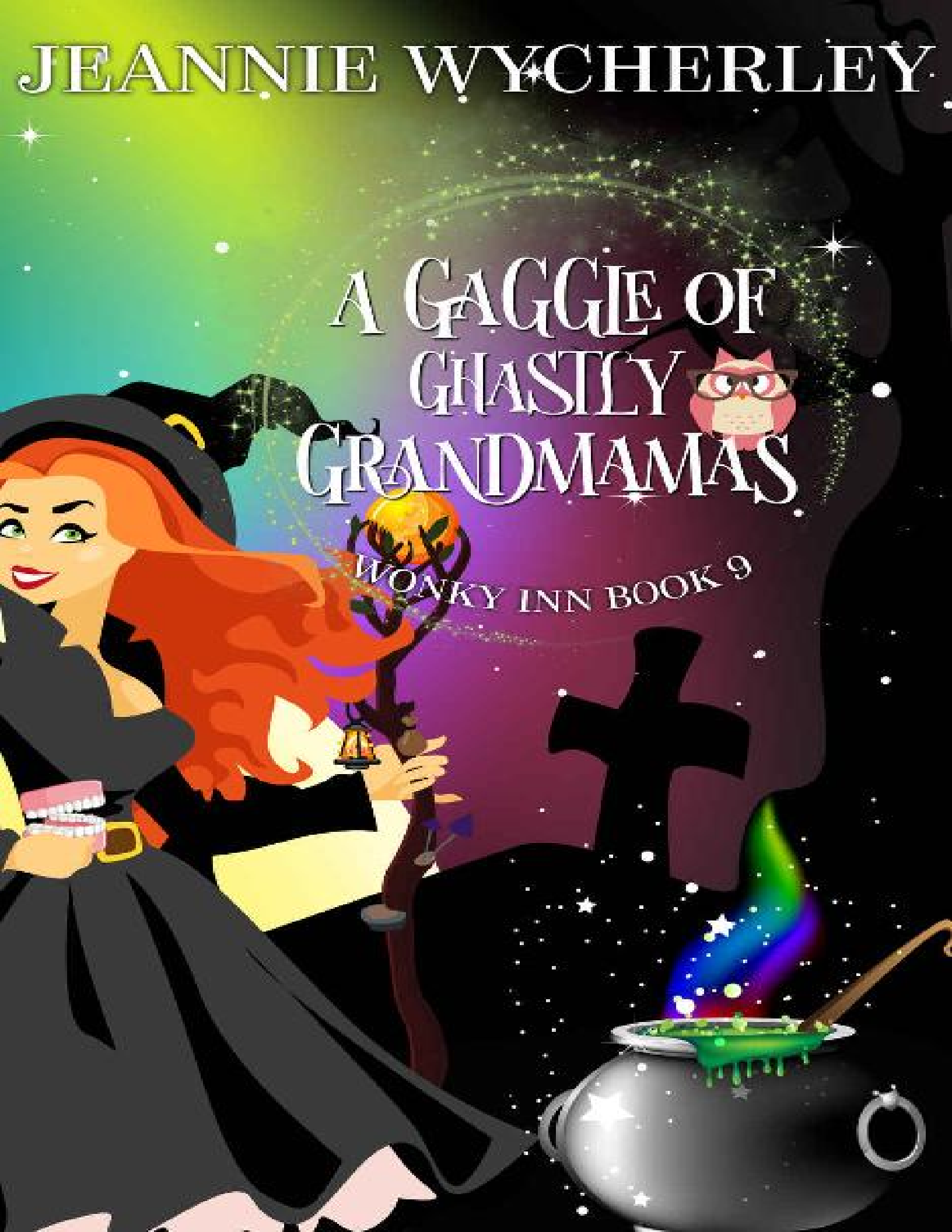
JEANNIE WYCHERLEY
A GAGGLE OF GHASTLY GRANDMAMAS
WONKY INN BOOK 9

A GAGGLE OF GHASTLY GRANDMAMAS

WONKY INN BOOK 9

JEANNIE WYCHERLEY

A Gaggle of Ghastly Grandmamas:
Wonky Inn Book 9
by

JEANNIE WYCHERLEY

Copyright © 2020 Jeannie Wycherley
Bark at the Moon Books
All rights reserved

Publishers note: This is a work of fiction. All characters, names, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and for effect or are used with permission. Any other resemblance to actual persons, either living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of very brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Sign up for Jeannie's newsletter: eepurl.com/cN3Q6L

