheris which turned him from a museum curator to a vengeance filled Muggle-killer,
then I’ll put all our resources into finding him.’

‘We’ve found nothing like that, Harry,’ Terry said quietly. ‘Evidence points to him being abducted.
Clothes still in his house; full larder; bank account untouched. No Dark Magic at his house, or at
the museum. I wonder if he could have been Imperiused and walked out to his death. We may be
looking for a dead man while the killer laughs at us.’

‘If he’s anywhere near as stubborn as his brother, Gaheris would be difficult to Imperius,’ said
Harry. He turned back to Trudi Corner. ‘I’m going to allocate another squad to the search for
Robards, Trudi, but not for a few days. Susan and her team are back from Transylvania. They’re
due a few days off, but I’ll put them on the search for Robards as soon as they’re back in the
office.’

‘I didn’t know they’d closed the case,’ said Trudi.

Harry shrugged. ‘There’s no reason why you should. The Transylvanian authorities are keeping it
quiet. They don’t want to encourage any more budding Van Helsings who feel it’s their duty to
extinguish innocent vampires. Susan contacted me yesterday the moment they arrived in London. I
asked them to call at Drakeshaugh for her mission debriefing. We briefly discussed this case while
she was there.’

‘Then why aren’t they here?’ Trudi asked.

‘Dominic hasn’t seen his family for a month,’ said Harry evenly. ‘And none of them have had a
day off since they went to Transylvania. They deserve a few days. At least we all get to go home to
our families every night.’ He turned to Bobbie. ‘Well, almost all of us, sorry Bobbie.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll be putting in an overtime claim, and asking for the time off in lieu to be added to
my maternity leave,’ Bobbie told him.

Harry nodded, but Trudi wouldn’t be stopped.

‘It’s fair enough about Dominic. He’s got young kids,’ said Trudi, pursuing her point. ‘But
Camelia doesn’t even sleep, and everyone knows that Susan doesn’t have a life outside the Auror
Office.’
‘Camelia is looking into a potential security breach at Drakeshaugh for me,’ said Harry. He was watching Trudi carefully as he spoke. She, like everyone else, looked puzzled.

‘Several Muggles appear to be able to walk straight through the protection spells around the place,’ Harry explained. ‘We think that it’s something to do with the party invitations we sent out. I’d be grateful if everyone who was invited would hand the invitations back. I hope you don’t mind.’

‘Les is keeping a scrapbook,’ said Dennis cheerfully. ‘She calls it “my life with a wizard”. I’m pretty sure that’s where ours is.’

Terry shrugged and looked at his wife, who looked horrified. ‘I, um, I, er, I Vanished ours once I’d written it on the calendar,’ Fenella admitted. ‘It had your address on, so I thought that would be best.’

‘That’s okay,’ Harry told her. ‘In fact, it was probably the most sensible thing to do, Fenella.’

Trudi shrugged. ‘I haven’t thrown ours out,’ she said. ‘But Michael might have.’

Terry gave a short laugh. ‘You know that’s not true, Trudi,’ he said. ‘Stop covering for him. Michael never throws anything out. It’ll be lost in a filing system only he understands, I guarantee it.’

‘If you still have it, Trudi, I’d like it back,’ Harry said. ‘But that’s a minor matter; it’s got nothing to do with this case. So, if no one has anything else to add, we’ll close the meeting.’

There were murmurs of agreement and, as the meeting broke up, Stan Cresswell made a dash for the door. ‘See you later, folks,’ he said.

‘Ellie wants a word with you, Harry,’ said Bobbie. ‘In private, if that’s okay.’

Harry nodded and glanced at Ellie, who was blushing. Harry’s gaze immediately moved to Stan, who was halfway out of the door.

‘Nothing to do with me, Harry,’ Cresswell protested.

‘It’s about the case,’ Ellie whispered. ‘But it’s, um…’

‘If no one else wants to say anything, you can all leave,’ said Harry. ‘Fenella, can you leave the final image up for a while, please. Give me half an hour.’

‘We won’t be that long,’ said Bobbie.

‘Give me half an hour, Fenella,’ Harry repeated. Once everyone had left, he fixed Ellie with his bright green eyes and ordered, ‘Tell me.’

Ellie gulped.

‘Tell him what you said to me on the way here,’ Bobbie ordered.

Rather reluctantly, Ellie did as she’d been asked.

‘Thanks for not saying anything during the meeting, Ellie,’ Harry told her when she’d finished voicing her concerns. He stared at her, and at Bobbie. ‘I’m going to tell you both something, and I don’t want you to tell anyone else, understand?’

‘Yes,’ Ellie and Bobbie confirmed.
Bobbie wasn’t sure what to expect, but Harry’s next words surprised her. ‘Come out, Susan,’ he said. A magically concealed door opened, and Susan Bones stepped out.

‘Susan! Have you been in there all the time?’ Bobbie asked, embracing her friend.

Susan nodded.

‘I wanted her to know what was going on,’ said Harry.

‘Why the secrecy?’ Bobbie asked.

Harry pulled a folded invitation from his pocket, carefully opened it, and showed them the names of the invitees. ‘As I said, yesterday we had an intruder at Drakeshaugh,’ Harry reminded them. ‘She tracked us down with this. I gave Trudi a chance to say something, but she didn’t.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘I’d like to believe that she was simply trying to protect Michael, because we all try to protect Michael.’ He turned to Ellie. ‘Michael was, well…’

‘Before the Battle, the Carrows tortured him; they subjected him to the Cruciatus Curse for a prolonged period,’ said Susan brusquely. ‘He can be fragile.’

‘Even so, I really can’t believe that Michael, or Trudi, or both of them are involved,’ said Harry.

‘Harry’s intruder, Frances, had been subjected to a crude and hastily cast memory charm,’ said Susan in her usual clipped and efficient manner. ‘We’ve done a few tests on her, and we think that the caster was interrupted. Unfortunately, she’s lost several years of memory. We’re working to restore it, but it may take weeks. Apart from us, only Dominic, Camelia, Harry’s family, and a family of Muggles know we have her.’

‘I want it to stay that way,’ said Harry. ‘Frances’ arrival at Drakeshaugh has given us some new leads. I was telling the truth about Dominic, he’s gone home. But Camelia spent the night keeping an eye on Drakeshaugh, and my neighbours, for me. Fortunately, it looks like our intruder was acting alone. If anyone else had been watching us, Camelia would have found them. Tomorrow I’m going to send Camelia into the Ministry to look at Michael and his colleagues. She…’ Harry hesitated. ‘She isn’t as close to Michael as the rest of us. I thought about adding her to the Muggle Interface Team, because there’s no one in the office who hasn’t known Trudi for years.’

He turned to face Ellie, ‘But I’m wrong, there is, isn’t there? I’m going to move you out from Al Webb’s team, Ellie, and put you into the Muggle Interface Team. Bobbie says you’re a good investigator, so you deserve the chance for some real field work. If you see anything suspicious, particularly regarding Trudi, report it to me, Bobbie, or Susan. Do not tell anyone else.’

‘Yes, Harry,’ said Ellie eagerly.

‘Good,’ Harry told her. ‘But be careful.’ He turned to address Susan. ‘When you get into the office tomorrow, Susan, you’ll find that someone from Hermione’s office has asked us to look into potential security breach at the Ministry. It seems that a member of the Ministry security staff, Frances Sidebotham, has gone missing. Ostensibly, you’ll be trying to find her.’

Susan gave a wry smile, ‘Shall I bring her in? We can see if this is the place she was running from.’

‘Yes,’ Harry said, giving Bobbie and Ellie a “don’t say anything” look.

Susan opened the concealed door into the room where she’d been hiding. It led into a small store room in which a confused-looking round-faced young woman sat. Susan solicitously escorted her
‘Hello, Mr Potter, hello Aurors,’ the woman said.

‘Hello, Frances,’ Harry said. ‘Do you recognise this place?’

‘This isn’t the room I walked through when we went into that cupboard,’ the woman said nervously. She looked around the crime scene Image, saw the petrified bodies, and squealed. ‘What’s happened here? Where is this place? How did I get here?’

‘Do you recognise this room?’ Harry asked. ‘Is it the place you ran from?’

She stared, her face creased in thought. ‘No,’ she said.

‘But you told us you were in Burngreave,’ Harry said.

‘I was,’ she confirmed. ‘Is this Burngreave? Where is it? Is it one of the old factory units near Bower Street?’

‘I don’t know,’ Harry told her.

‘It is,’ Bobbie told him. ‘I was planning to check out the ownership of this property,’ she said, indicating the Image in which they still stood. ‘Someone must have been paying rent on it, and the police will be trying to find a name.’

‘Good,’ said Harry. ‘On your way out, ask Fenella to take Images of all of the surrounding streets. Tell her it’s your idea, but I agree.’ Harry took another look around the image. ‘The more I look at this place, the more convinced I am that our killer is someone who is at home in both the Muggle and magical worlds.’

‘Which rules out Gaheris Robards,’ Ellie observed.

‘Oh, he’s already ruled out,’ said Harry. ‘He’s been positively identified as the man who told Frances to run.’

‘I hope he’s okay,’ the young woman said anxiously.
Waning Gibbous

As I opened the passenger door to release my daughter from her seatbelt, I was illuminated by the lights of Mike’s car. He pulled up the drive and swung his car around to park alongside mine. Neither the crunch of tyres on gravel nor the bright glare of halogen headlamps streaming across her face was enough to make Annie stir. She was sound asleep and ragdoll limp, and I was still struggling to lift her from her seat when Mike opened his door.

‘Sparko?’ he asked.

‘Totally zonked,’ I agreed.

‘I’ll get her, if you like,’ Mike offered. ‘Henry’s still awake; he’ll be easier for you.’

‘Thanks.’

After giving my husband a peck on the cheek, I walked around his car, opened the passenger door, and released a very drowsy Henry from his car seat.

Mike, meanwhile, had tenderly lifted Annie from my car. He was carrying her in the crook of one arm. His other hand was a steadying influence on the back of her head, which was resting on his shoulder. Her flailing arm grabbed him around the neck.

‘Zannysleep?’ Henry mumbled as he pushed himself out from his seat and dropped down into the floor well.

‘Yes, Annie’s asleep,’ I confirmed. ‘And it you won’t be long before you join her in the land of nod, Henry.’

‘Mabitired,’ he admitted.

‘You’re a lot tired,’ I said knowledgeably. My son only admitted to tiredness when he was about to collapse. ‘It’s been another busy day, hasn’t it, Henry?’

‘Mmm,’ he agreed.

I held out my hand and, somewhat to my surprise, he took it before jumping down from the car. Smiling down at him, I led him slowly towards the kitchen door. He tried to smile back, but his attempt was interrupted by a yawn as big and round as the full moon hovering above the hills.

‘I’ll help you to get ready for bed,’ I said as we stepped through the door and into the welcoming light of the kitchen.

Once I’d closed the door, and we were safely inside Lintzgarth, I felt much calmer. That surprised me, as I hadn’t realised I’d been anxious. As I shook off my worries, I looked back on another long and rather peculiar day. Days with the Potters were always exiting and a little bizarre; I wondered if I’d ever get used to them. Perhaps when Harry’s case was finally solved things might become a little more normal.

Slipping out of my shoes, I placed them next to Mike’s muddy boots before kneeling down to help Henry out of his trainers. Even Henry’s socks were muddy from his exploration of the woods.
around Drakeshaugh, and I hoped he hadn’t spread too much dirt around Ginny’s home. I made him take his socks off before chivvying him upstairs.

Annie’s bedroom door was open, and when I looked in, Mike was carefully negotiating Annie’s floppy head through the neck of her pyjama top.

‘Absolutely exhausted, bless her,’ Mike whispered.

He grinned happily as he gently teased her hair out through the neck hole. Carefully lifting her up the bed, he pulled the sheets over her and kissed her forehead.

‘Night-night, little Annie,’ he whispered.

While Mike retrieved her clothes from the bottom of her bed, I led Henry into her room. I leaned over the bed and gave her a goodnight kiss. To my surprise, Henry pulled himself onto her bed and kissed her cheek. I glanced at Mike, who gave me a wide-eyed, hands-in-the-air, pantomime of astonishment. For our son, such a show of tenderness towards his sister was almost unheard of.

‘Night-night,’ he whispered.

‘I’ll put these in the laundry basket,’ Mike murmured, lifting Annie’s clothes by way of explanation as we all left Annie’s room. ‘Then I’ll go down and put the kettle on. I assume that you’ll be wanting a cuppa?’

‘Thanks,’ I nodded.

He closed Annie’s bedroom door, brushed my cheek with his fingertips, turned, and tiptoed downstairs.

A few minutes later, Henry was standing naked in front of me, and still trying to tell me all about the woods they’d explored with Mike.

‘An’ I found a holler tree,’ he told me.

‘Hollow,’ I corrected. ‘Arms up.’ Henry dutifully raised his arms, and I pulled his pyjama top over his head. ‘Peekaboo,’ I added when his head reappeared through the hole.

‘An’ we played onna swing, even Annie an’ Lily!’ Henry continued. Dismissing my peekaboo as childish and apparently unable to stop talking, he refused to be distracted from his story. ‘An’ we found a ‘normous branch what had fallen offa tree. An’ Daddy said he’d ask Harry if we could have it for my birfday bonfire.’ He paused, deep in thought. ‘I thinks he forgetted,’ he concluded sadly.

‘Harry had some visitors, remember,’ I said. ‘Those people from his work. Daddy probably thought Harry was too busy. I’ll ask Ginny on Monday.’ As I spoke, I wondered how big this “branch” was, and how we could transport it from Drakeshaugh to Lintzgarth.

‘Yes,’ said Henry, his mouth narrowed as he remembered something else. ‘Cept James said he fort a birfday bonfire would be great, an’ he wants a birfday bonfire an’ all. An’ his birfday is first! But Daddy said p’raps we could share it, or find more wood, ’cos there’s lots lying about, ’cos it’s a forest.’

‘James’ birthday is first. When is it?’ I asked. That was news! I knew that Henry and James must be close in age, both with birthdays between September and December, but I hadn’t realised how close they were. Ginny hadn’t mentioned anything about birthdays to me.
Henry shrugged. ‘Soon,’ he told me. ‘But not termorra, orra nexday,’ he added helpfully.

‘I’ll find out,’ I said. ‘We’ll have to make him a card, won’t we?’

‘Yeah.’ Henry nodded so hard that he almost overbalanced.

‘Feet!’ I ordered once he’d steadied himself. I held up his pyjama trousers and he lifted one leg and pushed it inside. As he did so, he put his arms on my shoulders to steady himself. Then, to my surprise, he slid his arms around my neck and hugged me.

‘I love you, Mummy,’ he said as I helped him by pulling the trouser cuff over his foot.

‘And I love you, Henry,’ I said happily. ‘Other leg, please.’ Still holding me around the neck, he obeyed.

‘I love you more than you love me,’ he told me as I pulled up his trousers.

He released me, stepped back, and I stared into his face and smiled. It was typical of him. He had turned his comment into a contest. ‘Really? How much do you love me?’ I asked, straightening his pyjamas and ruffling his hair.

‘This much,’ he said, releasing me and holding his arms as far apart as possible.

‘Ah, but I love you this much!’ I said teasingly. I held my hands as far apart as possible. He looked at my outstretched arms, then at his own, and frowned. I watched him think, saw an idea spark behind his eyes, and waited.

‘I love you double this much,’ he said, trying to stretch his arms even farther apart. ‘An’ that’s more than you love me.’

I decided not to respond in kind. If I had, we’d have been there all night. ‘Thank you, Henry,’ I told him, giving him a hug.

After kissing his cheek I lifted him up into my arms and carried him along to the bathroom.

‘Teeth!’ I said, picking up his toothbrush. I squeezed a little toothpaste onto it and turned on the tap. ‘I’ll do them, okay?’

Henry nodded and then yawned; I took the opportunity his wide-open mouth presented.

‘Then wee-wee, wash, and bed,’ I told him. His lack of protest showed me how tired he was.

After I’d tucked Henry into bed and said goodnight to him, I gave him a kiss and, at his request, promised I’d send Daddy up to say “night-night”. I was fairly sure that Mike would be too late, as Henry’s eyes had closed before I’d left the room.

When I entered the living room, Mike was sitting on the sofa, the teapot in his hand. He’d just finished pouring me a cuppa.

‘I heard you on the stairs,’ he said when I thanked him. When I passed on Henry’s request, he leapt to his feet and went up to see him.

Alone in the living room, I noticed that Mike hadn’t closed the living room curtains. The night sky was cloudless, and the bright full moon was bleaching out some of the weaker stars. As I looked out of the window, I again saw the bats. This time they were fluttering through the trees in the fields opposite. For some reason their continued presence unsettled me. I closed the curtains, but
that didn’t ease my concern. They were out of sight, but still not out of mind. I was pacing back and forth in front of the curtains when Mike came back downstairs.

‘I wonder,’ I began when he entered the room.

‘And wander in front of the window, like a wandering window wonderer,’ said Mike flippantly. He saw my expression. ‘Sorry, what’s up, Jacqui?’ he asked concernedly.

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘It’s just a feeling, a prickle on the back of my neck. I feel like we’re being watched. Did you see the bats as we left Drakeshaugh? I think they followed us here, and that they’re watching the house.’

‘Come on, Jacqui,’ he said. ‘You’ve got Harry’s werewolf murder mystery to keep you occupied; you don’t need a vampire, too. Werewolves and vampires!’ He gave me a look of despair, shook his head, and then grinned. ‘That reminds me, Being Human is coming back for a second series early next year.’

‘How do you know?’ I asked.

‘Our new admin lass—Sophie—has a cast photo as her screensaver. I made some stupid comment to her.’


He ignored me and pressed on. ‘I said something about it being the only fantasy series I’d ever persuaded you to watch, and that’s when she told me. It’s obvious that she’s a huge fan of the programme,’ he was still smiling. ‘Actually, I think she’s a big fan of Mitchell. You’ve got a rival!’ He winked at me as he flopped down in the sofa and picked up his mug of tea.

I tried to put on an expression that would indicate to my husband that the dishy vampire character wasn’t the only reason I watched.

‘I’m pretty sure that if vampires were real, we’d know about it. And anyway, we’re in no danger here. They can’t get in unless we invite them, remember?’ Mike smiled as he spoke.

‘That young girl, Camelia,’ I said worriedly. ‘She stopped outside Drakeshaugh and waited to be invited into the house!’

‘Come on, Jacqui,’ said Mike. ‘You can’t be serious. What’re you saying? Harry has a teenage vampire on his payroll? She was outside in daylight.’

‘She might not be a teenager, she could be hundreds of years old,’ I protested. ‘And Mitchell goes out in the daylight!’

‘True, but if you’d watched Near Dark, or John Carpenter’s Vampires, or even Buffy with me, then you’d know that vampires catch fire if they’re outside in daylight,’ Mike said. He stopped and stared. ‘I’ve got it! American vampires are different to British ones, and this is the daftest conversation we’ve had in years!’ He was still chuckling, and I was smiling too. ‘You saw some bats, Jacqui. There are a lot of bats around here, you know that. There are roosts in most of the old barns.’

‘I suppose,’ I said, finally acknowledging that he was right. The conversation we were having was becoming more and more ridiculous. ‘But you started it! I didn’t say anything to you about vampires, only about bats,’ I added. My attempt to deflect some of the blame for my flight of fancy onto Mike didn’t work.
'Bats following us home!' he reminded me. 'Which is not normal bat behaviour, is it? But don’t worry, I’ll protect you, my darling. I’ll be your Batman!'

I laughed, sat next to him, and picked up my mug. ‘Another good day,’ I said.

‘Another good day, this time with little red riding hood and a vampire to go with Harry’s werewolf,’ Mike said. ‘What an exciting life we lead, all we need now is a ghost.’

‘James’ birthday is coming up!’ I said abruptly, remembering my conversation with Henry. ‘I don’t suppose you know when.’

‘Actually, my darling, I do,’ he said smugly. I was impressed, until he added the word, ‘Probably.’

‘So you don’t,’ I accused.

‘S’on furzeday,’ Mike told me. He failed in his attempt to capture James’ accent, but it was close enough that I knew he was giving me a direct quote. ‘I’m assuming that it’s Thursday coming. I put the “probably” there because my informant was a boy aged almost-five. A boy who is, so far as I can tell, no more reliable than the only other almost-five-year-old boy I know. In fact, when we were driving back from the pool, James told me that his daddy’s car could fly. On that basis he may be even less reliable than Henry.’

‘I’d better check with Ginny,’ I said.

‘Yup,’ he agreed, putting his arm around my shoulder.

Sunday started fraught and fractious. Despite a good sleep, Annie was grumpy when she woke. She had good reason; her nose was running like a tap. The affection Henry had displayed towards her the previous evening had fled, and he lacked any sympathy for his snotty sister. He teased her unmercifully, particularly when she sneezed. Eventually, he wound her up to the point that—while they were playing with the bricks—she threw one at him. Before I could scold her, he’d thumped her.

I, of course, shouted, and then both kids were crying. Mike dashed in from the garden to help me deal with them. He removed Henry and gave him a severe talking to, while I dealt with Annie. After I’d dosed Annie with Calpol, she began to pick up a little. At eleven we strapped the kids into Mike’s car and set off for Hawksburn. Both kids had calmed down, their argument forgotten. They even sang on the journey, although Annie’s cold gave her a lot of pronunciation problems.

As we drove through Otterburn, I phoned my parents to let them know that we were close and to warn them about Annie’s cold. Dad was holding the gate open when we arrived, and Mum was at the front door. They completely ignored my warnings about Annie’s cold, and she was first fussed over by Mum and then passed on to Dad, who cradled her on his hip. She sneezed, and he wiped her nose with a rather grubby looking hankie, which—knowing my father—had almost certainly been used to clean up worse things. My mother tried to fuss over Henry, but he ignored her. This was because the first thing Dad had done when we arrived was give my son seven spent cartridges.

‘They’re from army guns, Henry,’ Dad had said, ignoring my protests. ‘I found them up on the tops. He indicated the hills behind the house, where his sheep were grazing. The flock, a scattering of distant white spots, moved slowly over green.

‘From army guns!’ Henry told Mike knowledgeably, as if Mike hadn’t heard my father’s words.
‘I didn’t know that. What are they made of?’ Mike asked. ‘Is that gold?’ He placed his left hand next to the bullet casing, and compared the colour with that of his wedding ring.

‘Gold,’ said Henry. ‘Yes, gold! Gold, Mummy!’

‘It’s brass, Henry,’ I told him. ‘It’s not gold. There’s a big difference.’

Despite my best efforts, Henry would not be parted from his “bullets”. I looked pleadingly at Mike, but he refused to back me up.

‘They’re spent, Jacqui,’ he said quietly, siding with my dad. ‘They’re not bullets, and they aren’t dangerous; they’re simply bits of old metal, and they’re keeping him happy.’

It was true, they were. I gave up and followed my parents into the house. We would be eating in the large guest dining room, because Mum’s guests were going to be out in the hills all day. Although Hawksburn is a working farm, the beasts don’t generate much money, so Mum and Dad—or at least Mum—supplement their income by running a five-bedroom bed & breakfast place. They do okay from it, particularly in the summer.

When we walked through the guest dining room and into the kitchen, I noticed that the largest table was already set. The sauce boat full of mint sauce was enough of a clue. Before we’d entered the kitchen and smelt the unmistakeable aroma, I already knew we’d be having roast lamb for lunch. Fortunately, Mike didn’t let slip that we’d had lamb hotpot the previous evening. Instead, an hour later, when lunch was served, he praised Mum to the rafters for the meal.

‘Creep,’ I told him.

‘Really, Jacqui, there’s no need to be like that,’ Mum scolded me.

‘Yeah,’ Henry agreed with his father. ‘This is great, Granny. Better ’n Mummy’s dinners.’

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ said Mike loyally, staring earnestly into my eyes. He then turned and winked at my mother. ‘At times like this, it’s difficult to know whether I should side with my wife or my mother-in-law. No man should have to make a decision like that, should they, Jack?’ While my dad chuckled, and Mum beamed, Mike turned to Henry. ‘You need to learn some tact, son,’ he said.

‘What’s tact?’ Henry asked.

‘There’s no point in asking your father,’ I said. ‘He has no idea.’

By the time Mike finished laughing, Henry had forgotten that he was waiting for an answer.

After lunch the kids went out into the fields with “Granddad Wake” to help with the beasts. There was little for them to do, as most of the low fields were empty. The majority of the flock was up in the hills, Dad was training a new dog—although to be correct, Jessie was a bitch. She was a Border collie, of course.

I watched for a few minutes as my kids, and Jessie, listened carefully to Dad. He tried to teach them all the difference between “come by” and “away to me”, using some of the oldest and most docile of his ewes. Jessie, as was expected from the smartest and most useful breed of dog on the planet, was a fast learner. She was much quicker than my children.

I went inside and, after we’d helped Mum with the dishes, Mike and I spent an hour or two telling her about our new friends, the Potters. Dad and the kids didn’t come back inside until I called to let
them know that tea was almost ready. Jessie had, of course, been left outside in her shed. She was a working dog, not a pet.

Mum’s guests arrived back in dribs and drabs, the first at a little after four and the last at six. By then we’d finished our tea and were almost ready to leave, and mum was preparing evening meals for the three couples who’d ordered them. As both kids desperately needed a bath before bed, and Mum had guests to cater for, we made our excuses and left.

‘Wonder what James’s done today,’ Henry asked as we drove home past the track leading up to Drakeshaugh.

‘An’ Al an’ Lily,’ Annie added.

She sneezed, and I leaned around to wipe the increasingly sticky snots from her face, I decided that, after her bath, I’d give her another dose of Calpol.

‘Today I’s got some bullets, an’ I’s learned to be a shepherd,’ said Henry proudly. ‘Bet James can’t shepherd, and han’t got no bullets,’ he added.

Monday was an overcast and chilly day. Autumn had dug its gloomy claws into the valley, and as I looked up into the grey sky, I knew that it wasn’t going to release its grip any time soon. The weather was continuing to turn, and the days were shortening with an unstoppable inevitability. The clouds that had arrived overnight were low enough to hide the hilltops behind a dank grey shroud. In the valley bottom, the trees were shading to orange and red, while on the hillside their evergreen neighbours marched unchanging up the hills and into the grey.

Henry was bright as a button over breakfast; Annie, however, was listless, whinging, and even snottier than she’d been the previous evening. Worried, I checked her temperature. It was normal, so I decided that it was simply a cold. She complained, coughed, and sneezed all the way down to the school, and I got Henry into his classroom as quickly as I could. As a consequence, I didn’t see Harry.

It was one of those days where Annie demanded, and got, my full attention. Her nose was bunged up, she sniffed constantly, and if I didn’t follow her around with a tissue to blow her nose, she simply wiped it on her sleeve.

I continued to dose Annie regularly. The medicine bottle was emptying fast, so I texted Mike and asked him to buy some more. It was certainly helping to ease her symptoms.

When I went down to collect Henry, Annie fell asleep in her car seat. Unable to leave her, I simply stood next to the car and looked down towards the school gates. Ginny was already standing at the gates, chatting to a couple of the other mums. When she looked up the road towards me, I pointed at the car, put my palms together at the side of my head, and rested my cheek on them. Ginny smiled, said something to the women she’d been talking to, and pushed Al and Lily up the hill in their pushchair.

‘Annie has a cold,’ I said. ‘She was probably starting with it on Saturday at the pool. Fortunately Henry seems to have escaped. Are your kids all okay?’

‘They’re fine,’ Ginny assured me. ‘They were all a little sniffly yesterday, but I dosed them with Pepper-up…’ she halted.

‘Pe-pru-po-shun,’ said Al helpfully, his green eyes wide and bright.
‘It’s, um, an old folk-remedy of Mum’s,’ Ginny explained. ‘It seems to have done the trick.’

‘Good, good,’ I said. ‘I was going to ask if you, Al, and Lily wanted to come up to Lintzgarth for lunch on Wednesday. It’s up to you, because I really don’t want to spread Annie’s germs around. We could wait and see how she is tomorrow. It seems to be going quickly. She’s passed runny, snotty, and sticky and she seems to be moving on to the crusty stage.’

‘I’m pretty sure that we’ll be okay,’ Ginny said, pulling a face at my description. ‘But I’ll confirm things with Harry and let you know.’

‘Great,’ I said happily. ‘Oh! And there’s something else I wanted to ask you. I hope you don’t think I’m being nosey, Ginny, but…’

‘The case is going okay,’ Ginny said. ‘Harry’s got several new leads, and Frances—the lady in the red coat who turned up unexpectedly—is being treated for her amnesia. I’d be grateful if you didn’t mention anything about her to anyone, Jacqui. Harry... the police are keeping her existence secret. He’s... they’re hoping that, once she’s recovered, she’ll be able to provide them with even more information. As for Robards…’

I waved her into silence. ‘Thanks for the update,’ I said. ‘But that’s not actually what I wanted to ask you.’

Ginny looked surprised, and a little worried.

‘I was only going to ask about James’ birthday,’ I assured her. ‘He’s told Henry that it’s very soon; Henry wants to make a card.’

‘Furzeday,’ Al told me eagerly. ‘James is gonna be five year.’ He held up a hand, fingers spread out, just in case I didn’t know how big a number five was.

‘Furdy,’ Lily squeaked and nodded. ‘James fife.’

‘Thanks, kids.’ Ginny ruffled Al’s hair and squeezed Lily’s shoulder. ‘They’re right, it’s Thursday,’ Ginny confirmed. ‘The eighth of October. And Henry’s is the fifth of November, bonfire night, exactly four weeks later.’

‘Thursday,’ I said. Mike had been right. James’ birthday was only three days away. I wondered when I’d be able to get somewhere to buy James a present, and what we could get him. ‘Right, thanks.’

Despite the fact that we were a long way from the gates, Ginny moved a little closer to me. ‘I hadn’t given it any thought,’ she confessed. Seeing my expression, she laughed. ‘I mean, we’ve given it a lot of thought. We’ve bought and wrapped his presents, and there will be a family party for him at Mum’s on Sunday, but I haven’t given this a thought.’ She pointed down to the school. ‘I don’t know what’s expected of me on Thursday.’

‘Nothing,’ I assured her.

‘Nothing?’ she asked uncertainly. ‘Harry’s told me about his cousin’s birthdays. He got trips away to the zoo and other places, and a party at a burger place, or wherever he wanted to go.’ She hesitated, and then confessed. ‘We were thinking about inviting his classmates for a party at Drakeshaugh on Thursday. But after last Saturday…’

‘That’s your decision, Ginny,’ I advised her. ‘You can do as much, or as little, as you want. Will it help if I tell you what I intend to do for Henry?’
'Yes.' Ginny gave me a grateful smile.

'I’m planning on asking James, and all of his family, to Henry’s birthday bonfire at Lintzgarth.' I said with a smile. 'Henry’s grandparents will be there, too. But that’s all. Henry isn’t really close to any of the other kids at school, and personally I don’t see the point in hosting a party for kids who aren’t really his friends. Mary always organised big parties for her kids, but she decided who would be invited, not the kids. I really don’t want to get involved in that nonsense.'

'Thanks.' Gratitude lit up Ginny’s face. 'I asked James who he wanted to invite, and he said “Henry” and no one else. In my family birthday parties have always been family-only affairs. It was hectic enough with all of my brothers, but these days, when you include all the cousins...’ she rolled her eyes. That’s more than enough! I don’t think my mum would be prepared to help with a repeat kids’ party so soon after our housewarming party. Which reminds me, do you still have the invitation to our party?'

'Of course,' I said. 'It’s in my “scrapbook” pile. It will join Henry’s birthday cards and other memories in the scrapbook, when I get around to it.'

'Oh,' Ginny looked rather embarrassed. 'I was... um... would you be upset if I asked for it back?'

'If you want it, you can have it,' I said. Suspecting the reason for her request, I tried—and failed—to keep the hurt from my voice. ‘But I hope that you trust me to keep it safe, Ginny. I’m not going to give it away to some random stranger, you know! Are you going to ask everyone else who was invited to hand them back? Mary will certainly have something to say about that!’ Ginny’s embarrassment was turning to annoyance; I was being rather tactless, and I suspected the request had come from Harry, not her.

I changed tack. ‘Of course, with Harry’s job, I suppose that you’ve got to be careful about who you give your address to. Do you think that’s what happened? Did Michael and Trudi give their invitation to that girl?’ I hesitated, as my brain finally caught up. ‘You think that the girl—Frances—has seen the killer, and Harry is worried that the killer knows where you live!’

Ginny glanced worriedly down at Al and Lily, who’d both been listening carefully, and gave an almost imperceptible nod. I wondered how to apologise, my reply had started sharply, and then I’d made a real blunder.

‘Sorry,’ I whispered.

‘There are times when I hate Harry’s job,’ said Ginny passionately. ‘Yes, we’re a little worried about security, but you’re right. If we can’t trust our friends, Jacqui, who can we trust? I’ll talk to Harry about it when he gets back from Sheffield. Would you like to come to Drakeshaugh tomorrow morning, after you’ve dropped Henry off at school? We can discuss... stuff, then.’

‘You don’t always have to invite me to Drakeshaugh,’ I protested. ‘If Annie’s okay, you can come to Lintzgarth tomorrow, instead of Wednesday. I know it’s a bit of a faff shifting the car seats about, and it’ll be a bit of a squeeze in the Micra, but I don’t mind, honestly.’

‘It’s a date,’ said Ginny.

‘Great, I’ll pick you up after I’ve dropped James off at school,’ I said. ‘Or is that too early?’

‘It’ll be fine,’ she assured me.

‘Oh, and I need to ask you about wood,’ I said.
‘Inspector Wood?’ she asked sharply.

‘Timber,’ I said in confusion, as I tried to remember who Inspector Wood was. ‘Wood for burning, for a bonfire, for Henry’s birthday.’

Wood was the policewoman from the television. Why would Ginny think I was asking about her? I was about to ask, but it was too late, Henry and James were running up the path towards us, and they wouldn’t shut up.

James was extremely happy, because Henry had given him a bullet. Ginny looked horrified, and carefully removed the brass shell from her son’s hand.

I put my head in my hand and shook my head. ‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t know he’d taken them to school. There’s nothing to worry about, Ginny. It’s a spent cartridge, not a bullet; it’s perfectly harmless. Honest!’

Ginny accepted my apologies, carefully examined the empty cartridge, and gave it back to James. We agreed that, unless Annie was really unwell, I would call at Drakeshaugh in the morning, and drive them up to Lintzgarth. With that, we parted.
‘Henry,’ As I drove home, I glanced in the mirror to make certain that he was paying attention, ‘those bullets Granddad gave you—how many did you take to school?’

‘Dust one, for James,’ he told me. ‘Cos James is my friend, an’ it’s good to share, you said!’

It was true, I was always telling him that it was good to share, but that was when he was refusing to let his sister play with his toys.

‘When did you give it to him?’

‘At first break,’ he said. ‘An’ Miss din’t see me do it,’ he added proudly, showing a level of foresight and cunning that rather alarmed me.

‘Why didn’t you want Miss to see you do it?’ I asked the question simply to see if my suspicions were correct.

‘If she’d a saw it, she’d a constipated it!’

Despite my annoyance, I came close to laughing. ‘I think you mean confiscated, Henry.’

‘Confiscated, okay,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘So what’s constipated then?’

‘You’d better ask your dad,’ I told him, not wanting to get involved in that conversation. ‘He’s the expert on big words.’

I should have scolded him, told him that giving a bullet casing to his friend was not a good idea, but I didn’t. I had a lot to do when we got home, and a telling off would likely result in a tearful journey. I said nothing to Henry; instead I resolved to have words with my dad, and Mike.

When we got back to the house, I plonked the kids in front of the telly, turned it onto CBeebies, and left them to it. As I busied myself preparing Lintzgarth to receive visitors, I wondered why I’d allowed Ginny to change my plans. I had planned on spending the whole of Tuesday getting the house ready for her visit. Instead, I had only hours.

Fortunately, Henry and Annie were happy enough. I managed to get most of the essential work done without interruption, and at no greater cost than finding myself constantly singing “What’s the story in Balamory, wouldn’t you like to know?”

When Mike got home the damned song was still rattling around in my head, but that was a small price to pay because the house—apart from the kitchen—was clean and tidy. After he’d fussed over the kids and given me a quick kiss of greeting, we had a whispered conversation about bullets and constipation. He was still laughing when he went upstairs to change out of his work suit. The kids were sitting up at the table and I’d started serving the spaghetti Bolognaise when he returned.

‘I thought you were going to invite Ginny up here on Wednesday, not tomorrow,’ he said as he sprinkled parmesan over the top of his Bolognese.

‘What makes you think plans have changed?’ I demanded.
He laughed. ‘It’s obvious from the smells, Jacqui.’ He sniffed, and shook his head. ‘The Bolognese has smothered it in here, but the rest of the house smells of bleach, polish, and air freshener. You’ve blitzed the place again, which is your prerogative, of course.’ He could see me bristling, so held up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. ‘I expect that you’ll be collecting them from Drakeshaugh. D’you want to borrow the big car?’

I considered his offer. The Freelander wasn’t a car I liked to drive, as I always worried about parking. It was so big, and I was never sure where the back end was. My Micra was much more manoeuvrable, and a lot more fun to drive. However, it was a sensible suggestion as the Freelander was a lot more spacious. After a moment’s hesitation, I agreed.

It took some time for me to remove the Bolognese sauce from Annie. The stuff on her face was due to her enthusiastic eating technique, and spaghetti. I should have cooked penne instead. She couldn’t explain how there was sauce on the back of her neck. It was simply another of life’s little mysteries.

When we finally managed to get the kids to bed, I went straight into our fourth bedroom—the one we call the computer room—and started to look for a present for James. It didn’t take me long to find something, but delivery was going to be a problem. Tiptoeing downstairs so as not to wake the kids, I startled Mike when I entered the kitchen. He’d loaded the dishwasher and set it going, and was busy wiping down the table.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

He heard the surprise in my voice and grinned. ‘I live to serve,’ he told me, a twinkle in his eye. ‘Found anything?’

‘Lego fire engine, twelve quid, is that too much?’ I asked anxiously.

He shook his head. ‘It’ll be fine Jacqui. Do Peters’ have it in stock?’

I shrugged. ‘I’ve no idea; their website is terrible, so I gave up. The Catalogue Store has it. Could you collect it tomorrow?’ I asked.

‘There isn’t a Catalogue Store in Morpeth,’ he reminded me.

‘I know; that’s why I’m here. I’m still online: Ashington, Blyth, or Cramlington, I have to select a store option for collection. Which one? It’s up to you.’

‘Ashington’s easiest,’ he began. He opened his mouth, shook his head, and gave me one of his dopey looks. ‘No it isn’t!’ he exclaimed. ‘I’m visiting one of the solicitors’ offices in Cramlington tomorrow. I’ve a conveyancing meeting at one o’clock, so I’ll be in the mall anyway. I can pick it up there, no problem.’

‘Thanks,’ I said.

Dashing back upstairs, I placed the order and printed it out.

After giving Mike his instructions, and threatening him with dire consequences should he forget to collect James’ birthday gift, I got to work preparing lunch for the following day and thoroughly cleaning the kitchen. Mike retired to the lounge and kept out of my way.

I had settled Henry into his classroom and was on my way back to the Freelander when I saw
Harry and James. Annie, who was very much better than I’d dared hope, was toddling slowly along at my side. She saw them too.

‘Dames!’ Annie announced, waving. She still sounded a little bunged up, but she was almost back to normal. ‘Eh, oh, Dames.’

‘Hi, Annie,’ said James. ‘Hello, Henry’s Mum.’

‘Hello, Annie; hello, Jacqui,’ said Harry politely.

The smile on his mouth didn’t extend to his eyes. It was the smile of a person who has nothing to be happy about. There was no doubt that Harry was on edge; I was certain that the case was still getting him down. Although I wanted to ask him, I didn’t. It didn’t seem to be the right moment, and besides, I knew that I’d be able to ask Ginny.

Although I said no more than, ‘Hello,’ I tried to show him some sympathy in my expression. It must have worked because, for an instant, a true smile flashed across his face.

‘I hope you have a good day,’ he said. ‘Ginny’s expecting you.’

‘Analanlily,’ Annie suggested hopefully.

‘Yes, Annie, Al and Lily are expecting you.’ Reaching down, he ruffled my daughter’s hair and smiled down at her.

‘I hope you have a good day, too, Harry,’ I said.

He shrugged helplessly. ‘I’ll try,’ he replied. Turning away, he continued towards the school, James at his side.

Turning Mike’s car around was a little difficult for me, but I managed to do it without hitting anything and mere minutes later I was pulling into the gravel yard of Drakeshaugh. The Potters must have heard me approach, because they were waiting for me at the door. Ginny had the kids’ car seats at her side. She didn’t wave hello, but that was because she had Al in one hand and Lily in the other, ensuring that they didn’t dash into my path.

It took us some time to fix the seats into the car, partly because we were chatting about Annie’s cold—and how quickly it had cleared up—but mostly because neither of us had any idea what we were doing. We eventually got the seats and the kids safely fastened in, and we set off for Lintzgarth. As I drove up the valley, I worried that I’d forgotten to tidy the kitchen. Had I put the breakfast dishes in the dishwasher?

Ginny looked across and saw my expression. ‘Everything okay, Jacqui?’ she asked.

‘Harry seemed a little down when I saw him at school,’ I said, feeling slightly guilty about using him as an excuse for the concern she’d seen on my face.

‘It’s the case,’ said Ginny. ‘They’re having no luck getting Frances’ memory back, and they’re certain she’s got vital information.’

‘I always thought that amnesia was simply a cheap trick used by crime novelists,’ I said. ‘Something used to tantalise the readers. But she really had forgotten, hadn’t she? You could see it in her eyes.’

‘Harry’s been involved in memory loss cases a few times,’ said Ginny. ‘In one case a man’s
memories were altered to the point where he confessed to a crime he hadn’t committed.’ She paused thoughtfully. ‘And Harry eventually solved that one, so there’s no reason why he shouldn’t figure this one out, eventually.’

I was fascinated by the scenario she’d described. I was about to ask her about it, but before I could speak, a female voice rang out from Ginny’s bag. ‘Ginny... Ginny... Ginny...’ The voice repeated itself like an echo, and it seemed vaguely familiar to me. While I was trying to place it, Ginny scrabbled through her handbag and pulled out a phone just like Harry’s. As I wondered about the weird ringtone, Ginny spoke.

‘Hello, Lavender,’ she said.

Lavender Moon! Harry’s werewolf expert, the woman in the lacy pink dress who’d arrived late to the Potter’s housewarming party. That was why I recognised the voice!

‘Where are you? We’ve just App...’

‘I’m in Jacqui’s car, the kids and I are spending the day with her, at her place.’

‘Ah, we’ve just arrived at Drakeshaugh.’

‘We?’ Ginny sounded surprised. She was staring down into the phone and it seemed to me that she was actually looking at Lavender.

‘I’ve brought Parvati and Padma with me,’ the woman said. ‘We wanted to talk to you, well Padma did,’ Lavender paused. ‘It’s about Michael.’ The name was accompanied by an “of course it is” sigh. ‘It’s complicated and... is Jacqui listening?’ she asked suspiciously.

‘Yes,’ I said sharply, unhappy about the tone of Lavender’s voice. ‘Ginny’s sitting right next to me and her phone seems to be on speaker mode. It’s impossible for me not to hear everything you say.’ Realising that I was beginning to sound a little bitchy, I bit my tongue. There was something about that woman which annoyed me enough to make me snappy; I tried to work out what it was.

‘Could you call back later this afternoon?’ Ginny suggested.

Lintzgarth and Drakeshaugh are relatively close to each other, little more than a mile. But they’re a long way from any large town. We’re about half-an-hour from Alnwick and almost an hour from Newcastle, and I was certain that none of Ginny’s visitors lived even as close as Newcastle. For a moment I wondered what time they’d set off to visit, and why they hadn’t phoned first. It didn’t matter, they were at Drakeshaugh; I did the only thing I could.

‘They must’ve travelled a long way just to discover that you’re not in, Ginny,’ I reminded my friend. ‘I suppose they thought you’d be at home with the kids. It must be urgent.’ I turned onto our driveway. ‘They can come here.’ I raised my voice to ensure that I’d be heard. ‘If you want to drive a mile further up the valley, and keep left where the road forks—I think it’s signed Blindburn—we’re at Lintzgarth. It’s the first house on the right after the fork; the name’s carved above the front door, you can’t miss it.’

‘There’s no need, Jacqui,’ Ginny protested.

‘It is rather urgent, Ginny,’ Lavender said.

‘They must’ve been driving for at least an hour to get here; you can’t simply send them away,’ I reminded Ginny as I pulled on the handbrake. ‘I’ll go and put the kettle on.’
'Polly put a kettle on, all have tea,’ Annie sang.

I laughed. ‘Quite right,’ I said.

‘Okay,’ said Ginny, rather reluctantly. ‘See you in ten minutes, Lavender.’

‘What was that all about?’ I asked as we freed the kids from their seatbelts and let them out into the back garden.

Ginny shrugged in obvious bewilderment. ‘If it was only Lavender, it might simply be a whim,’ she said.

Al, Annie, and Lily dashed across to the plastic slide at the far end of the lawn. Although Ginny was looking at them, she wasn’t really watching them, she was confused and concerned.

‘But she’s with Parvati and Padma, and they want to talk about Michael?’ Ginny asked herself aloud. ‘Why me? Why at home? Why don’t they simply go and see Harry?’

‘I’ll put the kettle on,’ I said. ‘Tea? What about Lavender, and Parvati, and ... Padma? Is she a friend of Parvati’s? What will they drink? Will tea be okay? We can keep an eye on the kids from the kitchen window. Do you want to go back out onto the road? I don’t suppose that your friends could miss us, but...’

‘They’ll find us, Jacqui, don’t worry,’ Ginny told me as she followed me into the kitchen. ‘Padma and Parvati are sisters—twins.’

As we walked indoors, I looked anxiously around the room, but apart from my breakfast mug, which I’d left on the draining board, the place was tidy enough. Relieved, I put the mug in the dishwasher, filled the kettle, and switched it on. Ginny was smiling at me.

‘Spotless,’ she assured me. Her comment flustered me. Because of Mike’s remarks the first time they’d visited, she seemed to think I was some sort of cleanliness freak. I’m not. I don’t clean everything, every day.

‘I’ve got everyday tea, Earl Grey, Himalayan Darjeeling, Assam, and I have Jasmine, if you think they’d prefer green tea?’ I prattled. Trying to cover my embarrassment, I waved my hand along the shelf full of caddies. ‘I’ve coffee too, somewhere. I don’t know what I’ve got in the way of biscuits, either. I was going to make chocolate buns today.’

‘Tea will be fine,’ Ginny assured me.

I opened the cupboard door and lifted the biggest of my teapots down from the top shelf. It doesn’t get much use because we rarely have a lot of visitors. I was reaching for the mugs when the doorbell rang.

‘That was fast!’ I exclaimed in surprise. ‘I don’t see how they can possibly have driven here so quickly.’

‘Perhaps they were already on the road when they called,’ said Ginny. She was trying to look unconcerned, but she failed to keep the annoyance from her voice. ‘Would you like me to answer the door for you?’ She was already heading towards the living room so I let her go, but I switched off the kettle so that I could hear what was being said.

‘The key’s in the door,’ I called after her. Moments later I heard it turn in the lock.
‘Morning, pet.’ The voice was male, and confused; I recognised it immediately. ‘Tea man.’

I reached for my handbag, which was hidden under the coats hanging on the back door, and searched for my purse.

‘Tea man?’ Ginny asked. It was as if the words didn’t make any sense to her.

‘Aye, that’s right, bonny lass,’ I heard him say. His voice slow and slightly suspicious. I finally found my purse and dashed through the house to join them at the front door.

Ginny was staring in confusion at the cheerful, rosy cheeked, and rather dumpy little man standing on my front step, basket in hand. He stared back at Ginny as each wondered who the other was. My tea man had one of the most unwise hair dyes I’d ever seen. In all the years he’d been calling, it had never changed. Blacker than the blackest hair I’d ever seen, the unnatural colour would have looked out of place on a much younger man, and Darren was in his sixties. The colour looked preposterous on his weather-wrinkled features. His appearance had always made me smile, but he was a lovely man.

‘Morning, Darren. You’re early,’ I said.

‘Nobody in at the last couple o’ stops, pet,’ he told me. He was still looking at Ginny, so I put him out of his misery.

‘This is Ginny Potter; she’s moved into Drakeshaugh. I’m surprised that you haven’t called in to see her.’

His eyes lit up, ‘I keep forgetting, sorry, hinny,’ he told her with a smile. Lifting up his basket, he showed her its colourful contents and began his sales pitch. ‘Tea and more, to your door. I get up here every fowerth Tuesday. Would you like a leaflet? We do tea, loose and teabags; coffee, fresh and instant; biscuits...’

‘She can see, Darren,’ I told him. ‘Just leave a leaflet. I’ll take the usual, please. And, as I’m expecting more visitors, I’d better have a packet of ginger snaps, and some of those fruit and lemon biscuits. I’ll take some chocolate mallows, too.’

As I spoke, he handed me my order regular order and pulled the biscuits I’d asked for from his basket.

‘There y’are, hinny,’ he said, handing a leaflet to Ginny.

While she examined it, he tapped away at the little machine he’d pulled from his belt. ‘That’s eleven pund an’ ten pee,’ he told me. I sorted through my purse and managed to find the exact amount for him.

‘Thanks a lot, pet,’ he said gratefully. He then turned to Ginny. ‘If yez wants owt, hinny, the phone number’s on the back. Gi’ the office a ring an I’ll call the next time I’m rund.’ He turned back to me. ‘See yez in fower weeks, pet.’

Giving us a cheerful nod, he turned and headed down the path.

‘Hinny?’ Ginny asked me as we watched Darren open the back of his van and restock his basket before his next call.

‘It’s a term of endearment,’ I told her. ‘Like pet, and bonnie lass, and easier than trying to remember the name of every customer. Darren never misses the opportunity to find new
customers. I’m surprised that he hasn’t called on you. He hears all the gossip from every customer in the valley, too.’

‘Perhaps he didn’t know we’d moved in,’ Ginny suggested.

‘He knew,’ I said. ‘I told him myself the last time he called, but I needn’t have bothered. He’d already been told by some of his other customers. Like I say, he knows all the gossip, and now he’s going to have even more to spread.’ I looked meaningfully over the lawn to the road.

As I’d been speaking a bright red VW Beetle Cabriolet had pulled up directly in front of Darren’s van (which was, of course, a VW Caddy). The driver’s door of the Beetle opened, and Lavender Moon slid out and waved to us. She wore a figure-hugging, pale blue cashmere sweater, a navy A-line skirt, and high-heeled blue suede ankle boots. It was, in my opinion, an unnecessarily glamorous outfit for a visit to a friend.

The two women who were with her looked similar to each other, though they weren’t identical. They were dressed very differently to Lavender, and also to each other. Doctor Rathod—Parvati—wore a smart black trouser suit and a green blouse, while her twin was in jeans and a rather shapeless pullover. I immediately decided that I would like Padma. Ginny, whose attire was similar to both Padma’s and mine, seemed to know what I was thinking.

‘It’s just the way she is,’ Ginny murmured in my ear. ‘It’s just Lavender!’

As we watched, Darren spoke to the three new arrivals, nodded politely, and got into his van.

‘Welcome to Lintzgarth, ladies,’ I said as the trio trooped up the path to my front door.

I was sitting outside, on the bench by the back door, and I was flanked by Lavender and Parvati. We were drinking Darjeeling tea and eating the biscuits I’d bought from Darren. Padma and Ginny were in my living room “having a quiet chat,” and I was convinced that Lavender and Parvati were sitting outside with me simply to ensure that I didn’t hear anything I shouldn’t.

For twenty minutes we’d been watching the three kids as they played on the slide, and then played ball. I’d been letting Lavender’s chatter wash over me. I’d heard how her husband “darling Emmsy” had taken their “lovely little Violet” up to Kirkcudbright to see his mother, and also about her journey up from her home in Robin Hood’s Bay. The woman could talk for England. I couldn’t get a word in edgeways, and Parvati didn’t even try.

Rather than listen to Lavender, I listened to my daughter as she tried to explain the rules of football to Al and Lily. When I’d offered the biscuits to the kids, Al had asked what the mallows were. In some ways Ginny’s kids were surprisingly ignorant.

Annie had taken it upon herself to explain about the biscuits, too. She’d told Al that they were chocktick wiff white sticky inside, and demonstrated by unwrapping one and biting it in half. In the process she had managed to smear chocolate and soft white mallow all around her face.

As she ran past me, chasing the ball, I noticed that, despite my best efforts, she was still rather grubby. I did nothing about it, as she was happily playing with Al and Lily and I didn’t want to interrupt their game.

When Annie caught up to the ball, she miss-kicked it and fell over. Picking herself up, she wiped her muddy hands on her shorts. Beside me Lavender shuddered, and I immediately decided against scolding her.
‘It’s only dirt,’ I said. ‘It’ll wash.’

‘I don’t think I’ll allow Violet to get so dirty and... sticky,’ said Lavender, shuddering.

I bristled, but held my tongue.

‘Pay no attention to her, Jacqui,’ Parvati told me, smiling impishly. ‘Lavender believes that she’ll be able to exercise complete control over her baby, but I’m sure I’m not alone in hoping that Violet will turn into a scruffy little tomboy like Dominique Weasley.’

‘I won’t allow that!’ Lavender was scandalised by her friend’s suggestion.

‘D’you really think that Fleur allowed it?’ Parvati asked.

‘Henry thought that Dom was a boy,’ I said, joining in with Parvati’s teasing of her friend.

‘So did Rani,’ Parvati said. She leaned forwards to get a better look at Lavender, and with a straight face, said, ‘Mark may even encourage her to be a tomboy. I’m sure he won’t want to go through what you put your father through.’

‘Oh shut up,’ Lavender snapped. ‘You’re supposed to be my best friend.’

‘I am! That’s why I alway tell you what I think!’ Parvati chuckled. Lavender appeared unimpressed.

‘We all worry our fathers at some point, don’t we?’ I said, trying to move the conversation on. ‘And our mothers, too. Mum hated the idea of me riding a motorbike.’ I looked across at the kids, who were still playing ball. ‘I wonder what those three will get up to when they’re older?’

‘Who knows?’ said Parvati.

‘Violet will be...’ Lavender began, reaching across to take another ginger biscuit from the plate I’d put on the patio table.

‘Violet will be what she wants to be,’ Parvati interrupted, taking one of the fruit and lemon biscuits. ‘These are really good, Jacqui.’

‘It’s a pity you saw the tea man,’ I said. ‘Now I can’t claim to have baked them myself.’ Both women laughed.

Seeing the adults eating was enough for the kids. They all stopped playing and trotted across to the table.

‘Can I have another chocolate mallow, please?’ Al asked.

‘An’ me, an’ all,’ said Annie.

‘An me,’ Lily added.

‘Of course you can. I helped them unwrap the mallows, and watched them scamper off again.

‘Kids, eh?’ I asked. ‘The strangest thing about being a parent is that you suddenly realise that one day you’ll be faced with your kids doing something you don’t approve of. And worse, that it’s something you did yourself when you were young.’

Lavender stared at me, open mouthed. ‘I hope that Violet never...’ She stared into space. ‘Or...
Parvati burst out laughing. ‘Welcome to motherhood, Lavender. I’m glad that it’s finally hitting home. Thanks for that, Jacqui.’

We were still gossiping when Padma and Ginny finally finished their chat and came out into the garden. I asked Ginny’s friends if they wanted to stay for lunch, but they politely declined.

We talked for a while, but a little more than two hours after their unexpected arrival, we were waving them off. I’d barely spoken to Padma.

Although I desperately wanted to know what was going on, I didn’t dare ask Ginny. Besides, the kids were demanding our attention. It wasn’t until half-past-twelve, when I was making the sandwiches for lunch, that I even broached the subject of the visitors.

‘Padma isn’t married,’ I said. I’d gleamed that much from my conversation with Parvati and Lavender.

‘No,’ Ginny agreed.

‘There’s time,’ I said. ‘She’s what? Twenty-nine, thirty? She can’t be much older than that.’

‘Thirty,’ Ginny told me.

‘Plenty of time to find Mister right,’ I said. Ginny gave me an odd look. ‘Or Miss right, or stay single, if that’s her choice,’ I added hastily.

Ginny laughed. ‘You should take a leaf out of Lavender’s book, Jacqui,’ she advised. ‘She says what she thinks and doesn’t care what other people think of her.’

‘So does your friend Luna,’ I said as I opened the fridge. As I lifted the bowl of sandwich filling I’d made from the shelf, I had another panic. I held up the bowl, allowing Ginny to see its contents. ‘In the confusion of our visitors, I forgot to ask about lunch. Will tuna, mayonnaise, and sweetcorn be okay for the kids’ butties?’

‘Fine, I’m sure,’ Ginny assured me before returning to the other topic of conversation. ‘You’re a nice person, Jacqui. You’ve made us welcome, and you shouldn’t be afraid to speak your mind, like you did yesterday.’

‘Yesterday?’ I wondered what I’d said.

‘I spoke to Harry about the party invitations. You were right, trying to get them back from everyone will cause more trouble, and simply invite more gossip about us. There’s no reason to assume that your invitation, or anyone else’s, will end up in the hands of the wrong people.’

‘Padma was invited, wasn’t she?’ I asked as I sliced the brown loaf.

Ginny nodded. ‘I knew she wouldn’t come,’ she told me. ‘She found her Mister right years ago. But he ignored her and married someone else. He was, and still is, oblivious to her feelings. He doesn’t even notice her. She might as well be wearing an invisibility cloak.’

‘That’s an odd turn of phrase,’ I observed. ‘Is it a West Country expression?’

Ginny shrugged, and it was her turn to look a little embarrassed. ‘It’s something Mum used to say. I picked it up from her.’
While she’d been talking, I thought back to Lavender’s original call.

‘Michael,’ I said. ‘It’s Michael, isn’t it?’

Ginny nodded. ‘Keep this up and I’ll be recommending you for a job in Harry’s office.’ She sounded almost serious, but I knew that she was joking.

‘Padma’s fancied him since school, but he’s never, ever, noticed her. For some reason she’s never been able to move on. But now she’s convinced herself that there’s something wrong with him; she says that he’s not himself, that he’s changed. She thinks someone is ... controlling him.’

‘Controlling him? How?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Ginny. I wasn’t certain that she was being completely honest with me, but I didn’t press her.

‘Surely his wife would have noticed?’

‘That’s exactly what I said!’ Ginny was triumphant. ‘I told Padma that if, something was wrong, Trudi would have noticed. But Padma thinks Trudi is behind it. After all, who else could it be? Michael spends every night at home with his wife, and every day in his ... laboratory. He works alone, always has. Padma says he won’t let anyone, not even her, or Terry, into the RANDOM room when he’s running a prediction. Terry and Michael have been friends forever, and Padma and Terry are the only ones who fully understand Michael’s system.’

‘That’s why she spoke to you,’ I said as the morning’s events finally fell into place. ‘She doesn’t want to contact Harry directly, because she doesn’t want Trudi to know that she’s suspicious.’

Ginny nodded. ‘I think it’s all wishful thinking, but I’m going to tell Harry as soon as he gets home tonight.’

‘But why would Trudi interfere with a case she’s working on, unless...’ I stopped, unable to believe what I was suggesting.

‘Exactly,’ said Ginny. ‘It’s nonsense. It has to be nonsense. Harry recommended Trudi for the job.’

‘When’s lunch? I’m hungry!’ Annie announced from the kitchen door. Al and Lily were with her, so Ginny and I had no alternative but to end our discussion.
Five

That night, after we’d put the kids to bed, I told Mike about the visitors and also about Padma’s suspicions.

‘Harry seems to have been to school with pretty much everyone involved in this case,’ he observed, voicing one of my own concerns. ‘That’s weird, isn’t it?’

I nodded.

‘It seems to me that the more we know, the less things make any sense,’ Mike continued.

I twitched my lips to indicate that he wasn’t going to get any argument from me on that score, either.

‘Why were those people killed? Four random strangers murdered in an attempt to get this Greyback person freed? It’s crazy! What’s it all got to do with the amnesiac, what’s-her-name—Little Red Riding Hood? How did she end up with that invitation?’

‘She’s called Frances Sidebotham,’ I reminded him. ‘And I’ve no idea how she ended up with the invitation. Ginny doesn’t know, either. I asked her.’ I looked up into my husband’s face. ‘You’re right, Mike, none of it makes any sense! I’ve no idea what’s going on, but the idea that two of Harry’s guests—his friends—might actually be involved in this worries me.’

‘A lot more than two,’ he reminded me. ‘Big Terry and little Dennis work for him and so, apparently, does the lovely Lavender, when she’s not busy producing a new little princess.’

‘What makes you say that Lavender is lovely?’ I demanded.

‘You’ve just described her to me Jacqui, in great detail, right down to the clothes she was wearing.’ The laughter lines around his eyes deepened as he spoke. ‘Although to be honest, I’ve no idea what an A-line skirt is. Frankly, I don’t care. In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve always been an admirer of tight jeans.’ He gently stroked my leg, gave me his silliest grin, and winked. I ignored him.

‘So, based on what we know, what do you think is going on?’ he asked.

‘I’ve no idea,’ I admitted. ‘Do you want to ask Ginny? I don’t, but if you want to risk it you can talk to her and Harry all about it on Thursday night.’

‘Thursday night?’ he asked.

‘Oh, yeah, what with everything else, I forgot to tell you. We’re all invited to Drakeshaugh on Thursday, straight after school. It’s James’ actual birthday, and James wants Henry to be there for a small and very exclusive party. Just us. Did you pick up the fire engine?’

‘Yeah, it’s in the boot. I didn’t tell you when I got home, because I didn’t want to mention it in front of Henry.’ Mike put on a thoughtful expression. ‘Straight after school is fine for ladies of leisure like you and Ginny, but it might be difficult for me, Jacqui. I’ll check my diary and see what I can do. If I can arrange to get a flyer, I will. If not…’ he shrugged. ‘I’ll be at Drakeshaugh at about six.’
James was already in the classroom on Wednesday morning, so I didn’t see either of the adult Potters. After making certain that Henry was okay—he was, because James was there—I lifted Annie into my arms and left.

‘My love my mummy and daddy,’ Annie announced, throwing her arms around my neck. Her words came from nowhere, and demanded a response.

‘And I love you, and Henry, and your daddy,’ I told her as we reached the gate.

‘I really expected better of you, Jacqueline,’ Mary said acidly. Her use of my full name was enough to make me bridle, and she knew it. ‘We’re all very concerned about the number of foreigners your friend Ginny knows.’ Mary charged straight into the attack. ‘I understand that they even visited you yesterday.’

I stared into Mary’s face, saw resentment and anger in her puffy and bloodshot eyes, and decided that I’d had enough. Putting on a confused expression, I went on the counterattack. ‘We?’ I looked pointedly around. ‘You appear to be alone, Mary. And as for these foreigners?’ I shook my head. ‘We didn’t have any foreign visitors yesterday.’

‘The tea man said that there were two funny-looking Moslems...’

‘I’ve known Darren for years, I don’t believe he said anything of the sort,’ I said firmly. ‘Anyway, even if Parvati and Padma are Muslims,’ I corrected her pronunciation, ‘and I don’t think they are, that’s a religion, not a nationality. They’re originally from Leicester. I’m happy to be corrected, Mary, but—so far as I know—Leicester isn’t a foreign country.’

My anger surprised me. It surprised Mary, too, and I immediately regretted the harshness of my words. I stared into the face of the woman I’d spent the past few weeks being either frightened of or annoyed with, and wondered whether what I was seeing was prejudice, or something else.

Everything about her demeanour was wrong. There was bitterness in her red-rimmed eyes, a need to lash out at someone, at anyone. As I looked into her face, I finally realised that she’d been crying, and that she’d used a lot of makeup to disguise that fact. My having “foreign” visitors couldn’t possibly be the cause of her unhappiness. She was sad and angry, and she was lashing out at me simply because I was happy and she wasn’t. The realisation made me want to make peace.

‘If something’s wrong...’ Her horrified expression showed that responding with a demonstration of sympathy towards her wasn’t going to work. ‘Look,’ I tried again in a more business-like tone. ‘I know that we’re not exactly close, but if you have a prob... if you want someone to talk to in confidence, just call me.’ I placed Annie on the ground, found a pen in my pocket, and scribbled my number on a crumpled old supermarket receipt. ‘I can be a bit stupid at times, but I can be discreet when required,’ I added as I handed her the number.

Dumbfounded, she said nothing, but she took the number from me.

‘The offer stands,’ I assured her. ‘Any time.’

Still, she said nothing. I gave up.

‘Bye, Mary.’ Picking up my puzzled daughter, I carried her back to my car.

Ginny was already waiting at the school gates when I arrived at school that evening. I had decided that I would tell her about my morning encounter with Mary. My task would be made easier by the fact that Annie was in a good mood, as was evidenced by the way she was singing at the top of her
voice as she toddled along at my side.

‘Bobbie Shafto’s gone to sea, silver buckles at his knee,’ she sang.

‘That’s a lovely song, Annie,’ said Ginny, smiling down at my daughter.

‘He come home an’ mawwy me,’ Annie continued. ‘Fanks, Dames’ mummy, ’lo Al an’ Lily.’

After a break for greetings, she returned to the song. ‘Bonny Bobbie Shafto.’

‘Okay for tomorrow, Jacqui?’ Ginny asked.

‘Yes, although Mike may be a little late,’ I said. ‘It isn’t easy for him to finish work early. What about Harry?’

Alongside me, Annie was encouraging Al and Lily to sing, but neither of them knew the words. Apart from the first verse, neither did Annie, but that didn’t stop her from serenading the two Potter kids—and mangling the words—while we waited for the school bell to ring. ‘Bobby Shafto Brighton Fair, he my love forever mair…’

‘Harry will be there, no matter what,’ Ginny assured me over my daughter’s din. She noticed my expression, and tilted her head to one side. ‘What’s happened?’

‘Later,’ I said, shaking my head and postponing my plans. I could see Amanda Berry approaching us.

‘Mary’s sitting in her car,’ Amanda announced as she walked towards us. ‘It looks like she’s been crying. What did you say to her this morning?’

Ginny stared at me, shocked.

‘I gave her my phone number,’ I said, startled into honesty by the directness of the question. Wondering why Amanda, who’d been Mary’s right-hand-woman for years, didn’t know what was going on, I pressed on. ‘I thought she might need someone to talk to.’

‘Why?’ Ginny asked.

‘She seemed … sad.’ I said, trying to indicate to Ginny that I didn’t want to gossip in front of anyone else. I turned to Amanda. ‘I thought that you and Mary were best friends,’ I said. ‘Don’t you know what’s wrong?’

It was obvious from her expression that Amanda knew nothing. I suspected that she still thought I was the cause of Mary’s tears.

‘I only know her from the school gates!’ Amanda protested. ‘Our daughters are friends, but we’re not close. I thought you must have… No… Are you sure you don’t know?’

I shook my head. ‘No idea,’ I said firmly.

She obviously didn’t like my answer, but I wasn’t prepared to say anything else. There was an awkward silence, in part because Annie had run out of Bobbie Shafto lyrics and the musical accompaniment to our conversation had ended. Fortunately, my daughter returned to her favourite standby song, so I joined in.

‘What’s a’ story in Balamory,’ we sang. After a moment, Amanda gave up and wandered off to gossip with some of the other mums.
'Well?' Ginny asked the instant Amanda was out of earshot.

I quickly told her about my morning encounter.

‘She’s not angry with me, with us,’ I told Ginny. ‘I’m not even sure that she’s angry about the colour of Padma and Parvati’s skin; I think she’s angry with the world.’

‘Or with herself,’ Ginny suggested. We stared down the road. Mary’s car, a top of the range black BMW two-series, was facing away from the school. We couldn’t see her.

‘Could be,’ I said.

‘I wonder why?’ Ginny pondered.

‘I’ve no idea,’ I said. ‘To be honest, I can’t see that she has a lot to be angry about. She’s probably the wealthiest woman at these gates. She has a remarkable house down the valley in Sharperton, a holiday home in Spain, another one in Florida, and two cars. And they’re both beamers!’ Ginny gave me an enquiring look.

‘BMWs,’ I explained, nodding down the road. ‘There’s that one, the two-series she uses for the school run, and she’s got a Z4 roadster, too. And when the cars are two years old, her husband replaces them.’

‘That’s just stuff,’ Ginny said thoughtfully. ‘I’ve realised who she reminds me of, Jacqui. Angry, being nasty for no reason… Alicia was like that for months after…’

‘After?’ I prompted. I didn’t know who Alicia was, and I didn’t really care. All I wanted to know was what Ginny was thinking.

‘Alicia was with Lee for more than ten years. They weren’t married, but they lived together and worked together. She helped Lee to build up his radio show. They were a team, and we all thought that they were happy. They certainly appeared to be happy. Then last year, at Lavender’s hen party, Alicia was angry and rude. Angelina and Katie managed to calm her down, but they wouldn’t tell us what was wrong. We found out a few weeks later, at Lavender’s wedding. Lee turned up with a different girl. She was nineteen, and he’d been having an affair with her for two years. Alicia had found out a couple of weeks before the hen night, but she hadn’t confided in anyone. Not even Angelina, and they’ve been like that…’ she curled her first two fingers around each other, ‘…forever.’

‘Robert Saville!’ I exclaimed in disbelief. ‘Who on earth would want…’

Ginny glared me into silence just in time. Mary’s daughter, Helen, strode past us, looked down the road, and trotted down to the mother’s car.

‘Thanks,’ I murmured. ‘I wonder if you’re right. We’ll find out, eventually.’

Ginny agreed, and we turned to look at the steady stream of kids flowing from the school. Henry and James were nowhere to be seen. When they finally arrived, Ginny and I had already finalised our plans for James’ birthday party.

Once the kids were safely in bed, I put James’ present in the boot of my car, to make certain that I didn’t forget it. While I worked, I brooded about Mary, and thought back to her husband’s woman-watching performance at the Potter’s party. I tried to persuade myself that it was my imagination. After all, I asked myself, what could possibly attract a woman to an ugly, overweight, opinionated,
and bigoted... I remembered the size of their house; he was a millionaire.

When I re-entered the kitchen, Mike was admiring the card Henry had made. ‘Who’re they?’ he asked, pointing at the two vaguely person-shaped scribbles on the front of the card.

‘According to Henry, that’s “James ‘n me”,’ I said.

‘Which is which?’

‘Can’t you tell?’ I asked.

He took another look. ‘Red hair is James,’ he announced, smiling. ‘They’re holding hands. Why are they holding hands? Should I be worried?’

‘You should never be worried about two people holding hands; it doesn’t matter what sex they are!’ I scolded. ‘Please don’t tease him about that, Mike. I don’t want him to grow up thinking that it’s wrong.’

He had the good grace to look ashamed. ‘You’re right, of course.’

‘How well do you know Robert Saville?’ I asked.

‘What? Where did that come from?’ My sudden change of subject had startled him. ‘I don’t know him at all, not really. I’ve done business with him a few times. He’s not an easy man to deal with. Why?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘Mary wasn’t very happy today. I was wondering if her husband...’ I stopped, and watched him carefully.

Mike said nothing, but I could see he was struggling with his conscience. He’s pathetically transparent at times. I could almost hear the fight going on in his mind.

‘Talk,’ I said.

‘I don’t deal in rumours, Jacqui, you know that.’ That was enough to confirm the existence of rumours. I frowned at him. ‘And I don’t spread them, because before you know it they’re facts, and people are being judged for doing something they haven’t done.’

He seemed to have forgotten how good my memory is; I reminded him.

‘At the Potter’s housewarming party you said you “could tell me some stories” about Mary’s husband. Talk,’ I demanded.

‘A lot of people won’t do business with him, and these days we always ask for payment in advance. I can give you facts and figures about how ruthless he is in business, but I don’t suppose you want to hear about all the subcontractors he’s stiffed over the years?’ Mike asked.

He was hoping I’d say yes, but despite the fact that I suspected Mike’s use of the word “ruthless” was simply his way of saying “completely immoral,” I shook my head.

‘They’re facts, Jacqui, and I can back them up; I don’t know anything else.’

I said nothing. He sighed.

‘He’s... well... look, I don’t know if any of this is true...’
I kept my mouth shut, silently demanding that he tell me. When I folded my arms, he surrendered.

‘Joe—from the Estate Agents—told me that Bobby is shagging his office manager. He also reckons that she’s not the first,’ Mike began. He shook his head. ‘It seems unlikely to me. I mean, you’ve seen him. He’s Timothy Spall, not Timothy Dalton.’

I tried not to laugh.

‘I’ve met her, too. She was in a meeting I attended at Saville Transport Services six months ago: mid-twenties, blonde, skinny, and she must be at least fifteen years younger than he is. It’s a rumour, Jacqui, nothing more. It’s gossip. That’s all I’ve heard and it all came from Joe, so it’s probably not true.’

The following morning, I saw Harry for the first time since Monday. He, and a very excited James, were both standing next to his car. it was apparent that they’d been waiting for us to arrive. They reached my car before I’d released my kids from their seats. Leaving Annie and Henry in the care of Harry, I unfastened Henry’s seat. Harry took it from me and, as he carried it down to his own vehicle, we chatted.

I got the impression that he was going to Sheffield again, which puzzled me. It didn’t seem worth it; in fact it didn’t seem possible. I was doubtful that he could even drive there and back within the six-and-a-half hours of the school day. When I asked, he said something about having an office in York. Although York is fifty miles closer to us than Sheffield, even that seemed unlikely to me. Despite my concerns, Harry assured me that he would definitely be back in time to collect both boys at the end of the school day. I told him that Mike would also be able to finish early, and that he’d be arriving at Drakeshaugh as soon as he could.

While Harry opened his car and worked on fitting Henry’s seat into it, I took both boys and Annie into school. On the way through the yard, I remembered to wish James a happy birthday.

Not to be outdone, Annie grabbed James’ arm, pulled him to a halt, and insisted on singing to him.

Henry was a little embarrassed by his sister’s antics and wouldn’t join in. James waited politely until she’d finished, and then said, ‘Thanks, Annie.’

A lot of the passing kids, and their parents, had watched Annie perform. There was no doubt that, by the time he entered the classroom, most of the school would now know it was James’ birthday.

By the time I got out of the classroom and back to the road, Harry had gone, taking Henry’s car seat with him. I looked around for Mary, but she was nowhere to be seen.

That afternoon, instead of driving down to school, Annie and I went directly to Drakeshaugh. I set off at the usual school run time, and arrived at the Potters’ home about five minutes before I would have arrived at the school gates. It was a strange feeling, knowing that I was leaving Henry’s collection in the hands of someone other than Mike.

Ginny, Al, and Lily were waiting at the door when I pulled into the gravel yard of Drakeshaugh, and they weren’t alone. Ginny’s brother, Ron, was there with his wife and kids. There was a colourful “Happy Birthday James” sign above the door. It was obvious from the misaligned letters and the smudged poster paints, that Al, Lily, and possibly Rose and Hugo had been busy.

As the Potter and Weasley children yelled excited greetings at Annie, the adults approached me.
‘Hello, Jacqui,’ Ginny began.

‘This time it’s our turn to gate crash a private party,’ said Ron cheerfully. He was doubtless referring to the first time we’d met, and his words made me feel guilty all over again.

‘Don’t be such an oaf, Ron!’ Hermione scolded. She gave me an apologetic smile. ‘James is our godson, Jacqui, and with Harry being so busy, we decided to surprise him with our presents rather than wait until Sunday. We had no idea that Ginny had something organised with you.’

‘You’re here now, Hermione,’ Ginny said. ‘You might as well stay for the party… Where do you lot think you’re going?’

‘Rope swing, Aunt Ginny,’ said Rose.

‘Not until James and Henry get here,’ said Ginny. ‘You want to say happy birthday to him, and see him open his presents, don’t you?’ Suddenly worried, she turned to her brother. ‘Are they safe?’

Ron and Hermione looked at me, exchanged glances, and nodded. Perplexed, I tried to think why Ginny might think they’d bought something unsafe. I panicked.

‘We bought Lego,’ I said. Opening the boot of my car, I pulled out a cake tin containing the chocolate buns I’d baked and the rattling present in its balloon-covered wrappings. ‘It’s for age five and over. Will it be okay? Small pieces! There are a lot of under-fives here. That was stupid of me.’

‘Lego?’ Ginny asked.

‘What’s…’ Ron began.

‘I’m sure it will be fine,’ Hermione assured me.

‘What’s…’ Ron tried again but his wife glared him into silence.

‘It’s okay, Ginny, we… I… bought…’ Hermione interrupted her husband. She stopped because, behind me, there was a crunching of gravel.

‘Here’s Daddy,’ Ginny told her kids.

‘Daddy!’ Al yelled.


I took the opportunity afforded by Harry’s arrival to dash inside and place the chocolate buns and our present on the kitchen table next to the large present apparently from the Weasleys.

By the time I returned, Henry and James had disembarked. James was basking in a chorus of birthday greetings. He was positively bouncing with excitement, and it was affecting the others. As the kids got more and more giddy, they began chasing each other around the yard, yelling and squealing. Hermione tried to calm them down, but Ron, Ginny, and Harry simply encouraged them.

Henry started it. ‘Tig, you’re it!’ he yelled, grabbing James by the shoulder.

Henry ran away from James, and the other kids scattered. James went after Al, who dodged away from his brother and ran past us, towards the gate. James quickly caught him, because Al was forced to stop in his tracks when Mike drove into the yard.
‘Tig, Al’s it,’ James yelled gleefully as he ran off to join Henry. Al turned and looked for a target; the other kids continued to back away.

‘It’s tag, not tig,’ Hermione announced firmly.

‘That’s what I thought, too,’ said Harry, although he sounded less certain than Hermione.

Ron and Ginny both shook their heads. ‘Tig,’ they told their partners.

All four of them looked at me expectantly. ‘Tig,’ I agreed. It seemed that Hermione was prepared to argue.

‘Hello everyone,’ called Mike as he clambered out of his car. He looked across at the kids. ‘I see the bedlam’s already begun.’

‘Is it tig, or tag, Mike?’ Harry asked my husband hopefully. ‘We’re losing the argument here!’

Mike looked at the kids, who were all running away from Al. ‘What’re you talking about?’ he asked. ‘The kids? Aren’t they playing tuggy?’

I laughed. ‘You pretend to be posh, Michael, but that’s proper Geordie, that is, pet,’ I told him.

Ron laughed gleefully and turned on his wife and Harry. ‘Tig!’ he announced triumphantly.

‘Tig,’ Al agreed as he ran up and hit Ron’s leg. ‘You’re it, Uncle Ron.’

When Ron grabbed his wife’s arm and shouted, ‘Tig, Aunt Hermione’s it!’, we all ran.

More than half an hour later, I was rather out of breath and hiding in the woods that surrounded Drakeshaugh. I hadn’t seen anyone for a few minutes, so when I heard voices, I stood still and silent, and listened to see if I’d have to make a run for it.

‘…said that Michael doesn’t let anyone into his lab,’ I heard Harry say.

‘What about Trudi and Terry?’ Ron asked.

‘Yeah, but what she meant is that he works alone.’

‘Well, that is true,’ Ron said. ‘He’s a secretive bugger, but he’s been a bit strange ever since the Battle.’

‘He was tortured, Ron,’ Harry said forcefully. ‘But the thing is, a few weeks ago, I met his assistant, Jason Jones; they were in the lift together. I should’ve realised that Michael was confounded but, in my defence, Trudi was with us, and she didn’t notice.’

‘He has an assistant?’

‘No, Ron, he doesn’t!’ Harry said. ‘We checked. And the guy I met in the lift isn’t even a Ministry employee, although he had a name badge and entry authorisation.’

By that point, of course, I’d realised that Harry and Ron must have established that neither of them was “it”, so there was no reason for me to keep hiding from them. Unfortunately, I’d already heard so much of a private conversation that revealing myself would be embarrassing. As I vacillated, and pondered Harry’s strange mispronunciation and misuse of the word confounded, the conversation continued.
‘How did he get a pass?’

‘Frances issued it. Her workmates say he’s her boyfriend, but she can’t remember him; she still can’t remember anything. We showed her his picture, he’s not the man she saw with Robards, but…’ he stopped, mid-sentence. ‘Who’s there?’ he asked.

I stepped out from behind the tree, I was no more than ten yards from them. Fortunately, Ron’s concerns were different to Harry’s and he got the first question in.

‘Are you it?’ he demanded.

‘No,’ I said. ‘About ten minutes ago, it was your Rosie. Now?’ I threw up my hands.

‘Aren’t you going to ask if it’s one of us?’ Ron enquired.

I shook my head.

‘First, if you are, you have to tell me, that’s the rules. But you can’t be, because you’re together, and I heard you talking… Not everything you said, just voices, I wasn’t eavesdropping,’ I added hastily when Harry stared. ‘If one of you were it, you’d have tagged the other, and you wouldn’t be gossiping.’

‘We don’t gossip!’ Ron protested.

‘Then what were you talking about?’ I enquired.

‘What did you hear?’ asked Harry.

‘You said something about Frances, a boyfriend she’s forgotten, and security,’ I admitted. ‘But I didn’t hear much, I was too busy keeping out of everyone’s way. I’ve not been “it” yet.’

Harry tried to stare into my eyes, but I looked down at the ground to avoid his piercing gaze.

‘Look at us,’ I said, indicating my muddy shoes, and Harry’s grass-stained trousers. ‘This is ridiculous, we’re not kids anymore.’ I turned to Ron. ‘This is your fault.’

‘Most things are,’ Ron admitted cheerfully. ‘But all I did was join in the kid’s game. You didn’t have to.’

‘Of course I did,’ I admitted with a smile. ‘We all did.’

‘I haven’t had this much fun for a long time,’ Harry admitted, beaming.

‘True,’ Ron agreed. ‘Although having seen the state of Rosie’s new frock, I’m not sure Hermione will agree.’

‘At least I’m in jeans,’ I said. ‘Mike’s still wearing his work suit, and so are you, Harry.’

In the distance, a child squealed, ‘Tuggy, you’re it,’ my husband shouted.

‘Doesn’t count,’ someone yelled in protest. I thought it was Al, but couldn’t be certain. ‘You have to say tig, Henry’s dad! Them’s the rules.’

‘Yeah, Al’s right,’ Ron bellowed. ‘Them’s the rules, Mike. Can’t say tag, or tuggy, you have to say tig, ’cause that’s the right word!’
Despite the fact that Ron was shouting at the top of his voice, and standing only feet from me, I thought I heard a bell ring in the distance.

‘And I have to say that dinner’s ready,’ Ginny’s voice echoed through the woods. ‘Sorry, kids of all ages, it’s time for us to go inside and eat.’

‘Food,’ Ron’s eyes lit up.

‘Phew,’ I said gratefully. ‘I’m getting a bit old for this.’

‘No, you’re not.’ Harry shook his head.

‘Definitely not,’ Ron agreed, grinning. ‘There’s nothing like a game of tig!’

‘Tag,’ Harry teased.

‘Tig,’ Ron’s tone was gleefully triumphant. ‘I’m right, and both you and Hermione are wrong.’

Harry winked at me. ‘He’s gloating because that’s only the second time in his life where he’s been right and Hermione’s been wrong.’

‘How dare you!’ Ron’s outrage was exaggerated, and he was smiling broadly. ‘It’s the third! Not that I’m keeping count.’

Harry laughed, and slapped his friend on the shoulder.

‘I assume that you don’t want me to tell you that it’s a regional thing,’ I said. ‘Where Mike was brought up, it is tuggy. In fact, I expect that everyone is right.’

‘Don’t mention that to Hermione,’ Ron begged.

We were the last to enter Ginny’s kitchen and the food was already waiting for us on the table. Hermione was supervising the kids, who were washing their hands in the kitchen sink. After slipping off my shoes, I went through to the downstairs cloakroom and washed my hands.

I met Mike coming the other way. ‘Hello, stranger,’ he said. ‘What happened to you? I arrive, and you vanish.’

‘I didn’t get got,’ I told him smugly. He darted forwards, reminding me that he was still “it”.

‘Skinchies,’ I told him, raising my crossed fingers. ‘I think the game’s over, and you’re still it, you loser. But just in case: skinchies.’

He grabbed me around the waist and kissed me.

‘You are the most competitive person I know,’ he said. He made it sound like a compliment. ‘I’ll save you some tea.’

When I returned to the kitchen everyone else was seated and the savoury part of James’ party meal was ready to serve. Somehow Ginny and Harry had managed to prevent James from opening his presents until the food was eaten.

There was a mountain of sausage rolls, a dozen individual Scotch pies, and the same number of pork pies. In addition there were six huge plate pies; two corned beef, two mince, and two cheese and onion. There was a huge bowl of salad, too, but the kids were ignoring it. When I arrived, Ron
was complaining about the corned beef pie.

‘There has to be something on the table you don’t like, Ron, otherwise you’d scoff *everything,*’ Ginny told him.

The main course was followed by trifle, jelly, and ice cream, and after that came the cake. Finally, after we’d all sung happy birthday to James, and he’d managed to blow out all five candles, James was allowed to open his presents.

I could see the disappointment on his face when he opened his present from the Weasleys. He was quite taken by the bright orange bobble-hat with the C-C logo. He yelled something about cannons, thanked his Uncle Ron, and insisted on wearing it in the house. The boxed set of early-reader books was, however, tossed aside with a rather dismissive, ‘Thanks, Aunt Hermione.’

Fortunately, the Lego fire engine went down well. James, Henry, Mike, Harry, and a puzzled Ron were soon all on the floor attempting to build it. The dads were, of course, relegated to brick-finding duties while James, hindered by Henry, attempted to follow the instructions. The other kids —apart from Rosie, who was attempting to read one of the books her mother had bought for James —formed a circle of spectators.

Later, after everyone had played with the fire engine, we all trooped up to the living room. There, the kids played musical bumps, blind man’s buff, pass the parcel, and pin-the tail on the dragon. The last was, of course, Ron and Ginny’s version of pin the tail on the donkey.

By the time we finally left for home, Henry and Annie were exhausted, happy, and full of the wonderful chocolate Ginny had been dishing out as prizes during the party games.
Henry was still talking about James’ party when we drove to school the following morning. He simply wouldn’t shut up about it.

Over breakfast, in between mouthfuls of Frosties, he’d told me—as he had on the journey home the previous evening and again when I’d put him to bed—that he wanted “lots an’ lots of Lego” for his birthday and “no rubbish boring books”. He was obviously thinking about his birthday over breakfast, because when we set off for school he added a request for the same party games as James, and he wanted Rosie and Hugo to come to his party, too.

‘Rosie an’ Hugo, yes,’ Annie agreed with him.

‘Rosie and Hugo live a long way away,’ I reminded them.

‘An that chock-lit was really nice,’ he added hopefully.

‘Yummy chock-lick,’ his sister added.

‘I’ll see what I can do, Henry,’ I assured him.

As I drove, I considered the possibility of inviting Rosie and Hugo to the party. Like James’, Henry’s birthday was a Thursday. They probably wouldn’t come; it was a very long way to drive. Although Harry’s friends and family seemed to be prepared to travel ridiculous distances to visit. The Weasleys, or Granger-Weasleys, lived way down south, yet they’d arrived unexpectedly on James’ birthday. Perhaps they would come.

That was when I realised that I hadn’t seen Hermione’s Mini at Drakeshaugh. If they hadn’t driven, how had they travelled? They could have flown, and got a taxi from the airport. But that would not have been cheap and, despite what I’d been told, Ron didn’t come across as a high-flying businessman. Then again, Harry didn’t come across as a tough investigator and war veteran. In fact, were it not for the scars I saw every Saturday at the pool, I wouldn’t believe it myself.

It was a long way, but Ron and Hermione were James’ godparents; perhaps that was it. They were simply being conscientious about their duties. We’d made Mike’s sister one of Henry’s godparents. I should’ve realised what a mistake that was when she had to be pushed into attending the christening by her parents. Since then, nothing. She didn’t even bother to send him a birthday card.

When I pulled up outside the school, Harry’s big black Range Rover was parked outside. As I lifted Annie into my arms, he strode out from the school gates, his long black overcoat flapping in the chill wind. Annie shouted a hello. When he saw us, he gave us a cheery wave and waited next to his car. We strolled down towards him.

‘Morning, Charltons,’ he said cheerfully.

Henry didn’t bother with a polite good morning, or even a hello. ‘Want lots an’ lots of Lego for my birthday,’ he announced firmly.

‘That was my son being subtle,’ I told Harry apologetically.

‘Well, I do!’ said Henry.
I smiled apologetically at Harry and shook my head in despair. ‘I assume Ginny has spoken to you about Henry’s party, Harry, Guy Fawkes night, at Lintzgarth. You’re all invited, and the birthday boy would like Rosie and Hugo to come, too.’

‘An’ me,’ Annie added.

‘And Annie would also like it if they could come, sorry, Annie,’ I said. Harry smiled at my kids. ‘I’ve told them that Rosie and Hugo live a long way away, but both Henry and Annie insisted that I invite them. Would it… Could I…’ I tried again. ‘I’d like to send them an invitation, but I don’t have an address.’

‘Lego, eh? Very popular, those little bricks,’ Harry told Henry cheerfully, before turning his attention to me and winking. ‘They’re already on James’ Christmas list, and Ron’s, and Ginny asked if I wanted some, too!’ Running his fingers through his untidy hair, he added. ‘I’m sure Ron and Hermione would love to come to Henry’s party.’ He stopped. ‘That’s okay, isn’t it?’

I laughed. ‘Of course,’ I told him. ‘Rosie and Hugo aren’t going to get here by themselves, are they?’ I smiled at him and shook my head. ‘I should have mentioned them, sorry. When did I stop thinking about the parents? When did we become the pluses to the kids’ invitations instead of the other way around?’

‘In my case, about five minutes after James was born,’ Harry told me with a smile. ‘Ron and Hermione live at The Roost, Green Lane, Oakford Fitzpayne, Dorset. I don’t have a … a pen with me, but if you can’t remember the address, I’ll give it to you tomorrow.’

‘I’ll remember,’ I said. ‘I’ve a very good memory.’

Harry gave me an assessing look, and nodded. ‘I’m sure they’d love to come, especially as Ron’s providing you with…’ he glanced down at Henry, ‘fireworks for the party.’ Henry clapped his hands and danced his happy dance. ‘We haven’t discussed wood for a bonfire, either. Ginny mentioned it to me, but with everything else going on, I forgot all about it. I’ll try and sort something out for you. Henry’s birthday is four weeks away, isn’t it?’

I nodded. ‘About tomorrow…’

‘Swimming? It shouldn’t be a problem this weekend. I’m not planning on going into work tomorrow, so Ginny and the kids won’t need a lift from you. We’ve had some good news at last. Not long after you left last night I got a call to say that there’s been some progress in restoring Frances’ memory. I don’t want to be overconfident, but I think we’re finally closing in on the killer. I’ll find out when I get to work, so I’d better be on my way.’ He looked meaningfully across at the school gate. ‘So had you, otherwise Henry will be late. Bye.’ Giving me a cheery wave, he walked around his car, climbed in, and set off.

While Harry and I had been speaking, I’d seen Mary pull up. I watched her daughter, Helen, climb out of the car, pick up her school bag, and walk up the path towards us. Her mother didn’t get out of the car and, the moment Helen disappeared through the school gates, Mary drove off. Unfortunately, she wasn’t paying attention and she pulled out directly in front of Harry. I gasped, anticipating a crash. It didn’t happen. Astonishingly, he somehow managed to stop his car almost instantaneously, avoiding a collision. Harry didn’t sound his horn and Mary drove on, seemingly oblivious.

Relieved, I followed Helen up into the school and hurried Henry into his class.
That afternoon, while we were waiting for the end of another school day, Ginny confirmed what Harry had already told me; they would be making their own way to the pool with us the following afternoon. ‘But we’ll be heading off to Mum’s as soon as we’re dry,’ she said. ‘And we won’t be back until late on Sunday. We’ll be away the following Sunday, to another party; Dominique will be seven.’

‘Doesn’t your mum live in Devon?’ I asked.

Ginny nodded.

‘It must be four hundred miles!’ I said. ‘And you’re planning on doing that journey two weekends in a row?’ I shook my head in disbelief.

‘We’re flying,’ Ginny told me. ‘I know it’s a long way to go, Jacqui, but it’s family.’

I was about to ask more, but Ginny pointed down the road. ‘That’s Mary’s car, and she hasn’t got out. Do you think we should go and speak to her?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘What would we say? What could we say? “Hello, Mary, we know you’ve been being a total “B one T C H” to us, but now we’re wondering if it’s because your husband is having an affair.” That’s not going to go down well, is it?’ I asked anxiously. ‘If it’s true, it seems she doesn’t want to talk about it. I gave her my number, but she hasn’t contacted me. Perhaps she’s unburdening herself on someone else, or perhaps it’s simply not true. And if it isn’t true, we’re the nasty you-know-whats.’

‘We could just say that we’ve noticed she’s staying in the car instead of holding court—no, better make that chatting, or socialising—at the gate, and ask her if there’s something wrong’ Ginny suggested.

‘Socialising!’ I smiled at Ginny as I nodded my agreement, but still failed to keep the sarcasm from my voice. ‘Good idea.’

We were about to set off, but too late. The school bell rang, and we had missed our opportunity.

On Saturday, after lunch, we set off down the valley to the pool. When Mike started his car, the CD player began blasting out “The singer out of Slipknot went to Rome to see the Pope.” His expression, the colour of his face, and the speed with which he ejected the CD meant only one thing; this was a song that the kids definitely shouldn’t hear.

The opening lyrics had made Annie sit up, and the subsequent silence annoyed her. She demanded that we play music. I tried to tell her that there wasn’t any, but she pointed out that I was wrong. There was Daddy’s music, she’d just heard it.

By then we were already on the road, and I hadn’t transferred any of the nursery rhyme CDs from my car into Mike’s. Frantically scrambling through Mike’s glovebox, I found four more CDs. Unfortunately, they were Trouble over Bridgewater, Back in the DHSS, Voyage to the Bottom of the Road, and Fiends of Dope Island. It was obvious from the glances I exchanged with Mike that none of them would be suitable for pre-schoolers.

I was about to retune Mike’s radio from Radio 4 to Radio 2 in the hope that some classic pop would be okay, when I spotted one of my own CDs—The Sky Didn’t Fall—poking out from under a cloth in the side pocket. I wondered how long it had been there. I’d been looking for it for weeks, and Mike had denied all knowledge when I’d asked him if he’d seen it.
I was about to berate him, but by then we’d reached the track leading to Drakeshaugh, and Annie’s complaints were increasing in volume. I saw the Potters’ car. They were parked at the entrance, waiting for us. Mike gave them a friendly toot as we approached. I waved, and distracted Annie from her complaints by encouraging her to wave too. They waved back and pulled out behind us.