A Gaggle of Ghastly Grandmamas was edited by Christine L Baker

Cover design by JC Clarke of The Graphics Shed.
Formatting by Tammy
Proofing by Johnny Bon Bon

Please note: This book is set in England in the United Kingdom. It uses British English spellings and idioms.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Epilogue

Need More Wonky?
Please leave me a review
The Wonky Inn Series
Also by Jeannie Wycherley
Coming Soon

Special dedication

We find ourselves in unprecedented times and I'm sure, like me, you've been feeling the strain.

I'd like to dedicate Wonky Inn Book 9 to everyone who has found themselves in the front line, especially to all our NHS workers and carers in the UK and to health workers worldwide.

Also those who are so often forgotten: the delivery drivers, the supermarket workers, the pharmacists, the cleaners, the council workers, those working in public transport, the police and the fire service, the prison service and so on.

But most especially, I want to dedicate this book to all of you who are fearful or alone or simply in need of a hug.

The doors of Wonky Inn are always open.

Rest assured, Alf and the gang, and I, will welcome you anytime.

Jeannie Wycherley xxx
April 2020

"If the wind changes, your face will stick that way, you know?" Charity, dressed in a chunky cardigan with a bobble hat covering her faded green hair, leaned against the door frame and chuckled. Steam drifted out of the large mug in her hand and I realised I could do with a cuppa myself.

"Hoo-hoo-hoo."

I gently moved Mr Hoo, balancing on my monitor, slightly to one side so I could see Charity properly over the top of the screen. I poked my tongue out at her. The air was frigid, so I didn't leave it out there too long.

"Is that for me?" I asked, ever hopeful.

"No, it's mine." Charity cradled the mug to her chest and stepped into the office. The enticing scent of soup tickled my nostrils and, right on cue, my stomach rumbled. "What's got you all grumpy?"

Pulling the heavy blanket I'd wrapped around myself a little more snugly under my chin, I narrowed my eyes in response. "I can't imagine." I huffed my breath out. "Have you seen this? It's

steam. That means the ambient air temperature in this room is lower than my body temperature. I'm freezing in other words. And what's more, I can only find one glove." I waved a mittened hand in her direction. "You haven't seen the other one, have you?"

"Nope." Charity tipped her head up to the ceiling. "Although you'd imagine there were a million pairs of gloves up in the loft somewhere. Hiding out in a chest. Just waiting for you to set them free."

"Eww," I turned my nose up. "Can you imagine? Full of the dust and dirt of decades gone by."

"It's not very warm, I must admit. I've got a t-shirt, a jumper and a cardigan on," Charity said, giving me a little twirl.

I pointed a foot at her. "I'm wearing three pairs of socks." I could barely get my slipper-boots on. My feet were the warmest part of me. Let's not talk about how cold my backside was, sitting in this chair and not moving around much.

Charity tittered again and took a sip of her soup. "Mmm. Yummy." She narrowed her eyes in ecstasy and I glared at her.

Sitting up a little straighter, I asked, "What flavour is it?"

"Winter veg. Leftovers from Sunday dinner, I think. It's glorious."

"It sounds it." I gave a theatrical shiver—channelling my inner Kate Winslet on the sinking *Titanic,* chattering teeth and all. "I'm so cold. I *need* soup!"

Charity hugged her mug again. "Then go and get some, lazybones!"

"I'm working," I grumbled, pointing at the spreadsheet on the display.

"Unlike the boiler," Charity reminded me.

As if I needed reminding.

The ancient boiler responsible for heating the water and the radiators had been temperamental ever since I'd taken over Whittle Inn and had conked out three times in the few weeks since Christmas. With a bit of patience and some prodding, I'd usually been able to tease it back to life. Not so, today.

"I've called the plumber approximately nine million times," I said, and picked up my mobile to check for any call-back I might have missed. Of course, I couldn't possibly have missed a message because I hadn't been more than six inches from my phone the entire morning.