‘I hope you like this, Annie,’ I said, pushing the CD into the player.

Mike gave a murmur of protest when the CD began, but I pointed out that it was the only CD in the car without any language issues, and I’d asked him if he’d known it was there weeks earlier, when I’d first asked him. That shut him up.

I encouraged Annie to listen to the harp, and to Kathryn Tickell talking about her favourite place. It wasn’t a complete hit. There were more instrumental tracks than Annie liked and, although she listened quite intently to the pipe and harp music, she was much happier when the singing started.

We were only a few minutes from the pool when Felton Lonnen came on. When Henry and Annie heard it, they both joined in. I was pleasantly surprised by how many of the words Henry remembered. Annie was almost word perfect, but she was thrown by the fact that the song was about “me laddie” because I’d always sung “me lassie” to her. Even Mike recognised the song, though he didn’t join in.

‘The kyes cam yehm but I see not me hinny, the kyes cam yehm but I see not me bairn,’ I sang along with my children.

‘You used to sing them to sleep with that song,’ Mike observed. ‘But are you sure there aren’t any “language issues” with it? You always encourage the kids to taak proper, and that isn’t proper taak.’

‘I still sing this, don’t I Annie?’

‘Yeh…’ Annie confirmed.

‘And while it’s important that the kids can speak properly,’ I told him firmly. ‘It’s…’

‘I’m teasing you, Mammy,’ he said as he pulled into a parking space. ‘We’re here, kids, never mind singing about cows coming home. It’s time to go swimblerating!’

‘Yay!’ they shouted. I sighed.

Our swimming sessions were beginning to fall into a routine. Ginny and Mike spent most of their time splashing about in the small pool with Lily and Annie, while I tried to teach Henry and James in the main pool. Harry and Al, meanwhile, shuttled between the two groups. I felt sorry for Harry’s middle child. Poor Al was getting bored in the small pool, but he couldn’t touch bottom in the main pool, and he wasn’t confident enough to be left unsupervised for even a second when he was out of his depth.

‘How’s Frances?’ I asked Harry when he and Al came over to join us.

James and Henry were practicing their underwater somersaults. Harry was moving slowly toward me, one hand under Al’s tummy to support him. Al, who was also holding onto one of the two new kickboards Harry had bought on his way into the pool, splashed his way nervously through the water.

‘She’s recovering,’ He told me. ‘Susan’s team spent all day yesterday questioning her. She’s
provided us with a lot of useful information.’

‘Do you think…’ I struggled to remember the name. ‘…Gaheris Robards is still alive?’ I asked.

‘I hope so,’ Harry told me, surprised by the question. ‘We’ll find out within the next couple of days, I’m sure of that.’

‘Star float,’ I said as my mind moved back to the events occurring in front of me.

‘Pardon?’ Harry asked.

‘Al,’ I said. ‘He’s holding onto the kickboard as if his life depended on it, and you’re holding him up; he isn’t floating. The board is supposed to be an aid, not a lifesaver. Al needs to know that he will float. Just a minute.’ I swam over to James and Henry, took them to the edge of the pool, gave them each a kickboard, and set them away to race two lengths of the pool. Pushing off from the wall, two strokes brought me back to Harry and Al, and well in front of the older boys.

‘Hello, Al,’ I said. I glanced at Harry, making certain it was okay for me to interfere. He nodded, so I took Al into my arms, took the kickboard from him, and handed it to his dad. ‘I’ve got you,’ I assured him as I lay him on his back in the water. I kept one hand on the small of his back, and the other under his head to support him. ‘Don’t worry, just look straight up at the ceiling,’ I advised.

While I was talking, I was also trying to keep one eye on James and Henry. It was a race, and James had gone off at full pelt. He had a good lead, and there was no doubt he would reach the far end of the pool first. Because of this, I could see that he was already tiring. Henry, showing a lot more tactical skill than I expected, wasn’t pushing himself, but neither was he letting James get any further ahead. Satisfied that they were safe, I returned my attention to the black-haired little boy I was supporting.

‘Can you make a star, Al?’ I asked. ‘Arms and legs apart.’ He did as I asked, and I slowly lowered my hand from under his back.

‘If you’re worried, Al, take a deep breath,’ I told him. ‘As much air as you can.’ I noisily sucked air into my own lungs as a demonstration. ‘Now, hold your breath.’ The moment he did so, I carefully lowered my hand from under his head. His eyes widened, but he relaxed when he realised he really was floating. I watched his smile banish his concern.

‘All that air in your lungs helps,’ I told him, ‘It’s like having a float inside your chest. Perhaps Daddy could help you practice floating on your back.’ I turned back to Harry. ‘Stay at the top of his head. Try to encourage him to breathe, but only little breaths. If he panics or starts to sink, support his head, not his back,’ I advised. ‘If you think he’s confident that he can float, then you could ask him to turn the star float into a pencil float.’ I raised my arms above my head and put my palms together to demonstrate. ‘But only if you think he’s happy. Making sure he’s confident is the priority.’

‘Thanks, Jacqui.’ Harry’s grateful smile was midsummer sunshine, but I had no time to bask in it, because the other two were on their way back, and Henry had just overtaken a now struggling James. I kicked my way across to them, just in case James began to really flounder. He was tired, but too stubborn to give in. When he finally struggled to the edge of the pool, he was panting, and almost a full body length behind Henry.

‘Well done both of you,’ I said.

‘I won,’ Henry said happily. James was close to tears, and Henry noticed. ‘But James was winning
most of the time,’ he added generously.

‘If you do real races, when you’re older, I think you could both be winners,’ I told them both.

‘Can’t have two winners,’ said James unhappily.

‘You can if there’s two races, James,’ I said. ‘Some races are like this one, to the opposite end of
the pool and back again. But some are only one length.’

‘And James got to that end first,’ said Henry. I was proud of him.

‘So we both sort of won,’ said James hopefully.

I nodded. ‘When I was eight, I started swimming for a team,’ I told them. ‘And if you ever swim
for a team, maybe you’ll both win. One in the short race, and one in the long race.’ I pointed to
James and Henry in turn. ‘And then you can both be champions.’

‘Two champions,’ they told each other happily.

‘Sprint and distance,’ I told them. James was smiling again. He’d already forgotten his annoyance.
They were holding onto the edge of the pool and had turned their attention to Al and Harry. To
give them a rest, and to try to give Al more confidence, I suggested they try to do star floats.

It took Henry and James no time at all to discover that by slowly bringing their arms down to their
sides, they could lazily drift about, and soon they were encouraging Al to do the same. Harry and I
stood and watched.

‘The news has gone quiet,’ I said. ‘It’s like everyone has forgotten about the case.’

‘There’s nothing happening for them to report,’ Harry said. ‘The man we’re looking for…’

He hesitated, so I supplied the name, ‘Jason Jones.’

‘You heard a lot more in the woods than you let on, didn’t you,’ he told me sharply.

He was a professional investigator, and I’d fallen into his trap. I nodded guiltily. ‘I didn’t mean to,’
I apologised. ‘We were playing tig and I didn’t know who was on, so when I heard someone, I
hid.’

‘I shouldn’t really have told Ron,’ Harry admitted. ‘But the fact you know the name isn’t
important, because that’s not his real name. It’s simply the name on his Ministry ID Badge;
although that’s worrying enough, because getting a fake ID Badge should be impossible. Frances
issued it, because he is—or was—her boyfriend. She compromised Ministry security for him, and
he was messing with Michael’s … computer system. It’s little wonder we weren’t getting
anywhere. Jason was using it to misdirect us.’

‘Should you be telling me this?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘But you were there when Frances arrived, and you keep finding things out.
Also—so far as I can tell—you haven’t told anyone what you know. I’m trusting that you won’t
say anything, Jacqui.’

‘I won’t! So how did Frances end up with the invitation?’ I asked. ‘I mean, I assume that this Jason
character somehow pinched it from Michael. You said that he was working with him.’

‘That’s what we believe,’ Harry admitted. ‘Frances found the invitation in Jason’s pocket and
asked him about it. He told her that “a friend of his” had asked him to find our address. And that’s when Frances finally got suspicious of him. If she’d reported him then, we might have stopped the last two killings, but instead she tried to follow him and catch his accomplice. I suppose we should be grateful that she managed to lift the invitation from his pocket and hide it in her boot.’

‘She went after two men, herself?’ I asked.

‘She’s always wanted a job in our office, so she tried to prove herself. It was stupid. She managed to track the accomplice, but got caught, and ob—well, she lost her memory. Two people died, and she was lucky she wasn’t the third.’

‘At least you have names and, presumably, descriptions,’ I said.

Harry nodded. ‘And… Ginny told you that Robards worked in a museum, didn’t she?’

‘Yes.’

‘Jason’s father works in the same museum… I’d better get Al.’

James and Henry were encouraging Al to paddle away from us, and Harry’s younger son was now getting far enough from us that Harry was worried. He was right to be careful, as Al didn’t have a float. Cursing myself for getting so distracted—the case was interesting, but not as important as the kids—I swam across to Henry and James and tried to get them to leave Al and Harry in peace. Setting them to work on leg drills proved easier than I thought. As soon as I told them that a good kicking technique would help them swim faster that, too, became a contest.

I didn’t get another chance to talk to Harry. Al was practicing his own leg kicks in the small pool, and both Annie and Lily wanted to do the same. They were still there when the buzzer went and we had to leave. While we were changing, Mike told me that the Potters were driving straight to the airport from the pool and then flying down to Devon. Henry and Annie were both a little gloomy as we dried them. And Henry complained about the fact that he wouldn’t see James until Monday.

‘I coulda gone wiff him,’ Henry said as I dressed him.

‘No room in the car, and no plane ticket, sorry Henry,’ I told him. ‘We could go to Cragside for the day tomorrow. That would be nice, wouldn’t it?’

He wasn’t keen, but it was the best we could offer.

Harry was looking very cheerful when I saw him on Monday morning. For once I’d arrived before him, but only just. I was watching Henry hang up his coat when Harry and James arrived. After making sure that the boys were settled, we walked back to our cars together.

‘How did James’ other birthday party go?’ I asked.

‘As noisily as I expected,’ he told me smiling. ‘A full complement of Uncles, Aunts, and cousins, plus his grandparents and Hermione’s parents—they’re sort of his adopted grandparents,’ he explained, seeing the unspoken enquiry on my face. ‘It was complete mayhem, and a lot of fun.’

‘I can tell,’ I told him. ‘You look more relaxed than you have since… well, since that young couple were killed.’

He acknowledged the last murders with a sad smile. ‘Hopefully, it’s all over. I got a message from
My first question to Ginny that afternoon was, ‘How’s the case going?’

She shook her head. ‘I’ve no idea, Jacqui,’ she told me, looking me straight in the eye. ‘Did you speak to Harry this morning?’

I nodded.

‘Then you’ve spoken to him more recently than me,’ she said. ‘He doesn’t phone me with updates during the day, you know.’

‘Oh, um, sorry,’ I said shamefacedly. ‘Of course he doesn’t. I’m an idiot. I should think before I speak.’

Ginny put a hand on my shoulder, squeezed it, and smiled at me. ‘I’m as curious as you are, Jacqui,’ she admitted. ‘All I can do is hope that no news is good news. Look, there’s Mary, sitting all alone in her car again. Should we go and have a word with her? We have our own little mystery to solve.’

‘Why not?’

We set off, Ginny pushing the buggy containing Al and Lily, and me holding Annie by the hand. When we peered in the window, Mary’s head was back against the rest. Her mouth was open and her eyes were closed. I hesitated; Ginny didn’t. She rapped on the passenger side window. Mary jumped, opened her eyes, and looked at us in horror. Without waiting to be asked, Ginny opened the car door. We were greeted by a waft of booze.

‘Oh, Mary,’ Ginny said.

Mary started to swear, and I protested loudly. Ginny pulled Al and Lily back from the door, away from Mary’s curses. Reaching down into the buggy, Ginny muttered something that sounded like, ‘Mumble Womble.’ She was a little behind me, so I couldn’t see what she’d been looking for in the buggy, but it didn’t matter, because Mary suddenly fell silent.

‘You can’t drive,’ I told her.

She glared but, apparently tongue-tied, said nothing.

‘Are you going to behave?’ Ginny asked over my shoulder. ‘No more swearing in front of the kids?’

Mary nodded.

‘Good,’ Ginny told her.

Mary made a clacking sound, clapping her tongue onto the floor of her mouth. It seemed to startle her back into speech. ‘It’s none of your business what I do,’ she protested.

‘You can do what you want,’ I told her forcefully. ‘We can’t stop you from endangering yourself, Mary, but we will stop you from endangering others. If you drive in that state, you’re a danger to Helen—and to anyone else on the road! You pulled out in front of Harry on Friday morning. Was that because you’d been…?’
Mary glowered.

‘There’s just us two here,’ said Ginny quietly. ‘But most of the Mums at the gate are watching us. You know what this place is like for gossip. In fact, you’re an expert. But we’ll say nothing, if you don’t want us to. Is it your husband?’

Mary was horrified. Her nod was almost non-existent. ‘What’m I going to do?’ she asked.

‘You’re coming to Drakeshaugh,’ said Ginny firmly. ‘You can leave your car here. The walk will do you good. I’ll sit here with you until everyone else has left. We’ll say that…’ Ginny looked at me for assistance.

‘We’ll say that one of your warning lights has come on, and your car’s telling you not to drive it,’ I suggested.

‘Can this car talk?’ asked Ginny in surprise.

‘No,’ I shook my head in amusement. It seemed that Ginny knew even less about cars than I did. ‘But it has all sorts of warning lights and smart systems on it. Any one of them could mean something’s seriously wrong. That’ll work, won’t it, Mary?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Thanks,’ she added in a whisper.

‘Jacqui can tell that to anyone who asks, and we can wait here until everyone else has left.’

I walked back up to the school and explained that Mary had car problems, and that it had upset her. When Amanda expressed concern, and offered to help, I told her that Mary was in a right fettle and didn’t want to be bothered by any more nosey parkers. It worked.

Everyone left, and when the last of the mini-buses finally drove off, Mary clambered unsteadily out of her car.

‘Thanks, Jacqui, but I can manage,’ Ginny said when I offered to walk back to Drakeshaugh with her. ‘You just get Annie and Henry home.’

As I looked into Ginny’s face, I realised that protesting wouldn’t get me anywhere. ‘If you’re sure,’ I said hesitantly.

‘Certain,’ Ginny told me.

I looked at Mary and her daughter. Helen wore a thick and expensive coat over her school uniform. Ginny and her kids were also well wrapped up, but Mary was in a blouse and a light jacket, and she was already shivering.

‘I’ll get my old jacket,’ I said. Hurrying ahead of them, I opened the boot of my car, and grabbed the worn old Barbour jacket Mary had once been so dismissive of. When they reached us, Henry and Annie had climbed into their car seats. I handed Mary the jacket. She pulled a face, but took it from me.

‘Thanks, Jacqui, see you tomorrow,’ said Ginny gratefully.

‘Thanks, Jacqui,’ Mary echoed, although there was no gratitude in her tone.

It had taken all of my willpower not to phone Ginny the previous evening. I’d been a little earlier than usual getting down to school, and I had arrived at the same time as Harry.
As James and Henry walked into school, I asked Harry about Mary.

‘She’d left by the time I got home,’ Harry told me. ‘Ginny said that she and Mary had a long talk, and that it looks like there’s going to be a messy divorce.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘But you should really talk to Ginny.’

I fell silent and listened to Henry and James loudly chattering about all the Lego they would like. We watched our sons take off their coats and hang them up, and when they walked off into their classroom without a backward glance at us, we looked at each other in mutual commiseration.

‘Redundant already,’ Harry observed.

‘Not completely, we’re still their taxi drivers,’ I reminded him. He laughed.

Harry was still in a good mood, and as we walked back to our cars—Annie toddling along at my side—I plucked up the courage to ask him about the case. Before I could formulate a question, a bell tolled. It was a teeth rattlingly deep tocsin. The loud, ominous chasm of noise made Annie put her hands over her ears, and it silenced me before I’d even started to speak. It silenced everyone in the vicinity.

It wasn’t a simple clang; it was Big Ben tolling the hour. The noise seemed to have come from Harry’s pocket, and it had drained the colour from his face. I was looking at a man who’d been suddenly drenched by a thunderstorm of anxiety. His face was ashen, and his jaw slack. The cacophonous chime was still reverberating through me when an urgent female voice spoke over its dying seconds.

‘Code black. All Auror alert! Code black: Emergency Portkey in five…’

As the bell faded, before the voice began to speak, Harry was looking everywhere. He glanced at me, then his gaze swept across the rest of the school gate mums. It was as though he was looking for somewhere to hide. It was impossible: everyone was staring at him, their attention drawn by the bell.

Hauling out his wallet, he yelled, ‘Cancel,’ just as the woman said the word five.

The voice stopped instantly. It looked to me as if it was the hardest decision he had ever made. Pulling out his phone, he looked down into it and said, ‘Martha!’

‘Oh, Harry,’ a woman answered instantly. She sounded close to tears.

‘I’m not secure,’ he told her. He turned his phone around. I got the briefest glimpse of a thin-faced and curly-haired woman, perhaps ten years older than Harry, before he turned it back and stared into the screen. ‘Who?’ he asked.

‘We don’t know, Harry.’

‘Where?’ he tried.

‘A derelict hotel on Fullwood Road.’

‘Polly’s team! What’s…’

‘Hold on, Harry. I have Terry on another line, he’s on site now.’ I watched Harry dance in frustration. ‘We have twenty-eight, um… agents at the … helping Terry, and two Hea… er… medical staff. Collapsed outbuilding… Oh, Harry… All four members of Polly’s team are missing,
apparently buried under the building, but Terry says “only three lives detected.”

‘Four?’ Harry asked.

‘Polly, Dennis, and Trudi had the trainee … Miss Cattermole … with them.’

‘Ellie?’ Harry slumped. ‘I heard the triple-A; it was a code black. Has A-K been confirmed?’

‘A-K? … Oh! The er… wait one second,’ Martha said. The wait was little more than the second she’d promised. When she came back, she stifled a sob. ‘Anne White’s with Terry, she says “A-K confirmed.” Oh, Harry.’

‘I’m on my way in. Find out if anyone didn’t respond to the triple-A, and get them into the office anyway. No excuses, I don’t care what they were doing. And… find all four addresses for me, please.’ Harry was shaking so much that I placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. He gave me a grateful smile. ‘Keep me updated, Martha,’ he ordered, before pocketing the phone.

I had no idea what the jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations he’d used meant, but it was understandable that I wasn’t supposed to know. While I wondered what sort of emergency could be codenamed “Portkey”, I continued to look into Harry’s face. It was apparent that he was badly shaken.

‘You need to take a minute before you drive anywhere,’ I told him firmly. ‘Let’s face it, Harry, you’re not going to be able to get to Sheffield quickly. Give yourself a minute or two to calm down. Do you want to tell me what just happened? You don’t have to.’

He shook his head, but answered anyway. ‘It’s possible … probable … that one of my people has been killed,’ he said quietly.

I’ve always been a hugger, so I stepped forwards and hugged him. ‘Oh, Harry, I’m so sorry.’ He hesitated for a moment before returning the hug. I spoke into his shoulder. ‘You’ll catch them, I’m sure. But please drive carefully. Sheffield’s a long way.’

‘Thanks, Jacqui,’ he said. Placing his hands on my shoulders, he gently pushed me a way. He was, if anything, even more downcast. ‘I’m not going to Sheffield. I’m the boss, it’s…’ his voice caught. ‘It’s my duty to inform the next of kin. I really must go.’

‘If you—or Ginny—need anything, anything at all, phone me,’ I told him.

He nodded and, with slumped shoulders, hurried off to his car. As he headed towards the gate, the other Mums looked into his face and let him pass, then they descended on me like locusts.
I should have taken my own advice and waited for a few minutes before driving home, but I’d been desperate to escape from the other mums at the gate. Annie had seemed to sense my mood. She’d become a little fractious when the other mums surrounded us. Her obvious unhappiness allowed me to use her as an excuse to leave. As I walked away, I heard Amanda and some of the others begin to make ever-wilder speculations about what Harry’s message really meant.

‘AK, that’s some sort of gun, isn’t it?’ Amanda asked. I’d had the same thought myself.

My imagination was exploding like a murmuration of starlings with a sparrowhawk in their midst. I was unable to stop myself speculating about what I’d heard. On a couple of occasions during the journey home, I found the car drifting over to the right. It’s a good thing that the roads up the valley are quiet and that there was nothing travelling in the opposite direction.

AK – Auror Killed? Emergency Port Key? I knew that there was more to the mystery than Harry was telling me. Was there an international element? People smuggling? I tried to remember what the acronym stood for. A.U.R.Or—Anti-terrorist Units in Regional Organisations—that was it. Despite what he’d told me, this couldn’t simply be a murder case. Everyone had stopped talking about Greyback, too. Perhaps Harry really was a spy, perhaps he had a helicopter waiting for him at the airport, perhaps he really was James Bond—James Bond with a wife and three kids.

I was in still something of a daze when I pulled onto the drive at Lintzgarth. When I tried to unlock my kitchen door, I discovered that my hand was shaking. Thinking back to my journey home, I was horrified to discover that most of it was a blur. I could remember virtually nothing; I couldn’t even remember if I’d played music for Annie. My conclusion, that I had, was based simply on the fact that she hadn’t complained.

When we got inside the house, I helped Annie with her shoes, carried her into the lounge, and settled her on the floor with her toys. My mind was still flitting through the morning’s events, unable to settle. I tried to be cheerful for my daughter’s sake; it wasn’t easy. No matter how much I tried to lock the events at the school gate inside a box, the lid stubbornly refused to stay shut.

The words were always the first to flap their way into my consciousness. The grief-stricken voice of Martha, whose attempt to remain detached and professional had failed, flew through my head, depressing and distracting me.

“Polly’s team!”

“Only three lives detected.”

“Polly, Dennis, and Trudi had the trainee … Miss Cattermole … with them.”

Who, I wondered, was AK Auror Killed? Was one of the four dead? How could Martha and—Anne, that was the name—be so certain only minutes after the alarm? How badly were the others hurt?

“All four members of Polly’s team are missing, apparently buried under the building.”

Not Dennis, please, not Dennis, I prayed, thinking back to the Potters’ party and the long conversation Mike and I had had with Dennis and the heavily pregnant Lesley. Cheerful, car-mad
little Dennis, the most normal of Harry and Ginny’s friends, couldn’t be dead; that would be unthinkably cruel.

The more I dwelt on that particular thought, the deeper I drowned in sadness and guilt. Who was I to decide, to wish for one life above the others?

Polly, the brash and heavily made-up Goth woman we’d met outside the pool on our very first swimming trip with the Potters was weird, and a little disconcerting, but she’d been friendly enough in her own brash and eccentric way. I couldn’t live with the idea of wanting her dead in Dennis’ place.

The same was true for Trudi Corner. I’d hardly spoken to her at the party because she’d come across as combative and angry. But even if I hadn’t been keen on her, she had a husband. Whether or not I liked, or trusted, Trudi was immaterial. If Trudi was dead, then her long-haired, bearded, computer-expert husband, Michael—a man who shared his first name with my husband—would be a widower. That idea was equally unbearable.

That left a trainee I’d never heard of, Miss Cattermole. Was I really the sort of person who would wish death on some young trainee, simply because I didn’t know her? Tears began to form in my eyes.

Throwing her arms around my legs, Annie forcefully pulled me back to the here and now. She almost knocked me over. I’d been standing in the middle of the living room, staring into an abyss of anxiety. The sheer physicality of Annie’s attempt to comfort me hauled me back from the brink.

‘There, there, Mammy,’ she told me. ‘Whassa ma’er? Tell me all ‘bout it an’ we’ll make it all better.’

I looked down at my daughter and smiled. She could sense that something was wrong and was clumsily trying to use the words of comfort she’d heard so many times on my lips. I picked her up and hugged her.

‘I’m okay, Annie,’ I assured her. ‘Mummy’s just a bit worried. One of James’s Dad’s friends might be … hurt … so she’s going to put the news on for a few minutes, okay?’ I said.

‘Okay, Mammy.’

I sat on the sofa. Annie clambered up next to me, scrambled onto my lap, and proceeded to hug me. It was with a lot of trepidation that I turned the TV to the BBC News Channel. The woman sitting at the news desk was talking to a political correspondent about the British National Party. The scrolling text across the bottom of the screen was all about the FTSE 100, Barbara Windsor, and foreign wars. I watched and waited for several minutes, but the report continued and the scrolling headlines didn’t change. There were no reports of any deaths, or even of a collapsed building in Sheffield. There was nothing else about the Sheffield murders, either. After ten minutes of seeing no news I was interested in, Annie began to squirm. I switched off the TV.

‘What do you want to play?’ I asked as I lifted her off my lap and placed her on the floor. I slid off the sofa to join her.

‘Gonna sing for Mammy,’ she announced.

I had to smile. I would often sing to her when she was sad, so she was going to do the same for me. Unfortunately, in her attempt to cheer me up, Annie decided that she would sing “Felton Lonnen”. I had to stop her. I knew that if her sweet little voice got as far as “I’d rather loss all the kye than
loss me hinny,” I would burst into tears. While the song was simply a lament for a missing child—who is found in most versions I’ve heard—and not a tale of death, I knew even that would be too much for me.

‘I’ll teach you a new song,’ I told her. ‘It’s called “The Water of Tyne” and it’s all about a lassie who lives on one side of a river, while her laddie lives on the other.’

As I spoke, I had an idea. Perhaps now would be a good time to let my daughter hear me play. Singing along with Annie would help, but I needed more. I needed to stop thinking, concentrating on the pipes always calmed me, and forced me to forget my concerns. As I stared down into Annie’s eager little face, I decided that now was the time.

Before we were married, Mike used to boast that I’m multi-talented. It took me years to persuade him not to embarrass me like that. I have a few swimming medals, but nothing at national level; I can hold a tune, but I’m not exactly Adele, or Amy Winehouse; and I’m an adequate piper, but no Kathryn Tickell. In truth, I’m a boring and very ordinary person. Nevertheless, I needed something to take my mind off things. The alternative was baking, but Annie wanted to sing.

‘I’ll be back in a minute, Annie,’ I told her.

Dashing upstairs I dragged the stool from under my dressing table and over to the wardrobe. Climbing onto the stool, I carefully lifted my pipe bag down from the top of the wardrobe, blew the dust from it, and sneezed.

‘Bless you,’ Annie shouted from downstairs.

‘Thanks, Annie,’ I replied.

To my surprise, the mere anticipation was enough to cheer me up. As I climbed down from the stool, I could feel the smile on my face. Henry had been petrified of the pipes when he was a baby; he’d cried whenever I’d tried to play. I’d put them away. They’d been on top of the wardrobe for at least three years, almost forgotten. Hopeful that Annie would be more receptive than her brother, and praying that I hadn’t forgotten how to play, I took the bag downstairs. My daughter already seemed to be more musical than her brother, so I hoped she’d appreciate my efforts.

‘Do you know what these are?’ I asked Annie when I walked back into the room. I unfastened the bag and pulled out the pipes. Picking up the bellows, I gave them a couple of gentle squeezes before sliding the belt around my waist. The bag shifted, and the pipes groaned.

‘No, Mammy.’

She shook her head and watched curiously as I placed the bellows under my elbow and tried to fasten the belt. Annie was unperturbed by the sad sigh emanating from the pipes. I, however, was horrified to discover that I was fastening the belt one notch away from the one I’d always used, and even that notch was a little tight. I had expanded in the years since I’d last played. That was Annie’s fault.

‘They’re called smallpipes, Annie, or Northumbrian pipes,’ I told her.

Settling the bag under my left elbow, I began pumping the bellows with my right. The bag began to fill, and the drone began its expectant whine. Annie watched in fascinated silence as I continued to pump the bellows. As soon as I could, I applied pressure to the bag and fingered the pipes.

Despite my promise to teach her The Water of Tyne, I found myself playing Bobbie Shafto. Annie recognised it immediately. Enchanted by the tune, she began singing. We spent the remainder of
the morning singing, and playing. By lunchtime we’d been through The Water of Tyne several times, and she was beginning to remember the words.

As I made lunch, I switched on the kitchen television and listened to the news. Again, there was no mention of the Sheffield murders in the headlines. When Annie and I sat down to eat, the news had passed through crime and politics—both national and international—and had moved beyond foreign wars to the human-interest stories. We were still eating when the news ended without any reports of an explosion, or a collapsed building, and no mention of any deaths. There wasn’t even any mention of the previous killings, or progress on the case.

It seemed that, since the last double murder, the Sheffield killings had completely vanished from the national news. Harry had told me that someone had been arrested, but there was no mention of that, either. Perhaps no one had died, perhaps the morning’s message to Harry was all a mistake, a false alarm, or, perhaps my wildest speculations were correct and it was all hush-hush, and being covered up.

As the local news began, I wondered if the story had been relegated there. I was fairly sure that there was a way I could get access to the other Look Norths, rather than our “North East and Cumbria” edition, but that would involve switching on the computer and going online. It would be pointless, I assured myself. Anything associated with the Sheffield murders was certain to make the national news.

As the local news continued, I pondered the fourth name “The trainee, Cattermole.” Why would they take a trainee into a dangerous situation? Perhaps because it wasn’t supposed to be a dangerous situation.

I let Annie “help” me stack the plates in the dishwasher and wondered what to do. I’d played the pipes for long enough, possibly too long. My shoulder muscles told me it was time to put the pipes away. Singing and playing the pipes had cheered me up, but enough was enough.

As the afternoon progressed, my concerns bubbled in the back of my mind. I began to fret. On three occasions, I picked up the phone to call Ginny. Each time I replaced the handset without dialling. If Ginny wanted to contact me, she had my number. Why hadn’t she phoned?

Her remarks the previous afternoon, “He doesn’t phone me with updates during the day, you know” finally resurfaced. Was it possible that she knew no more than me? Was it possible that she knew less? My worry continued to increase and I cracked. It was ten to three, only minutes before I would normally set off to collect Henry from school. If Ginny knew nothing, if Harry hadn’t spoken to her, I needed to warn her of the reception she was likely to get at the gates. Picking up the phone, I dialled her number.

When she answered, I didn’t let her speak. She’d barely finished saying, ‘Hello, Jacqui,’ when I interrupted her.

‘I’m setting off now to collect Henry,’ I told her. ‘I don’t know whether Harry’s told you, but he was dragged away by an emergency call this morning.’

‘I know, Jacqui.’ She sounded very low, but I had made my plan, so I put my curiosity on a short leash and pressed on.

‘I don’t know what’s going on. I can collect James for you. I did say that if you need help—if you need anything at all—you just need to ask. Like I said, I don’t know what’s going on, but the call Harry got this morning was very public. I was standing right next to him, and most of the other mums were close by. After he left, they were desperate to find out what I’d heard. If you go to
collect James, you’ll face an interrogation from the other mums.

‘I’ll have to face them sometime, Jacqui,’ said Ginny. She was trying to be her usual forceful self, but her protest lacked its usual passion.

‘I know, but you don’t have to do it tonight,’ I said. ‘If you want to put off the inquisition for a day, I certainly wouldn’t blame you. I could collect James for you. It might be for the best. I can’t tell anyone anything, because I don’t know anything. It would spare Al and Lily, and James for that matter, from the mob.’

There was silence.

‘Are you still there?’ I asked. ‘I’m going to have to leave soon, so…’

‘Still here.’ Her voice was little more than a whisper. I waited for her decision.

‘Given what’s happened, I don’t want any questions, not today,’ Ginny admitted. ‘It will upset me, and that will upset the kids. Are you sure you don’t mind?’

‘Not at all,’ I assured her. ‘No problems, Ginny. That’s what friends are for, isn’t it?’

‘It is, thanks,’ she sounded genuinely grateful. ‘I’ll put the kettle on in half-an-hour or so. It will be good to have someone to talk to. It’s…’

‘I’d better go, Ginny,’ I interrupted again. ‘I don’t want to be late to collect the boys, and the less I know, the less I’ll have to tell the others. That way I won’t be delayed. See you soon.’

‘Thanks a lot, Jacqui. See you soon.’

Ginny knew something, that was obvious. I promised myself that I wouldn’t press her. Not even when I took James home, I told myself firmly. If she didn’t volunteer the information, I wouldn’t ask.

The instant I hung up, I realised that I couldn’t simply drive to school, pick up the boys, and drive back to Drakeshaugh as I’d planned. I didn’t have a car seat for James, what could I do? While strapping Annie into her seat, I improvised a plan. Once she was safely in the car, I dashed back into the house, picked up her buggy, and put it in the boot.

Rather than drive all the way down to the school, I parked in the castle car park, got Annie into her buggy, and hastily pushed her down to the school gates. I arrived only moments before the bell, and my breathless arrival without a car was noted by the other mums. I fended off questions regarding Harry’s case by honestly stating that I’d heard nothing since the morning, and saying that Ginny had asked me to collect James.

It was obvious that Amanda, for one, didn’t believe me. She implied that the fact I’d arrived on foot meant that I’d walked down from Drakeshaugh. To my astonishment, Mary intervened on my behalf.

‘I’m sure that if Jacqui knew anything, she’d tell us,’ Mary boomed. She looked a lot better than she had the previous afternoon. Pushing her way through the throng, she handed me my scruffy old Barbour coat. ‘Not exactly glamorous, but it kept the wind out while I waited, thank you,’ she said.

‘You’re welcome,’ I said. ‘How’s the car?’

‘Much better,’ she told me. ‘Ah, here’s Helen, goodbye!’ Her final word was straight from the old
Mary. It meant “this discussion is over”, and it worked. I’d arrived so late to the school that the kids were already starting to come out; Mary’s goodbye was my opportunity to escape.

‘I’m taking you to Drakeshaugh, James,’ I told him as he looked around for his mother. ‘Because your Mum is busy.’

‘Where’s a car?’ Henry asked me.

‘It’s up the road, at the castle car park,’ I told him. ‘We’re walking to Drakeshaugh, because I don’t have a car seat for James.’

‘Walking?’ Henry asked. I sensed a protest coming on.

‘I always walks home,’ James reminded him. ‘Cos my mummy don’t not got no car, ’member?’

While I was attempting to disentangle James’ overuse of negatives, Henry dropped his protest. ‘I can walk for miles! Specially onna big ’venture.’ His imagination took over. ‘Where we going, Jamie?’ he asked. ‘Onna bear hunt?’

‘We’re going on a bear hunt!’ James confirmed.

‘Did you hear that story today?’ I asked them.

‘Yeah,’ they confirmed as they trotted up the road ahead of me.

‘Keep to the side of the road, Henry,’ I ordered. He was zigzagging up the road with no regard for any potential danger.

‘Swot Mummy says, too,’ James said wisely. ‘Else cars could come an’ squish us.’

‘That’s right, James,’ I said. ‘We need to be careful of cars, don’t we?’

The boys were happy, and Henry was obviously looking forward to going to Drakeshaugh. Despite having been together all day at school, they still seemed able to find stuff to talk about. Their speed fluctuated wildly as they scampered excitedly ahead of me, then dawdled to talk, or stopped to examine whatever moss-covered stone, distant sheep, or spider’s web had attracted their attention. I was constantly alternating between warning them to slow down and chivvying them to hurry up.

It was the first time I’d walked from the school to Drakeshaugh, a journey that Ginny made every day. I soon discovered that, although there wasn’t much of a gradient, pushing Annie up the hill towards the castle car park wasn’t easy. Ginny had a double buggy; she pushed both Al and Lily more than a mile from her home, and then went back again with James. It was little wonder that she was fit.

I wasn’t, and it took me much longer than I expected to reach the track that led to Drakeshaugh. We were still more than quarter of a mile from James’ home, but at least we were safely off the road. While I opened the gate, James led Henry up and over the wooden ladder stile next to it.

‘Me, me,’ Annie demanded, pointing at the boys, who by then were standing atop the style.

‘The gate’s open,’ I told her. ‘And I think those steps are rather big and steep for a little girl.’ I thought that they were a little steep for the boys, too, but they’d already reached the top, so there was no point in saying anything.

‘Not,’ she argued. By then it was too late. I’d pushed her through the gate and allowed it to swing
closed. The boys clambered down and joined us on the track, but she continued to complain.

‘It’s not far now, Annie,’ I assured her. ‘We’re nearly at Drakeshaugh. Soon we’ll see Al and Lily.’

The first section of the track was as steep as the road, but getting the laden buggy up the loose gravel required even more effort. Fortunately, I hadn’t even got a hundred yards from the gate when James yelled, ‘Moomee!’ and began waving wildly.

Ginny hadn’t completely crested the ridge in the road, all I could see was her head and shoulders. Despite this, it was obvious from her posture that she was holding both Al and Lily by the hand. As Henry and James ran up to meet them, Ginny released her two youngest. Annie saw them and increased her protests.

‘Out, out, out!’ she demanded, tugging at her straps.

I put the brakes on the buggy, released her, and watched as she scampered up the track after the boys, shouting, ‘Wait for me!’ To my surprise, they did.

My load lightened considerably, I followed them up the track. Ginny had slowed. When the kids met, she was several yards behind them. I stared over the heads of the children, across the space dividing me from my friend. She was silent and unsmiling. As I stared into her careworn face, I knew that, despite the lack of any news reports, Harry’s initial message had been accurate.

‘There’s apple juice waiting for you, and fruitcake.’ The flatness in her voice I’d discerned over the phone was patently obvious when Ginny called out to the kids. ‘It’s on the floor in the living room. An indoor picnic.’

Squealing happily, they all trotted off up the track. Ginny managed a feeble smile and a quiet hello to my two when they passed her. Five happily shouting and squealing voices faded into the distance ahead of us, but as I closed on Ginny, her red-rimmed eyes told a different story.

Releasing the buggy, I stepped forwards and opened my arms. ‘I’m a great believer in hugs,’ I told her. ‘I even gave Harry one, this morning.’

‘He accepted it?’ she asked.

I nodded.

‘He doesn’t often do that,’ she said, trying to smile. ‘He must’ve needed it.’ Her eyes showed the enormous burden of concern that was weighing her down. I suspected that most of it was for her husband. She stepped into my embrace.

‘Terrible news,’ I observed.

Ginny squeezed me tightly. ‘Polly,’ she said. My heart skipped a beat. ‘She survived the battle… Eleven years… The Aurors—Harry’s office—haven’t lost anyone since May of ninety-eight.’ Releasing me, she looked up into my face. ‘Sorry,’ she added, wiping a tear from her eye. ‘I’ve been with the kids all day. It’s been hard.’

‘I know,’ I admitted. ‘You should’ve called me, Ginny. I’ve been worried, too. How are the others? Someone—Martha—said that there were four people involved. Polly, Dennis, Trudi, and a trainee called Cattermole. It’s wrong of me, I know, but I’ve been fretting most of the day, praying that it wasn’t Dennis. But more importantly, how are you, and how’s Harry? He looked utterly desperate when he got the call this morning.’
Ginny hugged me again. ‘Thanks for asking. Harry’s not doing too well. He’s taking it badly, blaming himself; he always does.’ She shook her head in despair.

‘He cares, Ginny,’ I said. ‘That’s obvious. And so do you! The world’s always rough for people who care. What can I do to help?’

‘Let’s go and have a cuppa,’ Ginny said. ‘We can discuss it indoors. Our kids are getting away from us.’ She motioned up the track to the gate to her home. The children were very close to it.

‘Okay.’ Grabbing Annie’s buggy, I struggled to keep up with her.

‘Polly… shielded… the others,’ Ginny told me as we hurried after the kids. ‘Dennis and Maisie Cattermole are fine, Trudi has a few broken bones, but nothing serious.’

‘Broken bones are serious enough,’ I observed.

‘I didn’t know what you’d overheard, Jacqui,’ Ginny told me. ‘Martha—she’s Harry’s personal assistant—called me this morning to tell me what was going on, but by then they had rescued the survivors. I haven’t managed to talk to Harry yet. No one, not even Martha, thought to let me know that the call to Harry had been overheard. They’re all under a lot of pressure. If I’d known you were worried...’

‘Harry’s got a lot more to think about than his daft old nosey neighbour,’ I assured her. ‘But everyone at the gates heard the alarm go off, Ginny; code black, emergency port key! It was obviously some sort of code. Then Harry called Martha. She told him that... that someone had died, but at the time they didn’t know who.’

Ginny placed a comforting hand on my arm. ‘And you’ve been worried all day that it might be Dennis.’

‘I didn’t want it to be anyone!’ Although I tried to protest, I felt it necessary to make a full confession. ‘But, mostly, I didn’t want it to be Dennis. I’ve been worried all day, for Lesley’s sake. They seemed such a lovely couple, and she’s very pregnant, and it...’ I floundered for words. ‘I don’t mean that Polly is...’

‘Losing anyone is terrible,’ Ginny told me understandingly as we walked through the gates and into the gravel yard of Drakeshaugh. ‘But an expectant father like Dennis would have been even worse, and I honestly believe that Polly would have agreed.’

Ahead of us, James managed to open the door and the kids piled into Ginny’s home. ‘Wipe your feet!’ I bellowed.

‘Today, I don’t care about dirty floors,’ Ginny told me quietly. ‘Could you go and keep an eye on the kids, please. I’ll make a pot of tea, and then I’m going to call Harry.’
Ginny didn’t return to the living room for quite some time. I was getting more and more anxious when, almost half-an-hour after I’d followed the kids into Drakeshaugh, she finally scampered up the stairs with a laden tea tray. She was moving a lot quicker than I’d have dared with such a load.

Her arrival, and her much more relaxed demeanour, banished the paranoid imaginings swirling around my mind. She hadn’t broken down, or been weeping alone in the kitchen. Whatever had been said in her conversation with her husband, it had certainly calmed her down. She remained subdued by the tragedy, of course, but the anxiety she’d shown when we’d met on the track had almost vanished.

The kids had long since finished their juice and fruit cake. They were all crawling about on the floor, playing with the wooden train set. Henry and James were also trying to recite “We’re going on a Bear Hunt” to their siblings. As the boys were constantly interrupting, correcting, and side-tracking each other, the story wasn’t flowing very well.

When they’d begun their rambling recitation, I asked them about the story. They told me that “Miss” had read it to them that afternoon, and they’d been encouraged to join in. Their entertaining, if confusing, attempt at storytelling finally petered out a few minutes before Ginny arrived.

She took a long look at the happily playing kids before placing the tea tray on the low table and giving me a grateful smile. They were deeply engrossed in the serious business of building a train track. As they played, their discussions continued to flip-flop bewilderingly between what happened at school and which direction the track should take.

‘I’ve been speaking to Harry,’ Ginny told me brightly. ‘He’d told Martha—which PA—that he was so busy that he wasn’t prepared to take calls from anyone, not even me.’ Her eyes flashed fire, and I knew he’d be in trouble. ‘But she and I have an arrangement; she ignored her orders and put me through anyway. He was intending to pull an all-nighter, but I told him that he’s coming home.’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘He needs to switch off, to unwind.’

‘Exactly!’ she nodded vigorously. ‘Sometimes he’s his own worst enemy. After all, he should know by now that he often gets his best ideas when he’s rested.’ She shook her head despairingly. ‘Tea?’

‘Please,’ I said.

‘Yes, please,’ James added as she poured the tea.

‘And me,’ Henry added, obviously not wanting to be left out.

‘An’ me, pease,’ Annie requested.

‘I’ll get more cups,’ Ginny said.

‘I’m going to set off early tomorrow, so we’ll be breakfasting with you,’ I told Mike. ‘I’m going to drop Annie off at Drakeshaugh, collect James, and then walk down to the school with him and
‘You really are a star,’ he replied, smiling. ‘Is there anything I can do to help?’

‘Not tomorrow,’ I said, but Ginny wants to keep Saturday as normal as possible for the kids…’ I hesitated, waiting for my husband to make the leap.

‘Harry’s going to be at work again, isn’t he?’ Mike observed. ‘We’ve already managed the swimming trip without him once, we can easily do it again.’ Leaning back on the sofa, deep in thought, he shuffled sideways so he could easily see my face.

‘You know, Jacqui, before we moved out here we spent ages discussing whether it was the right thing to do,’ he reminded me. ‘We talked about how isolated we’d be, and the problems we were likely to face and—after a lot of chat—we decided we’d manage. But we had two cars, even then, because we need them! Harry and Ginny have moved up here despite the fact that Ginny hasn’t even passed her driving test! She’s not so much isolated at Drakeshaugh as trapped there. I wonder if they really thought about the implications of their move? I hope that the remoteness of the place doesn’t get to her.’

‘Do you think it might?’ I asked anxiously.

‘Dunno,’ he admitted.

I watched as my husband ponderously gathered his thoughts and tried to make sense of them. ‘It probably won’t. She seems like a proper country girl, like you. She’s perfectly at home in the countryside with her kids and her chickens. But when Harry’s not around, she literally can’t go anywhere, at least not without help from friendly neighbours. There aren’t even any buses up here! I’m just…’ Mike paused. ‘While I was bathing the kids, Henry told me that James was his “bestest friend inna world”. I think I’m just a little worried about what would happen if they decided that they couldn’t stick it, living way up here, and left. It’s a helluva change from where they were living, in London.’

I was about to interrupt, but Mike waved me into silence. ‘I know, I know!’ he said with a smile. ‘We can’t wrap our kids up in cotton wool. Making, and losing, friends is a fact of life. But let’s be honest, Jacqui, there are no other boys Henry’s age in the school, and none of the older boys are anywhere near as close to him in terms of friendship, or physical distance, as James is. Their friendship is doing them both good.’ He sighed. ‘I’m probably worrying about nothing, sorry.’

‘I’d hardly call our son’s happiness “nothing”!’ I leant over and gave him a kiss.

‘There’s nothing we can do about it,’ he admitted. ‘And, anyway, they could fall out with each other tomorrow.’

‘Unlikely,’ I said. He made a gesture of helplessness.

‘So, what was this battle Ginny mentioned, the one poor old Polly survived?’ He asked. When he started talking, he was still grinning from my kiss, but by the time he reached the question, his eyes had a faraway, melancholic look. I knew he was remembering our brief encounter with the woman. ‘Any idea?’

Mike often picked up on things I’d missed, but I couldn’t see the point of his question.

‘I didn’t ask,’ I admitted. ‘When I arrived at Drakeshaugh, after I’d collected James and Henry, she was… To be honest, Mike, I’ve never seen Ginny looking so down. All I did was listen, and try to cheer her up. Although it turned out that one phone call with Harry was all it took to do that! What
would’ve been the point of asking her about some combat Polly Protheroe survived?’ Leaning my head on his shoulder, I waited for him to put his arm around me before continuing.

‘Ginny probably doesn’t know much about it. I mean, she said something about “ninety-eight”, I think. It’s not as if she was there, is it? In nineteen-ninety-eight Ginny was probably—definitely—still at school! But she wasn’t making much sense. She mentioned eleven years ago, and a battle, and ninety-eight, but for all I know they might be three different things. They almost certainly are.’

‘True,’ Mike admitted. He sighed. ‘It’s weird to think that we met the goth a few weeks ago, and now…’ His voice tailed off.

‘And now you’ll never know where her hippogriff tattoo was.’

‘Jacques!’ He was shocked.

‘We only met her once, but it was enough to know that she’d be the first to laugh at that.’

He chuckled. ‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘I think she would.’

We sat in silence, and hugged each other.