"And what about the fuel situation?" Charity asked.

She meant the coal and wood we needed for the fires. Whittle Inn is blessed with dozens of open fires. There's one in every bedroom, the bar of course, The Snug and The Hug, and the kitchen. Late the previous evening, we'd realised we were out of coal and had little in the way of wood left either.

"I phoned down to Whittle Stores and Stan promised he'll do his best to get us some. Finbarr is out chopping wood with Ned and Zephaniah. Between the three of them, we should be able to keep a fire going, even if it's only the big one in the bar."

"We'll have to huddle together in there, then." Charity sipped her soup and made a few appreciative noises. "Mmm. Yum."

I put my head down, studiously ignoring both her and the gurgle of cold empty hunger emanating from my stomach.

"Why don't you come and work down there where it's a bit warmer?" Charity asked. "It's not as if we're overrun with guests at the moment."

"Mmm. No kidding," I grumped.

A lack of guests was partly responsible for my glum mood. Bookings for the inn were down. I kind of expected a slump in January, I

mean, who in their right mind takes a holiday in the UK in January? Down here in the south-west it didn't even get snow very often (unless Mara the Stormbringer was having an off day). No. It remained generally cold and damp or, as today, frozen solid outside. But it seemed to me that I'd had more cancellations than normal, and even a few of our regulars like Frau Kirsch, who practically lived with us, had yet to enquire about fresh reservations for the spring.

"Maybe I need to do some more advertising or something. Bolster awareness of how wonderful a stay at Whittle Inn can be, even in the grip of the deadliest of winters."

"It's hardly deadly, boss," Charity laughed. "It's a bit cold and the boiler isn't working. Other than that, perfectly normal for the time of year."

That seemed to be an opportune moment for my deceased great-grandmother to apparate into the room. I say 'apparate', but that assumes that she wasn't there to begin with and, as far as I'm aware, Alfhild Gwynfyre Daemonne—or just Gwyn as I like to call her behind her back—is annoyingly omnipresent. Unless you want her for some reason, and then she can't be found.

Anywhere.

Today Gwyn looked particularly resplendent in her blue velvet ballgown and tiara.

"Board games," she announced.

Charity snorted. The way Gwyn had expelled the word it had sounded like something else entirely.

"I beg your pardon, Grandmama?" I asked politely, sending Charity a warning look.

"Are you going deaf, Alfhild? I said, *board games*. Why don't you organise a board games weekend? People like board games."

"Do they?" I rocked back in my chair, pulling the blanket around my shoulders again. Gwyn sometimes invited a few of her friends over to play cards, mainly bridge and cribbage, but I couldn't recall ever seeing her playing a board game. "Like Monopoly and Buckaroo, you mean?" I'd enjoyed playing those with my Dad as a kid.

Charity sniffed. "That's all a bit last century, isn't it?"

I blinked. Last century? We weren't exactly running a business popular with millennials, were we? Had it passed Charity by that the average age of people who stayed at our wonky inn was probably about seventy? And that quite a few of them—like Gwyn's friends—had died decades ago?

Gwyn ignored Charity. "I was thinking more of bagatelle."

"Bagatelle?" Charity and I repeated at the same time.

I couldn't resist it. I had to follow up. "Jinx!"

Charity lifted her mug to her lips. "You're such a child, Alf."

"Takes one to know one!" I had yet to forgive her for having soup when I had none. She understood the cause of my angst and therefore smirked and took a big swig.

I turned my attention back to Gwyn. "It's a nice idea Grandmama, but I'm not sure a bagatelle weekend would have quite the draw that Whittle Inn needs at the moment."

"You don't know till you try," Gwyn barked. "You shouldn't be so closed-minded, Alfhild."

Oh, here we go, I thought. *It's 'have a pop at Alf' time*.

"Perhaps not a bagatelle weekend, but some other event," Charity nodded. "I think that's a great idea, Gwyn."

"Marvellous. Everyone's ganging up on me." I folded my arms and the blanket slipped off my shoulders. "We're not hosting an event of any kind. We just need to attract some—"

"An event could be a great money-spinner. You can charge a little more for food and drinks," Gwyn nodded.

"I don't think—" I began.

"Or have an all-inclusive package," Charity said, her voice rising with excitement. "I went on holiday to Tenerife and absolutely *everything* was included. I didn't stop eating for a week."

"How would we make any money if everybody ate and drank all day every day?" I asked, appalled by the idea. "How much food would we need to order? How much would go to waste?"

"Okay," Charity shrugged. "Just a suggestion. Do it Gwyn's way and charge extra for evening meal and drinks. Let's see. What kind of event can we organise?"

"We're not holding an event," I reminded her, a little more firmly this time. Why was everyone intent on ignoring me?

"Don't be a stick-in-the-mud, Alf. We organised a great wedding —"

"I'm *never* doing that again." I shuddered.

Charity rolled her eyes. "It doesn't have to be a vampire—"

"No weddings. No events." I was adamant. "And *definitely* no vampires."

Charity tried a different tack. "Well, what about something culinary? You know, we could host something like *The Great Witchy Cake Off* again?"

"Absolutely not!"

Gwyn nodded at Charity in full agreement. "Really, Alf. That was a magnificent success."

"Somebody died, Grandmama," I reminded her. "And to be fair, you spent most of the time hidden away."

Gwyn had the grace to look sheepish. "Did I?"

"And this is the problem," I complained, forcing my chair back. "I end up having to handle things we haven't planned for, and it can all be a little bit stressful."

"Oh my," Gwyn tutted. "You *are* being a bit precious this afternoon, my dear."

"Hooo!" Mr Hoo joined in.

"She's hangry," said Charity.

"I am not!" I returned, starting to get narky now. My mobile vibrated and began dancing towards the edge of the desk. I reached for it before it could tumble off. "Hello?" I asked, glad of the distraction. Mr Perry, the plumber, was calling to let me know he'd be along in five minutes. He'd just finished a job in Whittlecombe and I had made it to the top of his to-visit list. "Splendid!" I smiled. "See you in a minute."

I stood up and violently threw my blanket aside. Mr Hoo flew away in alarm. "You see?" I demanded. "That was the plumber. He's on his way. We'll have heating and hot water by teatime."

Feeling more positive, I skipped past Gwyn and Charity. "I'm going to go downstairs and meet him."

Charity nodded and slipped into the seat I'd vacated to have a look at my spreadsheet. It told the full story of the financial bind Whittle Inn currently found itself in. She raised her eyebrows at me.

"No need to look like that," I told her. "Things will pick up. I won't need to hold an event of any kind. People will be flocking to our nice warm inn again in no time."

I wiggled my fingers at them, one hand in a mitten, the other naked. "Mark my words."

More like famous last words.

A rather substantial beast, the inn's boiler was housed in its own room, just off the kitchen at the back of the inn. Mr Perry took the screwdriver from between his teeth and pointed at a brass component in front of us. He'd unscrewed the cover and what I was examining now looked like nothing I'd ever seen before. Thin copper pipes and a variety of brightly coloured wires had been mashed together to create … well, a mess, quite frankly.

Now I'm not a plumber. Drains and stopcocks and u-bends and taps are not my thing. I've had occasion to bleed radiators—goodness knows there are dozens of them at Whittle Inn—but boilers are something I've never really taken much notice of. Boilers are why central heating experts were invented.

That being said, I didn't recognise the inside of this boiler as being typical of a normal boiler and, judging by Mr Perry's face, neither did he.

"There's your problem," he said.

I edged a little closer and grimaced. What should I be looking at? "Where?"

"There," he said and waved a hand in a gesture that covered everything we could see.

"Oh."

He scratched his head. "You know, Miss Daemonne, I have never not seen nothing like this before and I've been a plumber for nigh-on forty years, I have. How old do we reckon this contraption is?"

"Ha ha ha." I laughed to cover the sinking feeling in my stomach. "Well, I don't suppose they had boilers in the fourteenth century, so any time after that is my guess."

"No, I don't suppose they did." Mr Perry had missed my attempt at humour.

"So, can we fix it?" I asked, knowing that there was no 'we' about it. Either Mr Perry could, or he couldn't. I certainly wouldn't be able to.