The following morning, as I dropped both Henry and James off at school, I found myself once again under siege. Encircled by an impenetrable wall of mothers, whose barrage of questions battered relentlessly at my defences, I had no alternative but to tell them all I knew. One of Harry’s staff was dead. No, she hadn’t been shot. She’d been in a cellar, and it had collapsed. I had no idea if there had been an explosion, because investigations were ongoing. I had no idea why it hadn’t been on the news.

‘You don’t know much, do you?’ observed Amanda. With Mary silenced, it seemed to me that Amanda had decided to sharpen her own tongue.

I admitted that I didn’t. Curbing the more venomous reply that bubbled in my gut, I simply said, ‘Polly Protheroe is dead, Ginny’s upset, and Harry’s busy. I’m not prepared to bother them by asking for all the details.’

‘Polly Protheroe!’ Amanda jumped on my comment. ‘You know her name. Was she one of the women at Harry’s party? Was she that short-haired one, the woman with the weird hippy husband?’

I shook my head. ‘Polly wasn’t at the party.’

‘You can’t be sure,’ opined Amanda dismissively. ‘I’m sure you didn’t meet everyone there.’

‘I can, because I met her weeks before the party,’ I replied. I regretted the words the moment they left my mouth.

Amanda immediately began to press me for more details. Was she young or old? Did she look like a secret agent? Under this onslaught, it was an easy decision for me to decide not to share my impressions of the eccentric goth. Doing so would merely lead to more questions, and I knew I’d be unable to answer any of them. All I said was that it was a very brief encounter, she looked to be about forty, and she’d seemed nice.

As I tried to make my escape from the questioners, Amanda played her final card. ‘I thought I’d call on Ginny to let her know that we’re all thinking of her. Do you want a lift?’
‘You don’t need to go,’ I said. ‘I can tell her for you.’

‘I’d much rather do it myself,’ she told me, somehow managing to imply that she didn’t trust me to pass on the message. ‘My car’s this way; come on.’

It was an order, not a request. Even so, I ignored it.

‘No, thanks, Amanda. The walk will do me good.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. I have the car here, and you’ve left yours at Drakeshaugh.’

‘I want to walk,’ I said stubbornly. ‘And Ginny won’t be expecting you.’ I tried to imbue the statement with as much protest as I could, but it was a pathetic reason.

It was obvious that Amanda wasn’t going to take my hint. The tiniest shake of her head was enough to show that I’d failed utterly. ‘You can walk if you want,’ she told me. ‘When I get there, I’ll ask her to pop the kettle on, shall I?’

‘It will be on, anyway,’ I felt the need to defend my friend from what seemed to me to be another veiled insult. ‘Ginny knows how long it will take me to walk back.’

Shaking her head again, Amanda climbed into her car and set off up the road. I watched her leave, and wondered whether to phone Ginny and warn her. It was then that I realised I’d left my bag, and with it my phone, in my car.

I was only about halfway up the road to the Drakeshaugh track when Amanda sped past me, heading in the opposite direction. I registered a worried expression on her face and wondered what had happened. What could have made her change her mind?

Upon my arrival at Drakeshaugh, I was proved correct. The kettle was coming to the boil. The second thing I did—after first fussing over Annie, Al, and Lily, who were playing with the wooden alphabet bricks on the kitchen floor—was to tell Ginny what had happened at the school gates. She was rather amused.

‘Coffee or tea?’ she asked. A large cafetiere was standing ready on the bench; it was obvious that Ginny was going to have a coffee.

‘Coffee’s fine,’ I told her.

‘How close do you think she got?’ Ginny asked, as she poured the water over the grounds.

Watching Ginny work, I gave it some thought. ‘I’m not sure,’ I replied. ‘I don’t think she can have gone any farther than the gate onto the track. It wasn’t locked, was it? I don’t know because I used the stile.’

‘No,’ Ginny assured me. ‘It’s never locked. And Amanda looked worried?’

‘That’s what I thought, yes,’ I confirmed, trying to read Ginny’s face. I was fairly sure that she was happy about the fact that Amanda hadn’t arrived unannounced, but beneath that there appeared to be another, more calculated, reaction.

‘You’re not worried about visiting me, are you, Jacqui?’ Ginny asked, pressing down on the plunger.
‘What a strange question,’ I said. ‘Of course not. I’m sure that no one would be worried about calling in on you, Ginny,’ I added reassuringly. I worried that the strain was getting to my friend; it appeared she was concerned about becoming a social outcast.

‘You have no idea how special you are, Jacqui,’ she told me with a sly smile. ‘Milk, cream, or black?’ She lifted the coffee pot.

‘Milk, please. Semi-skimmed, if you have it. I’m nothing special,’ I protested. ‘I’m really very ordinary, even boring.’

She put down the cafetiere without pouring, walked over, and hugged me. ‘Think what you like, Jacqui. But believe me, you’re not ordinary.’

‘Mike tells me I’m extraordinary,’ I admitted. ‘But I think he’s probably teasing. After all, the way he tends to use it, that word could mean anything!’

‘He’s a good man. I’m certain he means it,’ Ginny assured me. Returning to the kitchen table, she poured our coffees.

I shook my head. ‘I doubt it. He can be such an idiot, and besides, he’s my husband; he’s supposed to say things like that.’ I told her.

‘Being a good man and an idiot aren’t mutually exclusive, you know,’ Ginny told me with a grin. ‘You have met my brothers, haven’t you?’

I laughed and nodded.

‘And what’s my excuse?’ she asked. ‘How many times do you need to hear a compliment before you take it?’

‘I… um… thanks,’ I said, not wanting to prolong my embarrassment.

‘You really aren’t good at taking praise,’ she laughed. ‘You’re a lot like Harry in that respect.’

‘And you’re a lot happier today than you were yesterday,’ I observed.

‘Because Harry was a lot happier when he came home last night,’ she admitted. ‘I think we can expect an arrest soon.’

This wasn’t the first time she’d thought the case was cracked, and she’d been wrong before. I had to repress a sudden surge of anxiety, so my nod of agreement was rather perfunctory. It didn’t matter; she was feeling upbeat, and my unspoken and inexplicable doubts passed her by. I had a vague feeling that there would be more trouble ahead, but I had no idea why.

‘Mike’s agreed that we can get you and the kids to the pool tomorrow,’ I told her. ‘Any other plans for blackberry week, next week?’

‘Blackberry week?’

‘Sorry,’ I said, rather embarrassed. ‘It’s a bit old-fashioned of me, but that’s what Mam always called the October half-term break. Your blackberries will be ripe by then—they’re ripe now. I noticed a lot of fat and juicy looking ones on the side of the track when I walked up here. I even tried a few as I passed.’ I showed her my purple stained fingers as proof. ‘They’re very sweet. Are you going to pick them? It’ll give the kids something to do.’
‘Half-term?’ Ginny asked.

‘Next week,’ I nodded, looked into Ginny’s face, and realised that she didn’t seem to know what I was talking about. ‘A letter with the term dates came home with Henry the first week of term,’ I explained. ‘Half-term is next week. The boys aren’t at school. All of the holidays have been on my calendar since I got the list. Didn’t you get the letter?’

I watched as realisation struck. ‘I did. I put the dates on my calendar, but I’ve had so many other things on my mind,’ she admitted.

‘True,’ I agreed. ‘So, you’ve no plans? It shouldn’t be too difficult to keep the kids occupied. There’ll be stuff on at the sports centre if we get desperate, of course. My sister and I used to spend at least one day with Mam picking blackberries, and another helping—in retrospect I should probably say hindering—her make bramble jelly.’ I smiled at the memory.

‘That sounds like a good idea,’ Ginny said. ‘We’re busy on Sunday, but if the kids are off all week, we could do some picking on Monday.’

‘I wasn’t trying to invite myself,’ I protested.

Ginny waved me into silence. ‘Do you really think that James and Henry will be able to last a week without seeing each other?’ She looked at me, widened her eyes, and altered her stance; I saw James’ protesting expression on her face. ‘A whole week? But Moomee, that’s like… forever!’

I had to laugh. She’d exaggerated his rather eccentric pronunciation of mummy, but otherwise her impersonation of James was spot-on. ‘Great, I’ll…’

‘Ginny,’ Harry’s voice echoed from her pocket. She pulled out her phone and stared down at it.

‘Hi, Harry,’ she said. ‘Jacqui’s here, hang on a second.’ She looked at me. ‘Okay if I take this in the study?’

‘Fine,’ I said.

She scurried from the kitchen and across the small hall. As she opened the door into the room with the big old desk with the inkwell and quill, I got the briefest of glimpses into it. I saw just enough to be certain I hadn’t been mistaken about the quill, then the door closed and silence fell.

I turned my attention to the chattering kids.

‘Geen,’ Lily told me proudly, holding up a green-painted wooden block.

‘Brillian’ are peas play green,’ Al told me, proudly displaying his knowledge. ‘Rubbish cannon zorange.’

‘Sorry, Al. I didn’t quite hear that,’ I admitted, unable to figure out what he was trying to tell me.

‘Berloo,’ Annie interjected, holding up a blue block. It was obvious that she didn’t want to be left out of the conversation.

‘Yes, blue,’ I agreed. ‘Can you say it properly, Annie?’

‘Berloo,’ she nodded.

‘Red and yellow and pink and green. Purple and orange and blue,’ I sang. Annie immediately joined in. Surprisingly, Ginny’s two didn’t appear to know the words.
I knelt down on the hard stone floor and started again. This time I sang the song slower, and encouraged Al and Lily to sing along.

‘Red.’ As we started the song, Annie found a red brick and placed it in front of her. Al and Lily followed suit. It became a contest, but it was a very uneven one. Annie had the huge advantage of being word perfect with the song; she was collecting bricks even before the Potter kids knew which colour to look for.

We went through the song twice, and the second time I encouraged the kids to touch a brick of the correct colour. When we finished, there was a round of applause from behind me.

‘That was lovely,’ Ginny said. ‘Well done children, and well done, Jacqui.’

‘Again,’ Annie demanded. ‘Red an…’

Al, Lily, and I joined in.

‘That’s enough now, Annie,’ I said when we finished. ‘Perhaps we can sing again, later. But now I’d like to finish my coffee.’

‘Kay,’ she nodded.

I hauled myself to my feet. ‘Everything okay, Ginny?’ I asked.

‘I think so,’ Ginny told me. ‘They’ll be releasing a name and photograph of the man they’re looking for later today, and Harry’s confident that they finally have the right man. But that’s not why he phoned. He wanted to let me know that Polly named him as her executor. She has no family, so she chose her boss.’

‘He must’ve known,’ I said. ‘He’d have had to sign something, wouldn’t he?’

‘Yes, but she did it years ago, and he’d forgotten. He’s starting to organise the funeral according to Polly’s very—particular—instructions.’ She chose the word carefully.

‘Particular?’ I asked.

‘She’d planned her own funeral down to the last detail. Music, everything!’ Ginny said. ‘She’s even named the four people she wants as her pallbearers.’

‘Harry was always going to attend,’ I said thoughtfully, more to myself than to Ginny.

Although I’d known them for less than two months, I knew Harry well enough to be certain of that fact. Ginny nodded, and something in her expression made me certain she’d be at her husband’s side.

‘We can look after the kids,’ I offered. ‘You can’t always drag your mum up here from Devon; it’s such a long journey. If we take care of them it’s one thing less for you, and Harry, to worry about—and to organise.’

‘That’s really good of you,’ said Ginny. ‘Mum and Dad are in France for a well-deserved holiday. They’re staying with Monsieur and Madame Delacour, Fleur’s parents, for a couple of weeks. Although it’ll be a miracle if Mum can cope with Apolline—Fleur’s mother—for that long.’ She laughed, glanced at the kids, and added. ‘At least we won’t have to worry about getting along with the in-laws for a long time.’ She paused, and returned to the original topic. ‘I’ll talk to Harry about the funeral arrangements tonight. But we already owe you such a lot. The kids so look forward to
the trips to the pool.’

‘You don’t owe us anything,’ I assured her.

‘Twain,’ Annie demanded. We took the kids up to the living room.

I had no other plans, so spent the entire day with Ginny and the kids. We played games and sang, and made ginger biscuits together. By half-past two we were back in the Potter’s barn-sized living room with some of the still-warm biscuits, and I was teaching the kids to sing “The Keel Row”.

I had almost forgotten about Harry’s case. The tragedy of the outside world was such a long way from the peaceful and happy family life going on at Drakeshaugh. The kids were blissfully unaware of how horrible the outside world could be. It was then that Harry rang again. When Ginny returned, she had a lot to tell me. After she’d done so, we planned how we’d tell the other mums.

‘Ginny!’

We were surrounded the moment we approached the school.

‘There’s going to be something on your news programmes tonight,’ Ginny began.

‘Our news programmes?’ Angela asked.

‘Ginny doesn’t own a television,’ I explained. It seemed that fact was almost bigger news than what we intended to tell them. Ginny, who’d been uncharacteristically silent after Angela’s interruption, gave me a grateful glance and indicated that I should tell them the news.

‘Harry’s people have identified the… the man they want to question about the killings,’ I began.

‘They haven’t caught him?’ Angela asked.

‘He’s called Pelias Hume.’ I refused to be diverted.

‘Pelias? What sort of a name is that?’ one of the other mothers asked.

‘Also known as,’ I paused, and tried to remember the other names Ginny had told me.

‘Pelias Fawley and Peter Wolfman,’ said Ginny.

‘Peter Wolfman…’ That name was a rock in the river, rippling across several lips.

Ginny continued regardless. ‘His brother, Jason, rented the place in Sheffield where the police found that young couple. Jason is already under arrest.’

‘They ought to string him up,’ someone said. I bristled, but Ginny ignored that comment so I did, too.

‘There was another man named a few weeks ago, a Mr Robards,’ I added. ‘He’d been kidnapped, what we heard yesterday morning was the aftermath of a dawn raid, where Mr Robards was rescued by Harry’s team.’

There was an avalanche of questions, and Ginny moved to the fore. ‘I can’t say any more,’ she said. ‘You might find out more on the news programmes, but I don’t know. I don’t know what Harry will be allowed to say, and I can’t tell you anything else, because that’s all he’s told us.’
Standing side by side, Ginny and I stonewalled all other questions, simply repeating ourselves until the kids left school. The moment our interrogators were, like us, forced to attend to more mundane matters, we made our escape.

‘Thanks,’ Ginny said as we walked back to Drakeshaugh with the kids.

‘No problem,’ I assured her.

The early evening news led on the case, and Mike settled down at my side to watch it with me. The report was accompanied by an unflattering photograph of Pelias Hume. He was a gaunt and dark-eyed man in his late twenties, or early thirties. Unlike the earlier sensational stories about wolf bites, the reporter explained that the injuries to the victims had been re-examined and found to be consistent with a frenzied knife attack. The police spokesperson was someone whose name Ginny had mentioned, Inspector Roberta Wood. The Inspector gave the reporter Hume’s aliases and described him as severely mentally disturbed. The reporter concluded with a warning to the public not to approach him, but to contact the police immediately. Hume was, we were told, extremely dangerous and probably armed with a knife.

‘He’s killed four people seemingly at random,’ Mike observed. ‘It’s a bloody good thing he can’t get his hands on anything more dangerous than a knife.’

‘Bloody good,’ Annie agreed from behind us.

Mike laughed, so I slapped his arm and scolded him.
Interlude: Last Rites?

‘Let me see that,’ Susan demanded, pushing herself between Lavender and Camelia.

Harry pushed the large sheet of parchment he’d been reading across his desk. Lavender and Camelia crowded around the blonde and tried to read over her shoulder. Behind them, Bobbie stood on her tiptoes and looked over Camelia’s head. Lavender laughed. Bobbie sighed. Camelia didn’t even raise an eyebrow.

‘The last funeral I attended was my adopted son’s,’ the vampire said thoughtfully. ‘I had to pretend to be his great-niece, of course.’

‘Do we have to do this?’ Susan asked her boss. Her colleagues groaned.

‘It’s a request, not an order,’ Harry said. ‘I’m Polly’s executor and, as you can see, she’s given me some very specific instructions about her funeral arrangements. If you refuse, I have to find replacements.’

‘If I said no,’ Susan began. Ignoring the cries of outrage from her colleagues, she pressed on, ‘If I said no,’ she repeated firmly, ‘who would you ask?’

‘Given what happened, Trudi would be my first choice,’ Harry told her.

‘No!’ Lavender shook her head firmly, but Harry ignored her vociferous objection.

‘If Trudi says no, then I thought about asking Ellie Cattermole,’ he added.

‘There’s nothing to worry about, Susan,’ said Lavender dismissively. ‘You won’t have to buy nail varnish; I’ve enough for all of us.’

‘You’ve enough nail varnish for the entire Ministry, including the blokes,’ observed Bobbie sarcastically.

Ignoring the laughter, Lavender continued. ‘I may have enough black lace gloves, too. If you need to borrow some, I’ve definitely got enough pairs of fishnets for everyone, except…’ She paused, stared into space, and put on a sultry expression. ‘The last time I wore fishnets, Emmsy…’

‘We don’t want to know,’ Bobbie told her firmly. Lavender smirked.

‘I can provide my own clothes, Lavender. I was a Goth myself, for a while.’ Camelia stared thoughtfully into the deep, dark abyss of her past. ‘They’re probably in one of my 1980s wardrobes.’

‘Don’t you throw any of your old clothes out?’ asked Lavender enviously.

‘Not often. I don’t get fatter or thinner and, even after more than two hundred years, I have no idea what might come in useful in the future. The only thing I can remember ditching from my eighties wardrobe was one of those ridiculous puffball dresses.’ As she spoke, Camelia pushed her raven-black tresses back over her shoulder and began planning her outfit. ‘I’ll wear the patent leather button-up boots I bought in the 1890s. You’ve seen them, remember? When we infiltrated that gang of steampunk vampire hunters, to make certain that they didn’t find one?’
'Muggles!' Lavender shook her head in despair.

'Oi!' Bobbie protested.

'Can I assume you’ve said yes, Lavender?’ asked Harry, desperately trying to keep the conversation on track.

'It’s a chance to dress up. Of course I’ll do it,’ Lavender said. ‘I’m sure my lovely Mark can cope with our little angel for a few hours. You’ll do it, too, Susan. We owe it to Polly; she got us together.’

‘I’m in, too,’ said Bobbie. ‘You’re right, Lavender. I owe my current career to her and Harry. Although I’m certain that this is simply one final joke. It’s her final revenge on us.’

‘Probably, but we have to do her proud!’ Lavender said forcefully. She wiped a tear from her eye and noisily blew her nose. ‘I’ll miss her.’

Susan sighed. ‘You’re right, Lavender. I’ll do it, Harry.’

‘This has instructions for you, too, Harry,’ Lavender said, pointing to the final paragraph. ‘Are you really...’

‘Yes,’ he sighed.

Lavender squealed.

As his client signed the final pieces of paperwork, the funeral director looked around the deceased’s home.

The black painted walls were covered with posters of bands, most of which he’d never heard of. On the mantelpiece, where most people would have had ornaments, there stood a collection of empty beer bottles. He read the labels: Hobgoblin, Ghost Ship, Pendle Witches Brew, Black Cat, White Witch, Black Wych, Blonde Witch, Mostly Ghostly, Thatcher’s Green Goblin, Centurion’s Ghost, Phantom, King Goblin, and Pride of Pendle. There were thirteen bottles—and a definite theme.

Turning his attention to the pallbearers, he examined them carefully. The smallest, a raven-haired youngster, was stick-thin and barely five feet tall; the tallest, the one with mousey, short-cropped hair, was pregnant. Even after twenty years in the business he’d never had a pregnant pallbearer before. It was only the second time he’d had four females take on the role.

‘You’re certain that you can do this?’ he asked, trying to mask his doubt.

‘Yes,’ the four women spoke in unison.

‘It’s for Polly,’ the dimple-chinned blonde said.

‘I’m a lot stronger than I look,’ the black-haired waif assured him.

All four women wore a mix of black, blue and bronze eyeshadow, and all wore blue lipstick. Painted fingernails, also a mix of black, blue, and bronze, protruded from four pairs of black lace fingerless gloves. Beginning with the “P” on the thumb, the nails of their left hands bore the name of the deceased, one bronze letter on each blue nail. All also wore at least one pair of black fishnets. Additionally, somewhere about their person, they wore a rose. All this, he knew, was at
the request of the deceased. Other than that, their outfits were startlingly different.

The blonde’s hair was a neat bun wrapped in black lace. Of all the quartet, she looked the least comfortable in her outfit; it was almost as though someone else had dressed her. The tails of her black velvet tailcoat fell halfway down her calves, far below the tight skirt that ended four inches above her knees. A gold watch-chain dangled from her buttoned yellow and black checked waistcoat. Her rose was in the buttonhole of her tailcoat.

The pregnant woman wore a black bowler hat with a rose in its chequered band. The bowler appeared to be a genuine Metropolitan Police female uniform hat—it even had the badge. He found it difficult to believe, but her sturdy black lace-up boots looked to be police standard, too. Her baby bump distorted the lace-hemmed purple sweater-dress she wore, and it was unlikely that the black ankle-length trench coat she wore over it could be buttoned. Nevertheless, she looked a lot more at ease than the blonde.

The other two women were obviously enjoying themselves.

The curvaceous woman’s lavender-coloured hair was mounded up into a lace-festooned beehive and topped off with the rose. She was the only one of the four wearing opera gloves, and her shoulders were bare. The flouncy collection of lace skirts and petticoats below her black, cleavage-displaying corset were so short that the red and yellow garters that held up two pairs of torn and laddered fishnets were visible. On top of the lot, she wore a floor length black cloak lined with red silk.

The raven-haired woman wore a pillbox hat with a veil that not only covered her face, but also curved under her chin. Her unbound hair cascaded down the back of the black off-the-shoulder Victorian dress she wore; her rose was placed in its cleavage. The dress, which appeared to have been cruelly hacked short, fell to just above her knees. The red lace petticoat beneath was calf length, and beneath it, patent leather button boots gleamed.

‘Is that everything?’ asked his client. The bespectacled man with the lightning scar on his forehead leant forward and handed over the paperwork. He was no less bizarrely dressed than the pallbearers.

Now the papers were signed the executor, Mr H J Potter (“Call me Harry, please.”), was exuding a simmering grimness. His purple frock coat was open, revealing a blue and yellow striped waistcoat. Looking down at his coat, Mr Potter adjusted the rose in its buttonhole and checked his inside pocket. This caused the funeral director to check his own pocket, where he had a copy of Mr Potter’s eulogy, just in case. Now lost in thought, Mr Potter was examining the raven feathers protruding from the band of his purple top hat.

The funeral director checked his own buttonhole. The roses were a variety he now knew well. He had spent a frantic day tracking down every “Black Baccara” rose he could find. His client had told him that money was no object. It was just as well; this was one of the most expensive funerals he’d ever organised.

When Mr Potter pulled a battered gold pocket watch from his waistcoat, the funeral director was brought back to the present. Looking at his wristwatch, he folded up the forms—the bureaucracy of death—and turned to his client. ‘Yes, Mr Potter, everything is in order,’ he said. ‘It’s time to leave.’

Standing, the funeral director led the quintet from the flat and down the stairs. As he opened the door, he heard his client gasp.
'It looks like a lot of people saw the notice, Harry,' the lavender-haired woman observed dryly.

They made their way out to the glass-sided, horse-drawn hearse. The blue and yellow beribboned wicker casket inside was surrounded by Black Baccara roses.

There were, the funeral director estimated, almost one hundred people in the street, plus four loudly grumbling motorcycles. His client had been unable to tell him how many people would be attending the funeral. He’d estimated forty or fifty, and he’d been wrong.

The street was a sea of black, blue, red, and purple. Tattoos, piercings, unnatural hair colours, and strange hairstyles were everywhere. There were leather jackets, frock coats and lace, even among the more mature of the mourners. Close behind the hearse stood a stout grandmotherly figure and a thin sallow-faced man; both were around sixty, and both were wearing long black cloaks. The woman also sported a pointed witches hat. Suddenly, the five people he’d met inside the deceased’s home didn’t look at all outlandish.

‘I will lead the hearse,’ the funeral director reminded his client. ‘You should walk directly behind it, Mr Potter. Ladies, in pairs behind Mr Potter, please.’

Leaving them to sort themselves out, he walked over to have a quiet word with his two assistants. ‘Kevin, call ahead and tell the cemetery they’ll need to put out about fifty more chairs. Walter, get to the back and try to keep this lot two abreast. Kevin will help, once he’s make the phone call.’

Moving in front of the horses, he put on his top hat. He was straightening his coat when two of the motorcycles roared past the hearse and pulled alongside him. One, whose pot-bellied rider had grey hair hanging lankly down his back, pulled up to the kerb. The other stopped alongside the funeral director.

‘Me’n Slim’ll lead,’ the bushy-bearded, black-jacket-wearing man told him. ‘Make sure there’s no tosser tries t’ stop us. Boris ’n Nobby are gonna keep order at the back, okay?’

‘Certainly,’ the funeral director said, although he was, in truth, far from certain. ‘Let’s go.’ He raised his umbrella into the air. When he dropped it, he set off at a stately pace. Ahead, two bikes rolled slowly forwards, riders constantly glancing in their mirrors. Behind him, reins jangled as the coachman coaxed the two white-stockinged black Shires into motion.

The walk from Kentish town would take half an hour and, as he strode down the streets, past the gawping public, he wondered who Polly Protheroe had been. Getting a burial plot in Highgate was almost unheard of, and the numerous mourners behind the hearse were some of the most eccentric he’d ever seen.

Ginny wore a knee-length black dress, a fitted jacket, and the black Homburg she’d worn to every remembrance service at Hogwarts. As she watched the additional chairs being hastily set up, she wondered what the unfortunately absent witch-fashion correspondents—who hated the fact that she’d worn the same hat every second of May for five years—would make of the Black Baccara rose she had attached to the hatband.

She had been at the cemetery for almost half an hour. Not being part of the cortege didn’t concern her. She wasn’t an Auror, and she didn’t know Polly well. Her presence at the cemetery was a wifely duty, a reassurance to her husband. Harry wanted everything to run smoothly, and he’d been worried about the graveside ceremony. As she watched the Muggles efficiently reorganise the seating, she knew his anxiety had been unfounded. But she also knew that her presence would be a comfort to him when he came to read Polly’s eulogy.
When the cortege arrived, right on time, it’s size and make up surprised her. It certainly explained
the hastily placed folding seats. Ginny tried not to smile as the mourners poured forwards; they
were trying get a good location while also keeping a degree of funereal decorum. She distracted
herself by watching her gaudily-dressed husband attend the four members of the Muggle Interface
Team as they lifted the coffin from the glass-sided carriage.

The funeral director and his three men had been alert when the wicker casket was pulled from the
hearse, presumably concerned that the four women would be unable carry it. The coffin was,
however, carefully balanced on their shoulders and they bore its weight with a determined ease.
Bobbie and Susan were at the rear, Lavender and Camelia at the front, and many of the Muggle
attendees were using their mobile telephones to photograph the four female pallbearers.

This was only the second Muggle funeral Ginny had attended, and it was very different from the
first. Reminded of that occasion, Ginny looked around to check on Dennis. He and Lesley—who
couldn’t possibly get any more pregnant—were standing between the Corners and a sallow faced
older man in a black-cloak. The Creeveys were hand in hand, and both were crying. The older man
was also crying. He was an Auror and, from his age, Ginny assumed that he was Aloysius Webb,
the oldest member of Harry’s team.

‘D’you know who that lot are?’

‘The pallbearers?’ Ginny turned to face the heavily tattooed and pierced woman who’d stepped up
to her side to ask the question.

‘Yeah.’ The woman wore a motorcycle jacket, a black leather calf-length skirt, which contained far
more zips than were necessary, and a black t-shirt. The t-shirt puzzled Ginny. The image was of
Death, the Grim Reaper, a concept she knew was familiar to both Muggle and Wizardkind;
however, the words underneath the image —“I COULD MURDER A CURRY”— made no sense.
Realising it must be a Muggle thing, she said nothing.

‘You’re Trish-from-the-pub, aren’t you?’ Ginny asked.

Startled, the woman nodded. The chain that stretched across her cheek from her nose ring, through
an extremely large hole in her earlobe, and back again rattled against itself.

‘You’ve spoken to my husband. He came to see you.’ She indicated Harry. ‘The wake is being held
at your pub.’

‘The Dorsetshire Arms, yeah,’ the woman nodded. ‘So—you’re “The Harpy”? I fort you must be,
’cos of your ’air, but you’re not what I was expecting.’

‘The Harpy? Is that what Polly called me?’ Ginny asked, somewhat surprised that Polly had ever
discussed her other life with the woman.

Trish nodded, and once again Ginny found herself watching the chains rippling across the
woman’s cheek.

‘She never called nobody by their proper names—’cept me an’ big-boss-Harry. E’s younger van I
fort, so are you. So, who’s the blonde?’

‘Susan Bones.’

‘So, that’s Prim! Bloody hell, getting’ yer dolled up like that must be Poll’s idea of a joke. She was
the one I wasn’t sure about. Plod and Plughole were easy to spot, but from what Poll said, I fort
Polidori would be a helluva lot older.’ She indicated, in turn, Bobbie, Lavender, and Camelia.
'Prim, Plod, Plughole, and Polidori?' asked Ginny, intrigued. ‘Prim, I get, and plod is police, right?’

‘Yeah,’ Trish agreed.

‘What about Plughole and Polidori?’

‘What happens when you pull out a plug?’ Trish asked.

‘The water drains…’ Ginny stopped and thought. ‘Everything in the sink revolves around the plughole.’

Trish smiled. ‘Poll said you was sharp.’

‘Polidori?’ Ginny asked.

‘Not sure about that one,’ Trish admitted. ‘John William Polidori wrote “The Vampyre”. I fink it must be somefink to do wiff that. It’s one o’ Poll’s jokes, like plughole, but she never explained that ’un. What about old “Spider,” is he here?’

While they’d been speaking, the pallbearers had carefully lowered the coffin to rest next to the open grave. Harry was striding over to join Ginny and Trish at the podium. Heads bowed, the pallbearers followed.

‘Spider?’ Ginny asked. ‘Who’s Spider?’

‘That’s what Polly called Aloysius Webb,’ said Harry as he stepped up to the podium. ‘Hello, Trish, there isn’t a problem with the wake, is there?’

‘Nah,’ she shook her head. ‘So, is Spider here?’

Harry pointed out the sallow-faced man.

‘Black cloak and purple velvet jacket at his age? Respect!’ said Trish, impressed. ‘Poll always liked ’im. I’ll go an’ say ’ello.’

As Trish scurried away, Ginny turned to her husband. ‘I feel distinctly underdressed, Mr Potter,’ she said. ‘You’re looking good, damn good. You suit the waistcoat, you should wear one more often.’

Harry stared at her in disbelief.

‘D’you think I could carry off Lavender’s ensemble?’ Ginny continued.

‘In the privacy of our bedroom, perhaps,’ Harry murmured, a twinkle in his eye.

‘What’s so funny, Ginny?’ Lavender asked as she moved to stand at Harry’s left.

‘And what is this awful din?’ Susan asked as she stepped up next to Lavender.

‘It’s called Love Song and it’s by The Damned,’ Camelia told her. ‘I saw them live a couple of times, nearly thirty years ago. The second time I managed to nick Captain Sensible’s red beret. I wonder I put it?’

‘The Damned?’ Susan pursed her lips.
‘What are they playing during the committal, Harry?’ Camelia asked.

He checked his notes. ‘Spellbound, Siouxsie and the Banshees,’ he said.

‘Polly was a wicked witch! I wish I’d met her sooner,’ said Camelia, laughing. ‘This is different, isn’t it?’

Before he could reply, the funeral director signalled that the last of the mourners had been seated. The music faded. Harry looked out at the crowd, and silence fell.

‘I’d like to thank you all for coming. I’m sure that Polly wouldn’t be surprised to see how many people are here to send her off,’ he began. ‘She’d be “totally bleedin’ gobsmacked”.’ He paused to allow the nervous laughter to die down. ‘Before we start, I’d like to invite everyone to The Dorsetshire Arms after the service. If there’s anyone here who doesn’t know where it is, please speak to the landlady, Trish.

Trish stood and raised a studded-leather gloved fist. There was a muted cheer.

‘My name is Harry Potter, and I was Polly’s boss,’ Harry began. ‘We’re here today to celebrate the life of Polly Protheroe, and the first thing you need to know is that her name wasn’t Polly. That surprised me, too. Did anyone, other than Polly herself, know that the name on her birth certificate is Mary Magdalene Protheroe…’

Harry looked around the crowded bar. The place was jumping: the music was loud, the buffet was well picked-over, and the mourners were a raucous lot. So far as he could tell, no one in Polly’s large circle of Muggle friends had a real name and, so far as the Muggles were concerned, neither did any of the magical mourners.

‘So, you’re “boss-man-Harry”,’ was the standard greeting he’d received from the many Muggles who had shaken his hand. He and Ginny had tried their best to socialise. They had spoken to those who “Trish-from-the-pub” had identified as Polly’s closest friends. Despite the strangeness of their names, Bert—whose relatively normal name disguised the fact that he was actually called Kevin—had joined Mustang Sally, Knobhead, Rat, Tray, Slim and Scotch Wullie in expressing a deep sense of loss.

The two worlds that Polly had inhabited had come together and, astonishingly, they seemed to be getting along. The members of the Muggle Interface Team—Prim, Plod, Plughole, and Polidori—were surrounded by curious well-wishers, all of whom had heard much-edited tales of their exploits investigating ghosts and other weird stuff. Lavender was already on her third pint of Pendle Witches Brew. Harry, who was still nursing his first, had turned down more offers of a drink than he could count.

Aloysius Webb was deep in conversation with three of Polly’s closest friends. Tray, a blowsy bleached-blonde in an ill-fitting catsuit, was crying black mascara tears as she spoke to the Office’s oldest working Auror. Mustang Sally—whose husky voice was almost male, although everything else about her appeared to be female—and Scotch Wullie—who was wearing a kilt because of a long-ago conversation with Polly—were helping Al Webb to console her. Webb had shed tears when he discovered how far Polly’s nickname for him had spread.

Harry thought back to his own conversation with Scotch Wullie. It seemed to sum up Polly’s world.

‘First time I met her she said “Yer accent’s Scottish, and your last name starts “Mac” so where’s
yer kilt?”. I told her that I wasn’t Scottish, and that fact should be bloody obvious. I was born in Zimbabwe, but raised in Fife. Ma name is Wilson Mkhuze, but that didnae matter tae Polly. From that day te this, everyone in this place has called me Scotch Wullie. For years she pestered me.

“Where’s yer kilt, Scotch Wullie?” Every bloody time I saw her it wez the same question. She pissed me eff so much that one day I telt her she’d nivvor see me in one, but I’d wear one to her funeral.’ He shrugged sadly. ‘Nivvor thocht it wad happen, but here I am.’

‘You didn’t know about this, did you?’ Ginny asked. Harry shook himself free of his contemplation and turned away from the room.

‘I knew she where she lived, and she’d sometimes tell us stories about her Muggle friends, but to be honest, I was certain she was exaggerating. I didn’t believe half of what she said.’ Harry stared out across the pub.

‘But now you do,’ Ginny said.

‘If anything, she was understating things.’ Harry nodded. ‘Any random Muggle could walk into the Leaky Cauldron and see a more normal looking crowd than this lot! She was the first ever Muggle-born Auror, you know? And now we’re back down to one.’ He glanced over at Dennis Creevey.

‘Wotcher, boss. Good turn out,’ Polly said. ‘I hope you haven’t cleared out my desk. We’ve got an Auror killer to catch.’

Harry swore, and almost knocked over the remains of his pint.

‘Pendle Witches Brew, good choice,’ Polly told him, floating through the table to examine the beer.

‘What…’ he began.

Ignoring him, Polly let out a whoop. ‘Good old Scotch Wullie. He remembered his promise,’ she yelled gleefully. Waving to the Aurors, most of whom had already noticed her, she floated through another table, crouched down on the floor behind Scotch Wullie, and looked up his kilt.

‘Lavender,’ she yelled. ‘He’s wearing it in the traditional way. Does your darling Emmsy do that?’

Lavender—who’d been indulging in a bit of gentle flirting with a couple of young men who weren’t actually conversing with her, but with her cleavage—dropped her pint. Susan and Camelia simply stared.

‘What’s going on?’ Bobbie Beadle asked her companions. ‘You three look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘There’s a very good reason for that,’ Camelia said. One of the Muggles, Mustang Sally, screamed and pointed at Polly.

Harry put the key into the lock.

‘You don’t need to be here, Ginny. You could go home.’ Ginny could see the tension in his stance. Although he tried to sound relaxed and in control, they’d been together too long for her to believe him. He didn’t really want her to go, which was just as well, as she’d already decided that she was staying. Looking into his pale face, she saw the anxiety and firmly shook her head.

‘Definitely not,’ she said. ‘I need to give that stupid, selfish, thoughtless … ghost a piece of my mind.’
‘She thought…’ Harry’s protest was half-hearted.

‘No, Harry.’ Ginny stared up at her husband. ‘She didn’t think; that’s the problem.’ Sliding a hand around his head, she pulled him down for a reassuring kiss.

‘At least four Muggles saw her before she fled from the pub,’ Ginny continued when they parted. ‘But that’s not why you’re annoyed and unhappy.’ Taking his hand, she slid her fingers through his and held on.

‘It is!’ Harry told her.

‘No,’ she said, squeezing his hand. ‘That’s simply what you’re telling yourself.’ Pausing, she caught his downcast eyes with her own. ‘I suppose it’s part of the reason,’ she admitted. ‘But… I don’t want to upset you, Harry, but you have to face the truth, and I have to tell it to you, because no one else will.’

Certain that she had his complete attention, Ginny took a deep breath and continued. ‘You’ve mourned her, Harry. I’ve watched you. I’ve held you every night since she was killed. I know what you’ve been going through. It’s brought back bad memories, and your old nightmares are back too. It’s not just you. The entire Auror Office has been mourning Polly. She’s the first Auror to die in the line of duty since The Battle, and we all hope that she’ll be the last. You haven’t…’ forcing herself to be firm, Ginny tried again. ‘You haven’t been this low since the summer of ninety-eight, and you’ve been dealing with her death by throwing yourself into your work.

With her free hand, Ginny reached up and gently held his chin. ‘I’m not complaining, it’s perfectly understandable,’ she assured him. ‘It’s helped you to cope over the past week. I hoped that the funeral would give closure, not only to you, but also to the rest of the Auror Office. That hasn’t happened, and it won’t, and you know whose fault that is!

‘While you were training, while I was still at school, you told me that Polly taught you how to cast a very powerful Blasting Curse. Well, she’s just fired one into everyone’s grieving process. The feelings of loss, feelings that everyone was coming to terms with have just been blown apart! You were starting to make order out of the chaos, but she’s exploded back into your life and made things even more chaotic. I’d suggest that we take a holiday, get away from this nonsense, but I know you! You won’t rest until the killer is caught.

Removing her hand from his chin, Ginny slipped it around her husband’s waist, pulled herself into him, and rested her head on his shoulder. She felt his free arm slip over her shoulder, while his other hand squeezed hers. The sigh of relief that exploded from him was close to a sob, and she forced herself to remain sensible and strong for him.

‘You know I’m right, and the first thing you need to do is tell her,’ She told him. ‘Because if you don’t, I will!’

‘Thanks,’ he whispered. Holding her in a rib-crushing hug, he struggled to get the words out. ‘Thank you, Ginny.’

‘You’re welcome.’ She managed to keep her voice even and practical. ‘Now, let’s go and let her know what we think. But first…’ She released him.

‘First?’ he asked.

Throwing her arms over his shoulders, she kissed him. ‘I love you,’ she told him when they finally parted. ‘Never forget it.’
'You might have to keep doing that occasionally, just to remind me,' he told her. The brightness was back in his eyes, and she knew that the lifeline she’d thrown him had worked. He was pulling himself from the pit of despair.

‘No problem,’ she said cheerfully. ‘How occasionally? Will once every fifteen minutes be often enough?’

He was still smiling when he turned the key in the lock. His smile vanished when he opened the door, because he opened it through Polly’s ghost. Surprised, he took a step backwards and pulled his wand from his pocket.

‘Sorry, boss,’ Polly began.

‘Were you listening at the door?’ Ginny demanded.

‘I heard the key go into the lock, but no one came in. I wondered what was happening. Poked my head through the door, but you was snogging—the first time. You snog a lot…’ Ginny glared, and Polly went back to the subject at hand. ‘I heard everything after that first kiss. I’m really sorry Missus P. I didn’t think this through, did I?’

‘From what I hear, you never bloody do!’ Ginny, who was close to boiling, took the opportunity to let off steam. ‘That nasty little *Prophet* columnist, John Richards, has been calling for Harry’s dismissal again. I swear that the next time I’m in the office I’m going to hex that overprivileged oaf! I spent last week assuring Harry that he was doing a good job, because he is. No one ever tells him that! He deals with crap from the press, and the politicians, and the public. The last thing he needs is crap from his own stuff.’

‘I am sorry! Honest,’ Polly sounded contrite, and she was drifting hastily away from Ginny. ‘But I was at this gig, you see, and I had to make a decision. I made the wrong one again, didn’t I?’

‘Again?’ Harry asked, walking into her flat. Ginny followed, and curiously examined the unusual décor.

‘Personal stuff,’ Polly shrugged. ‘Years ago, it’s not important.’

‘Are you talking about Kiwi Sam?’ said Ginny. Both Polly and Harry looked at her in surprise. ‘Harry doesn’t listen to Lavender’s gossip, Polly, but I do,’ she explained. ‘He was there, at your funeral, flew over from Christchurch just to attend. Trish pointed him out to me. He wouldn’t come to the wake, although Trish begged him.’

Polly buried her head in her hands, and began to wail. Ginny looked through the unhappy ghost’s insubstantial hands and into her face. ‘I’m sorry, Polly, but you should know that your death affected a lot of people.’ She watched the ghost carefully. ‘You didn’t realise how many, did you?’

Polly shook her head and used her fingers to wipe translucent tears from her cheeks. ‘I’ve really messed up again, boss,’ the ghost said sadly. ‘All I wanted to do was get back to work, to help catch my killer.’

Harry shook his head. ‘You can’t simply get back to work. You’re not an Auror, Polly, not now,’ he told her.

‘But…’

‘Polly…’ Harry was uncertain what to say.
Ginny took over. ‘Your death in service benefits paid for your funeral. Harry’s your executor, remember? He’s been dealing with your estate. You’re dead, and you aren’t an Auror. Your contract ended when you died.’

‘So, I’ll have to re-apply for my old job,’ said Polly. ‘There’s a vacancy in the Auror Office, and I’m ideally suited, because it’s the job I was doing. And I can identify the man who killed me. Don’t you want to know what he looked like? You need to know what I can tell you about the man who killed me, don’t you?’

‘I can’t guarantee that you’ll get your job back. Lavender was difficult enough, and she’s a witch. Camilia was worse and you’re…’ Harry sighed, and Ginny took his hand.

‘Camelia’s dead, and she’s working for you,’ Polly protested. ‘And then there’s old Cuthbert Binns up at Hogwarts. Employing a ghost isn’t unheard of. You’ve already got a werewolf Auror and a vampire Auror; you need a ghost Auror to complete the set, boss-man, it’s obvious! Besides, you’ll need my help to catch this guy.’

Releasing his wife’s hand, Harry walked up to the ghost of his colleague and tried to stare into her eyes. The fact that she was transparent didn’t make it easy. ‘You died eight days ago, Polly, and…’ he hesitated. ‘And we were all very sad, but we kept working. There were four witnesses to your death: Dennis, Trudie, Ellie, and Gaheris Robards. We have eye-witness testimony from all of them. The Auror Office continued to function without you; it could function without me, too.’

‘I suppose.’ Polly was even less happy than when Harry had opened the door through her. ‘I can’t change my mind now, boss. I don’t know how this works, I suppose that I might get the chance to go through the door to “Onwards” again. But…’ She threw up her hands.

‘The door to “onwards”? Where have you been?’ Harry asked as his curiosity finally got the better of him. ‘Did you have to wait until your funeral? Could you have … returned … sooner?’

Polly shrugged. ‘I don’t know, Harry. I remember being hit by the Killing Curse. That was weird. I stayed upright, and my body sort of fell out of me, and I saw Dennis get his Shield Charm up, to protect the others from the debris. At the same time, Ellie and Trudi both fired off Stunning spells, but the guy was Disapparating and their spells went straight through him. Then the mist descended.’

‘Mist?’ Harry asked.

‘It was white and fluffy, like I was standing in a cloud,’ Polly told him. ‘It sort of morphed into moving spotlights and dry ice, swirling around my ankles. It was very trippy. Then I was standing in a venue, and the place was totally rocking. Sid Vicious was on stage, and the world’s two greatest Ians; Dury and Curtis were there, too. I watched loads of long-dead acts, but eventually the last encore ended, and I knew it was time for me to leave. I looked for an exit sign, and I finally found two doors. They had those big green “Fire Exit” signs above them, but instead of saying fire exit, one said “Onwards” and the other said “Back”. I stood there for ages, but I finally chose to come back. I stepped through the door, ended up here.’ She indicated her flat. ‘It took me a while to find you. Eight days! What have I missed?’

Reaching into his pocket, Harry pulled out a photograph.

‘That’s him,’ confirmed Polly, a little deflated. ‘That’s the man who killed me. Have you caught him?’

‘No,’ Harry shook his head. ‘But we know who he is. He was born Pelias Hume, and his face is on
wanted posters everywhere. Even the Muggles are looking for him.’

‘Pelias Hume? That’s not a name that’s come up in any briefing I read,’ Polly observed. ‘What about that fake friend of Michael’s, Jason? D’you know what his real name is? And what about his girlfriend, Frances Sidebotham, is she really as thick as she seemed to be?’

Harry sighed. ‘You’re not an Auror, Polly. I can’t brief you about the case.’

‘But…’

‘I’ll schedule a witness interview with you tomorrow. Because you did witness your own death,’ Harry came to a decision. ‘But not in the Auror Office. I don’t want you turning up and upsetting everyone. As you heard, people are still coming to terms with your death.’

‘But…’

Ginny stepped forward and took Harry’s hand.

‘Mary Magdalene Protheroe,’ said Harry firmly. ‘You are a material witness in your own death. Are you prepared to give an interview here, tomorrow? Ten o’clock. Myself, along with Aurors Bones and Boot.’

Polly slumped, ‘What am I supposed to do now?’

‘You can start by looking up the regulations regarding ghosts,’ Harry suggested. ‘You’re now aware that four of your Muggle former friends can see you. You can’t allow yourself to be seen by them.’

‘That means I can’t go back down the pub!’

Harry nodded. ‘If you’re serious about getting back into the Auror Office, you’ll need to be interviewed for the vacancy, Polly. And…’

‘And if there are any outstanding magical misdemeanours on my record, I won’t even get an interview. Shit!’ her annoyance lasted only a moment. She smiled wickedly. ‘I am allowed to haunt my killer, aren’t I?’

‘Do you know where he is?’ Harry asked.

‘No, but I could go to Hogwarts and ask around. There must be a way for a ghost to be able to track down the person they want to haunt,’ said Polly. ‘See you tomorrow boss-man-Harry.’ She flew through the wall.
Half-term Activities

The half-term holiday began with half-hearted autumnal weather: unable to reach cold, wet, and horrible, it settled for chilly, damp, and unpleasant. The forecaster warned that the dreary drizzle wouldn’t clear until Sunday evening. Fortunately, the weather wouldn’t affect our plans for the weekend.