Mr Perry nodded, his face grave. "I really wouldn't know where to start to even try and patch this thing up, but in any case, I think if I were you, I'd seriously consider upgrading this old monster to something a little more up-to-date."

"Really?" I rubbed my forehead. "And how much would that set me back?"

"Oooh. Now you're asking. For a building this size with this many rooms? I expect you use a fair amount of water, don't you?" Mr Perry glanced up at the ceiling as though he would be able to count the number of bathrooms in the inn using some sort of X-ray vision.

"A small oceanful every day," I nodded. "And that's just the washing machines."

"That's what I thought. You'll need an industrial-sized boiler to cope with everything. That and having the pipes flushed through and the radiators cleaned out, you won't get much change from, let me think …" he pondered, screwing up one eye, "… around fifteen grand. Maybe more."

"*Fifteen*?" I squawked.

"At least."

"I can't afford that!" I slapped at the side of the boiler. There was a click and a whirr, and the blue light unexpectedly flashed on, then off, then on again.

I frowned. Mr Perry stepped a little closer. With a sudden whoosh, the boiler came alive. Something mechanical clattered and thumped. I put my hand out to touch a pipe. It vibrated beneath my fingers. "It's working!"

Mr Perry scratched his head. "Seems like you've got the knack, Miss Daemonne." He jabbed his finger towards the tangle of wires. "But even so, I think you genuinely need to consider a replacement. It could conk out at any time, and next time for good. You wouldn't want to inconvenience your guests, I'm sure."

"No, you're right, I wouldn't." I touched the side of the boiler. It had started to warm beneath my touch. Another few minutes and the pipes would heat up, followed by the radiators. Then we could all thaw out.

Hurrah!

I noticed a raised area on the side panel and stroked it. "What's this?" I asked.

Mr Perry stepped alongside me and peered at it through his glasses. He rubbed it too. "That looks like the maker's name. I can't make out what it says though. It's been painted over several dozen

times by the look of it. If you get some paint stripper you might be able to take it down and find out what make it is."

"And get some parts, do you think?" That would be cheaper than having a fancy-schmancy new boiler fitted.

"I expect whoever made this went out of business a long time ago. It's Jurassic era, this is." Mr Perry began to collect his belongings together, slinging a hammer and a spanner back into his toolbox. "I'll leave this panel off for now. It'll be perfectly safe as long as you keep the door locked and don't allow anyone to touch it."

"No problem," I said. We habitually kept the doors downstairs locked as a matter of course these days. I'd become a little more security conscious since my outing in Transylvania.

"But as I say, if I were you, I'd really be considering upgrading to a modern boiler. They tend to be more efficient these days and waste far less energy …"

"That's important," I agreed. "It's just the cost!"

"It is an outlay, I have to admit." Mr Perry nodded at the boiler. "Maybe you could sell that one for scrap or spares. It's that old it's probably a collector's item. Put it on an auction site!" He closed his toolbox with a clunk. "I'd be interested to know what make it is, actually. Give me a shout when you find out. If there's anything I can do for you in the meantime, don't hesitate to give me a ring."

"I will do," I said. "Thank you."

Beside me, the boiler clanked ominously. The little blue light flickered. "Eek!" Fearing it was about to turn itself off again, I reached out and touched its side. The blue light wavered, blinked off and then on again, and finally began to glow steadily.

"Very impressive." Mr Perry donned his hat and scarf and zipped up his jacket. "Until next time, Miss Daemonne. I'll see myself out."

"Thank you!" I waved him off and, biting my lip, turned to survey my ancient boiler. Fifteen thousand pounds? *Fifteen!*

"I'm going to be a pauper," I told it. "And I'm not going to be happy about that, not one little bit."

Sighing, I patted its side. "Behave for now. I guess I need to go and have a chat with Gwyn about holding a blooming bagatelle weekend."

We settled ourselves in The Snug for what I'd labelled 'a full and frank discussion of the current financial situation at Whittle Inn.' The Snug, being a smaller room just off the bar, is perfect for meetings such as the one I'd called. I'd had Florence build a fire in here, and although I don't suppose the ghosts were overly bothered by the temperature, it made it cosy for the mortals among the staff. A large, scratched old table dominated the room, surrounded by a pair of benches in an L-shape around two sides of it, with cushions scattered over them, and a couple of chairs. I threw my phone, planner, notebook and the inn's fat A4 diary—a kind of bible that Charity, Gwyn and I shared—onto the table and fished in my robes for a couple of pens.

Charity had shed a couple of woollen layers now that the inn had started to warm up. She sat cross-legged on the long bench watching with avid interest as Finbarr, a small and annoying Irish witch descended from a leprechaun, who had answered my call for help and had remained with me ever since, began to squeeze splinters out of his fingers. His pixies, fortunately, were nowhere in sight. Florence, Ned, Zephaniah, Luppitt Smeatharpe and Robert Wait—representing the Devonshire Fellows—Monsieur Emietter and Archibald, who

I'd recently co-opted to work as head receptionist and customer relations manager, hovered in a corner jostling for space in their own plane somewhere.

Gwyn floated by the fire, casting her critical eye over everything and everyone.

"It's not dire," I grimaced, "but it's not great either."

"I thought we'd been doing alright," Charity said. "We were full to the rafters at Christmas."

"That's true, but remember we had to shut down when we experienced our little"—I could hardly bear to say it—"*vampire* problem last year, and it took us a while to get up to full speed. Our winter bookings are so-so. They could definitely be better."

"I've taken a few reservations this week for Easter," Charity reminded me. "I'm sure we'll see things pick up shortly."

I smiled at her optimism, but I couldn't quell my anxiety. The income I received from the inn was only a small part of the Whittle Estate. I had a dozen tied cottages in the local village as well as the rent from several of the businesses. That meant I was responsible for their care and upkeep, and I took that responsibility seriously. In the years that Whittle Inn had fallen into disrepair, before I'd come into my inheritance, the cottages had too. I'd begun a programme of refurbishment—mainly for roofs, windows and doors, central heating, and bathrooms—but it all took time and money.

"The thing is," I nodded in the direction of the kitchen and boiler room, "Mr Perry has just informed me that we need to replace the boiler. We'll also have to flush the system through or something." I pulled a face. "Well, when I say *we*, I don't mean *we*. I mean *we'll* have to get someone in to do it, and you know what that means."

"Big bucks," said Finbarr without looking up.

"Yes. Exactly. Big bucks."

“The boiler seems to be working at the moment,” Gwyn chipped in.

“Yes, it is. It keeps turning on and off but Mr Perry can’t figure out why.”

Gwyn sniffed. “It’s always been temperamental.” She raised her hand. “Back in my day, I used to give it a wallop whenever it started to play up.”

“Funnily enough, that’s what I did, and it started working again.”

“Well, there you are, my dear. Why worry?” Gwyn dismissed all discussion of the boiler and turned her attention elsewhere. She pointed her finger at the painting above the fireplace. It tipped slightly until she had straightened it to her satisfaction. “This room could do with a dust.”

Florence bristled. Her feather duster twitched and sparkled as she quickly sent it to run over the picture frame. “It’s on my list of things to do today, Mrs Daemonne.”

“Before we move on to housekeeping issues,” I interrupted, frowning at my great-grandmother and hoping she’d take the hint about keeping the peace, “I wanted to raise the subject of …” I sighed, “holding an event.”

Gwyn raised her eyebrows in my direction.

Charity peered up at me. I could tell she was struggling not to laugh.

“An event, Miss Alf?” Florence repeated.

Gwyn folded her arms. “I thought you were dead set against holding an event?”

“I am. Or rather, I was. It’s just, we need to raise some cash fast and this may well be the easiest way to do it.”

"Well, that's what we told you," Charity nodded. "Isn't that what we told her, Grandmama?"

"It is. She never listens to reason."

"I wonder who I could possibly take after?" I mumbled, although not loud enough for her to hear me.

"Your mother, I should think." Evidently Gwyn had the hearing of a bat.

I ignored her and threw myself down on the chair at the head of the table. "So, I'm looking for ideas about what we can do and when. It needs to be as soon as possible, I think."

"A Valentine's ball?" suggested Florence.

"You old romantic!" Charity laughed, and Florence flushed.