After lunch, I phoned Ginny to let her know we were on our way. Minutes later I was following Mike through the not-quite-rain. When we arrived at Drakeshaugh, Ginny and her kids were ready and waiting for us. As Mike fastened the Potter boys alongside Henry in his car, I helped Ginny to strap Lily into mine, next to Annie. Ten minutes later, we were heading for the pool.

During the journey, Ginny and I took the opportunity to plan the half-term week. Because her parents were in France, my offer to babysit the three young Potters on the Friday—when Harry and Ginny would be attending Polly Protheroe’s funeral—was gratefully accepted. After finalising those arrangements, we planned the other days, too.

Mike and I had a longstanding arrangement to visit his parents in Stocksfield on the Sunday, but as the Potters were also visiting relatives, that wasn’t an issue. Ginny offered to host us every other day. I refused, of course, and countered with an invitation to Lintzgarth. It was no use; Ginny reminded me that she was without a car and could only visit by walking up the valley with all three kids. I reluctantly backed down. By the time we reached Alnwick, we had the week roughly planned.

‘What about next Saturday?’ I asked, trying to complete our plans for half-term.

‘Ron and Hermione are bringing Rosie and Hugo up to see us next Saturday,’ Ginny began.

‘Oh, fine. You don’t have to come swimming with us every Saturday,’ I assured her, not wanting to make her think I was being pushy.

‘Let me finish, will you?’ Ginny scolded me teasingly, a smile on her lips. ‘I was going to ask if they could come, too.’

‘Sorry,’ I said sheepishly, ‘of course they can.’

We spent most of the journey back home discussing the kids progress in the water. Ginny was particularly pleased with Al, who had managed to splash his way from her arms to the poolside with neither buoyancy aids nor assistance—a distance of two metres. We had passed through Thropton, and I was explaining strokes and teaching techniques to Ginny, when Annie burst into song. She’d been happily sitting behind us, trying to teach Lily nursery rhymes, but for some reason she decided that she’d entertain us with one of the songs I’d played and sung to her earlier in the week.

‘Aah ca tell ye just exactly where Ah larnt this tune it was at Rowston, at the are vists upper.’

‘At the harvest supper,’ I corrected her. With my help, she got most of the words. By the time we reached the track to Drakeshaugh, Annie and I were trying to persuade Ginny and Lily to join in the chorus.
We succeeded, but I soon realised that Ginny couldn’t hold a note even if her life depended on it. As a consequence, I found myself singing all the louder.

‘You really have a good voice,’ Ginny told me. ‘Unlike me.’

‘It’s simply practice,’ I assured her.

Sunday’s visit to Mike’s parents’ house was rather fraught. I’ve always been a little nervous around my very opinionated father-in-law, and we weren’t my in-laws’ only guests. I had to face Mike’s equally formidable sister, Lucy. She had travelled up from London to show off her fiancé to the family. His name was Richard, and he was a tall, tanned, toffee-nosed twit from West Thurrock. I took an almost instant dislike to him.

We got off on the wrong foot, as he appeared to have little idea where he was, and I was probably too forceful in correcting his mistaken belief that he was somewhere near Leeds. As the afternoon progressed, things didn’t improve. He obviously had no experience with kids, and insisted on calling Henry and Annie “the little man and the little lady”. Not only was learning their names too much trouble for him, he compounded the issue by calling me Jaqueline rather than Jacqui. That annoyed me more than it should.

Henry didn’t like him, either, and he’s worse than me when it comes to hiding his true feelings. When Richard scolded him for running around the lounge pretending to be an aeroplane, Henry’s response was to call him “Mr Nasty”. I attempted to apologise on Henry’s behalf, but it’s difficult to apologise for your child’s words when you actually agree with his assessment. Fortunately, Mike came to my rescue and proved that he’d been paying attention.

‘Now then, Hen,’ Mike said, sweeping our son into his arms. ‘You really shouldn’t call your Aunt Lucy’s boyfriend names; it’s rude. I apologise on his behalf, Dick!’

My husband can be a cheeky sod. His final word walked the tightrope between innocent abbreviation and deliberate insult. I knew which one it was, and when Mike fired a surreptitious wink at me, I had to stifle a snigger.

‘It’s Richard,’ Richard told Mike pompously.

‘Sorry, abbreviations are my default, aren’t they, Jacqui?’

I nodded.

‘I usually only get Michael when I’ve done something wrong,’ Mike continued.

Smiling, I nodded again.

‘You’re not a Dick, then?’ Mike asked. ‘What about Rick, Rich, Richie, Ricky, or Dicky?’

‘Richard!’

‘I’ll try to remember that,’ said Mike politely. ‘It might be difficult, because you look like a Dick to me.’

While I was coughing, and Richard was looking for a polite rejoinder, Mike dropped to his hands and knees and yelled ‘Horsey.’

Henry jumped on his dad’s back and they proceeded to gallop around the lounge making horse-
noises. Then, of course, Annie had to have a turn. By the time Mike had finished, the kids were squealing and shouting, Mike’s parents were laughing at their grandchildren, and Richard was sulking. The atmosphere remained strained for the remainder of the afternoon.

On Monday, the local weather forecaster on BBC Breakfast assured me that the drizzle would clear by nine. Unfortunately, she hadn’t told the clouds. It was still murky and mizzling at half past when I arrived at Drakeshaugh with Henry and Annie. The kids went straight up to the living room to play. After a brief hello, I left Ginny to make coffee and followed the kids to keep an eye on them. It wasn’t long before Ginny arrived with coffees for us, apple juice for the kids, and a plate full of freshly baked ginger biscuits. As we drank, the kids played indoor tig, and I entertained Ginny with the story of our visit to Mike’s parents.

Fortunately, by the time we’d finished our coffees and tidied up, the skies finally cleared. It was still a little overcast, but the ground was drying, so Ginny and I took the kids out for a walk. We strolled down the track to the road and then walked along to the Harbottle Castle car park.

Despite its proximity to both Drakeshaugh and Lintzgarth, neither Ginny nor I had taken our children to visit the castle. I’d visited the snaggle-toothed old ruin, of course, but not for many years. When we arrived, Ginny didn’t head directly for the gate. Instead, she walked over the grass to a recently erected standing stone in the car park that I knew little about. The curious kids followed her, and I brought up the rear. At James’ request, Ginny read aloud the words carved onto the stone.

‘The Sad Castle. Who made me into a ruin like an old city? Was it the soldiers who rode out on horseback? Was it my old enemy the Scots? Or was it those border reivers? Perhaps it was just the centuries passing.’

After Ginny’s recitation of the poem, the kids had a lot of questions. The first—‘what’s a century?’—was easy enough to answer, but it was followed by ‘How many centuries has it been here? What’s a border reiver? Are the Scots still enemies? What soldiers?’

‘I wish Mike was here. He knows more about this stuff than I do,’ I admitted to Ginny as we tried to provide the kids with answers. I answered those questions I could. ‘No, the Scots aren’t our enemies, and the reivers were bandits, cattle thieves, and murderers. I can’t answer your other questions, sorry. Perhaps there’s something on that board.’ I pointed at the gate, next to which was an explanatory board.

The kids ran ahead to find out. However, none of them could read more than a few words, so they had to content themselves with looking at the weather-worn pictures until we arrived. When we did, Ginny managed to answer another question.

‘The castle was built about eight-hundred and fifty years ago,’ she said. ‘King Henry the second asked a man named Odinel de Umfreville to build it. But now most of it has gone.’

Ginny opened the gate, and we led the kids across to the earth mounds and fragments of wall. As I looked around, I remembered something else. ‘I think it was a motte and bailey castle.’ I said, remembering a conversation I’d once had with Mike. That was a mistake.

‘What’s a motte and bailey castle?’ asked James.

‘It’s…’ Not wanting to mislead him, I hesitated. ‘It’s something to do with the way it was designed and built, I think. People who are cleverer than me can tell you how the design of castles changed over the years, and which bits were built when.’
‘Really?’ James stared at the broken walls we were approaching, and then looked back at me. ‘Wasn’t it all built at once?’ he asked.

‘Probably not. There have been people in these hills for thousands and thousands of years, James. You can still see the evidence, if you know where to look. Unfortunately, I don’t,’ I admitted, preventing the question I could see forming on his lips. ‘If you want to know more, ask Henry’s dad when you see him. He knows more about this stuff than me. But, yes, the way the walls are built, the shape of an arch—even though there aren’t any arches here—they’re clues for the people who know what to look for.’

‘Clues! Daddy find clues,’ Al told me knowledgeably.

‘He does,’ Ginny agreed. ‘But Daddy is looking for clues to find out what happened in the last few days and weeks. The people Jacqui…’ she paused, gave me a thoughtful look, and continued. ‘The people Aunt Jacqui is talking about are looking for clues to find out what happened long, long ago.’

While I smiled my thanks to Ginny for making me an honorary aunt, Lily was pondering.

‘Long ’go, when G’an-ma little girl?’ Lily asked.

‘Long before that, Lily,’ said Ginny with a smile. ‘Long before Grandma’s Grandma was little.’

Lily immediately found a flaw in that statement. ‘G’an-ma not have G’an-ma,’ she observed.

‘Older than Grandma?’ Al added, showing that he, too, was struggling with the concept.

Ginny was saved from a long explanation because we were closing on the ruins, and Henry chose that moment to shout, ‘I’m the king of the castle!’

The kids took off up the hill in a bid to be the first to reach the top. James who was neck and neck with Henry when they set off, slowed down when he reached the first remnants of stonework. As a consequence, Henry won easily. It didn’t matter, because the kids soon lost interest in the game and came back down to examine the weathered stones.

We spent the remainder of the morning, and the early part of the afternoon, at the castle. We clambered onto the walls, ran up and down the mounds, made up stories about life in the castle, and played hide and seek. When we returned to Drakeshaugh for lunch, Henry and James were busy trying to decide which of them was going to starve to death first. Annie and Lily had run themselves ragged and were so tired that Ginny and I had to carry them down the road. Al, bless him, simply followed the two older boys in stoic silence.

We’d only just entered the track up to Drakeshaugh and cleared the stile when I spotted the black clouds lurking behind the hills. Ginny spotted them, too.

We quickened our pace, but the rain reached us just as we reached the gravel yard, forcing us to turn our rapid walk into a trot. While it was only a matter of thirty metres or so, I was breathless when we reached the kitchen door.

‘I used to be fit,’ I said. As I spoke, I knew that I should be taking more exercise. ‘I used to swim four or five times a week. Now all I do is watch the kids swimming, and it shows.’ I patted my belly.

‘I’m slowing down, too,’ Ginny admitted. ‘We should try to get more exercise. It isn’t easy with this lot, is it?’
We spent the stormy afternoon indoors, playing with the kids and planning what we could do if the weather didn’t improve. As we were leaving, I took the opportunity to ask Ginny about the case. Pelias Hume’s name continued to appear on the news, along with the warnings not to approach him, but all the reports said was that police were “following a number of leads.” Other than the fact that the police, and Harry, had everyone available looking for Hume, Ginny could add no more.

Fortunately, Monday’s afternoon storm finally cleared the air. Tuesday morning was chill, but dry. We kept to our original plans, and took the kids out blackberrying. By lunchtime, we had purple-stained and thorn-prickled fingers and dozens of bags full of juicy berries. We’d had a couple of minor mishaps, too. Annie had somehow managed to crush a blackberry onto her forehead and had rubbed the sticky remains into her hair. Al, in an attempt to reach a particularly large clump of berries, had fallen headfirst into the straggling thorns. His extraction had been difficult, as his clothes were caught in the brambles.

Despite his misadventure, and the bloody scratches on his cheeks, Al remained cheerful. The scratches didn’t bother him, he simply wondered if he’d end up with “a scar like Daddy’s.” When we got back to Drakeshaugh, I cleaned up Annie in the kitchen sink while Ginny took Al to the downstairs loo. He was disappointed when he returned, because there wasn’t a mark on his face.

After lunch, we wandered through the woods surrounding Drakeshaugh. We set the kids looking for apple trees, easily identifiable because of the windfall apples surrounding them. When they found them, we gave the branches a shake, and collected almost every fresh apple that fell. Only those that were rotten or bird-eaten were discarded, and there weren’t many of those.

By the time we arrived on Wednesday morning Ginny had already sliced most of the apples. We had a very productive day. The kids alternated between playing games in the kitchen and “helping” Ginny and I. We were boiling up the blackberries and apples, together with lemon juice and sugar, in an enormous copper.

It was safer, and easier, when we didn’t have to worry about the kids. After lunch, to make life easier for ourselves, Ginny and I sent the kids out to look for more apples in Drakeshaugh Woods. They were under strict instructions not to leave the woods, and they all made a solemn promise. We didn’t need the apples, but the kids’ absence gave us the opportunity to strain the boiling hot sludge through muslin bags.

When I took Henry and Annie home that evening, Ginny’s kitchen was a mess. The muslin bags were carefully strung from the rafters above the kitchen table, and the slowly dripping jelly was being collected in jam jars. The smell was truly wonderful. I wanted to stay and help, but I had to get home to prepare our evening meal for Mike’s arrival.

Courtesy of our children, Ginny also had another large basket full of apples. She had no use for them, and was busy jam-making, so I offered to take them home with me. That evening, while I made dinner, I also made four apple pies.

On Thursday, I took two of the fresh apple pies to Drakeshaugh, a present for Ginny. In return, she offered me twenty jars of homemade blackberry jelly. Her final total was, she assured me, more than forty. I protested, then offered to take ten. She was having none of it, claiming that I’d done half of the work. My arguments were to no avail. I managed to barter her down to fifteen, but she fed us all crumpets—toasted on the fire—with butter and the fresh home-made jelly, and Henry intervened.

‘Is this really what we made?’ Henry asked, licking the jam off the top of the crumpet.

‘It is, Henry,’ Ginny told him.
‘It’s very nice, Mummy,’ he told me pointedly.

‘Take twenty jars,’ Ginny took the opportunity to reopen the discussion.

We finally settled on eighteen.

Mike had been at work all week, but had managed to wangle himself a day’s leave on Friday. I was grateful for his presence because, despite my offer to the Potters, the half-term week had shown me that five excitable kids were a lot of work, even with two people. Friday’s forecast was for good, if windy, weather for the entire day. A glance out of the kitchen window assured me of its accuracy. Almost every tree I could see was shaking itself free of its leaves and the only clouds in the clear, pale blue, sky were high wisps of white hurrying through the upper atmosphere.

On Thursday evening Mike and I had planned for both wet and dry weather, and over breakfast the following morning we finalised our plans. Given the weather, we would definitely take the kids out for a walk. We were tidying up the kitchen and discussing “just in case” routes when the Potters arrived.

‘Right on time,’ Mike observed.

I glanced at the kitchen clock in time to see the second hand sweep up to mark the hour. Harry and Ginny waved as he pulled his car up next to our kitchen door.

‘Potters are here,’ I called, while hanging up the tea towel.

Yelling excitedly, Annie and Henry scampered through from the living room. They didn’t stop; Mike had opened the door, and gone out to help the Potters unload kids and bags. Our kids followed him into the yard. I was the last one out. When I reached the car, the Potter kids were dancing around Henry and Annie and chattering excitedly.

Harry and Ginny were already dressed for the funeral. Ginny looked stunning in a plain, sleeveless, knee-length sheath dress. Harry was in black trousers, a white shirt, and a black tie. The waistcoat he wore was, I thought, inappropriately bright with its wide stripes of blue and yellow. Mike had taken a large bag from the back of the Potters’ car, and Harry held two more.

‘Are they staying for a week?’ Mike asked cheerfully.

‘I’ve probably overdone it,’ Ginny admitted. ‘There’s a complete change of clothes for each of them. Jacqui said you were thinking about taking them out for a walk. If it rains, you might need them, but otherwise just put them out of the way and forget about them.’

Mike’s attention was fixed on the car boot, and he didn’t appear to be listening to Ginny. ‘Nice coat, Harry,’ he said.

‘Mike!’ I said sharply. ‘Ginny’s talking to you.’

‘Complete change of clothes in case they get wet, probably won’t need them. I heard.’ Mike winked at Ginny as he spoke. ‘The homburg must be yours, Ginny, it looks a bit small for Harry. Which means that the top hat is yours.’

‘You’re right,’ said Ginny, smiling.

Mike was still staring into the back of Harry’s car, much more interested in what remained than in the bags of children’s clothes. Curious, I strolled around to take a look. The black jacket and
homburg hat were obviously Ginny’s, but Mike was much more interested in the purple frock coat and matching top hat.

‘You should try those on, Harry,’ Mike suggested.

Harry shook his head. ‘I’ll take these inside,’ he said. ‘And then we’ll have to go, won’t we…’

His voice tailed off. Ginny had reached into the car, donned the homburg, and tipped it to a jaunty angle. Harry seemed lost for words. When she picked up the top hat and sashayed over to him, he silently tipped his head and allowed her to put it on him.

‘Polly’s instructions,’ Harry told us, as Mike used his phone to photograph the Potters. ‘Right down to the feathers.’

‘She obviously knew what she wanted,’ Mike told him cheerfully. ‘Didn’t you want to go full-on gothic, too, Ginny?’

‘Polly’s instructions apply only to Harry and the pallbearers,’ she told him. ‘I expect I’ll blend in with the Mu-jority of the other mourners.’

‘Mind your hat on the door, Harry’ said Mike. Harry ducked as he followed my husband into the kitchen, although he didn’t need to.

‘Thanks for looking after the kids, Jacqui,’ said Ginny. She strolled over and hugged me. ‘Thanks a lot.’

‘You’re very welcome,’ I said. ‘The hat suits you,’ I added in a whisper as we embraced.

‘Harry really likes it,’ she muttered. As we separated, she gave me a broad grin.

We need to get going, Ginny.’ Harry sounded nervous as he returned to her side.

Ginny’s grin vanished, and she turned to look after her husband. His face was pale and sorrowful; he looked like what he was, a man going to a funeral.

‘Behave yourselves,’ Ginny reminded her children. Taking off her hat, she took Harry’s from him, kissed his chin, and hugged him.

‘Yes, be good, kids,’ Harry ordered when they parted.

‘We will, Daddy,’ said James seriously. His brother and sister nodded.

‘And thanks, Charltons,’ Harry added. He already had his door open, and his mind was obviously elsewhere.

We watched them climb into the car and encouraged the kids to wave and shout “bye-bye” as the Potters left for the airport.

‘Harry looks worried,’ Mike observed.

‘He’s doing the reading at Polly’s funeral, a funeral he’s had to organise because she has no next of kin, and he’s doing it wearing a purple top hat festooned with raven feathers. On top of all that, despite the posters and the manhunt, the police still haven’t caught Pelias Hume.’

‘True,’ Mike admitted. ‘But I have to say, that’s a helluva hat and waistcoat. Not sure about his coat though. I think Polly might have been having him on about the gothic gear.’
‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Purple frock coat and that top hat?’ Mike’s eyes twinkled. ‘I reckon he’s less goth, more Willy Wonka!’

I laughed, and once the image was in my head, I couldn’t get rid of it.

Within half an hour of Harry and Ginny’s departure, we were on the move. Mike and I each carried a daysack. The picnic lunch I’d made—three bottles of water, two flasks of tea, and our lightweight waterproofs—were divided fairly evenly between us. Mike had taken the odd bottle of water.

After making certain that laces were fastened, and everyone was ready to go exploring, Mike and I herded the kids out from Lintzgarth and along the road towards the pub. Because it was half-term, there were a few families in the car park. There was even a moving car on the road. After passing the pub, and crossing the green, we took the footbridge over Hosedon Burn and set off along the old drover’s road.

Although we’d taken Henry and Annie along the same route before, Annie had been in her baby carrier, strapped to Mike’s chest. Henry had been so small that he’d forgotten. It was new to them all. They had no idea where we were going, but it didn’t seem to bother them. They were simply happy to be outdoors. Once we’d passed the last farm on Clennell Street, Mike explained that we would be visiting a hill fort. Henry and James got excited, until he pointed to the low grass-covered hill in the distance.

‘It’s called Castle Hills,’ Mike told them in an attempt to rekindle some excitement.

‘Can’t see no castle,’ observed Al.

‘Where’s the fort?’ Henry asked.

‘Where’s the other hill?’ James asked.

‘You’re right, Al, and those are good questions, Henry and James,’ Mike began. He rubbed his hands happily. He was definitely in his element.

‘The fort was built in the iron age, more than two and a half thousand years ago, Henry. That makes it about three times as old as Harbottle Castle, and there’s not much of Harbottle left, is there?’

‘No,’ Henry agreed.

‘Well there’s even less of the fort left. There are a few old stones up there, but a lot of them are buried in the grass. The place is so old that no one knows what it was called when it was built. These days, people call it Castle Hills, and that’s the name on the map. But, as clever Al has just said, there’s no castle, and as James noticed, there’s only one hill. So why is it called Castle Hills? I don’t know! It’s a mystery. Perhaps, one day, one of you will solve it.’

‘Yeah,’ James nodded.

As we walked, Mike continued to entertain the kids with tales of Clennell Street—the old drover’s road we were walking along. He also tried to explain the history of Castle Hills, and of Camp Knowe—a second hill fort that lay on the other side of the Alwin valley. The kids were getting bored, so he moved on to tales of the legendary Arthur who—he claimed—had ruled not from the
lands around Cornwall, but from the hills of Northumberland.

By the time we began the ascent to Castle Hills fort, he was telling them about distant Yeavering Bell, and Gefrin. Mike’s very fond of tales of the old kingdoms, of Bernicia and Northumbria. The kids were enjoying Mike’s stories, and in no hurry to reach the summit. Neither were we. Despite the fact that there’s not much to see when you get there, I’ve always found the approach to the ancient hill fort oddly inspiring. It was well after noon when we reached the summit and, thanks to Mike’s tales, the kids had become Anglo-Saxon warriors.

Once inside the fort making camp, and eating our banquet, was essential. It was while we were feasting on sandwiches and crisps that Henry, James, and Al remembered their questions about Harbottle Castle. Mike, prepared to go into a lot more details about motte and bailey castles than the kids could understand, began with an enthusiastic but poorly received lecture. Fortunately, when he realised that he was losing their attention, he changed direction. He returned to tall tales of the people who’d inhabited the hills long before the Saxons had arrived. I was fairly certain that his stories of the Britons, the people who the Roman Emperor Hadrian had built a great wall to keep out, bore little relation to historical fact, but the kids lapped them up.

After lunch, we made our way downhill. We headed north for a few hundred yards before leaving Clennell Street to head across to the River Alwin. Once across the river, we made our way back downstream. James was completely turned around by the journey, and was surprised to realise that we were somehow back in Alwinton. The sun was dropping down towards the hills when we arrived at Lintzgarth.

While Mike supervised the kids in the garden, I began to prepare our meal. The salad leaves at our back door were sparse and weather-beaten, and very few tomatoes remained in our greenhouse. We were even running short of onions and radishes. Despite this, there was enough for a fresh side-salad. As I worked, I wondered how Polly’s funeral had gone. The day had flown over; in fact the second weekend was upon us. The entire week of half-term week had flown by in a flurry of busy, happy days.

It was six o’clock, and getting dark outside, when Mike and I settled the kids down for their evening meal. I’d made a rigatoni sausage bake, and I was serving a large portion to James when I heard the crunch of car tyres on gravel. Mike was standing next to the sink. He’d poured the vinaigrette I’d made over the salad and was still busy tossing it. He glanced out of the window and confirmed my deduction.

‘Your mum and dad are here, Potters,’ he announced.

‘Yay!’ Al announced.

‘Mmm,’ said Lily. Unable to wait for the salad, she was already chewing her pasta, and spreading the sauce around her face. As I looked at the five hungry kids, I wondered how Ginny’s mum had coped with seven.

‘I’m not going home yet!’ James told us firmly. Fork clutched tightly in his hand, he was staring covetously at the plate I still held.

‘Not!’ Henry agreed.

‘Quite right, boys,’ Mike told them as he walked over to the table. ‘Don’t ever let anything as boring as parents get between you and a good bit of scran.’

‘Scran?’ James asked.
‘Scran, nosh, grub, din-dins,’ Mike spoke as though he were imparting ancient and important
knowledge. ‘The stuff you’re eating, or about to eat. Here you go, Lily.’ Strolling over to the table,
he added some of the diced tomato, leaf, red onion, and radish salad to her plate. He was serving
Henry when our outside light came on. By then, I’d finished serving the kids, so I dashed across to
the kitchen door. I opened it just as Harry was raising a hand to knock.

‘Come in, come in,’ I said. ‘We’ve just served the kids their dinner. Have you eaten? Do you want
something?’

Ginny shook her head.

‘Not for me, thanks. There was a huge spread at Polly’s wake,’ Harry told me. ‘Hello, kids, have
you had a good day?’

‘Bin see a fort,’ Al said.

‘An’ walked,’ Lily added. ‘An’ walked.’

‘Hundreds of miles!’ James added. ‘So we’s hungery!’

‘Hungry,’ I corrected.

‘For wor scran,’ Henry added.

‘Nosh,’ said Annie happily.

‘Henry’s dad knows all ’bout Merlin.’ James comment came from nowhere, but Ginny’s look of
astonishment surprised me.

‘Really?’ Harry smiled. ‘And Arthur, and the knights of the round table, I assume?’

‘An’ ancient Britons, an’ Romans, an’ angular Saxons,’ Henry added. ‘My daddy’s clever.’

‘So’s mine,’ James told my son. Mike and Harry grinned at each other.

‘Would you like a cuppa?’ I asked.

‘I’ll make it,’ Ginny offered. ‘You’re all eating. I can manage to boil a kettle, and I can see your
collection of tea caddies and teapots.’

I really wanted to ask Harry and Ginny about the funeral, but I didn’t get the opportunity. Both
during and after the meal the kids were telling them about the walk and all the places we’d
explored.

‘Sounds like you’ve had a great day,’ said Ginny.

‘How was yours?’ I asked.

She and Harry exchanged a meaningful glance. ‘Interesting,’ Ginny told me. ‘Harry fitted right in,
but I was decidedly underdressed.’

‘You’ve changed.’ I realised. The Potters were both in jeans and sweatshirts.

‘We called in at Drakeshaugh on the way,’ Ginny admitted. ‘We took the opportunity to get out of
our funeral clothes, didn’t we, Harry?’
Harry nodded, and I tried to figure out what the “say no more” look he was giving Ginny meant.

Mike broke the ensuing silence by saying, ‘I understand that we’ll be seeing Ron, Hermione, Rose, and Hugo tomorrow. Will you need a lift, Ginny?’

‘No,’ Harry replied for his wife. ‘I have … something … to do in the morning, but after that, I’m taking the weekend off.’

‘How’s the manhunt going?’ Mike asked him. ‘There’s been nothing much on the news. No sightings of him?’

‘There have been a lot of sightings,’ Harry admitted. ‘That’s one of the problems. He’s been seen in Truro and Thurso, and almost everywhere between. But I’m hoping that Polly—that information from Polly—will help us find him.’

‘Let’s hope,’ Mike said sympathetically.

‘Thanks for the cuppa,’ Ginny said. ‘But we really should get back home. We’re having visitors tomorrow, and we’ve a lot to do. Come along, kids.’

There were protests, of course, but Ginny overrode them, and fifteen minutes later it was just the four of us. The house felt strangely empty.

‘Phew,’ said Mike. ‘And tomorrow, we’ll see Ron and Hermione, too. What a busy life we lead. Grand scran, by the way, Jacqui. I’ll go and pack the dishwasher, shall I?’

‘Thanks,’ I said.
The sky above the Coquet valley lacked any hint of blue. Black and dismal clouds hung in the air like malevolent shadows, releasing their watery contents across the world outside my window. The soggy landscape was drab; the rain had washed not only the blue from the sky, but also the green from the ground. Autumnal browns and bare branches were coming to the fore, replacing the colours of summer. The semi-clad trees at the roadside were silent and unmoving, and that lack of wind told me that there was no likelihood of a break in the rain.

I watched the wet leaves wash down the edge of the road and decided that they were like people. Benign as individuals, it was only when they gathered together that they were capable of causing problems. As they reached the gullies, they were no longer solitary and harmless. They clustered together, blocked the drain, and the balance of power changed. The water had been controlling them, now they controlled it.

‘You’re thinking deep thoughts,’ Mike told me.

Embarrassed, and not wanting to explain my foolish musings, I shook my head. ‘Just watching the water pooling on the edge of the road,’ I said.

‘It’s definitely wellies and waterproofs weather,’ Mike agreed. ‘At least the promise of the pool has kept Hen and Annie quiet this morning. What d’you fancy for lunch? I’ll make it, and you can keep staring out of the window, philosophericating.’

‘That’s a big word, Daddy,’ Henry observed, looking up from his Lego.

‘That’s because it means thinking big thoughts about big things,’ Mike told him.

Mike was right about the promise of the pool. Not even the constant rain was able to dampen the kids’ mood. Annie was looking forward to seeing Lily and Rosie, and Henry was beaming and bouncing and bursting with excitement. He was so keen to get ready that he collected his own coat from the lower set of coat hooks that Mike had put in the hall. He was still fiddling with one of the zip pockets when he returned to the kitchen. I offered to help, but he told me that he could manage, and he did.

The moment we set off, Annie began singing “The Keel Row”. I sang along with her, wondering how many times she’d sing from beginning to end before she finally tired of it. She was on her third sing-through when a sudden torrent forced Mike to switch the windscreen wipers up to top speed. I hadn’t realised that Annie was using the windscreen wipers as a metronome, but her immediate switch up from andante to allegro left me spluttering in her wake. Mike was still chuckling about it when we reached Drakeshaugh.

There were two cars waiting, lights on and wipers swiping, when we passed the gate. Hermione’s Mini was behind Harry’s Range Rover. I gave a cheery wave, which Harry and Ginny returned, then turned to watch the Potter and Weasley cars pull out behind us. As I looked over my shoulder, Henry caught my eye and interrupted Annie’s singing to complain about the travel arrangements. He expressed the opinion that we should’ve stopped at the Potters’ house and swapped Annie for James and Al, “like last time.” I disagreed, but he was unconvinced.
I had hoped that we’d leave the rain in the valley, but it wasn’t to be. When we crossed the Morpeth to Coldstream road, the grey skies ahead told me that the Aln valley was as wet and miserable as Coquetdale.

The wipers were still fighting the deluge when we reached the pool. Rather selfishly, Mike parked in the closest space to the pool that he could find. I said nothing. Feeling guilty about my silence, I watched Harry’s Range Rover and Hermione’s Mini drive past as they looked for spaces. Mike switched off the engine, we exchanged a glance, and peered warily out through the windscreen. There was no point in waiting for the rain to stop. The dark clouds stretched as far as we could see.

‘I’m looking after my family first,’ Mike admitted as we watched Harry finally find a space. ‘Although a few yards further away won’t make much difference in this weather! We’re going to have to make a dash for it, kids.’

Zipping up his waterproof jacket, Mike pulled up his hood and clambered out of the car. After fastening my waxed cotton jacket, I pulled on my old Barbour sports hat and followed. Mike grabbed our swimming bag from the boot, slung it over his shoulder, and then opened the rear door and freed Annie. With the rain rapping noisily on the brim of my hat, I released Henry from his seat. When I was certain he was well wrapped up, I lifted him out into the rain and took his hand. Together, we splashed through the puddles to the entrance. Mike was close behind me, carrying both the bag and Annie.

Moments later, the Potters and Weasleys followed us through the rain and into the leisure centre. Harry carried Al and a sports bag, while Ginny carried Lily and held a wet-haired and grinning James firmly by the hand. Ron had picked up both of his kids and left Hermione to carry their bag.

Harry, Ginny, and Hermione all wore parkas. Their kids, like ours, were in colourful plastic waterproof coats. James’ coat was a spectacularly bright orange, and there was a cannonball logo on the back of it. I was about to ask about the logo when I noticed that the shabby old duffle coat Ron wore was shedding the rain as if it, too, were plastic. It must have been treated with some spectacular waterproofing.

‘Chucking it down,’ Ron observed as he lowered his kids to the floor, and turned to take the bag from his wife.

‘Hoyying it doon,’ Mike agreed as they shook hands. ‘Good to see you again, Ron. Keeping well?’

‘Fine,’ Ron said. ‘Hi, Jacqui… Hijack…’

I could see him looking for a pun, but Hermione halted his search with a firm elbow to his ribs. She smiled at me as if nothing had happened. Ron shrugged and winked at me.

‘Hello, Jacqui, and Mike,’ said Hermione seriously. ‘How are you?’ After our previous meetings, I was beginning to get used to Hermione, but the tone of her question put me off my stride. She might as well have demanded, “What’s the square root of seventeen? Answer now!”

While I was fumbling for a precise and accurate answer to her question, Mike—who seemed impervious to her questioning gaze—said, ‘We’re fine. Never wetter, in fact.’ While Ron chuckled, Mike moved on to exchange pleasantries with Ginny and Harry.

I was chatting to Ron about Rose and Hugo when James and Henry got restless. They quickly wound up the other kids, and soon they were all reminding us that we were supposed to be swimming, not talking.
The pool was more crowded than usual; I assumed that it was because of the weather. To some extent, it was, but it didn’t take me long to realise that a number of the extra bodies were teens. It soon became obvious that one of the boys was celebrating his sixteenth birthday. The birthday boy was a swimmer, broad-shouldered, good looking—if a little pimply, and a bit of a poseur. I recognised the behaviour; I’d been there and done that.

A birthday trip to the pool! It was simply an excuse for the swimmer to show off his prowess in the water. He’d got his male friends into swim-shorts while he was in trunks, and the girls were in bikinis. We were faced with a group who were doing everything you’d expect hormonal teens faced with lots of flesh to do. There was much splashing and ducking, and several blatant attempts at fondling. To the annoyance of his male friends, three of the girls were vying for the birthday boy’s attention. It was obvious that he was impressing all the girls with his dives, swimming ability, and underwater antics. All this teenage flesh and flirtation was disrupting my attempts to teach the four oldest kids.

I soon got myself narked by the constant splashing and interruptions. I was close to snapping, and about to say something I’d regret to birthday boy, when the girl with the biggest boobs—the one who all the boys were trying to stay close too—had a major problem with her bikini top. It seemed that the clip broke, or snapped off. She squealed and ducked under the water in an attempt to retain her modesty, but whatever had happened to her top was enough that she was unable to refasten it.

The pool fell silent and, although some pretended not to, everyone was watching her. She scampered from the pool, a hand behind her back holding her top in place. It wasn’t long before the others followed. I felt a little sorry for the girl, but was more relieved that they’d all gone. I was about to restart my lesson when I noticed that Hermione was angry with Ron. I couldn’t hear what was being said, but it seemed to me that Hermione was blaming her husband for the girl’s mishap.

That was impossible, of course. When the incident happened, I’d been in the main part of the pool with Harry, James, Henry, Al, and Rosie. Hermione was in the small pool with Ginny, Mike, Annie, Lily, and Hugo. Ron had, I assume, been to the loo. He was just walking back from the changing rooms when the girl fled past him.

I couldn’t be bothered to find out what Hermione’s problem was; I was much more interested in concentrating on the kids. When my lesson recommenced, Harry and I were joined by Hermione. Under a barrage of questions, I had to explain to her what I was trying to do. It wasn’t easy. It was obvious that Ron’s wife wasn’t a confident swimmer; it was even more obvious that she wanted to know everything I was trying to teach Rosie and why. Fortunately, Harry diverted her, and I returned my attention to the kids.

Once the teenagers had gone, the afternoon flew by. Despite the interruptions, Rosie and Al were both much more confident in the water when we finally climbed out of the pool than when they’d entered the water. I was feeling rather pleased with my efforts as Mike and I herded Henry and Annie into a cubicle.

‘What do you have planned for dinner?’ Mike asked as he towelled Henry dry.

‘I got a chili con carne out of the freezer this morning, why?’ I asked.

‘Ron asked me about local pubs. I told him about The Anglers and The Wheatsheaf. He’s persuaded Harry and Ginny to go to the pub for a meal on the way home. We’re invited, if…’

‘Weed-seef?’ Henry interrupted his father. ‘Izzat where’s ’at great big slide an’ fings? We gonna play wiff James ‘n’ Al ‘n’ Lily ‘n’ Rosie ‘n’ Hugo?’
I hesitated.

‘I’m not asking you to take over the driving,’ Mike assured me. ‘The weather’s cleared up here, and even if it’s still raining in the dale, we can let the kids loose in the pub’s indoor play area and pretend we’re grown-ups. You can even have a glass or two of wine.’

I continued to ponder. It seemed to me that Ginny, Ron, and Mike had cooked up this plan together. A trip to the pub was always a good plan for my husband, and I was fairly certain he’d found a kindred spirit in Ron. I was about to ask, but Mike spoke first.

‘You know you want to,’ he told me. ‘Say yes.’

‘Yes,’ Henry said. ‘Me’n Annie wanna go play wiff everybody, do’n’ we Annie.’

‘Play, yes,’ she agreed.

‘Chili for Sunday dinner?’ I asked scornfully. ‘Not sure what the hungry oaf I live with will think about that!’ Mike’s a full-on Sunday roast man, and I wanted to be certain I wasn’t going to get any hassle the following day.

‘End of the holidays. Special occasion. Nowt’s the bother,’ he assured me, laughing.

‘Fine,’ I agreed. The kids cheered, and Mike kissed me.

When we finally got ourselves sorted and left our cubicle, the Potters and Weasleys were waiting for us. Harry and Ginny were both ready to persuade me to go to the pub with them, but with one word, ‘Sorted,’ Mike assured them that no persuasion was necessary.

‘We’re paying,’ Harry said firmly.

‘No…’ I began.

‘Consider it a babysitting fee,’ Ginny told me firmly. I took one look into her face and realised that arguing with her wasn’t an option.

‘There’s no need,’ I protested feebly.

‘Probably not,’ said Ginny, smiling. ‘But, we’re paying anyway.’

‘Then I’ll buy us a bottle of wine,’ I told her firmly. ‘We can share it. The drivers will have to make do with fruit juice or pop. Will you help us drink it, Hermione?’

‘I’d love too, but I can’t,’ she told me, rolling her eyes wearily. ‘Ron still hasn’t passed his driving test.’

‘Really?’ Mike was incredulous. He turned to Ron. ‘How on earth do you get to work?’

‘Train and tube,’ Hermione answered for her confused-looking husband.

‘London!’ Mike nodded wisely. ‘Probably easiest.’

‘I thought you lived out in the West Country,’ I said.

‘It’s not Cornwall, or Devon, and we do have good connections. Look, the rain has finally stopped.’ Hermione’s explanation was brief and her change of subject blatant.
We followed her into the car park. The ground was still wet and puddle-strewn, and the moist air was filled with the fresh clear scent of a world washed clean. The sun remained unseen, but the clouds above were now a hopeful white rather than a depressing grey. I took a deep, and embarrassingly noisy, breath. Everyone looked at me.

‘I love the smell of after-a-storm,’ I admitted. They smiled politely, but I was certain that they thought I was completely mad.

As we drove to the pub, I finally remembered to ask Mike what had happened with the teens. ‘No idea,’ he admitted. ‘I could see that you were starting to boil, and I mentioned it to Ron. He excused himself and went off into the changing rooms. He was still there when Norma had her little accident, and they all left.’

‘Norma!’ I sighed. ‘You told Ron about that name, didn’t you?’

‘Yup,’ he admitted, chuckling. ‘It got a laugh out of him, but I don’t think Hermione thought it was funny.’

It’s an old joke of Mike’s. Any busty woman he sees is “Norma”. If anyone asks how he knows, he’ll gleefully tell them that her surname is “Snockers”. It’s a really terrible pun, and not exactly PC, and he knows it. He grinned at me. I shook my head in despair. Sometimes, he’s simply incorrigible.

It was still early when we arrived at the pub—the clock on the dashboard said 5:04. The Wheatsheaf wasn’t full, but there were enough early diners to ensure they couldn’t immediately provide a table for six adults and seven kids.

Thirteen at dinner! I said nothing, and pushed silly superstitions to the back of my mind.

The waitress was great, and she gave us a choice: two tables at opposite ends of the dining area immediately, or an indeterminate wait until they could move a couple of tables to keep us all together. Given the early hour, and the fact that Henry was telling the other kids how great the indoor play area was, we opted to wait.

Harry and Mike both declined a drink, and went off to supervise the kids. For some reason Henry insisted on keeping his raincoat with him. I tried to persuade him otherwise, but he turned on his stubborn face. Rather than drive him to tears, I relented.

Mike nodded approvingly. ‘It’s not hurting anyone,’ he told me. ‘Just get yourself a drink and relax. Take some time off. Harry and I are real men, we can easily cope with seven five-and-unders.’

When they’d gone, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and I found a small table in the bar, and took the opportunity to indulge in some child-free chatting. Ron offered to buy me a drink, but I refused. Following him to the bar, I waited until he’d paid for his drinks, a pint of Puffing Billy for himself and a fresh orange juice for Hermione, and ordered a bottle of Merlot from the barman. When I returned to the table with the bottle and two glasses, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were talking about school.

We were well through the bottle, and still discussing our kids’ education, when the waitress came over to tell us that our table was ready. Because I was curious to see how Mike and Harry were coping, I volunteered to collect the others from the play area. As I walked through the lounge bar, I pondered my discussion with Ron and Hermione. They both harboured much higher hopes for their
children than I did for mine.

When I arrived at the play area, there was no sign of the kids. ‘See that big cube at the top of the rope ladder?’ Mike asked. ‘They’ve all squeezed in there. In all probability, they’re plotting world domination.’

Harry laughed. ‘We thought they’d be coming straight down the slide, but they didn’t.’

‘Charltons, Potters, Weasleys, it’s time for food,’ I shouted.

There was a chorus of okays, and one by one they came down the slide and dropped into the ball pool. By the time we’d lifted them all out and herded them through the pub, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had moved into the pub’s huge conservatory to claim our table. It took us some time to settle the kids, but after the pool and the play area, they were hungry.

The menu was as expansive as I remembered, but nothing was cheap. As we gazed out over Coquetdale, I tried to decide what to have. The Wheatsheaf’s fillet steaks were usually excellent, but knowing that the Potters were paying, I decided against ordering the most expensive item on the menu. Instead, I settled for the gammon steak with pineapple and fried egg.

When the waitress arrived to take our order, Ron was still vacillating. As she took the kid’s orders—fish fingers and chips for my two—Ron continued to scan the menu.

‘Steak and kidney pie or a fillet steak?’ he wondered aloud.

‘If it helps, it’s a proper steak pie, shortcrust pastry top and bottom,’ Mike assured him from across the table. ‘Not one of those daft ramekins full of stew hiding under a puff-pastry hat, which is what most pubs try to pass off as a pie’

‘And that’s why I don’t like the pies at the Royal Oak,’ Ron told his wife. It was obvious that Mike’s joke had actually enlightened him.

Ron was still chuckling to himself about Mike’s comment when Annie decided to tell the entire pub that she needed a wee-wee. As Ron, still laughing, ordered the pie and another pint of Puffing Billy from our waitress, I lifted Annie from her chair and carried her through to the ladies. When I returned, I discovered that Ron had ordered a second bottle of Merlot, too.

I protested, but my glass had been filled in my absence. From his face, I had no doubt that Mike had approved Ron’s generous act. Our first bottle was gone, and the second started. We couldn’t send it back. Faced with a fait accompli, I surrendered to the inevitable. When we’d first arrived, the three drivers had made it clear that they weren’t touching any alcohol. As Ron was drinking pints, it would be up to Ginny and I to finish the wine.

‘I never drink an entire bottle by myself,’ I addressed my half-hearted complaint at my husband, not Ron. ‘You’ll have to take charge of the kids.’

‘Seems fair enough,’ Mike said, smiling. ‘You and Ginny have had them all week, now it’s the Dads’ turn, isn’t that right, Harry?’

‘Yes.’ As Harry stared at his three kids, sorrow furrowed his brow for a second. It was immediately replaced by a brave face for his kids, but it wasn’t quick enough.

‘S’alright, Daddy,’ Al said.

‘Dat lady wiff a hippogriff on ’er bum’ll find him,’ James added.
‘She will,’ Ginny agreed, giving me a warning glance. Understanding her concern, I tried to silently convey the fact that I wasn’t about to say anything. It seemed that—like me—the Potters had avoided talking about Polly’s death, and her funeral, to their children.

‘And then,’ Ginny added. ‘Daddy will be taking some time off work.’

‘After the paperwork’s done,’ Harry corrected her.

‘You can do the paperwork from home,’ said Ginny firmly. She lifted the wine bottle. ‘Do you need topping up, Jacqui?’

‘No, thanks, Ginny,’ I said. ‘I’ll wait until the meal arrives. I’m not much of a drinker; two bottles between two of us is a lot. Are you sure you don’t want some, Ron?’

‘No, thanks,’ Ron said.

‘I fink I’d like to try it,’ said James hopefully.

‘Not until you’re seventeen, James,’ Ginny said firmly.

Sometimes, Ginny’s lack of knowledge about really ordinary stuff astonished me. I knew her well enough to know that she wasn’t stupid, but she seemed to be ignorant of so many things. I was going to correct her, but Hermione jumped in first.

‘Eighteen, Ginny.’

That was when Mike stepped in. ‘Actually, right here and right now, it’s sixteen, Hermione,’ he told her.

She was obviously astonished to be so firmly contradicted, and for a moment I thought she was going to argue.

‘Is it?’ asked Ron gleefully.

‘You have to be eighteen to buy alcohol,’ began Mike diplomatically. ‘But sixteen and seventeen-year-olds can drink on licensed premises, which we are.’ He gestured around the room. ‘Provided that the alcohol is ordered with a meal, and there’s an adult with them.’ He gestured at the set table, and us, by way of explanation.

‘Really?’ Ron asked. He glanced at his wife for confirmation. She shrugged, and Harry and Ron exchanged looks of amazement.

‘Let’s just hope that this lot have forgotten this conversation eleven years from now,’ I told Mike.

He stared at me in disbelief. ‘Remind me, Jacqueline, my darling. How old were you when you had your first alcoholic drink?’ I glared at him, and refused to answer.

‘I was fifteen,’ admitted Ginny cheerfully.

‘Me, too,’ Mike told her. ‘And so was Jacqui,’ he added in a confidential whisper that everyone could hear. ‘What was it, Ginny, beer, cider, the dread Lambrini?’

‘Whisky,’ she replied calmly.

‘Bloo-imey!’ he said. ‘All I managed to snaffle was a can of Carling. I didn’t like it! But then it is a bland, mass-produced lager. What about the rest of you?’
‘My parents used to holiday in France,’ Hermione began.

‘Wine with a meal at age ten?’ Mike asked, grinning.

‘I wasn’t that young,’ she said carefully.

‘What about you two?’ I asked Harry and Ron. They looked at each other, and shrugged.

‘A few days before your seventeenth, Harry?’ Ginny suggested. ‘Moody, like me.’

‘You and Harry were moody teens?’ Mike smiled at her as she spoke. ‘I’m not sure I can believe that!’

Four faces fell, and the conversation stopped. The Potters and Weasleys were uncertain what to say, and Mike immediately realised that he’d said something wrong.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I just meant… Well, most sixteen-year-olds are… but… I’ll just shut up now, shall I?’

‘Yes,’ I told him firmly, uncertain about what had just happened.

‘It’s…’ Harry began.