"Oooh yes!" Luppitt clapped his hands. "I could get the boys together—"

Elizabethan love sonnets set to music and played on the crumhorn? I shuddered. "Erm, I'm not sure we have enough time to organise that for this year …" *Thank ye goddesses.*

Luppitt's face fell. "Oh."

"I mean, it's a wonderful idea," I backtracked, "don't get me wrong. Maybe we should pencil it in the diary for next year." I nodded at Charity. She gave me a hard stare in return before sitting up properly and pulling the diary and a pen towards her. She flipped through the pages and scribbled something down. I made a mental note to erase it with a little bit of magick later on when no-one was looking.

A Valentine's ball? How mushy.

And Elizabethan music? A complete no-no.

"Anyone else?" I asked, head down, poised to write the flurry of fresh ideas in my planner.

Florence whirled her feather duster. "Ooh, Miss Alf! A baking—"

I levelled her with a warning stare from under my eyelashes. She visibly sagged. “Of course, we did that,” she acknowledged.

The room fell silent.

I looked up. “Come on guys.”

Charity pulled a face. Finbarr tried to reach an itch in the middle of his back and when he couldn’t, he pinched the pen out of Charity’s hand and slipped it down the back of his jacket to better get at it.

“Ew,” said Charity into the silence.

I waited. Nobody was at all forthcoming. I had the feeling that I’d been so adamant about not holding an event that I’d discouraged them all from making suggestions.

I puffed my cheeks out. “About the bagatelle idea …”

Gwyn’s face lit up. “Oh yes?”

I groaned inwardly. “Could we make that work, do you think? Would there be enough interest?”

“What the blazes is bagatelle?” Finbarr asked, handing the pen back to Charity, who quickly dropped it onto the table and wiped her fingers on her jeans.

“You young people today,” Gwyn tittered. “It’s a board game. With balls. And pins,” she explained, sounding a touch vague, “and things.”

Finbarr scratched his chin. “So, you’d be inviting people here to play this bagatelle game for a weekend? Am I right?”

“That’s about the shape of it,” I said.

“A week,” Gwyn butted in. “I think it should be a week.”

“A week?” She had to be kidding me. “Rightio.”

“Why would anybody come to this here inn just to play a board game?” Finbarr looked around at the ghosts. “I mean, would you fellas come, do you think?”

"I would," Zephaniah piped up. "I always enjoyed a game of bagatelle in the mess." I didn't quite grasp what he meant. Was he calling Whittle Inn a mess?

"He means the place where soldiers enjoyed their meals and a little recreation time, Alfhild," Gwyn said, obviously reading my mind again. Zephaniah had been a soldier during the First World War and had been killed in action in Europe. Gwyn had brought his ghost light back to Whittle Inn some time afterwards.

"Yes, in our mess tent," he nodded. "We didn't have much, but there was an old piano someone found in a deserted farmhouse and a couple of games people brought from home or cobbled together from odds and ends."

"Oh, I see," I said.

"Bagatelle was a popular game at that time, Miss Alf," Zephaniah explained. "That and cards."

"So a board game getaway might be doable?" Charity flicked through the pages of the diary. "We could dust off the KerPlunk and the Monopoly and the other board games in the attic. There are piles of them up there."

"It would be doable, but how do we promote it?" I asked. "Do we have enough time? I know from experience that *The Celestine Times* requires adverts a few weeks in advance, and the specialist witch magazines even longer."

Gwyn suddenly snapped a finger in the air. "My friends!"

"That would be a start, Grandmama," I agreed. "But they'd have to pay. This isn't a freebie I'm trying to organise here."

"No, dear. You misunderstand. Not just my friend friends, but my larger circle of friends."

"Alright," I shrugged. "Same thing applies."

"From my branch of the WI."

I gaped at her. "You were a member of the Women's Institute? I never knew that. Was it the Whittlecombe branch?" I'd had some dealings with them. Millicent had been a keen member for donkeys' years.

"Not *that* WI. I was a member of the Whittlecombe Women's Institute but I'm actually referring to my friends in the *Witches'* Institute." Gwyn raised her eyebrows, probably despairing of my lack of knowledge. "I started a sorority."

"Sorority?" I didn't understand. "Isn't that an American thing?"