‘Not important,’ said Ginny firmly. ‘Well, it is, but not here and now. What did you think of the play area, James?’ Like Hermione, earlier, her change of subject was abrupt.

‘Great,’ James told us.

‘Henry’s nice,’ Rosie added. ‘He…’

‘He is,’ James interrupted her. ‘He showed us all the slides and fings.’

‘Yeah,’ Al agreed. ‘Good.’

The kids exchanged glances, fell into an uneasy silence, and Harry, Ginny, Hermione, and I exchanged a “do we keep questioning them?” look. It was obvious that they were hiding some minor misdemeanour or other, but they were happy in each other’s company, and there were no obvious quarrels or grudges. Without words, we agreed to say no more.

Ron and Mike, meanwhile, were discussing beer. Or, at least, Mike was extolling the virtues’ of Wylam’s Jakehead IPA. Their conversation soon turned to Ron’s local, The Cricketers, and several beers I’d never heard of. I left them to it, turned to Hermione, and started a different conversation. I soon realised that I was lecturing her on the health and fitness benefits of swimming. Fortunately, she didn’t seem to mind. She even asked me some intelligent questions.

The food, and the company, were good. The conversation stayed on solid ground, with discussions centring on our children, their behaviour, and our hopes for their futures. As the tables were cleared, Hermione was trying to explain to Ginny why she was convinced that her two would both be prefects, and Head Boy and Girl. Harry was smiling indulgently at her, while Ginny and I admitted that we were setting our sights lower.

‘I don’t really care how well they do,’ I said. ‘Provided that they’re happy, of course.’

‘Happiness!’ Ginny agreed. Raising her glass, she chinked it against mine. ‘That really is the only thing that matters, isn’t it, Harry?’
The look he gave her made my heart melt.

‘To happiness,’ Ginny said, raising her wine glass.

Everyone joined us in that toast, even the kids. Ginny then, rather drunkenly, announced that friends and family were all that were needed for happiness. She and I raised our glasses again and toasted friends and family. Mike smiled indulgently at me, and I realised that I was feeling more than a little lightheaded. My wine glass was still half full, but the bottle was empty. Despite my protests, Ginny and I had managed to finish two bottles of Merlot between us. I looked around at good company and empty plates, and realised the evening was coming to an end. I checked my watch. It wasn’t even close to eight o’clock.

‘Drakeshaugh for coffee,’ Ginny announced. ‘No arguments.’

The night was cold when I clambered out of the car at Drakeshaugh. A surfeit of wine had made me a little clumsy, so I left Mike to unbuckle the kids. The wind was brisk and the sky miraculously clear. The stars were diamonds on black velvet, and I was rather drunk.

The moment they were freed from the cars, James slapped Al’s arm, shouted, ‘Tig,’ and ran off into the darkness. The kids all scattered; rather than give chase, Al looked at us hopefully.

‘Kids only,’ Ron made the decision for us. ‘We’re going into the warm.’

Al turned and ran off after the others.

‘Be careful,’ Harry called after him. ‘It’s dark.’

‘And don’t stay out too long,’ Hermione added.

As they vanished into the trees, I was still debating whether or not to call my two back. Mike distracted me from my considerations by walking up behind me and putting his arms around my waist. I felt his breath on my ear.

Before he could speak, someone said, ‘Harry!’

We all remained silent as Harry pulled out his phone. ‘Terry,’ he replied, looking down into it.

‘Someone has broken into Seamus’ place,’ Terry said. ‘Not really a job for us, but it’s Seamus, so I’ve despatched Susan and a full team. I thought you should know.’

‘Anything ta…’ Harry got no further, because I screamed.

The ghost of Polly Protheroe drifted through the kitchen door of Drakeshaugh, stared at me in surprise, and turned to Harry. ‘I’ve been looking for you, boss,’ she said urgently. ‘He’s here!’

As I pointed at the ghost, my scream now no more than a worried whimper, everything went crazy. A bell sounded, a klaxon blared, and a woman’s voice said, ‘Code Blue, Code Blue, unauthorised intruder at the Head Auror’s home. Emergency Portkey in ten, nine, eight…’

By then Harry was sprinting into the trees, taking the counting voice with him. The ghost of Polly followed, as did Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. I could feel myself fighting for breath. I couldn’t, I wouldn’t, faint. Mike was holding me, but also trying to lower me to the ground so that he could follow.

When the woman’s voice reached six there was a loud noise, like a gunshot. My wine-fuddled
brain couldn’t decide whether the noise was an actual gunshot, or merely Al shouting the word, ‘Bang!’

When the woman’s countdown reached zero, I was sitting on the uncomfortable gravel and Mike was whispering reassuringly in my ear. I saw blue lights flashing in the woods, but couldn’t figure out how the emergency services had arrived on scene so quickly, or how they’d driven through the trees. I gave up, and closed my eyes.
‘Head Auror Harry James Potter, black quill.’

‘What is this?’

‘Senior Auror Susan Bones, red quill. Harry has just told you, Miss Sidebotham, but you weren’t paying attention. We use Auto-dictation quills to record formal interviews. For the benefit of Auror Office records, please identify yourself and state the colour of ink your quill is using.’

‘Is this how you carry out all of your interviews? You record absolutely everything everybody says? The paperwork must be a complete nightmare.’

‘Auror Camelia Tepes, blue quill. It’s a completely accurate recording, Miss Sidebotham. We use the system for formal interviews. You still have not complied with Harry’s request, despite the fact that Susan has just repeated it.’

‘Tepes! You’re the vampire Auror, aren’t you? No offence, but I don’t want to be locked in a room with a vampire!’

‘Why do people feel the need to use the words “no offence, but…” to precede an offensive remark? I am an Auror, and I am offended.’

‘Camelia is one of the Aurors who’ve been investigating your actions, Miss Sidebotham; she’s staying. Will you please confirm that your words are being recorded in green.’

‘But… Sorry, sir. Yes, that’s me.’

‘For the last time, Miss Sidebotham, do what Harry asked. Please identify yourself and state the colour of ink your quill is using!’

‘Aagh! Frances Sidebotham, green ink!’

‘Put the fangs away, Camelia.’

‘Sorry, Harry.’

‘Miss Sidebotham, Senior Auror Bones will carry out the interview. Auror Tepes will assist her. Address your replies to Auror Bones. I’m simply here as an observer.’

‘Susan Bones! Weren’t you married to Jonny Summerby, that dreamy Tornadoes’ Chaser? It said in Witch Weekly that…’

‘It said a lot of things about my marriage in Witch Weekly, and all of it was wrong!’

‘We’re not here to discuss Susan’s poor choice in men, Miss Sidebotham, we’re here to discuss yours!’
‘Camelia! Enough!’

‘Sorry, Harry, but… Sorry, Susan, that was unkind of me. Go ahead.’

‘You are Frances Sidebotham, and you were employed as a security witch here at the Ministry, correct?’

‘Were! What do you mean, were? I am a security witch.’

‘Correspondence—thanks, Camelia. For the record, Auror Tepes is showing Miss Sidebottom document reference AO/MIT/0387 cor.097. This is a copy of your letter of suspension. It was delivered to you three days ago. You signed for it. This is your signature, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, but…’

‘This letter informed you that you’d been suspended for gross misconduct and advised you that you’d be subject to a formal interview with the Auror Office. You are not, currently, a security witch. Surely you read the letter, why do you think you’re here?’

‘You sent me another letter, yesterday; it said you wanted me to come in for interview at nine this morning. When I arrived… Ah! That’s why the security arch trapped me, isn’t it?’

‘Camelia—thanks. For the record, Auror Tepes is now showing Miss Sidebottom document reference AO/MIT/0387 cor.101. This is a copy of the letter which called you in for interview. You’re here, so you must have read it, though not, apparently, the part reminding you to use the visitor’s arch. Did you read any of the first letter?’

‘It was five pages long.’

‘Yes or no?’

‘Some of it.’

‘But you now understand why you’re here?’

‘Yes. I can explain…’

‘You will be given an opportunity to explain, but first I’d like to establish the basic facts. We’ll start with—thanks, Camelia—Miss Sidebotham, this is photograph AO/MIT/0387 pua.27FB, and this is evidence item AO/MIT/0387 p.ev.142, an official Ministry Identity Badge. Do you recognise the man in these two images?’

‘Yes.’

‘The man in the “prisoner under arrest” image—PUA.27FB—is the same person as the man whose photograph is on the ID badge, is he not?’

‘Yes.’

‘Please tell us who he is.’

‘He’s… Jason Wallace… I… He asked me out… We were… I thought he was my boyfriend, but he was lying to me. When I found out…’

‘We’ll get to what happened when you found out. Are you certain this is Jason Wallace?’
‘Yes, of course!’

‘Thank you. Now, can you please read the name on the ID badge.’

‘Um…’

‘It’s not difficult, Miss Sidebotham. Please read the name on the ID badge.’

‘Jason Jones.’

‘Jason Jones, correct. But you’ve just identified this man as Jason Wallace. This is a genuine Ministry ID badge, but it carries a false name. Do you know who issued it?’

‘Um…’

‘Would it help if I told you that we already know the answer to that question?’

‘Okay… It was me, but… but…’

‘You should know how the Ministry’s Security Arch system works, Miss Sidebotham, but perhaps you need reminding. The Arches are Mapped. People walk into an Arch and state their name. The name they give is magically matched to the name on the Map. If the names are different, the portcullis drops. If they speak their own name correctly, but the name on the Map isn’t on the master list of Ministry employees—this morning you discovered that yours has been removed—the portcullis drops. If someone tries to pass through an arch without speaking, the portcullis drops. If someone speaks, but the arch appears to be empty, the portcullis drops. The system is supposed to keep out all non-ministry employees. Visitors must use the guest arches, where they’re identified, screened, and issued with a temporary visitor pass. The system detects people who are using Polyjuice, or are invisible, while allowing staff to enter freely. Even if someone manages to somehow get through the arches, without an ID badge that person would trigger an alarm the moment they left the Atrium.’

‘You make that sound more complicated than it is. It’s really simple—only staff can get through the staff arches!’

‘Except that Jason Wallace could, and he wasn’t staff. You gave him access, and an ID badge, although the name on it is false. We have checked Ministry personnel files; Jason Jones is not a Ministry employee, nor is Jason Wallace. However, the name Jason Wallace appears on the Employee Master List. Two separate security systems were bypassed. He could use the staff arches unchecked, and the badge allowed him unrestricted access to the Ministry. We know you issued the badge; did you also add his name to the employees list?’

‘Erm. I… Don’t you know?’

‘No. Though you are our prime suspect. I will remind you that you are currently suspended on full pay. It’s my job to assess your answers and recommend either reinstatement, or dismissal. Should we discover at a later date that you’ve lied to us during this interview…’

‘It was me!’

‘Why did you do it?’

‘Because he asked me to.’

‘Jason Wallace asked you to add his name to the list.’
'Yes.'

'Did he give a reason?'

'He said he wanted to be able to visit me without having to queue at the visitors’ arch.'

'Why does his badge say that his name is Jason Jones and that he works in the Department of Mysteries?'

'Because that’s the name he asked me to put on it.'

'Did he specifically ask to be assigned to the Department of Mysteries?'

'Yes.'

'You didn’t question this?'

'No.'

'Did you carry out any security checks on Jason Wallace before you compromised Ministry security by adding his name to the employees list?'

'I didn’t mean to compromise security!'

'Did you carry out any security checks on Jason Wallace?'

'Of course not. I knew who he was!'

'Who is he?'

'What sort of a question is that? Don’t you know?’

'Indulge me.’

'He’s Jason Wallace, his dad is Hereward Wallace, owner and curator of the Marvellous Magical Menagerie.’

'That’s what you believe, is it?’

'Believe? It’s the truth! I know he’s not really called Jones. He told me that he only chose Jones because it’s the second most common last name in the country.’

'Do you have any idea how many times Jason Wallace entered the Ministry?’

'For the record, Miss Sidebotham shrugged her shoulders. Please verbalise your replies. Does that shrug mean you don’t know? Did you ever check?'

'Check? How?’

'You know that all movements through the arches are recorded by an AutoQuill, don’t you?’

'Recorded? Oh, you mean the daily scroll! Yeah, but come on, Auror Bones, no one ever looks at that! It’s just a really long list of hundreds and hundreds of names. Every night at midnight the duty security officer starts a new scroll and sends the old one down to Central Filing. I’ve no idea what happens to the scroll after that.’

'Auror Tepes can tell you. Camelia…’
‘The daily scrolls are filed securely. Access to them is restricted to senior Ministry staff and all Aurors. The scrolls list the names of everyone who enters and leaves the Ministry, and they show the time that they passed through the arches. Trainee Auror Cattermole and I searched through four months of scrolls and annotated them. Do you know when Jason entered and left?’

‘I’ve already asked you once, Miss Sidebotham, don’t shrug. Can you give a verbal response to Camelia’s question?’

‘Why? If you’ve looked, you must know.’

‘I want you to tell us... Don’t shrug, answer the question.’

‘Jason was waiting for me in the Atrium every Friday afternoon when I finished my shift. The records should show that. But on that last day, when I saw him… It was early on Friday morning, that’s why…’

‘We’ll get to that last day soon. Every Friday, for how long?’

‘Since I put him on the list. About three months. He was there a few other times, too. I didn’t see him that often, because his dad was keeping him really busy at the menagerie. He’s had access to the Ministry… three months. So… say five—maybe six—times a month, to account for the extra few days. That’s… um… maybe about fifteen times. Definitely less than twenty.’

‘This is document AO/MIT/0387 p.ev.45. It shows that Jason Wallace used the access you gave him on seventy-one separate occasions.’

‘Seventy-one? Never!’

‘On many of those occasions he was in the Ministry for at least eight hours.’

‘Eight hours? What was he doing?’

‘Interfering with an Auror Investigation, tampering with Ministry equipment in the Department of Mysteries, Confunding an Unspeakable, and—on his final visit—attempting to steal an invitation containing the Head Auror’s address.’

‘I stopped that. I helped you!’

‘True, but he could only do those things because you had given him access.’

‘If I’d know what he was going to do, I wouldn’t have given him a pass.’

‘But that’s the point. You didn’t need to give him a pass. You’ve just told me that you always met him in the Atrium. Putting his name on the employees list was all you needed to get him into the Atrium, but you gave him an ID badge, too. You applied to be an Auror, you work in Ministry security, and yet you didn’t even realise that he didn’t need the badge to meet you. He needed it because he wanted access to the Department of Mysteries. You’re personally responsible for a major security breach!’

‘Sorry.’

‘Five people are dead, and you’re sorry.’

‘I had nothing to do with the murders.’

‘No? Are you certain? I don’t think you grasp the seriousness of your situation, Miss Sidebotham.’
‘That’s not fair. When I realised, when I saw Jason, I followed him. I investigated!’

‘And you were Obliviated and almost captured. If it wasn’t for Gaheris Robards, you’d be dead, or at least completely unaware of what had happened to you.’

‘But… I… Look, I said I’m sorry, okay?’

‘Let’s move on. This is a copy of witness statement AO/MIT/0387 WS092, the statement you signed once your memory had been recovered. I’d like to go through it with you and make a few notes.’

‘Okay.’

‘Your statement begins on your last day in the Ministry; the day you were Obliviated. Although it is mostly accurate, you omitted a number of significant details.

‘Not really…’

‘You omitted a number of significant details. Among many other things, you neglected to mention that you were the person who issued Jason—we’ll call him Jason Jones for the moment—with his Ministry ID badge.

‘You never asked about that. I can’t tell you everything. I was Obliviated!’

‘You state you were away from your post, with permission, because you had been to the Administration Office to collect an MJO.32 “Replacement Uniform” form. You were heading back to the Atrium when you saw Jason Jones talking to Michael Corner. That part of your witness statement is true. You saw them get into the lift together, watched the floor indicator, and realised they’d gone to level nine. You then took the lift to level nine yourself. Why?’

‘It’s in my statement! Because it’s the Department of Mysteries! Jason wasn’t supposed to go there.’

‘Why not? You had issued him with a pass that allowed him access to that level.’

‘He wasn’t supposed to use it!’

‘Are you really so naïve? Sorry, you don’t have to answer that. Let’s get back to the statement. You had never been in the Department of Mysteries. You got lost. Rather than ask anyone for directions, you simply wandered around the place, looking for Jason Jones. You saw Michael… Mr Corner. He was alone. You claim that he looked rather confused. You then asked him if he knew who Jason Jones was.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Michael… Mr Corner agreed to allow us to explore his memories with him. Why did you approach him?’

‘When I saw them get into the lift, it looked like they knew each other. I wanted to know… I… Okay, I wanted to know why Jason hadn’t told me he actually knew one of Dumbledore’s Army! And I was worried. I wanted to know if Jason had been into the Department of Mysteries before.’

‘Worried about a security possible breach, or worried about your job?’

‘That’s not fair! I was investigating. If you’ve seen Mr Corner’s memories, you know what
happened.’

‘We know what Mi… Mr Corner thinks happened, but Jason had been Confunding and Obliviating him for months. We’d like corroboration.’

‘I didn’t know! Wait a minute: Confunded and Obliviated? He’s married, didn’t his wife notice?’

‘Yes, but he was working with us and she assumed his eccentric and forgetful behaviour was due to the stress the case was placing him under. What did you say to Mr Corner?’

‘I wanted to find out why Jason had gone to the Department of Mysteries. I asked Mr Corner if he knew him. Things got really weird, said something about “random security” and told me Jason was his assistant. That’s when I knew something was really wrong! I told Mr Corner that Jason wasn’t anyone’s assistant, that he wasn’t even an Unspeakable. I thought he was going to collapse. He started to shake, and then he went crazy. He shouted, “He’s been interfering with the system,” and ran off. When he ran, he dropped something. It was the invitation to your… to Mr Potter’s party. I picked it up, but I didn’t know what to do, so I left.’

‘So that’s how you got hold of it! Michael didn’t realise that he’d dropped it. Thank you for clearing that up. Then, you left. You knew there was an unauthorised intruder in the Department of Mysteries, but you left the Ministry without raising the alarm. Ministry Security Regulations state that, upon discovering an intruder, you should have immediately summoned aid. Instead, you lied to your manager, telling him that your mother had been rushed into St Mungo’s. Then you fled from the Ministry, leaving Michael alone with an intruder!’

‘I… I… I didn’t want to believe Jason was involved in anything bad. I had to check, so I went to his flat…’

‘Which is in Nether Edge, Sheffield.’

‘Yes, he moved there to be closer to me!’

‘And after he moved there, he asked you about Muggles, and if you knew of any empty or abandoned buildings in Sheffield. You told him about the industrial buildings in Burngreave, the place where the murders were committed, and you told him about the derelict hotel where Auror Protheroe was killed.’

‘I… How do you know that?’

‘You did, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, but how did you know?’

‘He was raised in Kent. He didn’t know Sheffield. You, however, are Sheffield born and bred. It seemed very likely. Thank you for confirming my suspicions.’

‘Oh.’

‘Tell me what happened when you went to Jason’s flat.’

‘It was really untidy. He had old copies of the Daily Prophet all over the floor; there were lots of words ringed. There were loads of notes, too. It looked like Arithmancy, but I didn’t understand it. There was something about altering input to redirect predictions. From all the lines and arrows, it looked like Jason was trying to make something point towards Mr Robards. That was when I remembered that Mr Robards worked at the Menagerie with Jason. And I found another clue!'
There was a Sheffield A-Z on the table, and the old Hallam Hotel was ringed. Jason asked me about the place, so I went there. I tried to rescue Mr Robards.’

‘You failed and got yourself Obliviated. You had proof of Jason’s involvement. When you found the evidence at his flat, you should have called us.’

‘I thought I’d get into trouble!’

‘You knew you were already in trouble! You’d allowed Jason access to the Ministry, and you were certain…’

‘Not certain, never certain.’

‘You strongly suspected that he was somehow involved in the murders. You didn’t call us because you thought that, if you could find and rescue Mr Robards, you’d be the hero, and you might not get fired. Am I right?’

‘Yes, no, I… It wasn’t like that, not really. I was confused. I was in love with Jason, but he’d betrayed me! You of all people must understand how that feels.’

‘I made a mistake, put it right the moment I realised, and I accepted the consequences.’

‘That’s what I was trying to do!’

‘No, you were trying to avoid the consequences of your actions.’

‘I told you where Mr Robards was! You rescued him!’

‘An Auror died during the rescue! We recovered your memories too late. This “evidence” you’ve just told us about, the map, the diagrams and calculations, it doesn’t exist.’

‘Of course it exists. I saw it. How else could I have found Mr Robards?’

‘If it did exist, then Jason destroyed it. Because you went off alone, and didn’t tell anyone what you were doing or why. Jason had the opportunity to clean up. And, in addition, his brother had time to set up a trap in the hotel. Your incompetence prolonged a murder enquiry and cost at least one, possibly three lives! You were invited here for a formal misconduct interview, so you have not been cautioned. However, given your actions, I believe that we are justified in treating you as an accessory to murder, and…’

‘Noooo! Please! I…’

‘Have a tissue. Dry your eyes. I am now suspending this interview. Camelia!’

‘Frances Sidebotham, I am arresting you for aiding and abetting a suspected offender, namely Jason Wallace—also known as Jason Jones and Jason Hume—by knowingly and fraudulently providing him with access to the Ministry of Magic. This is an offence under sections 12a, b, and d, and section 17 of the Ministry of Magic Security Act 2006. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. You have the right to legal counsel and you may, if you wish, be questioned under Veritaserum. Notwithstanding this, any replies you give while under the influence of Veritaserum can be contested. Do you understand?’

‘Noooo… Please.’
‘Do you understand?’

‘Yes, but I’m not… I helped! I escaped, I found my way to Harry’s house and told him—and you—everything I knew as soon as you got my memory back.’

‘And that’s why we’re arresting you. It would be unfair of us to allow you to further incriminate yourself in a formal interview. If you don’t have legal counsel, please let the Sheriff’s Custody Officer know. Counsel will be provided. The time is nine-twenty-one, it is Tuesday, the twentieth of October. Any future interviews will be held under caution. Formal interview zero-one-three-slash-one is now suspended.’

AO/MIT/0387 SS092/AJW/DP
Signed Statement of: Gaheris Robards, Magizoologist (retired), Volunteer Cataloguer at the Marvellous Magical Menagerie.

Interviewer: Senior Auror Aloysius Jonah Webb. (Also present: Dyddgu Phillips, Sheriff of Wales.)

Location: St Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

Preliminary Notes: Mr Robards was recovering from his kidnap ordeal when this statement was taken. He was severely malnourished and still recovering from his Obliviation. The Healers, and Mr Robards himself, assured us that his memory of events has been fully restored. While the interviewer had never previously met the interviewee, Auror Webb worked alongside Prof. Robards brother, Gawain (Head Auror 1996-2007) for more than thirty years. As all but the most junior of Aurors have worked for Gawain Robards, Dyddgu Phillips, Sheriff of Wales, observed the interview to ensure probity.


I am Gaheris Robards, Professor of Magizoology, Fellow of the Royal Magizoological Society, and Member of the European Cryptozoological and Cryptobotanical Explorers, Naturalists, Technicians and Researchers Institute and Collegium.

I live alone, at [ADDRESS REDACTED by Harry J Potter, Head Auror].

Auror Webb has told me that I am required to provide information regarding my marital status. I have refused. My husband, Declan, is Muggle-born. He was “arrested” in November 1997, apparently by Fenrir Greyback. Declan is one of “the Missing”. No corpse, or any evidence of his death, has been discovered. Despite my objections, and appeal to the Wizengamot, his death certificate was issued in July 2005. This was only seven years after his disappearance. I object to being classified as a widower; I thank Auror Webb, both for allowing me to make this statement and for his courtesy and understanding.

I am, technically, retired. I no longer have a paid teaching or research position. However, I volunteer as a cataloguer at the Marvellous Magical Menagerie (hereafter MMM), where I examine and document the various stuffed creatures in Mr Hereward Wallace’s collection. While many deride the MMM, there are a number of endangered and extinct creatures in the collection, particularly in the store rooms.

I had always assumed that the “stuffed werewolf” on display was simply an altered wolf and ignored it. My reasons were simple humanity—I could not believe anyone would practice taxidermy on a human being—and practicality—werewolves revert to their human form upon
death, and I could not conceive of a method to retain the form during the process of taxidermy. I still have no idea how it was done.

On the morning of Thursday, the twenty-fourth of September, I noticed a man—who I now know to be my interviewer, Auror Webb—carefully scrutinising the exhibit. This event, coinciding as it did with the reports in the Daily Prophet about the so-called “werewolf murders”, piqued my curiosity. I waited until Auror Webb left, and then carried out my own examination.

My detailed analysis left me in no doubt. The exhibit was, as claimed, a real werewolf. I was appalled by this discovery. While I was trying to decide what to do, Mr Wallace’s son, Jason, chanced upon me. He asked what I was doing. I told him. He seemed very upset by my discovery, and he begged that I keep it quiet. He promised that he would discuss the exhibit with his father. Because of his anxiety, I agreed.

The following week, on Tuesday, 29 September, at approximately quarter to nine in the evening, Jason Wallace called on me at my home. He claimed that he wanted to talk about the werewolf, but when I opened my door to him, he Stunned me. (1)

When I next woke, I was supine, wandless, shackled, and locked in a windowless room. My legs were chained together, and the chain was magically bonded to the wall. The chain restricted my movement to only a few feet. The only door was well out of my reach; I could not even reach the centre of the room. In addition, I had been Obliviated and, although I knew who I was, I had no recollection of my examination of the wolf and no idea how, or why, I had been imprisoned. At the time, I wondered if my kidnap had something to do with my husband.

In the room were an old mattress and a chamber pot. On the mattress was a rather flimsy orange bag on which was printed the word “Sainsbury’s”. It was made from a strange material; I have since been informed it was a Muggle material called plastic. Inside the bag were three cardboard packages of sandwiches and four large bottles of water—they weren’t glass bottles. I’ve been told that they, too, were plastic, although this seems unlikely as they were a very different material to the bag. There was also a small piece of paper (2), which, together with the orange bag, I placed in my pocket.

Auror Webb and Sheriff Phillips have shown me Crime Scene Image AO/MIT/0387 CSI.33FB. I can confirm that this is the room in which I was held.

The place was magically illuminated. The light was dim, but constant. My watch was missing and I was fed only sporadically. Consequently, I had no idea how long I was in captivity. Hunger and thirst were my only constants. At what seemed to me to be random intervals, a wand was poked around the door, and I was Stunned. Every time I awoke, the chamber pot had been emptied and the food had been replaced. On several occasions, I tried to free myself from my shackles; I only succeeded in injuring myself. (3)

I was very hungry when the young woman arrived. I have no idea when that was.

I have been shown evidence item AO/MIT/0387 p.ev.141, an official Ministry Identity Badge. I can confirm that the woman I saw was the person on the badge, Security Support Officer Frances Sidebotham. When she opened the door, she simply stared at me. From her worried expression, it was apparent that she was not my captor. I suggested that, instead of staring, she use her wand to free me. She tried, but failed.

I was certain that I would be able to use the Blasting curse to free myself from the chains, so I asked the woman—Frances Sidebotham—to give me her wand. She did so, and I succeeded in freeing myself. I then returned her wand to her. In retrospect, that was a mistake.
We were making our way from the building when a man Apparated into the foyer. He was only a few feet away from us. I immediately recognised him as Jason Wallace. I was, I regret to say, pleased to see him. Because I had been Obliviated, I had no idea that he was my kidnapper.

Frances Sidebotham screamed. Jason raised his wand and pointed it at her. From Frances’ reaction, I knew something was wrong. I was wandless, so I did the only thing I could. I jumped at Jason, hoping to distract him. I knocked his hand aside, and his Stunning Spell missed Frances. I then tried to wrestle his wand from him, but he is both younger and stronger than I. The young woman appeared to have forgotten how to use her wand, and I knew I was losing the fight. I told her to run. She did so. She was almost out of the door when Jason managed to Obliviate her. She stopped, confused, and I was convinced that she was going to come back to try to help me. I again told her to run. Fortunately, she did. Jason and I continued to struggle until he was finally able to stun me. When I next awoke, I was again in chains. Jason had gone, but for some reason he had not Obliviated me. This time, I was not alone in my cell. The man with me was not in chains. Nor was he Jason, although his features bore a distinct resemblance to Jason’s. At first, I wondered if Jason, unable to procure the ingredients for a Polyjuice potion, had simply tried to magically alter his appearance. I soon realised that I was wrong. Jason had always been quiet and polite, even deferential. This man was angry, assertive, and he seemed several years older than Jason.

The stranger attempted to be friendly, to gain my trust. Frankly, it seemed that the very idea of friendliness was alien to him. He certainly wasn’t very good at it. Despite my misgivings, I went along with his attempts to ingratiate himself with me, and he began an unsubtle attempt to question me. As I listened to his questions, I had an epiphany. I knew both Jason and his father, Hereward Wallace, well. Despite this, I had never realised that there was no family resemblance between them. Rather than answer the man’s question: “The woman who tried to rescue you, what does she know?” I asked him if he was Jason’s brother.

That was a mistake. He drew his wand and used the Cruciatus Curse on me. He was utterly deranged, wild-eyed and furious. He pushed his wand against my forehead and demanded that I tell him how I knew. I said, “there’s a family resemblance.” He swore, and yelled, “Family! I have no family. Greyback took my parents, and Fawley took my memories of them!” Then, he once again used that Unforgivable Curse on me. When I recovered consciousness, he was gone.

I remained alone in my cell until the Aurors arrived. They were freeing me when he returned. I believe that he expected to find Miss Sidebotham, not four Aurors. He blasted the floor, and while the Aurors were trying to stop the collapse, and to protect me and themselves, he used the Killing Curse and Disapparated.

Addendum: Auror Webb has shown me photograph AO/MIT/0387 PUA.29 (Pelias Fawley). I can confirm that this was the man who questioned me, and killed Auror Protheroe.

(1) On the morning of Wednesday 30 September, Aurors Protheroe (decd.), Corner, and Creevey followed “Gaheris Robards” to MMM. According to Mr Robards’ account, he had already been abducted. The working hypothesis is that the person the Aurors followed was, in fact, a Polyjuiced Jason Wallace. They watched “Robards” enter the MMM grounds, but, according to the Surveillance Map of MMM, he did not enter the building. These facts are consistent with “Robards” being Jason Wallace. This appears to be the most logical explanation for his last reported sighting.

(2) Prof. Robards retained similar pieces of paper from other bags of food he was given. They were Muggle receipts for the food. Detective Inspector Roberta A Wood (Auror Liaison Officer) has acquired both “fingerprint” and “CCTV” (4) evidence that prisoner Jason Wallace (AO/MIT/0387
PUA.27) bought these items.

(3) Images of Prof. Robard’s injuries (AO/MIT/0387 CSI.39FB) were taken for evidentiary purposes by Imager Fenella Boot.

(4) CCTV is a Muggle system for recording moving images.

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AO/MIT/0387 MN094/1 Notes of Preliminary Meeting with: Wallace, Hereward: Marvellous Magical Menagerie, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director.

**Auror Attendees:** Senior Auror Terry Boot, Trainee Auror Amber Skoll.
**Location:** Hereward Wallace's Office, The Marvellous Magical Menagerie.

Mr Hereward Wallace was first asked about his son, Jason’s, whereabouts. He informed us that Jason had argued with his parents and moved out from the family home. Hereward Wallace stated that there had been an argument and that he believed that his estranged son was staying with Pelias Fawley, who is Jason’s biological brother. He agreed to be questioned under Veritaserum.

During the course of the interview with Mr Wallace, the following facts were established:

Pelias and Jason Hume were brothers. They were orphaned when their parents were murdered by Fenrir Greyback. Jason was adopted by the Wallace family as a baby and was raised with no knowledge of his parents or brother. This was at the express request of Mr Wregan Fawley, who adopted Jason’s seven-year-old brother, Pelias. The boys are Pureblood (according to Mr Wallace, this fact was very important to Mr Wregan Fawley).

Several months ago, Pelias contacted Jason. When the young men met, Pelias claimed to have been Obliviated by his adoptive father and to have only discovered Jason’s existence by breaking into his adopted father’s study. Hereward Wallace confronted Wregan Fawley, who admitted this.

Hereward Wallace appeared extremely distressed by his adopted son’s arrest. He claims that Jason must have been acting under duress. He stated that, until Pelias arrived in their lives, Jason had been polite and well-behaved. It is recommended that both Mr and Mrs Wallace be invited into the Auror Office and subjected to separate Formal Interviews.

_Agreed, arrange the interviews asap._

*Harry Potter (Head Auror)*

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AO/MIT/0387 IUC005/3 – Wallace, Jason: Marvellous Magical Menagerie, Junior Assistant.
(Also Known As: Jones, Jason, and: Hume, Jason.)

‘Auror Dominic Strang, Blue Quill.’

‘Senior Auror Phillipa Fortescue, Black Quill. I will be carrying out this interview, Mr Wallace. As you were told in your two previous interviews under caution, you have been arrested for murder, which is an offence under common law. The formal caution you were given still applies. Would you like me to repeat it?’

‘For the record, Mr Wallace shook his head. If neither you, nor your legal counsel wishes to say anything regarding the charges, we shall continue. I’m sure that counsel has informed you that, because of the seriousness of the offences, we have been granted a three-day extension by the
courts. We can now hold you for a total of ninety-six hours from the moment you were arrested. At that point, now some forty hours away, you will either be charged or released. Do you understand?’

‘Beauregard Fitzherbert, legal counsel to Jason Wallace, Red Quill. Auror Fortescue, my client declines to answer any questions. He will not speak and has instructed me to make “no comment” responses to every question you ask.’

‘Mr Wallace, will you at least confirm that you are Jason Wallace, also known as Jason Jones, and born Jason Hume?’

‘As you can see, my client has no comment to make.’

‘Do you intend to “no comment” on behalf of your client throughout this interview, Mr Fitzherbert?’

‘Those are my client’s instructions, Auror Fortescue.’

‘Then I won’t waste anyone’s time with further questions. It seems that we did not need the extra time to question him. No matter. Dominic.’

‘Jason Wallace, also known as Jason Jones, and born Jason Hume, you are charged with the following offences:

‘Despite the fact that you are not, and have never been, employed by the Ministry of Magic, you conspired with Frances Sidebotham to obtain a Ministry of Magic Identity Badge for the Department of Mysteries. You used this badge to enter, under the name Jason Jones, restricted areas of the Ministry. This is an offence under sections 12a, b, and d, and section 17 of the Ministry of Magic Security Act 2006. It carries a maximum penalty of ten years in Azkaban.’

‘While inside the Ministry, you interfered with, and wilfully obstructed, an ongoing Auror investigation. This is an offence under section 60 of the Magical Law Act 1806. It carries a maximum penalty commensurate with the crime whose investigation you attempted to obstruct. In this case, murder, which carries a life sentence.

‘On separate occasions, on dates to be ascertained, you stunned and unlawfully took or carried away the following five people: James Phillipson McLuckie, Eleanor Fearn, Caitlin Satterley, Jack Tuffnell, and Gaheris Robards, thereby infringing their personal liberty. Kidnapping is an offence under magical common law that carries a maximum life sentence.

‘You delivered the aforementioned James Phillipson McLuckie, Eleanor Fearn, Caitlin Satterley, and Jack Tuffnell to your brother, Pelias Fawley, born Pelias Hume, in the knowledge that he intended to kill them. Murder, and abetting murder, is an offence under magical common law that carries a maximum life sentence.

Mr Wallace, you have refused to answer any questions, but you have now been formally charged with eleven offences, ten of which carry a life sentence. Do you wish to make any comment?’

‘My client has no comment to make.’

‘As you wish. We’ll provide you with the most recent evidence we have gathered against your client. I believe that his loyalty to his brother is misplaced and that he’d be better off telling us his side of the story. If not, your client is likely to be in Azkaban for a very long time. I’m sure you’ll advise him of the best course of action, Mr Fitzherbert. Interview terminated.’
Detective Inspector Roberta Wood and I arrived at Mr Fawley’s house at 13:00 hours on Sunday, 25 October. The door was opened by Mr Fawley’s house elf, Narkie, who refused to allow Det. Insp. Wood and I entry to the property. I explained who we were, and why we wanted to speak to Mr Fawley, but despite this, the house elf, Narkie, closed the door on us.

We continued to knock at the door. After several minutes, Mr Fawley came to the door himself. He told us that he did not wish to answer any questions regarding Pelias Fawley. During a very short, and frank, discussion he referred to Pelias Fawley only as, “the ungrateful wretch I foolishly adopted.” When I suggested that he might be able to assist us in our enquiries, and asked if we could enter his home, he told us that under no circumstances would he allow a scrawny little Mudblood into his property and that he considered the fact that I was accompanied by a filthy good-for-nothing Muggle was an unforgiveable insult to an important Pureblood wizard of independent means, such as himself. He then told us that if we didn’t leave the grounds immediately, we would hear from his solicitor. At that point he slammed the door in our faces.

Det. Insp. R A Wood and I saw no point in continuing our attempt to interview him.

Signed
Auror Dennis Creevey
D.I. Roberta A Wood

(Attached)

**Arrest Warrant Authorisation**

*Reason for warrant: “Obstruction of an ongoing murder enquiry.”*

*Notes: Property search under this arrest warrant is considered essential.*

*Aurors Assigned: Squad δα (Creevey, Baines, Wylde), Squad βα (Bones, Strang, Tepes), plus: Detective Inspector R A Wood (Muggle Liaison), Imager F Boot, Analysis Unit Supervisor A White, Cursebreaker H McLeod.*

Signed
Harry Potter (Head Auror)

*PS Dennis, contact Angela Weasley in the Sentient Entities Rights Authority, and make sure Mr Fawley’s house elf (elves?) are SERA registered.*
I’m one of those people who wake quickly and, when I wake, I like to be doing. I’ve never been one to lounge lazily in bed, not even when I’m feeling unwell. That Sunday morning, for the first time since Annie was born, I wanted to roll over and go back to sleep. I couldn’t.

I can’t claim that I was suffering from the hangover to end all hangovers, as in my limited experience, they all are. My mouth was parched, my head was throbbing, and my bladder was ready to burst. The desperate urgency of the latter outweighed everything else. Although I didn’t want to move, I had no choice.

Forcing my eyes open, I tried to focus on my surroundings. The walls seemed to be swaying. Sitting up in bed was a struggle, and the pain in my head was exacerbated by an encounter with a laser beam of daylight burning through the gap in the curtains. As daylight swept across my face, it lit a fuse. Fireworks flashed behind my eyes, and explosions echoed in my skull. Despite my disorientation, I forced myself to my feet, and staggered towards our en suite.

In order to lessen the pyrotechnics in my head, I kept my eyes closed and hoped that familiarity with my surroundings would be enough to get me to my destination. It almost worked.

As I staggered blindly towards the bathroom, I stumbled over my slippers and overbalanced. Forced to open my eyes, I managed to remain on my feet. Three loudly echoing footfalls and a steadying hand on the door jamb were enough to keep me upright. Although I hadn’t fallen, the sudden burst of light combined with the thump of my heavy-footed recovery to exacerbate my pain. The first two steps were on bedroom carpet, the last on the cold tiles of the bathroom floor. I spent a moment recovering, then three more steps took me to my destination.

As I sat, I closed my eyes and tried to remember the events of the previous evening. My brain wasn’t working properly. Jumbled memories of a ghost, flashing blue lights, noisy children, concerned friends, and Harry sprinting into the woods only made things worse. I simply couldn’t remember.

The dazzling display going on inside my skull seemed to have passed its peak, and my body was becoming better able to differentiate between vertical and horizontal. Unfortunately, reorganising the jigsaw pieces of recollection into a coherent image remained impossible. A vague sense of danger made me desperate to know that everyone was okay. I decided on a simple plan. Flush, wash hands, go downstairs, ask Mike.

I managed the first two.

When I opened the bathroom door, someone was sitting on the bed waiting for me. I looked at the amorphous, Mike-sized blob on the bed and forced my bleary eyes to focus. My husband’s half-smile was, I thought, one of sympathy.

‘I’ve brought you breakfast in bed,’ he said.

I think he was trying to be quiet, but my hangover was telling me otherwise. Concentrating carefully, I successfully identified the items on the small tray he was offering. A fizzing glass of something white, probably Andrews Liver Salts, and two paracetamols.
'Kettle’s on, if you want a cuppa,’ he added quietly. ‘I’ll put some toast on for you, too, if you think you’re up to eating. It’s been a very long time since I’ve provided you with the toast and marmite cure. It’s always worked for you.’

‘That’s…’ I stopped. The hoarse croak that had issued from my mouth belonged to someone else.

Mike silently handed me the glass. I gulped down half of the liquid and stretched out my hand to take the tablets. Mike lifted the tray. Taking the paracetamol, I used the rest of the drink to wash them down.

‘Better?’ he asked.

I shook my head. That was another mistake. As it rattled around my skull my brain told me in no uncertain terms that it didn’t want to be shaken, or stirred. I groaned.

‘Obviously not,’ Mike told me cheerfully.

Annoyance surged to the fore. This was all his fault. He’d let me drink an entire bottle of wine. He’d been driving, he’d been sober, he wasn’t hungover, he should have stopped me! The urge to scold him was strong, but common sense prevailed. I knew raising my voice—if I actually had a voice to raise—would hurt me more than it would hurt him. Handing him the glass, I rubbed my face in my hands, and realised that I hadn’t removed my makeup before going to bed. It shouldn’t have surprised me, as I couldn’t remember going to bed. I couldn’t remember much after our arrival at Drakeshaugh.

‘The kids!’ I croaked. That was the most urgent question.

‘They’re fine,’ he said. ‘They’re sitting in front of the telly. Everyone’s fine, although that poor lost hiker apparently took quite a tumble.’

Unable to make any sense of Mike’s last sentence, I decided not to press him. I needed a few more minutes to wake properly. ‘Shower,’ I told him. ‘Then tea and toast.’

‘Okey-dokey, wacky-Jacqui.’ He told me. His jovial response garnered a glare from me. Its spectacular lack of effect on him was further proof that I definitely needed more time to recover.

‘Indigestion?’ His question showed how pathetic my glare had been.

‘Annoyance,’ I said.

‘Yeah, well. You haven’t had a skinful since we went to Kos, and that’s six years ago. That was your “never-again”, remember?’

‘Mmm, hmm’ I sighed in agreement. Nodding was too dangerous.

‘Took me a blooming age to find the liver salts,’ he continued cheerfully. ‘Can’t remember the last time we used them. They don’t go off, do they?’

‘Mmm-mm,’ almost the same noise, but opposite meaning. He understood. It’s all in the pitch.

‘At least I know where the tea, bread, and marmite are. Wholemeal toast, I know, but English breakfast, Assam, or Darjeeling?’

‘Breakfast,’ I ordered, waving him away.
It was almost half an hour later when I finally got downstairs. Henry and Annie were out in the garden, playing on the swing.

When I walked into the kitchen, Mike was pouring me a cup of tea. There were three thick slices of wholemeal toast on the table, and they were carefully covered in a thin layer of Marmite. He’d cut the toast in half diagonally and arranged them in an artfully overlapping flower pattern on the plate. Seeing them made me smile. He’d gone to a lot of trouble, and not simply with the arrangement. Mike was firmly of the opinion that diagonal cuts were pretentious. In his view, loaves were baked rectangular and should never be made triangular. It was one of our sillier disagreements.

‘I love you so much I’m even prepared to cut toast the wrong way. Just this once, and only because you’re rather fragile,’ he said. ‘It might be a bit cold, sorry. I put it on when I heard you turn off the shower. Took you longer than I expected to get downstairs.’

‘Thanks,’ I mumbled. Picking up a slice, I took a big bite. The toast was barely lukewarm, but the Marmite worked its magic. ‘It’ll do.’ I said as my taste buds fired up, and kickstarted my body and brain.

‘You look better,’ Mike told me as I chewed. ‘Still not good, but a few notches above bloody awful.’ He gave me a cheeky wink.

‘Thanks a bunch,’ I grumbled, taking a big slurp of tea. ‘Tell me what I missed last night.’

‘What’s the last thing you remember?’ he asked.

‘I saw…’ I stared into his face, trying to warn him not to tease me. ‘I saw the ghost of Polly Protheroe. She said, “He’s here!” I can hear her words clear as day. Then I heard a gunshot. At least, I think I heard a gunshot. Was it a gunshot? It might have been nothing more than one of the kids—Al, I think—shouting bang.’

‘It was Al, shouting,’ Mike told me. ‘It did sound weird, almost real. It must’ve been the way it echoed through the trees. You don’t remember anything else? You don’t remember anything about being in Drakeshaugh?’

I closed my eyes. ‘You helped me out to the car,’ I recalled. ‘So, logically, I must’ve been inside.’

‘I carried you in,’ said Mike. ‘After Al shouted, Harry, Ron, and Hermione went haring off to check on the kids. Ginny wanted to go with them, but Harry told her she was too drunk. She listened to him. Just as well, because she wasn’t in any state to go with them. I wanted to go too, but I was holding onto you, and you were a dead weight, and the others had gone off like sprinters.’

Mike paused and lowered his head. The kids had needed him, and he’d been stuck holding onto his drunk wife. I knew he was lost in the what ifs.

‘Did you see her?’ I asked.

‘Yeah,’ Mike nodded. ‘After the alarms had been turned off, she arrived at the house with Harry, Ron, Hermione, and the kids.’

Seeing the surprise in my face, he shook his head. ‘Irritated dolphins,’ he said. ‘You’re asking me about Polly Protheroe’s ghost, aren’t you? I’m talking about Camilia the Teenage Vampire. I didn’t see any ghosts.’

It’s quite a leap from cross-purposes to irritated dolphins, but I’m used to Mike’s moronic wordplay and that’s one he uses whenever he can. He’s the only person who thinks it’s funny, although I
suspect that Ron would, too.

‘Camelia’s a bit odd,’ I mumbled, starting on my third piece of toast. ‘But cold hands don’t make her a vampire.’

‘Says the woman who thinks she saw a ghost!’ Mike was pulling an apologetic face almost before he’d finished that sentence. ‘Sorry, Jacqui,’ he continued quietly. ‘I know you believe that you saw, and heard, a ghost, I can see that in your face. But I was right next to you, and I didn’t see anything. All I heard was the alarm, and the kids. I don’t think anyone else saw her, either. I didn’t ask them, but I’m sure they’d have reacted to a ghost.’

‘You took me into Drakeshaugh,’ I said as memories began to return. ‘And you put me down on a sofa. D’you know what was going on outside? What were those lights and alarms? What happened to the kids. There was a countdown, wasn’t there?’

Mike reached over the table and squeezed my hand. ‘The Marmite’s working its magic. You’re remembering stuff and asking the questions I expected you to ask. Sit back, eat your toast, and I’ll tell you everything I know.’

I took another drink of tea and topped up my half-empty mug from the pot.

‘Once upon a time,’ Mike began.

‘Properly,’ I ordered.

‘Fine.’ He stuck out his bottom lip. You were sitting on the gravel, pretty much out of it, when all hell broke loose. Like you said, Harry’s phone was counting down, and when it reached zero, a load of blue lights went off in the trees. They were apparently a feature of his security system. Harry and the others ran off, and I picked you up and carried you into Drakeshaugh. Ginny held the doors for me. We went into that other room off the hall, Ginny’s study, because there’s a sofa in there. I laid you on the sofa, you curled up into a ball, and…’

Another memory returned with embarrassing clarity. I put my head in my hands. ‘Oh God, no,’ I mumbled. ‘Please tell me I didn’t puke…’

‘I wish I could,’ he said. ‘Most of it went onto the floor!’

‘I wish I could,’ he said. ‘Most of it went onto the floor!’

‘Most!’ I hung my head in shame.

‘Ginny dashed off into the kitchen; I stayed with you. That study’s an odd room. There’s a couple of old oil paintings in there. One’s apparently of Harry’s grandparents, the other one was just an empty chair. The desk was ancient. There was even an inkpot on it. While I was looking after you, there was another announcement. Countdown lady—I’m not talking Carol Vorderman—said “suspect in custody, all clear, stand down.” You opened your eyes for a moment, then closed them again.

‘Hmm,’ I said. I had a vague recollection about that announcement, too.

‘You were groaning and pretty much out of it. Ginny came back with a bucket and a mop. The emergency, and the announcement, seemed to have sobered her up and calmed her down—I wonder why sobering is up, but calming is down? Anyway, Ginny took charge. She told me that everyone was okay and heading back to the house, and then virtually pushed me out of the study while she cleaned you, and her floor, up.’

‘Oh, God,’ I groaned again.
Mike gave my hand a sympathetic squeeze and continued his tale. ‘She’s a lot like you, you know. “Leave this to me, Mike. Kettle’s on. If you want to make yourself useful, go and make a pot of tea.” Despite appearances, I’m no fool, I know when to obey a woman’s orders. I was putting teabags in the pot when Camelia the Teen…’ I glared at him, and this time it worked. ‘When Camelia walked in. I asked her if she wanted tea, she said “I vant to dreenk your blood”—sorry, just can’t help myself sometimes.’

‘No more of your nonsense!’ I ordered.

‘That won’t be easy,’ he replied, putting on his posh and serious voice. ‘Camelia politely declined my offer of refreshment, and then everyone else arrived. Well, almost everyone. The kids came hurrying in, and they told me that they’d caught the bad man. They said Al had “shotted” him.’ Mike paused.

‘This is where things get complicated. Bear with me. If this was a film—are we really living in a film these days? Sorry. I’ll keep going. It’s time for a flashback. Scene: the children’s indoor play area in a local public house. Seven children are squeezed inside a plastic cube. They are not plotting world domination but one, our son, is distributing weapons.’

‘What?’ I squawked.

‘Your dad gave Henry seven spent cartridges, remember?’

I nodded, instantly knowing where Mike was going. After four slices of toast and Marmite, my brain accepted the head movement without protest.

‘He now has one. As do each of the other kids.’

‘Even Annie?’ I asked.

‘Even Annie,’ Mike confirmed. ‘This may be a first. He’s usually taking things from her, not giving them to her unasked. I think we can end the cut scene there, and fast forward to the final battle. This, as I understand it, is the kids version of events.’ He paused dramatically, and I watched him gathering his thoughts.

‘Seven brave adventurers ran off into Drakeshaugh Wood; they were having a night time game of tig-tag-tug—they seem to have renamed the game. Having scattered, they were hiding from Rosie, who was “it”, when a lady said something about co-blue, and Trudi—at least that’s what Henry and James heard her say. Trudi is a big girl in Henry and James school, and they don’t like her. That’s probably not important. Then the lady started counting—backwards—Rosie was particularly impressed by that. That’s apparently when “the bad man” grabbed Rosie. She screamed, and the others got to her very quickly. According to Henry, “the bad man” had tight hold of Rosie, and he was going to hit her with a stick. According to James, it was a magic wand, and he was going to cast a spell on them all. That lad’s got quite an imagination! Anyway, they could all hear the countdown, and “the bad man” was shouting at them, so Al pulled the spent cartridge from his pocket.’ Mike paused expectantly.

‘And?’ I asked.

‘This is the weird bit. They were all remarkably consistent about what happened next. Al pointed the spent cartridge at the bad man, and shouted “Bang!”’, because that’s the noise guns make. The man flew backwards, hit a tree, and fell over. Then Al started to cry, because he thought he’d killed “the bad man”, and Rosie and Annie hugged him, and James and Henry went to see if the bad man had been “deaded”, and the grownups arrived, and that’s it, except…’ He again stopped.
‘Tell me,’ I demanded.

‘I’d forgotten…’ said Mike thoughtfully. ‘I went over the story with the kids in the car, when I was bringing you all home. You were snoring, and Annie was almost asleep, but she said “that floaty see-froo lady” got there before any of the other grown-ups. Henry said she was bonkers, that the first people there were Camel and Cloud—he meant Camelia and a guy called McLeod—who I never saw. Apparently, this McLeod guy took the hiker off to hospital. But I’m getting ahead of myself. The bottom line is, so far as the kids are concerned, a bad man snuck into Drakeshaugh and grabbed Rosie, but Al shot him and saved the day. As you’d expect, Camelia’s version of events is rather different. Do you want to hear the adult version now? I should warn you, it’s not nearly as exciting.’

After my shower, I’d put on the bloodstone necklace, the family heirloom Mum had given me when I was thirteen. I wore it so often that I usually forgot it was there, but that morning it seemed to be heavier than usual. I held up a hand.

Before Mike continued, I wanted to process the possibility that, like me, Annie had seen the ghost of Polly Protheroe. When she’d handed me the necklace, Mum had told me that there was witch-blood in the family and that, if I ever had premonitions, or saw ghosts or other strange things from the corner of my eye, I shouldn’t worry. She also warned me that broadcasting that information was a bad idea. It could only ever cause problems. It seemed to me that Annie was too young to worry about ghosts, so I decided to say nothing. That discussion could wait until she was older, until it was time for me to hand the necklace on to my daughter.

‘Go on,’ I asked as I lowered my hand and grabbed the last piece of toast.

‘Are you okay? Want any more toast?’ Mike asked.

‘Fine, and no, thanks.’ I shook my head.

‘So, the grownup version,’ Mike announced. ‘Harry was worried, by the fact that whatshername—Little Red Riding Hood—had found his address.’

‘Frances Sidebotham,’ I interjected.

She had been waving a stick, too, I recalled. As I caressed the bloodstone between my thumb and first two fingers, I filed that thought away. Something told me that speculating about magic wands was a step too far.

‘Right. Because of Frances, he set up an alarm system and arranged for a couple of his staff to keep an eye on the place—Camelia and this McLeod guy were on duty last night. Seemed sensible to me. If I was working with the cops to find a killer, and there was the slightest chance the killer knew where I lived, I’d want to make certain that my family was safe.’

‘Oh,’ Mike interrupted his story. ‘That reminds me. The police have arrested the actual killer, this Pelias Hume guy whose picture has been all over the news. As we were getting ready to leave Drakeshaugh, Harry got a message from Sheffield confirming the arrest. The police received an anonymous tip off and they picked him up some time before nine. It’s true; I watched BBC Breakfast this morning, “Werewolf Killer Captured” was their headline story. It looks like it happened not long after the kids encountered the hiker. I bet they’ll think they were the ones who really caught him.’ He paused for breath.

‘Where was I? Oh yes, the grownup version! Harry had the place alarmed, lights, speakers, and a couple of his people as security. Not sure how much use Camelia would be in a fight, she looks
like a strong wind would blow her over, but…’

He sighed. ‘I’m distracting myself again, sorry. Um… Oh, yeah. It appears that some young hiker managed to get himself lost on Cold Law. Seems unlikely to me, but he walked into Drakeshaugh Wood and set off Harry’s alarms. That made him panic. He ran for it but, in the darkness, he bumped into Rosie. Camelia reckons that he’d just picked Rosie up when the rest of the kids arrived. They thought he was attacking her, so Al pulled out his cartridge and shouted bang. Camelia thinks that—when he saw all the kids—the hiker took a step back, tripped over a root, and cracked his head off a tree.

‘Camelia told us that Henry and James were watching the guy when she and McLeod arrived. He was unconscious, bleeding from a head wound, and slumped against the tree. They were worried about concussion, so Camelia looked after the kids while Harry and Ron helped McLeod carry the guy back to Drakeshaugh. Harry told me that he didn’t look good, so McLeod took him off to A&E. Camelia and Hermione calmed Al down, dusted off Rosie, and reassured the others. A series of unfortunate incidents, and some poor soul hospitalised, but nothing as exciting as the kids’ version.’

‘Just as well,’ I observed. ‘The kids had an adventure, and I’d rather they think they caught a bad man than gave an innocent man a concussion.’ I smiled at my husband. ‘I was looking through my old kids’ books while I was getting dried this morning. I thought I might start reading one of Mum’s old “Lone Pine” books to Henry, but I don’t want to give him ideas.’

‘What’s he going to do, set up a secret club with the others?’ Mike asked. ‘Even if he did, where’s the harm in that? Kids need to be able to play, to express themselves.’

‘You’re probably right,’ I admitted. Topping up my mug for a second time, I gulped down the well-stewed, lukewarm liquid and stared at my husband. ‘Where was I when Camelia and Harry were telling you this marginally more believable tale?’

‘It is a bit of a wacky story, isn’t it? Life with the Potters really is a lot more exciting,’ Mike observed. ‘You missed out on the tale because you were semi-conscious on the sofa in the study. Hermione was keeping an eye on you.’ He smiled. ‘I’d forgotten what a quiet drunk you are. Some people get loud, some get mellow, and some get violent; you just curl up and go to sleep.’

‘After puking on Ginny’s furniture and her floor!’ I put my head in my hands.

‘Mostly on the floor, and Ginny was fine about it. Don’t be embarrassed,’ he told me. ‘If you do get drunk, then being quiet is a lot less likely to lead to embarrassment. I know I’ve said and done some very stupid things when drunk.’

‘Like “You’re the most beautiful girl in the world, and I’m going to marry you!”’ I suggested.

He laughed, stood, walked around the table, and kissed my forehead. ‘That wasn’t stupid! My lovely Jacqui is feeling better, her sark is returning.’ He threw his arm around my shoulder and hugged me. ‘I’ve said some very honest things when I’m drunk, and sometimes there’s nothing more embarrassing than total honesty. Especially when you’re convinced that the girl in question is way out of your league.’

‘Sometimes, you’re too nice to me,’ I said quietly, slipping an arm around his waist.

‘Thank you, I try,’ he said seriously. I looked up at him, but he was staring out of the window. ‘Annie’s seen me. Let’s go outside and play with our kids; they’d like to see you. When I drove home last night, you were the first one to fall asleep in the car. They were both worried about you.’
‘I should phone Ginny and apologise.’

‘Yes, you should,’ Mike agreed. ‘But you don’t have to do it right now.’

Playing in the garden with the kids worked wonders for me. The fresh air did a good job of blowing the last alcohol from my head. I was sitting on the swing, resting after a strenuous game of chasey and Annie was trying to push me. Mike was sitting on the lawn, a little dizzy, having spun both of the kids around by their arms. Henry had decided he wasn’t dizzy enough, so was spinning on the spot.

In the midst of this, Mike and I were trying to discuss what we’d have for dinner. Confident that there were pork medallions in the freezer, and certain we had a couple of Bramley apples in the vegetable rack, I was working on Mike. There’s a pork and caramelised apple dish he does really well. While we were talking, Annie began to imitate the phone’s ringtone. It was only then that I realised the phone was ringing. I dashed inside.

‘Hello,’ I said.

‘Hello, Jacqui, how are you feeling?’ Ginny asked me.

‘Very embarrassed,’ I admitted. ‘I puked on your floor! I’m so, so sorry.’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ Ginny assured me. ‘I’d almost forgotten about it. Probably because I don’t remember much about last night, either. I think I must have been functioning on automatic.’

‘Well done you, I wasn’t functioning at all,’ I said.

I could sense her smile. ‘How are you?’ Ginny asked. ‘Hangovers can be a bugger, can’t they?’

‘They can, but I’m a lot better than I was when I first woke up,’ I assured her. ‘What about you?’

‘Not too bad now, thanks. We were led astray by an enjoyable afternoon, and an imbecile. I’ve told Ron that the next time he buys us a second bottle of wine unasked, I’ll shove it so far up his… Hello, Al. Mummy’s talking to Aunt Jacqui, why not go and jump on Uncle Ron. He’s snoozing on the sofa, but he won’t mind. He loves it when you do that. Sorry, Jacqui, as I was saying…’

‘I get it,’ I told her, laughing. ‘Any news on your dangerous intruder?’

‘Dangerous?’ Ginny asked. ‘Who said he was dangerous?’

‘Mike told me the kids version of events, and Henry and Annie confirmed it. They’re convinced they helped catch the bad man, bless them.’

‘Oh, yes, sorry,’ Ginny laughed. ‘It would be a bit much if Al had really captured a mass-murderer, wouldn’t it? Did Mike tell you that the police in Sheffield caught Hume. So much for Harry’s time off work! He’s on his way to Sheffield now. It seems Hume is prepared to enter a guilty plea.’

‘That’s unusual in a murder case,’ I observed. ‘What about the hiker.’

‘The hiker?’

‘The guy the kids saw.’

‘Oh, him! So far as we know, he’s fine. A fright, and a nasty bump on the head, that’s all. I think Harry overdid the security. Those blue lights and verbal warnings were a bit over the top, weren’t
‘Definitely,’ I agreed. ‘Is Harry sure the police have the right man?’

‘Positive,’ Ginny assured me. ‘Like I said, he’s gone off to sort everything out, but he’s promised me that this will be the last Sunday he works—I know that only means it’s the last one until the next emergency. But the good news is that with Hume incarcerated, he can take tomorrow off. That’s the other reason I’m ringing. Would you like to go out for lunch with me tomorrow? Harry can babysit Annie and our two.’

‘Lunch would be great, if you’re sure Harry can cope,’ I said. ‘My treat, and no arguments. I need to make up for last night.’

‘Fine,’ said Ginny reluctantly.

‘Where d’you want to go?’ I asked.

‘Surprise me,’ Ginny suggested. ‘You know this part of the country better than me. I only know the road from here to the pool. Oh, and I’ll drive.’

‘Have you passed your test?’ I asked, surprised.

‘You know I have, but not for a car,’ she said. ‘Do you have a helmet?’

I squealed.

‘I’ll take that as a yes,’ she told me. ‘See you at the school gates tomorrow. You can park your car at Drakeshaugh, and then we’ll head off.’
Despite the disconcerting scrapes and clomps, the bedroom ceiling remained unmoved. While Mike searched the loft, I looked through the wardrobes. My racing red Belstaff jacket was the only thing I hadn’t put into the big box of bike gear we’d consigned to the roof space when we moved into Lintzgarth. From the noise, it seemed Mike wasn’t having much success in his mission. Nor was I; the jacket didn’t appear to be with my other coats.

My tourist trophy jacket was waterproof, warm, and a classic; even people who’d never owned a motorbike were seen sporting them. Despite this, I hadn’t worn it since we’d sold the bike. I’d lifted it out from the wardrobe a few times, though not since I was pregnant with Annie, but I’d always put it back again. I couldn’t bring myself to wear it. I was no longer a biker, and I’d always regarded those who wore bike jackets as mere fashion items with a degree of contempt.

I finally found it at the very back of the “stuff-we-never-wear” wardrobe. It had been hidden from my searching gaze by a garish pink blazer I’d worn only once. As I lifted out the heavy bike jacket, I was horrified to discover a layer of dust on the shoulders. A major clean of the entire bedroom was essential.

After carefully dusting the waxed cotton, I examined it for damage. There was none. Satisfied, I placed the jacket reverently on the bed and looked back into the wardrobe. If the red Belstaff was hope, the blushing blazer that had hidden it was folly. Pulling it from its hanger, I dusted it, folded it, and placed it on top of the waste bin. Above my head, there was a grunt of success.

By the time Mike arrived in the bedroom—my boots, trousers, helmet, and gloves in his arms—I was wearing the jacket and staring at the small rectangle of paper I’d found in the pocket. The six-year-old petrol receipt from Ostend was more than a piece of paper, it was a clue to the past. It gave the date we’d returned from our last epic trip around Europe. Within weeks, the bike was gone.

‘The biker girl is back!’ Mike declared. He followed this observation up with a whistle and a wink. I scowled.

‘It still fits!’ he protested, somehow sensing the reason for my annoyance.

I pointed at a well-worn notch on the belt. ‘That’s the one I used to use,’ I said. ‘Closest I can get is there.’ I moved my finger two notches. ‘And that’s uncomfortably tight. Three notches, Mike. Three bloody notches!’ I snatched the leather trousers from his arms and held them up. They’d been snug six years earlier. ‘There’s not a chance these will fit!’ I folded them carefully and placed them on top of the pink blazer.

‘You can get rid of that blazer, but not the trousers,’ Mike told me firmly.

‘Why?’ I demanded. ‘They won’t fit me!’

‘That’s not the point. They’re a memento…’ he paused, and I watched him gather his thoughts. ‘Remember that stein you bought for me in Bavaria?’

‘The one Henry broke last year.’ I nodded.
‘That was a souvenir. You bought it for me, so it was important but—as I said when Henry broke it—it was only a souvenir. This brain of mine knows the difference between a souvenir and a memento. Those trousers, and the Belstaff jacket, they’re mementoes, they are the holiday. I know that in most ways it’s just stuff… like the stein… and I know we don’t have the bike… but we still have all the gear, and even if it no longer fits…’

His plea was heartfelt. I placed a finger on my lips, and he fell into a hopeful silence.

‘I understand,’ I assured him. ‘That’s why I kept the jacket. But why the attachment to the…’ The gleam in his eye made me blush, and I was swept back to a starry night in the Swiss Alps. ‘Ah!’ I smiled. ‘But, even three notches bigger, I can at least get into the jacket. The trousers are a depressing reminder of how skinny I was.’ I hesitated. ‘How about a compromise? If I can get into them by my birthday, they stay; otherwise, they’re going the way of that blazer.’

‘But…’ Mike began.

‘Exactly!’ I told him. ‘My butt is the problem.’

‘Butt?’ His attempt at an American accent terrible. ‘Bum,’ he teased, grabbing me. I didn’t push him away until Henry scampered upstairs to find out what the noise was.

The denuded trees warned of winter’s approach. Monday morning was chilly but there was no sign of a frost. As I stood at the kitchen door, smells of damp moss, leaf mould, and soil suffused the cold, still, air and promised a clear autumnal day.

‘Have a great time, Jacqui,’ Mike told me. ‘I’m jealous.’ His goodbye kiss was a lot more passionate than usual. After watching him depart, I packed my helmet and gloves in the car boot. I’d decided against wearing my motorcycle boots, because we’d be walking. That done, I roused the kids and began the school day breakfast ritual.

The prospect of a bike ride had put me in a good mood. I didn’t realise that I was singing until both Henry and Annie joined in. We went through “Will Atkinson” twice before we reached the school. We didn’t even break off when we drove past Ginny and James on the edge of the village, although we did wave to them as we passed. The kids had picked up on my mood. Oblivious to its deeper meaning, Henry was still singing the song and holding Annie’s hand as we danced into school.

Dancing wasn’t easy for me, as I was wearing my hiking boots. It was a good thing that the warm, water-resistant, walking trousers would stretch. The ridge pants were the next best thing to leathers and were marginally better dance wear than bike gear. After saying goodbye to Henry, Annie took my hand and, still singing, we skipped our way back to the gates.

I’d intended to walk up the road and meet Ginny, but several of the other mums ambushed me. They all assumed that I knew a lot more about the arrest of Pelias Hume than the limited information being given out on the news. I didn’t, and I was still busy explaining that to them when Ginny arrived with James. The questioners immediately turned their attention to her.

Although surprised by the interest, Ginny simply shrugged them off. She told everyone that she knew nothing about Hume, or his motive. The only things Ginny would confirm to the other mums were that Hume had confessed, that Harry was absolutely certain that the police had the right man, and that there would be no more full moon murders. With that, she hurried James through the throng and up to the school building. The conjectures continued.
‘Surely Harry’s told her something,’ Amanda speculated.

‘None of us knows everything about our husbands,’ Mary Saville, who’d been uncharacteristically quiet, finally gave her opinion as loudly as ever. Everyone fell silent. ‘That’s why Robert and I have separated,’ she added viciously.

The whispers started, and attention turned immediately to Mary. When Ginny returned, the arrest of a murderer was forgotten in preference to a more local and personal matter. Ignored by everyone, Annie, Ginny, and I made our way to my car.

‘Surprised by Mary’s announcement?’ Ginny asked me.

‘Given what we know about her husband’s behaviour, no.’ I admitted. ‘But I am surprised by the fact she’s being open about it. I even feel a little sorry for her.’

‘Me no’ sowwy,’ Annie announced.

‘And you’re perfectly entitled to hold that view,’ I told her as Ginny laughed. ‘Now let’s get you into the car and up to Drakeshaugh. Are you going to be good for Uncle Harry?’

‘Gonna play onna rope swing,’ my daughter told me confidently as I strapped her into her seat. Once Annie was secure, Ginny climbed into the passenger seat and we set off.

‘Slight problem,’ Ginny told me the moment we set off. Safely strapped in her seat behind us, Annie paid no attention to us. Instead, she began to sing “Bobbie Shafto”.

‘What’s happened?’ I asked, instantly worried. ‘Aren’t we going?’

‘We’re definitely going,’ she assured me firmly. ‘But Harry’s boss arrived at Drakeshaugh about half-an-hour ago. Harry’s supposed to be taking three days off work! I’ve told Kingsley that I have plans, and they involve Harry babysitting, but we may be a little late setting off.’

‘Nightmare!’ I said sympathetically. ‘I hosted Mike’s boss once. Didn’t like the man at all. He was totally up himself—all “I’m in charge, all hail me”, you know? All ego and bluster, and no talent at all! It always surprises me how far that can get some people.’

‘Kingsley’s not like that!’ Ginny sounded horrified. ‘It’s just that with—complicated—cases, Kingsley likes to know everything as soon as possible. Harry wrapped the case up yesterday, but Kingsley wasn’t at work on Sunday.’

‘Of course not! But he wants to know now.’ I was annoyed on Ginny’s behalf.

‘Kingsley’s okay, honest,’ said Ginny. ‘I simply hope there won’t be much of a delay.’

When I drove through the gate and into Drakeshaugh, Harry, Al, Lily, and a tall man in a well-tailored three-piece suit were standing on the gravel, waiting to greet us. The gleaming red Bentley parked next to Harry’s Range Rover could only belong to Harry’s visitor.

‘Is that Mr Kingsley?’ I asked, failing to hide my surprise.

‘Shacklebolt, his name’s Kingsley Shacklebolt,’ Ginny told me. ‘Yes, that’s Harry’s boss.’

‘He’s not what I expected,’ I admitted. ‘Not at all what I expected! Very Spencer Jordan, isn’t he?’

‘I’ve no idea who Spencer Jordan is,’ Ginny admitted.
‘He’s a cop on the telly. Waking the Dead,’ I explained. ‘Can’t remember the actor’s name.’

‘Never owned a television, remember,’ Ginny told me.

‘You’ve led a sheltered life, my friend,’ I told her with a sigh.

Getting out of my car, I waved at Harry and managed to call out a quick hello. Harry’s reply was lost in Al and Lily’s exited greetings. As the two Potter children shouted, my frantically fidgeting daughter stridently demanded her freedom. Unbuckling her straps, I lifted her out and placed her in front of her friends. To my relief, Harry’s boss hadn’t tried to talk over the kids.

‘Daddybiddasinganside,’ yelled Lily excitedly.

‘We help,’ Al added.

‘You’re going to help daddy, that’s good,’ I told them, although Al’s eager confirmation held no more meaning for me than Lily’s initial declaration. Her words were so fast, and ran into each other so much, that I had no idea what she’d said.

I glanced at Ginny, whose smile indicated that I’d given the correct answer. She then pointed at a large pile of wooden beams on the lawn near the chicken run. ‘Daddy’s building a swing and slide,’ she explained.

‘You’re going to let the kids help you build that?’ I asked Harry, closing the car door.

‘Yes, is that okay?’ He sounded worried as I walked over to greet him. At my side, the kids, led by Annie, joined hands and danced in a circle singing “Ring-a-ring o’ roses.”

‘Fine by me,’ I told him cheerfully. ‘Mike let Henry “help” build our swing. He reckoned it would’ve taken less than half the time if he’d simply done it himself.’

‘But that’s all part of the fun, isn’t it?’ Harry asked. His smile was broad and excited; he was obviously looking forward to the task.

‘Good luck,’ I said, glancing meaningfully at the man at his side.

‘Oh, sorry,’ He performed the introductions. ‘Jacquie, this is my boss, Kingsley Shacklebolt. Kingsley, our neighbour, Jacqui Charlton.’

‘Mrs Charlton.’ His voice was deep and calm, and his firm but relaxed handshake gave me the impression that this was a man who shook a lot of hands. He smiled at my daughter. ‘I’ve heard a lot about you. And this must be Annie.’

‘Nothing bad, I hope,’ I said. ‘You’re Harry’s boss, I hope you’re not going to try to steal my childminder from me. I’m looking forward to a nice day out with Ginny.’ Almost before the words were out of my mouth, I was embarrassed. Ginny’s blatant thumbs-up didn’t help me feel any better. ‘Sorry,’ I began.

‘Don’t worry, Mrs Charlton…’

‘Jacqui,’ I interjected.

‘Jacqui,’ he continued. ‘Please call me Kingsley. Ginny has already made it very clear to me that she has plans for the day. I’ll be leaving soon. I’m just waiting for a final report from Harry.’

‘Give me five minutes, Kingsley, maybe ten,’ said Harry. He hurried over to the kitchen door.
'If you really are almost ready to get on your way, Kingsley, I’ll go and get ready, too,’ said Ginny. ‘You can keep an eye on these three for a few minutes, can’t you, Jacqui? I’m sure Kingsley will help.’ Her smile was cheeky. Turning, she followed Harry into Drakeshaugh. While I appreciated her eagerness to get ready, I didn’t appreciate being left alone with Harry’s boss.

‘Rope swing,’ Annie demanded, grabbing my arm.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, preparing to make my own escape from the man in the suit. ‘Best to keep these three happy.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Kingsley offered. He looked around at the house its grounds, and the hills. ‘Harry’s found a nice place for himself.’

‘The best,’ I said. ‘A lot more space for the kids than there was in their London home.’

‘London?’ he sounded surprised that I knew. ‘Ginny told you, of course.’

‘Yes.’ I nodded. ‘This must have been a long journey for you. I’m guessing you’ve come up from London.’

‘Harry mentioned your knack for accents,’ Kingsley smiled. ‘You’re right, I’m a Londoner, but I was in Scotland yesterday, so my journey here wasn’t too long.’

‘That depends on whereabouts in Scotland you started. We’re about a dozen miles from the border, but a very long way from John o’ Groats,’ I said as we strolled towards Drakeshaugh Woods. ‘From here, you could walk to the Scottish border in a few hours.’

I knew I was babbling, but I was finding it difficult to stop myself. Looking down at his feet helped. His shiny brown shoes were designed for city streets and the office, not muddy leaf-strewn woodland. It would take him more than a few hours to walk to the border in them. He stood in a patch of mud, but didn’t appear to be concerned.

‘So you know the local area, and you’re good with accents,’ he observed.

‘I’m not an expert,’ I began.

Kingsley’s smile silenced me. ‘Harry told me that you’d identified Miss Sidebotham as being from Sheffield simply from her accent. You’re right about me, too. I’m London born and bred.’

‘She was easy. It wasn’t simply her accent; she said bread cake, not bun or bap That’s a dead giveaway,’ I explained. ‘I’m not an expert at anything, Kingsley, I’m really very ordinary.’

‘I don’t believe that anyone is ordinary, Jacqui,’ he told me firmly. ‘We are unique individuals. We all have our passions and we all see the world differently.’

‘Shh,’ I hissed. He fell silent. I pointed at the chicken run. ‘Annie, Al, Lily, see that bird on top of the henhouse?’ I whispered.

‘Yellow,’ Annie told me loudly. The bird began to flap its wings.

‘It is yellow, and it’s called a siskin. That’s a male.’

‘Gone!’ Al observed as we watched it fly away.

‘We all see the world differently, Jacqui,’ Kingsley repeated. ‘I can name every member of West Ham’s first team, can you?’
'Of course not!' I laughed and shook my head.

'To me, however, that wasn’t a siskin. It was simply a little yellow bird. What sort of tree is that?'

I glanced in the direction he was pointing. ‘Alder,’ I told him.

‘Yet I see nothing but a tree,’ he said with a smile. ‘I wonder what else you can see that others can’t?’

He stared into my eyes with such an intense curiosity that I was tempted to tell him about seeing the ghost of Polly Protheroe. Fortunately, common sense prevailed.

‘You might see a sheep, I see a Cheviot, a Swaledale, a Herdwick, or…’ I said.

He smiled at me and nodded wisely. ‘You have the skills of someone raised in the countryside, Jacqui. That colours the way you see the world. But it’s more than that, you pay special attention to the things that interest you, too. I think everyone does.’

‘True. Mike, my husband, knows a ridiculous amount about castles and local history,’ I admitted, eager to show him that I understood. Mike’s fascination was something I’d always teased him about. Kingsley had somehow persuaded me that it was an almost magical ability.

‘There you are!’ he declared in triumph.

‘Swing, mister King,’ Lily announced as we approached the rope swing.

‘Swing, king, swing-king, we all fall down!’ Annie sang, and Harry’s boss began to laugh.

When Harry found us, I was sitting on a fallen tree and singing. I was trying to teach Al and Lily the words to “Wor Geordie’s Lost His Penker” while watching a man in a business suit and muddy shoes push my daughter on the rope swing.

‘Hello, Jacqui. Ginny’s ready; she’s waiting for you at the bike,’ Harry called. I turned to face him, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was staring in disbelief at his boss.

‘Thanks, Harry.’ I scrambled to my feet. ‘Mummy’s going now, Annie,’ I called across to my daughter. ‘Uncle Harry’s going to look after you. Bye!’

‘More push, swing-king!’ Annie demanded.

‘Bye, Al and Lily,’ I said.

‘Bye, Aunt Jacqui,’ they replied.

‘Bye, Annie,’ I again tried to get through to my squealing daughter.

‘Bye-bye.’ Her eventual acknowledgement of my imminent departure was half-hearted at best.

‘See, she’s missing me already,’ I told Harry sarcastically. ‘Good luck.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ Harry assured me. ‘I’ve looked after our three often enough, and I’m pretty sure Annie won’t be as much trouble as James.’

‘Perhaps you can persuade your friend “swing-king” to stay and help,’ I suggested. His bemused expression made me laugh. ‘See you later, Harry.’
As I walked out of the woods, I looked over my shoulder. Annie wasn’t worried by my departure; she wasn’t even watching me leave. She was now on the ground, and they’d begun a game of chase. Harry and Kingsley had joined in. Turning away, I walked past the henhouse and onto the gravel.

Ginny wore tight black jeans and black lace up boots. Her leather jacket was a very dark green, and in the morning light it—like Harry’s, I recalled—appeared almost scaly. She was standing next to the bike and carrying two helmets.

‘I’ve brought my own helmet,’ I told her.

Opening the boot of my car, I pulled out my jacket, helmet, gloves, and rucksack.

‘I thought you would’ve,’ Ginny admitted. ‘But mine and Harry’s are linked.’

‘Oh, yeah. The intercom,’ I said. ‘Ride and chat. Good idea. Is Harry okay with me borrowing his helmet?’

‘Yes, we discussed it this morning,’ Ginny replied. She was looking past me, not at me. ‘Where’s Kingsley?’ she asked.

‘Playing chasey,’ I told her as I shrugged on the Belstaff jacket and zipped it up for the first time in years.

‘Seriously?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I said carefully. ‘I think he’s actually having fun.’

She groaned, and grinned. ‘Mike would be proud of you.’

‘Oh, joy, I’m turning into my husband,’ I grumbled, rolling my eyes. ‘Shoot me now!’

Laughing, Ginny handed me Harry’s bright red helmet. I pulled it over my head. After fastening her own, she reached down, pulled out the kickstarter, leapt into the air, and put all her weight onto the lever. The bike roared into life.

‘Where are we going?’ she asked.

‘I’m taking you to Cragside,’ I told her. ‘It isn’t far, and I want a proper bike ride, so I’m going to take you the long way around.’

‘Okay.’ With that, we were off.

‘I haven’t apologised,’ I said, when I finally remembered. ‘If your carpet needs cleaning, or your sofa, or anything, you must let me know.’

‘Everything’s fine,’ she assured me. ‘It’s all cleaned up, and so spotless you’d be proud of me.’

Certain she was teasing me, I said nothing.

Angela and Mary were still standing outside the school when we passed. They’d heard the bike approaching and were staring at us, so we waved.

‘That’ll keep gossipping for another twenty minutes,’ I observed.
‘At least,’ Ginny agreed.

I’d always had to peer over Mike’s shoulder, and I’d peered over Harry’s too. Harry was smaller than Mike, and Ginny was smaller than Harry. Riding with her was a different experience: I was looking over the top of her head, my view almost unrestricted. I guided her off the Coquet valley road, past Holystone village, and on to the B-road, where we turned right.

We chatted as we rode. We talked about the kids, the injured hiker—who was fine and had been released from hospital—and about Harry’s case. Ginny freely admitted that she knew more about the case than she’d told the other mums at the gate.

‘But the arrest has been made, so the case is sub judice…’ she hesitated, uncertain whether to assume ignorance or knowledge on my part.

‘I know how that works,’ I confirmed. ‘Overnight he went from being “Pelias Hume, armed and extremely dangerous” to “the man arrested for the full moon murders”. No mention of his name, or his past. The papers will be digging, of course, but even if he has a criminal record as long as my arm, they won’t say anything until the trial is over. If he’s found guilty, that’s when the explosion of exposés will start.’

‘Exactly. If the papers printed anything that could prejudice a jury, they’ll be in contempt of court,’ Ginny agreed. ‘I’m not sure how long it will be until it’s back in the papers, but it might be soon. He’s pleaded guilty and made a full confession. Harry reckons he’ll be sentenced in a couple of weeks.’

‘He must be a psychopath,’ I suggested. ‘He wants the publicity, the notoriety. The papers shouldn’t give it to him.’

‘I agree,’ said Ginny. ‘At least he’s caught. Now that the case is closed, things can get back to normal, and Harry can relax a bit.’

‘Relax?’ I asked. ‘We’ve left him with the kids, remember?’

Ginny chuckled.

‘This is Elsdon,’ I said as we approached the village. ‘The castle is on the left; it’s just a couple of earth mounds, but Mike likes it. And that’s the Pele tower on the right. We’re going right over the bridge and left when you get to the green.’

Moments later we were accelerating out of Elsdon. I swear we were airborne when we went over the narrow humpbacked bridge. The road ahead was straight and clear, and Ginny opened up the throttle.

‘Damn the kids!’ Ginny announced. ‘I’d almost forgotten how much fun this is.’

‘Damn them,’ I agreed. ‘Sharp left over the crest,’ I added.

‘Saw the sign, but thanks,’ said Ginny, slowing.

We still took the corner at speed, our knees only inches above the tarmac. As the moors opened out ahead of us, Ginny again accelerated. After a second left hander, the road straightened and stretched ahead of us to the horizon. We were soon doing seventy, and we flew past the first moving car we’d seen on our journey, an old VW Polo. Unsure how to show her how happy I was, I settled for squeezing her shoulders.
‘The Cheviots are way over to the left,’ I said.

Ginny glanced over. ‘I see them,’ she said.

‘And we’re getting close to the gibbet,’ I warned her.

As we approached, she slowed and stared. Many people do. The scaffold stood on a high point, and the wooden head dangling from it was swaying. Of the many monuments in the area, the gibbet is one of the strangest.

‘Winter’s Gibbet,’ I said as Ginny pulled the bike to a halt in a dirt layby. ‘They used to hang criminals here, a few hundred years ago. You should come here in the rain, or on a moonlit night. It’s really eerie. They say it’s haunted, but I’ve never seen anything.’

‘Harry camped near here, once,’ said Ginny, taking off her helmet. ‘A long time ago, before we were married. He told me about it, but he didn’t explain it very well. He didn’t capture the creepiness of it.’

‘I think you have to see it to feel it,’ I said, removing my helmet. We stared at the scaffold, and the head, in silence for a while, and then Ginny broke the spell.

‘Who haunts the place?’ she asked.

‘A murderer, a man called William Winter,’ I told her, ‘It’s all on the plaque.’

‘You said you’ve never seen him, would you expect to?’ Ginny asked quietly.

‘Um,’ I hesitated, then confessed. ‘Mum says I’m sensitive, like her. We feel the ghosts of these hills, but I don’t like admitting it. Imagine what Angela and Mary would do with that information! Anyway, no one believes in ghosts these days, do they?’

‘Don’t be so sure. There are a lot of inexplicable things in the world,’ Ginny told me.

‘Possibly, although—according to Mike—they’re unexplained, not inexplicable,’ I said. ‘He’s not a believer. It doesn’t matter. I’m not looking for explanations, I simply know what I feel.’

Once again, silence fell.

‘Great views,’ Ginny observed as the wind caught her hair.

‘Yeah,’ I agreed. ‘It’s a bit bleak, especially in the winter, but for me there’s something wonderful about this part of the world.’

‘I felt the same about Devon, where I grew up,’ Ginny agreed. The white Polo drove slowly past us and the driver, an elderly chap wearing a scarf and flat cap, glared at us. Ginny spotted him, too. ‘If he doesn’t like being overtaken, he should do more than forty. Where now?’ She pulled on her helmet.

‘Straight on. This road’s straight as a die for a few miles. I wonder if this is a Roman road? They’re the only people who’ve ever built straight roads in this country.’

‘You’re asking the wrong person,’ Ginny told me as she replaced her helmet. ‘I bet Mike would know.’

‘He would,’ I admitted as I refastened mine. ‘Ready,’
We roared off, and soon caught up to the Polo: he was driving down the middle of the white line, making it difficult for us to pass.

‘Arse!’ I said.

‘Trust me?’ Ginny asked.

‘Yes,’ I assured her.

She swerved left in an apparent attempt to get past him on the inside. The instant he moved back onto the correct side of the road, in an obvious attempt to block her, she swerved to the right and accelerated hard. We were past in an instant, and I was swearing, and giving him a two-fingered salute.

‘Really, Jacqui!’ Ginny sounded more amused than shocked. ‘Where on earth did you learn language like that. What will your children think?’

‘They’ll never hear me bloody swear,’ I said. She laughed.

Within moments the Polo was lost in the distance and we were discussing bike-haters, and their irrational dislike of people who chose two wheels instead of four. I interrupted the discussion only to direct her onto the Rothbury road, where we encountered the first cars we’d seen since the Polo. We saw three cars travelling in the opposite direction, and we overtook a laden estate car. Turning left again, we finally began heading north.

‘Rothley’ I announced. ‘The stories say that fort was built to keep Bonnie Prince Charlie’s Scots out. They’re the Simonside Hills you can see in the distance. On a clear day, you can see the North Sea from the top of Simonside. I’ve heard people claim you can see the west coast, too, but I doubt it. The Solway estuary is a hell of a long way away.’

Before I knew it, we were descending into Rothbury. It seemed to me that our bike trip had taken no time at all.

‘Right here, and straight on,’ I said. We followed the high stone wall uphill, and soon reached the entrance. ‘And second right. You’ll have to stop. I’ll pay.’

‘Pay for what?’ Ginny asked as she rolled to a halt outside the ticket hut.

‘Entrance,’ I told her. ‘My treat, remember. I said I’d pay.’

Pulling off my gloves, I sat on them and pulled my purse from my pocket. As the lady in the green parka approached. I flipped up my visor.

‘I’m a member,’ I said, handing the woman my card. ‘Plus one.’

‘Are you going into the house?’ the woman asked.

‘Yes,’ I said, handing her the cash. I had looked up the entry price on our computer and had the correct change for her.

‘Thank you.’ As she dropped the money into her bag and printed out a ticket for Ginny, she went through the ritual instructions. We were told about parking and access, and asked about previous visits, whether we needed a map, etc. I gave my usual answers, and she finally let us go.

‘Follow the road around past Tumbleton Lake and up the hill; the car park is signed,’ I told Ginny.
'What do you want to do first, ride around the grounds, stop and walk, visit the house, or have a coffee?'

'I’m in your hands, Jacqui,’ she replied.

'We’ll get a coffee, and then walk to the house. After that, we can get some lunch, and explore the grounds.'

The café was in the visitor centre, a converted stable block some distance from the house. I led Ginny along a path through the trees, and out onto the hillside. Downslope, Tumbleton Lake sparkled in the sunshine. The entrance, on the opposite bank, was quiet. It was long past peak season for visitors. The few people we saw wandering around were pensioners.

After taking in the view across the valley, I led Ginny through the arch across the sheltered quadrangle, and into the café. Only two tables were occupied, but despite this, I took her through into the empty side room. There, we took the table furthest away from the counter. Leaving her at the table, I went to the counter to order. When I returned, minutes later, she stared at the contents of my tray, and raised an eyebrow.

'One latte, for you,' I said. ‘One americano with milk, for me, and two singing hinnies. One each. I know you didn’t want anything to eat, neither did I, but I couldn’t resist them.’

'I lived on Ynys Mon … Anglesea … before I was married. They’re welsh cakes. What did you call them?’ Ginny asked. I refrained from commenting on her unexpected use of the Welsh language, and instead defended the scones.

‘In this part of the world, they’re singing hinnies,’ I told her firmly. ‘Mum used to make them; I haven’t had one in years. I couldn’t resist,’ I pulled a face. ‘That’s the problem, I should have. I’m supposed to be getting back to my pre-kids weight.’

‘Good luck with that,’ said Ginny, spreading butter. ‘When I was playing, we were training regularly. These days…’ She shrugged helplessly.

‘Kids!’ I said. ‘Love ‘em to bits, but they don’t half fill your days, and they make snacking easy.’

‘True,’ Ginny nodded ruefully.

‘Don’t get me wrong,’ I continued. ‘I chose to give up work. Mike and I discussed it. We can manage his salary, and I wanted to look after them myself, not put them into a day nursery. But…’

‘But there has to be more to life than snotty noses, grazed knees, and tidying up after the messy little buggers,’ Ginny announced. I smiled and nodded.

‘In a couple of years, Annie will be at school,’ I said. ‘And then…’

‘And then!’ Ginny interrupted. ‘What’s wrong with now, Jacqui? You’re a swimmer…’

‘I was a swimmer, and used to do a bit of running, too…’ The gleam in Ginny’s eye stopped me mid-sentence. She’d had an idea, and her expression had given me one too.

‘We…’ we spoke, and stopped, simultaneously. ‘You first,’ I told her.

‘When I was younger, most of my training was balance exercises and core work, but I used to run, too,’ Ginny told me. ‘Harry’s usually home by six. We could go for an evening run two—or three
'It'll be dark well before six,' I said thoughtfully. ‘But that needn’t stop us. I’m up for it.’

‘Great! Now, what were you going to say?’ she asked me.

‘Nothing, really, at least nothing as good as your idea.’

Ginny shook her head. ‘So you say, Jacqui. I won’t know until you tell me.’

‘Our Saturday family swims are sort-of regular now, aren’t they?’ I began cautiously.

‘Yes,’ Ginny agreed.

‘I was going to suggest—it’s not as good as your suggestion, but—there’s an adults-only swim session on Saturday morning. I was thinking that I could collect you from Drakeshaugh, we could swim, and lunch, and Mike and Harry could bring the kids down in time for the children’s session. But I really like the idea of running.’

‘I like your idea, too,’ Ginny told me. ‘We could compromise.’

‘Compromise, how?’

‘By doing both!’ Ginny grinned.

‘D’you think they’d let us?’ I began.

‘Let us?’ Ginny popped her eyes at me and opened her mouth in a cartoon of shock. ‘How dare you? We don’t need permission, Jacqui! Even if we did, Harry’s pretty easy to persuade about anything—apart from work. And Mike would do anything for you.’

‘You must be thinking of a different Mike,’ I said.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Ginny was shaking her head as she spoke. ‘I saw him when you fainted. The look in his eyes… I’ve seen it in Harry’s when he’s been worried about me…’

‘You were drunk,’ I reminded her.

‘So were you, but if you’d seen his face, you’d know I’m right.’

‘Two evenings and Saturday morning is a lot…’

‘Three evenings. Ask Mike. He’ll say yes,’ Ginny announced. ‘Or simply tell him. He won’t argue.’

‘He’d have to bath the kids,’ I said hesitantly.

‘And what’s wrong with that?’ Ginny demanded. ‘Harry bathes our three; he always has.’

‘I had to ban Mike from bath-time,’ I said. ‘Too much splashing, not enough drying of the floor afterwards.’

‘That is the worst excuse ever,’ she said firmly. ‘Tonight’s too soon, but our first run is on Wednesday evening. That’s settled, and one more thing…’

‘What else are you going to try to force me to do?’ I asked teasingly.
‘Not telling,’ she said petulantly.

‘Pretty please?’ I asked.

‘You could collect me from Drakeshaugh for a Saturday morning swim, or you could leave your car there, and we could…’ Raising her hands, she grabbed imaginary handlebars, and twisted a throttle.

‘Hell, yes! I like the way you think, Ginny,’ I said, raising my hand. We high-fived.

From the café, I took Ginny down to the house and showed her around. She found everything about the place fascinating, particularly the fact that it was the first residential property in the world lit by hydro-electricity. When we finally finished our tour of the house, Ginny was already planning to bring her dad to see the place.

After returning to the café for lunch, we explored the lower grounds and gardens, and then took the bike under the arch, past the house, and up into the grounds. We parked up at the top of the hill, and walked around Nelly’s Moss Lakes, and we chatted and planned. The walk took longer than I expected, and instead of going back to Drakeshaugh to pick up Annie, and my car, we only just got back to the school in time to collect the kids. Our arrival on the bike caused quite a stir, but I didn’t care. It had been a great day out.

By the time I left Drakeshaugh, Harry had already agreed our planned running and swimming regimen. He raised no objections, and the pressure was immediately placed on me to persuade Mike.
Interlude: The Minister

Breaking the connection, Harry pocketed his Mirrorphone, put on an apologetic expression, and looked across the kitchen at his wife. Ginny’s eyebrows were holding a meeting above her nose, conferring about their owner’s displeasure. At times like this Ginny’s annoyance on his behalf was one of her most endearing, and arousing, traits. Her pursed lips, the glint in her eye, and the tension in her stance were unneeded confirmation of her aggravation. Knowing why she was displeased was no help.

‘It’s only Kingsley,’ he began. He knew that his attempt to reassure her was unlikely to meet with instant success, but he had to start somewhere.

‘It’s not an emergency, Harry,’ Ginny snapped. ‘You’re on holiday, and you’re not at Kingsley’s beck and call twenty-four hours a day.’

‘That’s why I told him that I’m not prepared to meet him in his office,’ Harry said. ‘You heard me tell him I’m taking three days off in lieu, and that you’re going out for the day—with Jacqui.’

Words weren’t working, so Harry took two steps forwards, grabbed Ginny by the shoulders, and pulled her close. He kissed the bridge of her nose, keeping his lips on that spot until he felt wrinkles subside and shoulders relax. As she calmed down, he slipped his arms around her waist and gave her a hug.

‘You have plans, Ginny, and so do I. I’m not going to let Kingsley disrupt them. You are going out for the day,’ he assured her. ‘But Kingsley must believe it’s important. The fact that he’s coming here to see me proves it. He has a few questions about the case report and wants to talk “off the record”. This is the best place. While he’s here, he’ll simply have to put up with the kids interrupting our discussion.’

‘If you’d told him about Al…’

‘That’s probably what he wants to talk about, Ginny. He’s probably spotted something in the report.’

‘Perhaps you should have…’ Ginny stopped when Harry shook his head.

‘We made the right decision. Reports get filed, and they get read, and…’ Taking a step back, he looked down into her chocolate eyes, seeking confirmation.

‘Taking the kids to Diagon Alley is already a chore. They don’t understand why strangers know who we are, and why people they don’t know want to fuss over them,’ Ginny agreed. ‘You’re right, a headline like Albus Potter Captures Killer would only make things worse. Particularly for Al.’

‘That’s why it’s best if Kingsley comes here,’ he said.

‘You’re going to tell him the truth, but off the record,’ Ginny observed.

‘Is that okay? We know Kingsley, he…’ Harry began. On the edge of his vision, he saw movement and his family concerns switched from major to minor. ‘Lily! No!’ He reached for his wand, but too late. With a viscous squelch the pot of strawberry yoghurt she’d thrown landed on its side on
the floor, spewing lumpy pink gobbets across the stone flags.

Turning toward the noise, Ginny sighed. ‘Why, Lily?’ she asked. Pulling out her wand, she began to clean up the mess.

‘Not like!’ Lily announced.

‘On Saturday, strawberry yoghurt was yummy-yummy-yummy,’ Harry pointed out. ‘And you’ve eaten half of it.’

‘No,’ Lily confidently rewrote history. ‘Not like,’ she repeated, wiping her mouth with her sleeve. ‘Want nana-nana.’

‘He’s here,’ Ginny observed, glancing at the window.

Harry looked away from his daughter just in time to see the blue glow of the Portkey fade.

‘Leave Lily to me,’ his wife continued. ‘You’re right, Harry, we can trust Kingsley. Tell him. Eat your toast. James, we need to get ready for school. Would you like some more pumpkin juice, Al?’

‘I’ll take him into the lounge,’ Harry said. ‘Maybe we’ll be finished by the time you leave.’

Ginny shook her head. ‘You won’t be,’ she observed. ‘You told him Jacqui was coming here. He’ll still be here when we get back.’

‘You think he’ll want to meet her?’ Harry asked.

‘Certain.’ Ginny nodded. Now in full agreement with his decision, she gave him a smile. ‘You worked hard yesterday to get this case wrapped up. You deserve a few stressful days at home.’

‘Don’t you mean stress-free?’ he asked.

‘Do I?’ she asked chuckling. ‘You’re right of course. That’s what I mean. I must! Our children are well-behaved angels, as Lily has just demonstrated.’ She kissed his cheek. ‘Go.’

Leaving Ginny to deal with yet another interrupted family breakfast, Harry strode from the kitchen, through the hallway, and outside. He wore a well-worn pair of cargo pants, a comfortable old polo shirt and his Holyhead Harpies slippers. While his clothing was suitable for his warm and comfortable home, the world outside his door was different. There was very little wind, but the air was chill enough to make him breathe out experimentally. It was cold, but not quite cold enough for his breath to frost.

The Minister for Magic had just closed the door of his Bentley. Ignoring the goosebumps forming on his flesh, Harry watched as Kingsley scanned the area. He noticed the Minister’s gaze halt momentarily on the distant Drakestone.

‘Morning, Kingsley,’ Harry called.

‘Good morning, Harry,’ Kingsley replied. ‘Nice place you have here. What is that?’ He nodded toward the stone.

‘Thank you,’ Harry said. ‘The locals call it the Drakestone. There are a lot of stories about it. Some of them even involve magic. It catches the eye, doesn’t it?’

It appeared that Kingsley wanted to continue that discussion, but Harry moved swiftly on to the matter in hand.
‘We’ve got about fifteen minutes until Ginny needs to take James to school. After that, I’ll be looking after Al and Lily. As I said, Ginny and Jacqui will be back here a little after nine, but they’re going out for the day. I’ll be looking after Annie Charlton, too. We should get started. Come in, please.’

Rather than return through the kitchen, Harry led Kingsley to the front door and into the lounge. The sun, still low in the sky, was peering through the enormous windows at the back of the room. Much of the room was filled with morning shadows, although morning light was beginning to creep across the floor. On the wall opposite the window, a blazing log fire suffused the room with warmth.

Making his way to the two large sofas and two armchairs clustered around the large fireplace, Harry moved a stuffed dragon toy and a large red ball from the longest sofa and sat down. With a courteous sweep of his hand, he indicated that Kingsley should sit in the adjacent chair. The minister took a good look around the enormous room before he did so.

‘Why the urgency, Kingsley? The killer is in custody, we have his wand, and can prove it was used to cast the killing curse. Plus, he’s confessed. Is there a problem?’ Harry asked.

‘No problem, Harry. I have a few questions for you, questions I believe would be best resolved informally. First, however… there is something I must tell you…’ Kingsley spoke carefully, ‘I have authorised the release of Wregan Fawley, without charge.’

‘But…’ Harry’s protests stopped when he saw the Minister’s expression.

‘If I thought we could justify holding him, Harry, I would have done so. Fawley has many friends, including several in the Wizengamot.’ Kingsley’s slow and deliberate explanation gave Harry pause. ‘He is one of the last surviving members of an extremely old Pureblood family, and two members of the Wizengamot contacted me about him. They complained that you authorised his arrest for no reason. I told them they were being foolish, but that I understood their concerns, and was personally ordering his release.’ Kingsley paused and looked into Harry’s face. ‘Of course, that’s not why he’s being set free, but I saw no reason to disabuse Fawley of his belief that he and his friends in the Wizengamot have some power and influence over me.’

‘But…’

Kingsley held up a hand. ‘I informed the complainants that Fawley’s adopted son was arrested for killing four Muggles and reminded them that—because he refused to answer any questions put to him by the Aurors sent to his property—Fawley had raised your suspicions. They may have left with the impression that I was going to reprimand you, but I’m not. You did the right thing, Harry. I allowed his release for only one reason; we have no evidence against him.’

‘Not much evidence,’ Harry protested.

‘None!’ Kingsley said firmly.

‘He adopted a young boy, and effectively brainwashed him using a combination of Obliviation and memory charms,’ Harry protested. ‘He made huge alterations to Pelias Hume’s memories. It’s possible that Fawley’s treatment of Pelias was what turned him into a Muggle-killer.’

‘Possible isn’t enough,’ Kingsley reminded him. ‘We need “beyond reasonable doubt”. There is no argument over the facts. Fawley made major alterations to Pelias’ memories. He has admitted that. He claims that Pelias was an unhappy boy who would often run away from home. He told Auror Fortescue that—in order to keep Pelias safe and happy—he removed all the boy’s memories of his
true parents, and of his brother. It’s outrageous, I know, but neither the Obliviators nor the experts at St Mungo’s have found any evidence that Fawley’s memory tampering turned Pelias into a killer. In fact, it seems Pelias broke free of his adoptive father’s memory alterations by sheer force of will. Despite Fawley’s efforts, Pelias remembered his brother, his parents, and the fact that Fenrir Greyback was responsible for his parents’ death.’

‘Fawley was cruel,’ Harry began.

‘I agree!’ Kingsley said. ‘Wregan Fawley made Pelias forget about his real parents. When you discovered that...’ Kingsley sighed, and shook his head sorrowfully. ‘I understand the reasons for his arrest, Harry. However, the raid on his home found no evidence of Dark Magic or cursed items. Whatever Fawley did—or did not do—to Pelias, he has done nothing wrong. At least he’s done nothing that falls within the remit of an Auror Office investigation. I know you want him brought to justice, and I understand your reasons. That’s why I’ve sent the transcripts of Auror Fortescue’s interview to both the Obliviator Squad and MAXI—the multi-agency child safeguarding initiative. The Sheriff’s bailiffs and Child Protection will investigate.

‘But, if Fawley used memory charms to make him hate Muggles...’ Harry protested.

‘If,’ Kingsley emphasised. ‘There’s no evidence, Harry. The fact that he was cruel to his adopted son isn’t enough.’

Harry fell into a thoughtful silence. ‘You’re right,’ he admitted. ‘So was Ginny. When I got home last night, she asked me if I was pursuing Fawley for the wrong reasons.’

‘Your wife is a wise woman,’ Kingsley said. ‘I don’t think we’ll ever know how much responsibility Fawley should bear. It’s possible that he guided Pelias. It’s equally possible that he’s completely innocent. It’s even possible that he simply stood aside and did nothing to prevent Pelias from moving towards hate. Pelias has confessed to the killing of four Muggles. Has he expressed any regret?’

‘None at all,’ Harry admitted. ‘He despises Muggles and Muggle-borns.’

‘Has he implicated his adopted father in any way?’

‘No,’ Harry admitted.

‘Then if you, personally, want to continue investigating Fawley, you’ll have to apply for a transfer into the local Sheriff’s Office, or Child Services. Fawley’s actions toward his son are not a matter for the Aurors and, having read the transcript of his interview, I think we’ll be lucky if we can get a charge of Unauthorised and Illegal Obliviation to stick.’

Harry thought back over everything the Aurors had discovered about Fawley. Forced to conclude that Kingsley was correct, he sighed.

‘You’ve caught a killer, Harry,’ said Kingsley consolingly. ‘Rejoice in that. In addition, you’ve brought Fawley’s prejudices to the Ministry’s attention. He’s a potential instigator of hate crimes. I have already placed his name on our watch list.’

‘Thank you,’ Harry nodded gratefully.

‘What about the brother, Jason? You’ve charged him, too. Is he a co-conspirator or a victim?’

‘Co-conspirator, we believe,’ said Harry. ‘According to Pelias, the memory charms he used were simply to restore Jason’s memories. He claims that, when Jason found out he was adopted, and
what had happened to their parents, he agreed that Greyback should die. The brothers knew they’d
never be able to break into Azkaban. Pelias claims that it was actually Jason’s idea to get Greyback
out.’

‘And that’s why you’ve authorised the charge despite the fact that Jason still hasn’t spoken,’
Kingsley observed. ‘His solicitor has answered no comment to every question, yet his brother has
implicated him.’

‘The prosecutors have agreed that we have enough evidence, he’s been remanded.’

‘And Pelias claims that Jason planned the murders. Having read your reports, I’m not convinced
you agree. Do you?’ Kingsley asked.

‘Terry and I had a long discussion about that. Terry is convinced that the RANDOM system came
up with the plan.’

‘Really?’ Kingsley leant forward.

Harry nodded. ‘In his last year at Hogwarts, Jason attended a guest lecture on Arithmanacy. Michael
gave it. It was all about the use of Arithmanacy in predictions, and it seems Michael said more about
the RANDOM system than he should have. Jason’s expertise in Arithmanacy is impressive, but it’s
not at Michael’s level, it’s not even at Terry’s. Pelias believes his brother is an Arithmonic genius,
Terry disagrees.’

‘Why not have Michael…’

‘Michael’s very fragile. Trudi, Padma and Parvati all say that he’s not fit enough to check out the
system. It’s likely Jason has been Confunding and Befuddling him for months. I should have
spotted it!’

‘Don’t blame yourself, Harry. Trudi didn’t notice, and she’s married to him.’

‘I’m not going to blame Trudi, either. She’s doing that herself, she’s even talking about resigning,’
said Harry.

‘She’s a good Auror, Harry,’ said Kingsley quietly. ‘But don’t try to pressure her into staying.’

‘An Auror who’s no longer interested in the job she’s doing is a liability, I know that,’ Harry
nodded in agreement. ‘I’ve authorised special circumstances leave for her, two weeks on full pay.
We’ll reassess the situation then.’

‘Good,’ Kingsley nodded. ‘It will give her time to reflect.’

‘Michael can’t help us, so Terry is taking a look at the RANDOM system. I’m not going to rush
him. He’s not the expert Michael is, but Padma is helping. It will take them a few days, but first
indications are that Jason was trying to use the system as a guide. He was trying to use it to predict
a path towards their goal. Then we asked Michael to help us with the investigation, so both
Michael and Jason were altering the information input, and they were trying to achieve different
things.’

‘But you believe that the system itself suggested the killings?’

‘Yes, but Terry’s not certain why. It’s possible that the plan was simply an attempt to blackmail
you—or the Wizengamot—into freeing Greyback. It’s also possible that their master plan has
succeeded.’
‘Succeeded?’ Kingsley asked.

‘As Terry pointed out, they wanted an opportunity to kill Greyback. If they’re both found guilty…’

‘They’ll be in Azkaban, which is where Greyback is,’ Kingsley’s eyes widened.

‘Exactly,’ Harry agreed. ‘That’s what’s been giving me a headache. I’ve given Terry until Thursday, when I’m back in the office, to come to a conclusion.’

‘But you’re already certain of their motive? In order to achieve revenge on Greyback—a multiple-murderer who is in prison and serving a whole life tariff—the brothers killed four innocent Muggles and one of our finest Aurors?’ Kingsley was as close to anger as Harry had ever seen.

‘Terrible, isn’t it?’ Harry nodded. ‘That reminds me, about Polly…’

‘Not now, Harry,’ Kingsley said. ‘We can discuss her future when you return to work.’

‘Yes,’ Ginny called from the stairs. ‘Stick to the business at hand, Harry, and that includes keeping an eye on these two. Hello, Kingsley. Welcome to Drakeshaugh. I’ve given you as long as I can, but James and I have to leave now. It’s time for me to take him to school.’

‘Ginny,’ Kingsley acknowledged Ginny with a smile and a nod, then turned his attention to James. ‘Hello, James, my name is Kingsley. You look very smart, is that your school uniform?’

‘Yes,’ James nodded, and fiddled nervously with the sleeves of his sweatshirt as he answered.

‘Do you like school?’ Kingsley asked.

‘It’s alright,’ James replied.

‘I expect you’ll still be here when I get back.’ As she helped her eldest into his duffel coat, Ginny smiled politely at their guest. Turning to Al and Lily who had also arrived in the lounge, she said, ‘Daddy and Kingsley will look after you until I get back.’ Returning her gaze to Kingsley, she caught his eye. ‘I’m going out for the day with my friend Jacqui. My plans mean that Harry will be looking after the kids. We’ll be leaving as soon as possible.’

‘I understand,’ Kingsley told her.

‘Good,’ Ginny replied. ‘Come on, James. Bye.’

Followed by a chorus of goodbyes, Ginny took James’ hand and led him from Drakeshaugh.

‘Daddy needs to talk to Kingsley,’ Harry told his two youngest children. ‘Can you play in here until we’re done?’

‘Yes, Daddy,’ Al nodded.

Lily shook her head. ‘Wanna toilet!’ she announced, dancing anxiously.

When Harry returned, several minutes later, Kingsley was sitting on the floor with Al. To Harry’s surprise, they were both playing with the wooden bricks.

‘I asked Al about his friends, Henry and Annie, and he told me about the bullets James’ friend Henry gave everyone,’ said Kingsley conversationally. ‘I suspected that your report was missing some details, and from what Al has said, it appears that there are several things in your report
which… require some clarification.’

Harry glared at his boss.

‘The information was freely given,’ Kingsley met his glare. ‘I would never interrogate a child, and I certainly wouldn’t use Legilimency. Do you want me to take Veritaserum? You’ll have some in your Auror wallet.’

‘No, I believe you.’ Harry replied. ‘I was going to tell you what really happened. Ginny and I discussed it earlier. But, we don’t want to make it official.’

‘I was an Auror for many years, Harry,’ Kingsley stared into Harry’s face as he spoke. ‘I’m well aware that, on rare occasions, certain things should be omitted from a report. I’ve done it myself, as you know.’ Turning back to Al, he continued, ‘I’m sorry, Al, I need to talk to your daddy. You’re a clever boy, you can build a castle of bricks without my help, can’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Al assured him.

‘My help,’ Lily offered. Harry put her down, and she scampered over to her brother.

As the two children began to chatter and plan, Harry and Kingsley returned to the fireside.

‘According to the official report, Auror McLeod was responsible for Hume’s capture, on the boundary of this property. According to Al…’

‘Al’s a child, Kingsley. Simply being the “son of Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley” is going to cause him enough problems when he gets to Hogwarts. He doesn’t need to be “Albus Potter, Child Auror,” or whatever the press would call him, too,’ said Harry firmly. ‘Hamish McLeod agreed to take the credit for the arrest of Pelias Hume.’

‘I would like to know what really happened.’

‘No one can Apparate into the Drakeshaugh grounds. Pelias Apparated to the edge of the woods and flew in on a broom. He set off the alarms the moment he crossed the wall. Unfortunately, the kids were all playing in the woods, and Pelias ran into Rosie first. She saw him and screamed. We’d all started moving when the alarm went off. I’ve got this place Mapped, as you know. I knew exactly where he was. Pelias managed to grab her, and that was when the other kids arrived. Al hit him with accidental magic. Polly was next to arrive, she had the advantage of being able to literally move through the trees. Hamish and Camelia were on security duty, they were next on the scene. By the time Ron, Hermione and I got there, it was all over. Poor Al was distraught, he thought he’d killed Pelias. In fact, he somehow managed to cast a really powerful stunning spell. Hermione thinks that the spent cartridge helped him to focus.’

‘I understand why you’ve altered the official report,’ said Kingsley sympathetically. ‘But I’d rather it was accurate.’

‘No!’

‘Hear me out…’ Kingsley insisted. ‘I pride myself in running an open and honest ministry, Harry. In my view, there have been too many secrets over the years. I propose that Auror McLeod’s statement be rewritten. It should be vague, but factual. Something along the lines of “Once the suspect was subdued, Auror McLeod transported him to an Auror cell” should cover it. We need a statement that can be released to the press.’

We’ve already got one.’
‘It claims McLeod subdued Hume. I’d rather be vague but honest, than approve a lie. I want a full—accurate in every detail—report.’

‘But…’

‘I give you my word that the full report will be “Classified Secret for operational reasons” by my order. We can drop a few hints about the secret security system around your property, that’s true, and it should allay suspicions. The report will be released to the public eventually, of course, because even classified reports are subject to the thirty-year rule. Would that be a problem? I expect Al will be able to cope with the information being released in 2039.’

‘I…’ Harry hesitated. ‘That seems reasonable, Kingsley, but can I speak to Ginny before I make a decision?’

‘Of course,’ Kingsley assured him. ‘A matter like this should be decided by the parents of the child involved, not by faceless Ministry officials, such as the Head Auror, or the Minister for Magic.’

‘Thank you,’ Harry smiled gratefully.

‘That leaves me with only one final question,’ said Kingsley. ‘Why didn’t you call the Obliviator Squad here? There were four Muggles in Drakeshaugh when your alarms went off.’

‘Two of them were under five,’ Harry pointed out.

‘But the adults, Harry, the parents…’

‘Jacqui, and Ginny had both been drinking. Jacqui fainted, she didn’t see anything.’

‘I spoke to Polly yesterday. She, too, assured me that Mrs Charlton saw, and heard, nothing,’ Kingsley frowned. ‘Unfortunately, I’ve known Polly for many years. I know when she’s lying.’

‘Jacqui saw Polly just before she fainted, but some of the Muggles at Polly’s funeral saw her, too,’ Harry protested. ‘They weren’t Obliviated, because some Muggles can see ghosts.’

‘If Jacqui saw nothing else, then we may not need to Obliviate her, but what about her husband?’

‘Mike saw the lights of the Emergency Portkeys when the Aurors all arrived, but we told him it was part of the alarm system.’

‘And he believed you?’

‘Yes.’ Harry nodded. ‘Mike’s a nice guy, and he’s not stupid, but he’s… he’s…’

‘He’s so wrapped up in the Muggle world that he can’t see beyond it?’ Kingsley suggested. The Minister leant back in his chair, apparently relaxing. Harry, however, knew that he was being observed carefully. ‘I don’t read all of the Auror Office Case Reports,’ Kingsley continued. ‘But I try to keep up with the ones submitted by the Muggle Interface Team. They are always very educational. Some Muggles simply refuse to see magic, even when it’s happening in front of their eyes; many others rationalise what they’ve seen. Only a few, like Detective Inspector Wood, have the will and determination to follow the evidence no matter how impossible it seems.’

‘Mike rationalises,’ Harry agreed. ‘Jacqui often spots something that doesn’t make sense to her, that’s why I suggested you use the Ministry car to get here. It’s always the little things. Nothing makes her more suspicious than visitors who seem to have arrived without a vehicle. Even then, Mike usually provides her with a logical, Muggle-friendly solution. On Saturday evening, after
Jacqui fainted, he didn’t leave her side. Ginny stayed with them. He didn’t see anything but the lights, and he’s accepted the cover story. Neither of them required Obliviation.’

‘I’m sure you’re right, Harry, but you have three small children,’ Kingsley said. ‘The Obliviations will almost certainly come in the future. Why risk it?’

‘James has a friend he isn’t related to,’ said Harry. ‘He’s living among Muggles, That’s important to me, and to Ginny. It’s easy to hate strangers, it’s much harder to hate your neighbour.’

‘That’s the argument Hermione makes, too,’ Kingsley observed.

‘She talks about “othering”, and about the fear of the unknown. Hermione says that’s why a lot of purebloods hated Muggles and Muggle-borns. They were frightened, because they knew nothing about them,’ said Harry. ‘I agree.’

A bell chimed.

‘That means there’s a car coming up the lane,’ Harry observed. ‘It’ll be Ginny, Jacqui, and Annie.’

‘Annie here!’ Lily shouted, running towards the door. Al followed closely behind his sister.


Harry heard the bike roar into life. ‘There they go,’ he observed. ‘Everything okay, Kingsley?’

‘She’s a remarkable woman,’ the Minister for Magic announced.

‘Which one?’ Harry asked.

Kingsley chuckled. ‘Good question. They’re both remarkable women, but I was referring to Mrs Charlton, not your wife. Are you certain there’s no magical blood in her family?’

‘I think there must be, but it must have been a long time ago,’ Harry said. ‘I met Jacqui’s mother once, when we were looking for Rabastan Lestrange. She gave me directions to Shivering Stone, the secret way into the werewolf village. She couldn’t quite see the entrance, but she knew there was something odd about it. Jacqui’s the same. I know Jacqui saw Polly. I suspect her mother would see her, too.’

‘It seems likely,’ said Kingsley. ‘Polly is certain that little Annie saw her, too. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to her alone. I asked her, indirectly. She saw Polly, but doesn’t want to admit to seeing ghosts. She wants to be normal, to fit in.’

‘Knowing Muggles, I’m not sure she’s going to achieve that by going off on a motorbike with Ginny,’ Harry observed. ‘But, you agree that there’s no reason to Obliviate her?’

‘Yes,’ Kingsley nodded. ‘She’s disappointed by the fact that she didn’t see the hiker, but she’s accepted your story. You’re going to have to tread carefully, Harry. You deserve a normal life, and so do your children, just remember that no one can break the Statute of Secrecy, not even you. I’d best be going. Goodbye, Al; goodbye, Lily; goodbye, Annie.’

‘Bye-bye swing-king,’ the children chorused.
Epilogue: More Fireworks

When I came downstairs, running shoes in my hand, the kids were still glued to the television. Mike was in the kitchen, so I went to join him. He had just opened the dishwasher.

‘T’ain’t a fit night out for man nor beast,’ he observed.

He was right. The night was cold and a dreary drizzle filled the air. Had I been running alone, one look at the rain trickling down the window would have been enough to persuade me to sit down and curl up in front of the telly. Having a running partner was essential. It ensured that I would not be the one who cancelled.

‘A bit of water’s not going to stop me,’ I replied. Sitting on a stool, I pulled on my shoes.

‘See the news today?’ Mike asked.

‘No,’ I admitted.

‘Ginny was right. The two brothers responsible for the Sheffield killings have both entered guilty pleas. They’ve been remanded; sentencing will take place in a couple of weeks.’

‘Yeah,’ I nodded. ‘She reckons that they’re both looking at a minimum of thirty years.’

‘When did she tell you that?’

‘Monday night, while we were running.’ I admitted. ‘Forgot to tell you, sorry.’

‘Any other snippets of gossip I should know?’

‘Remember “Little Red Riding Hood”? She’s been allowed to resign,’ I said.

‘Wasn’t she responsible for a security breach at Harry’s place?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘She’s got off lightly, I reckon. First there was talk of charging her with something, then they were going to sack her. But, in the end, they decided to allow her to quit.’

‘Why?’

‘Ginny reckons it’s because if they imprisoned people for being useless idiots, half the world would be in jail,’ I replied.

‘True,’ Mike agreed. ‘Thinking about it, she must be civil service. It’ll be a lot less paperwork for her bosses if, instead of them pushing her, she jumps.’

‘Hmm,’ I agreed.

Double-knotting my laces, I stood and picked up my phone. Setting off now. I was midway through the first word when my phone predicted the remainder of that recently regular message. After hitting “send”, I strapped my phone to my arm and pulled on my hoody, kagoule, hi-vis vest, and
head torch.

‘Have fun!’ Mike’s words were cheerfully teasing, with just a pinch of irony. He paused from packing the dishwasher, strode across the kitchen, and gave me a ritual goodbye kiss. As we brushed lips, he grabbed my bum and squeezed. As he did, I reached up and switched on my head torch. He staggered backwards theatrically, hands over his eyes, crying, ‘It burns, it burns.’


‘Bye, Mummy,’ they replied from the living room.

Stepping outside, I closed the kitchen door and set off down the drive. As I looked back, Mike waved to me through the window. Waving back, I trotted out onto the road. The rain wasn’t heavy, but the wind was a gusty and chill northerly and it was blowing me down the hill towards Harbottle.

As I pounded towards the river, all alone in the dark, my thoughts returned to Henry’s party. I went through my plans, trying to assure myself that I hadn’t forgotten anything. Mentally running through my list, I decided that everything really was ready. Everything, that was, except the fireworks.

Before I knew it, I’d reached the track leading to Coquetside Farm, the point where the circular part of my running route began and ended. When I next reached that junction, I’d be saying goodbye to Ginny and running home. I’d also be running uphill into the wind that was currently at my back.

Living in an unlit part of the world makes jogging after dark difficult. Still low in the sky, the waning gibbous moon should have given a reasonable amount of light. Unfortunately, drifting rainclouds worked hard to obscure it. Because of the inconstant moon, my world was restricted to a few metres of rain-diffused torchlight.

Although I couldn’t see any great distance, the iron railings at my side and the sound of water gushing over rocks soon told me that I had reached the bridge over the Coquet. As I crossed the river, an owl hooted. I risked looking up, although the need to constantly scan the road for obstacles made my skyward glimpse brief. I didn’t spot the owl, and it was a good thing that I looked back down immediately. I had to shorten my stride in order to avoid a rolled-up hedgehog. Stepping on it would have been a bad omen for Henry’s birthday cake.

The world was quiet. The rain had turned into a drizzle so fine that it made no sound upon landing. Little more than mist, it coated my clothing and chilled my fingers. There were no more hoots. The wind in the trees, the wet thumps of my running shoes as they beat a steady time on the tarmac, and the sound of my own breathing were my world. There was no traffic, no distant voices, no children demanding my attention. I ran on through the darkness, free.

When I approached the castle car park, I glimpsed another head torch. That bright ball of light bounded steadily toward the road. It was difficult to estimate distance, but I was certain that Ginny was a little closer to the Drakeshaugh gate than me. Increasing my pace, I tried to arrive when she did. My timing was good, but not perfect. I was less than twenty metres from the track leading to Drakeshaugh when she ran out onto the road ahead of me.

‘Cold evening,’ Ginny called over her shoulder. Slowing down a little, she allowed me to catch her, then matched her pace to mine.

‘Nights are closing in. Winter’s coming. It’ll only get colder,’ I agreed as I joined her. ‘I should’ve
'Me too!' Ginny agreed, flexing her fingers. 'Still, we’ll survive, and Harry’s promised there’ll be a hot bath waiting for me when I get back.'

'Damn, wish I’d thought of that,' I replied as we made our way down toward the school.

For a while, we didn’t speak. In the silence, I found myself again going over plans for the following evening.

'Everything okay?' Ginny asked.

'Fine,' I assured her.

'All ready for tomorrow night?’ Once again, Ginny again demonstrated a knack for knowing what was nagging at the back of my mind.

'I hope so,' I said. 'Mike threw a tarp over the bonfire before this lot started.’ I waved a hand through the drizzle. ‘The thing ’ud be a bugger to light if the timber got too wet. Fortunately, tomorrow’s forecast is for a clear night. Any news from Ron about the fireworks?’

'Didn’t Harry tell you? It’s all sorted. Ron’s prepared something special, or so he says. He’ll bring them with him tomorrow. Claims it’s experimental,’ Ginny told me. ‘He also says he doesn’t want any money for them. It’s his treat.’

'I can’t accept…’ I began my protest as we pounded toward the village pub.

'He told Harry that no one in their right minds would run more than three miles in the dark—three times a week—especially in November. He said we probably stop in the pub for a glass or two of wine and just claim to have been out for a run!' Ginny interrupted.

'The cheeky sod! In that case, I can accept his offer,’ I said. 'How was Wales?’

'Fine, the two girls moving into our property on Anglesea seemed nice enough on paper, but I wanted to interview them, just to be sure.’

Once again, my curiosity got the better of me. ‘A house in London, and another one in Wales! How many properties do you and Harry have?’

‘Just the two, plus Drakeshaugh, of course,’ she said. ‘Ron tells us we’re lucky. In a way, we are. We went from one property to three in ten years, but we’re accidental landlords. I bought the house in Beaumaris when I was single and working in Holyhead. When we married, I moved in with Harry and we decided to rent it out rather than sell. We still don’t get any real income from it. The rent simply covers mortgage and upkeep. We could afford to keep it, because Harry’s London house is ours. It was an inheritance. It belonged to his godfather, who died very young and had no family. He left his house, and everything in it, to Harry.’

'Sorry to hear that,’ I said. ‘Was Harry close to his godfather?’

'Until he died, very close. Sirius was Harry’s closest connection to his parents.’

'Sirius—James Sirius!' I exclaimed as we reached the footbridge over the Coquet. The narrow bridge forced us into single file, so Ginny didn’t reply until we turned up the track and headed back up the valley.
‘James for Harry’s dad, and Sirius for his godfather,’ Ginny confirmed. ‘Did I miss much gate-gossip yesterday, or today?’

It was a blatant subject change, but I couldn’t blame her. Harry seemed to have had such a lot of tragedy in his life. It was little wonder they didn’t like to talk about it. There wasn’t much for me to tell her. Since Harry’s case was now closed, the hot topic for school gate gossip had become Mary’s divorce.

‘Yesterday was the day after the full moon,’ I said. ‘So Angela was finally forced to admit that the full moon killer had, indeed, been captured. Today…’

I paused to catch my breath. Ginny was setting quite a pace, and we’d reached an uphill stretch of track.

“Today?” Ginny asked.

‘Mary’s after a half share of Saville Transport!’ I said, deciding to share my thoughts. ‘I don’t know if she’s a changed woman, or if I’ve been misjudging her. Perhaps she’s not so bad, after all. I wonder what sort of relationship she and Bobby had? Was she always unhappy? Has betrayal and a messy divorce been good for her?’

‘I’m not sure she’s changed,’ said Ginny cautiously. ‘You’re sympathetic to her situation, Jacqui, and so am I, don’t get me wrong. I think most people are. But it’s okay to feel sympathy for someone and still not like them. When I first met Mary, I thought she was a snooty and self-important bitch, so did you! Now you want to think she’s a better person than she first appeared.’

‘Isn’t she?’ I asked. I knew Ginny well enough to be able to predict her answer, but I wanted to hear her say it.

‘No,’ Ginny’s response was blunt. ‘You’re thinking better of her because, at the moment, she’s not being mean to you, or to me, or anyone, really. That doesn’t mean she’s nice, Jacqui. It means she has a finite amount of spite and anger to vent, and right now it’s being directed exclusively at her soon-to-be-ex-husband.’

Ginny’s words were food for thought, and I considered them carefully.

‘You may be right,’ I admitted, recollecting my schooldays. ‘It’s easy to forget what a bully someone is when they decide to leave you alone and target someone else.’

‘Exactly,’ Ginny agreed.

As we continued to climb up the muddy track, the steepest uphill section of our run, conversation stopped. We concentrated on keeping up our speed and avoiding the puddles. In the silence, my mind drifted back to school gate conversations.

‘Where’s your friend?’ I’d been asked on the previous evening.

‘Ginny’s in Wales; they have a property in Beaumaris they rent out.’

‘Still jogging?’ Angela asked.

‘We’re running three nights a week. It’s only our second full week, but it’s definitely doing us good.’ I’d said. Most of the other Mums remained unpersuaded, but that was fine by me. I loved my new routine, and I didn’t want anyone to disrupt it.
The running, the swimming, the coffees and chats at Drakeshaugh. Since the new school year had started in September, my life had changed for the better. All because my son had made friends with Ginny’s son. Mike was trying to persuade me that we could buy a motorbike, and he’d suggested I start playing my smallpipes again.

Ginny brought me out from my drifting thoughts by asking, ‘What can I bring?’

I was surprised to discover how far we’d got. We were passing Coquetside Farm and beginning our descent toward the river.

‘Yourself and your family,’ I said. ‘And Ron’s fireworks, and his family, of course. You can leave Ron behind, if you want.’

‘I’ll tell him you said that.’ Ginny laughed.

‘Stop in the pub!’ I grumbled. ‘He can come out running with us on Friday. Let’s see how he would cope with that!’

‘Very badly, he couldn’t even run as far as the pub,’ said Ginny. ‘Ron, Hermione, Rosie, and Hugo should be arriving at Drakeshaugh around midday tomorrow. Would you like to join us for lunch?’

‘I’d love to, but I can’t. Thanks for asking, but there’s still a lot for me to do,’ I gasped. I was beginning to get a little out of breath. ‘I’m hosting a birthday party tomorrow night, remember?’

‘We’ll be there,’ she assured me. ‘Can I help? Is there anything you need?’

‘Need, no,’ I told her. ‘But both of the men in my life have been dropping elephant-sized hints that, if you asked, I should remind you that they’re very fond of your homemade ginger biscuits.’

‘I’ll bake some tomorrow morning and lock them away before Ron arrives. If I don’t hide them, Mike and Henry still won’t get any.’ She glanced down at her watch. ‘Almost a minute quicker from Drakeshaugh to here,’ she added as we approached the Alwinton to Harbottle road. ‘See you at school tomorrow, Jacqui.’

‘See you, Ginny.’

We reached the road and waved. She turned left and headed back down toward Drakeshaugh, I turned right. As I headed back up the hill to Lintzgarth, I tried to pick up my pace. I wanted to be able to sprint the last half mile home. It was hard work.

‘When’s they coming?’ Henry asked for the umpteenth time.

‘Before tomorrow, and after yesterday,’ said Mike, once again.

I clenched my teeth. The exchange was becoming very wearing.

‘But when, zactly, Daddy?’ Henry asked.

Mum was smiling fondly at her grandson, and also at my husband. I had my oven gloves in my hand and, had Mike said “today,” just as he had on every previous occasion, I think I’d have risked the wrath of both Mum and my mother-in-law and thrown them at him.

Instead, he said, ‘Right now, Henry. Headlights approaching. It’s them. Action stations! Action stations!’
‘Yay!’ Henry yelled. Annie began to dance.

My kids were at the kitchen door and trying to open it before the car engines were switched off. Henry succeeded, and our guests were met outside. Chaos ensued. Presents were passed over and, before I could intervene, a very giddy Henry was scattering ripped wrapping paper like confetti. Harry and Ginny were fussing over him. The kids were squealing and screaming and chasing each other around the cars, laughing.

In the midst of the mayhem, Ron presented me with a bottle of Bordeaux Grand Cru bearing a label saying “Warning: Don’t drink all at once!” Hermione apologised to me for her husband’s sense of humour, at the same time Mike was complimenting him on it. All this was happening while I was trying to tidy up after Henry. At least Mike managed to do his job, introducing our visitors to my parents and to his. As I scrabbled about on the gravel for wrapping paper, Ginny came over and helped.

When things finally calmed down, and we’d all admired Henry’s presents, I set Mike to work making sure that our guests all had drinks. Once that job was done, the kids, under adult supervision, were allowed to go out and watch the blazing bonfire.

Small children and large fires always put me on tenterhooks, but Mike, Ron, Dad, and my father-in-law were there to keep an eye on them. Mike, Ron, and Dad all had beers: pints of Riggwelter. Mike’s dad was the only one of the men not drinking. My mother-in-law, and Hermione, were on their way outside, too, but they stopped in the kitchen and offered to help. I claimed that I was under control and sent them out to help supervise the children.

When Harry, Ginny, and Mum finally walked through from the living room, I was frantically slicing buns and flipping burgers. They’d been chatting. It turned out that, many years earlier, Harry had stayed in her B&B. He had recognised her immediately.

Astonishingly, given the number of guests she’d hosted over the years, Mum remembered him, too. He’d arrived unannounced on her doorstep on a foul February evening, cold and wet. Later, he’d asked her about Shivering Stone. Either one of those things would make him memorable to Mum; both made him unforgettable.

‘Shivering Stone, those creepy rocks on Bloodybush Edge?’ I could feel the goosebumps forming on my arms as I mentioned the name of the place. There was something odd about those stones, and my granny had always warned me to stay away from the place on full moon night. In deference to Harry’s recently closed case, I didn’t mention my grandmother’s warning. Instead, I simply said, ‘I’m surprised a southerner like you had heard of Shivering Stone, Harry.’

‘It came up in a conversation I was having with your mum about strange place names,’ Harry said.

‘It did,’ Mum agreed, ‘because you brought it up.’

‘Did I?’ he shrugged.

‘Need a hand, Jacqui?’ Ginny interjected.

‘I can manage,’ I assured her.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Jacqueline,’ Mum said. ‘Those sausages are almost done, so are the burgers. Shouldn’t those onions be frying?’

‘I can fry onions,’ Harry volunteered.
‘Ginny, could you slice the tomatoes?’ Mum asked. ‘And I’ll get these buns buttered.’

‘You’re my guests,’ I protested.

‘I’m family, pet,’ Mum reminded me.

‘And we’re friends,’ said Ginny firmly. Choosing a knife from the block, she began slicing.

‘Everyone else is outside, Jacqui. We’re not going to leave you alone in here to struggle.’

‘I can cope,’ I protested.

‘But you don’t have to,’ she replied. ‘What else are friends for?’

Mike and Ron were close to the bonfire, chatting away. I wandered over to join them.

‘…our trip to London, before we had the kids,’ Mike said to Ron. ‘Hello, mi-deario, have I told you how wonderful you are?’ With that acknowledgement of my presence, he returned to his story. ‘You know those little sachets of mustard you get in hotels?’

Ron nodded.

‘There was this American guy at the table next to ours. Really loud. You know the type. Well, he wasn’t keen on the full English breakfast buffet, and he was positively horrified by the presence of baked beans and black pudding, so he got himself a bun and put a sausage in it. Then he got a handful of mustard sachets, at least half-a-dozen.’

‘He didn’t!’ Ron chuckled in anticipation. Mike had certainly found a kindred spirit. I continued the story.

‘He did,’ I confirmed ‘He put at least six packets of mustard on one sausage.’

Mike nodded, popped his eyes and blew out his cheeks. Ron’s chuckle turned to laughter.

‘Exactly,’ said Mike. Hermione, a tired-looking Hugo in her arms, joined us, ‘The guy took one mouthful, opened the bun, and scraped all the mustard off again.’

Ron caught my eye. ‘These are fine sausages, Jacqui, no mustard required,’ he said, waving the bun at me. ‘Great spread, in fact. I don’t know how you did it, bloo…’ Hermione’s glare could have burnt through lead. ‘Blooming brilliant,’ he finished the sentence with barely a pause. ‘Any spuds left?’

‘Just one,’ I said. He strolled back into the kitchen.

Everyone else had finished eating, even the kids. Mike, Hermione, and I re-joined the others.

‘Where on earth does he put it all?’ I asked Ginny as her brother returned with the last baked potato and yet another sausage in a bun.

‘I have no idea,’ she admitted. ‘However, while Ron’s busy polishing off the last of your potatoes, perhaps now’s the time for Harry to get the ginger biscuits from the boot.’


‘If anyone wants more than biscuits, there are a couple of burgers left…’ I said.

‘One burger,’ Ron corrected me. ‘And one sausage.’
'There’s a cheeseboard on the kitchen table. Unless Ron’s eaten all that, too,’ I announced. He shook his head. ’We have mature cheddar, Blagdon blue, Coquetdale, and Redesdale—which is a sheep-milk cheese.’

There were other fireworks going off in the village, and more further down the valley, but none were as bright and loud as the ones Ron was setting off. The last rocket was louder than everything that had preceded it. As its colourful stars were fading, and its final boom was echoing across the hills, Ron asked a question. ’Is this a birthday party?’

The kids yelled confirmation.

’Whose birthday is it?’ Ron asked.

’Me!’ Henry yelled.

’Henry,’ James, Al, and Rosie agreed.

’Henny,’ added Annie, Hugo, and Lily.

’Excellent,’ Ron announced. ’This is the last firework, and it’s especially for the birthday boy. You might need some help blowing out these candles, Henry. Will everyone help?’

’Yes!’ the kids chorused.

’What about you lot?’ Ron asked us.

’Yes,’ we said, though not so loudly.

Ron folded his arms and tried again. ’That was rubbish; show some commitment!’ The kids turned and stared at us. ’Will the grown-ups help?’ Ron asked.

’Yes,’ we yelled.

’Well, that was better, wasn’t it?’ Ron asked the kids.

’Yeah,’ they agreed.

’This is it, last firework. Let’s all just keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best, eh?’ Ron asked.

’Cannons!’ James yelled, raising a fist into the air.

I glanced over at Ginny. ’Long story,’ she said, shaking her head at Ron. He wasn’t paying attention; he was giving James the thumbs up.

’And that’s why you’re my favouritest nephew in the world, James,’ Ron said. ’Stand back, everyone.’

He lit the final fuse on the final stubby firework, a plain cardboard cylinder about the size of a five-litre paint tin. At first, nothing happened. Suddenly, there was a loud bang, and the cylinder shot up into the air. There were no colours, nothing. It simply vanished into the darkness.

’What…’ Henry began. Then it happened.

I’ve no idea how Ron had made it work, but a colourful cylinder burst into slowly spinning life in
the sky above our heads. An instant later five wide and glowing red lines appeared atop it.

‘Birthday Cake firework!’ Rosie yelled. She was right. It was a birthday cake, with five candles, and it was made of sparkling fireworks.

‘Come on, light,’ Ron muttered. Almost immediately, a yellow flame appeared atop each of the glowing candles ‘You have to make a wish and blow out the candles, Henry,’ Ron announced. ‘Everyone will help. On three. One, two, three!’

We all blew, the flickering yellow flames went out, and everyone cheered. The cake itself remained suspended for several more seconds before it, too, faded into the night.

‘Bloo… blooming impressive,’ Mike told Ron. ‘How did you do that? Timing the “flames” to come on last and go out first was a masterstroke. You knew how long they’d stay lit, didn’t you?’ Very clever.’

Ron shook his head, winked at Mike and I, and looked down at the kids. ‘Don’t be silly, Mike. If Henry hadn’t blown them out, the candles would’ve stayed alight right until the end.’

‘Mine had four candles,’ Rosie announced.

I was about to ask about her birthday, but Mike leapt in first. ‘Fork handles?’ he asked gleefully. ‘Got any ‘ose?’

My parents chuckled, and so did Mike’s dad. No one else did. Rosie looked at him as if he were mad, and he realised his mistake.

‘Very old, and very silly telly programme, Rosie. It would take too long to explain,’ he admitted.

‘Rosie’s party was Sunday—family affair in Dorset,’ Ginny told me in an undertone while Mike was talking. ‘And Rosie’s “cake” didn’t work as well as this one. I think that’s probably why Ron didn’t want payment.’

‘That’s right. Rosie’s birthday was my first test; this was my second,’ Ron admitted.

‘It was brilliant, Ron, thank you,’ I said.

‘My pleasure,’ he replied.

‘Only one thing left to do now,’ I said. ‘You have more candles to blow out, Henry.’

‘Birthday Cake!’ Henry shouted.

I’d made an enormous chocolate hedgehog cake, with Flakes for spikes. It was a real hit. Even my mother-in-law was impressed.

The bonfire was down to it’s embers, the kids were yawning, and I’d packaged up some of the cake for people to take away with them. Ginny was helping me to pack the dishwasher when Harry arrived, Lily in his arms.

‘Bedtime for Lily-loo,’ he announced. ‘Hugo’s already asleep in Ron’s arms. We’re going to have to go, Ginny. Thanks for a great evening, Jacqui.’

‘Thanks for coming,’ I said. ‘I hope Henry has thanked you for his present.’
‘He has,’ Harry assured me.

‘And thanks for making us welcome when we first moved in, Jacqui,’ Ginny said. ‘I don’t know how we’d have coped without you and Henry.’

Behind us, Mike blew a raspberry. I was horrified, but Ginny laughed.

‘And Annie,’ she added pointedly, giving me a wink.

‘Oh, that hurts,’ said Mike.

‘Not as much as this will, when I clock ye ower the heid with it,’ I announced, waving the frying pan I’d been about to put in the dishwasher.

‘Michael Charlton!’ Ginny couldn’t quite get my accent right, but she’d got my scolding tone off to a tee. ‘Do you know what my friend Jacqui told me the first time she ever visited Drakeshaugh?’

As Mike shook his head, I frantically tried to remember that day.

‘“My husband can be an idiot sometimes,”’ she told him. I could hear myself saying those words.

‘He is an idiot,’ I agreed. ‘But he’s my idiot.’

‘That’s me,’ Laughing, Mike came over and hugged me. ‘Seriously, thanks, Ginny. Thanks for being Jacqui’s friend, thanks for everything.’

‘I’ve lost touch with my school friends, and my swimming friends are scattered around the country,’ I admitted. ‘I think I was going a bit stir crazy, locked up with the kids. Thanks for freeing me.’

Ginny hugged me. ‘Everything you’ve just said applies to me, too, doesn’t it, Harry?’

‘Well, it’s … it’s hockey, not swimming, but otherwise…’ he agreed.

‘Hermione’s my friend, but she’s a high-flying career woman, and I’m not,’ Ginny admitted. She looked around the kitchen, but Ron, Hermione, and the kids were still outside, talking to my parents and in-laws. ‘And Luna is my friend, but I never know where in the world she is.’

‘Even when she’s here!’ I suggested.

Ginny laughed.

As we waved at the departing Potters and Weasleys, Annie was asleep in her dad’s arms, and both grandmothers were engaged in a ludicrously polite argument about which of them should put her to bed. Both wanted to do it, neither wanted to do anything so rude as quarrel about it.

As I listened to them, I realised that I was already preparing the tale of their discussion in my head. It would be something to tell Ginny about at the school gates the following morning.

‘Whoever doesn’t do Annie can deal with Henry,’ I suggested. They quickly came to a decision. The rear lights of the cars had vanished around the corner when they joined us. All we could see was the glow of headlights in the distance.

‘What d’you think?’ Mike asked my dad.
'Nice people,' he said.

‘Nice,’ Mum agreed.

My in-laws agreed.

‘Ever heard of the Chudley Cannons?’ Mike’s dad asked. ‘Ron’s a supporter.’

‘Probably his local non-league team,’ Mike suggested.

‘A football team called Chudley Cannons?’ his dad asked.

‘Blyth Spartans, Bedlington Terriers,’ Mike replied.

‘Exactly!’ I said, agreeing with my husband.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Strangers at Drakeshaugh is complete, but the relationship between the Charltons and the Potters is further explored in:

Sports Day, The Drakeshaugh Dragon, Xmas Daze, Owl Post, Young Love, and James and Me

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