"Yes, yes. That's where I got the idea from. Many years ago—"

Oh here we go, I thought, shifting in my chair to make myself more comfortable. Gwyn could be long-winded at times.

"—when I was a young woman, younger than you are now—"

"Very young, you mean?" I asked. "Practically a teenager?"

She ignored me. "I visited the United States of America and toured around that magnificent country for a few months."

"You did?" I don't know why I was surprised. It had dawned on me in Transylvania that I didn't know very much about Gwyn's life at all.

"I did," Gwyn confirmed. "One of the places I stayed was Connecticut and I visited a few friends at Yale. They had a sorority there and I really liked the idea of it. When I returned home to London I decided I'd try something similar."

Charity nodded in approval. "It's a wonderful way to support other women, or so I've heard."

"But isn't that what covens are for?" I asked. "I mean, aren't we all brothers and sisters under the stars? Aren't we supposed to have each other's backs and give each other a hand up?"

Gwyn offered a pitying smile. "That's just it, my dear. What if you have friends outside your coven that you want to swear alle-

giance to?"

"Ah—er," I pulled a face. "I don't know. I guess I'd just say, 'hey friend! Let's be buddies forever and always look out for each other'."

Gwyn pursed her lips. "You don't have any buddies, Alfhild."

Ouch.

"Grandmama!" I protested. "I do. I have Charity." I checked with her quickly and she gave me a thumbs-up, "And Florence—"

"Oh yes, Miss!" Florence was delighted to be counted as a friend.

"And Finbarr!"

Finbarr wrinkled his nose as though I smelled bad. "To be sure."

"And Millicent." Millicent wasn't attending the meeting because she didn't work at the inn. "And Wizard Shadowmender and Mr Kephisto."

"And Mr Silvan, Miss!" Florence reminded me.

Crikey. How could I have forgotten him? A bit more than a friend though. My heart skipped happily just thinking about him.

"Yes! And Silvan! I have lots of friends." *So there*.

"Very good, my dear." Gwyn regarded me sceptically but her face quickly softened. "And of course, you have me too." I glowed at her words. "But as I was saying, Alfhild, I wanted to cut across covens and draw in people with whom I was friendly—mainly women at that time—from a variety of walks of life. Those I knew from my travels, those I knew from our coven, and others I'd met while working for the Ministry of Witches."

Mysteriouser and mysteriouser.

"And so you started a sorority?"

"After a fashion, yes." Gwyn nodded. The ghosts were rapt by the conversation. Most of them worshipped the ground my great-grandmother floated on. "I borrowed the general idea and made it a

little more British. You know what our American cousins are like. So very excitable. I curated a group of older and more sophisticated women and together we shared—and still do in fact—friendship and loyalty. We offer a helping hand to those witches who find themselves in need. We share contacts, that kind of thing."

"Parties," Florence chipped in. I glanced at her. "I've seen it on *Witchflix*, Miss Alf. The girls in the dorm rooms in the American shows, they have lots of parties. It's always warm and they don't wear many clothes."

"It was a little bit different back then," Gwyn corrected her. "But yes, we had the occasional party. When it was warranted. Most of the time we just met for afternoon tea at The Ritz."

I nodded. If they'd been meeting at The Ritz and they didn't hold *Witchflix*-movie-type parties then clearly this would be a sedate affair? I didn't have to worry about raucous vampires and their outrageous hedonism where my great-grandmother and her friends were concerned, surely? "Alright," I ventured. "But if we invite your sorority, won't they all be …" I looked Gwyn up and down, "… deceased?"

"You'd have thought so, wouldn't you?" Gwyn smirked in response. "But no. We've never stopped recruiting members, so we have over four hundred now, both living and dead. More than enough to fill Whittle Inn several times over. Not everyone would be able to come at such short notice, but I'm fairly certain enough of them will accept my invite that your financial woes will soon be a thing of the past."

Well I never. I clapped my hands in glee and then pulled my planner towards me. "That's marvellous, Grandmama. So, let's pencil in a weekend—"

"A week," Gwyn insisted.

“Right. A week then,” I capitulated. “Let’s start making plans.”

“That’s a first!” Gwyn clapped her hands happily. “My great-granddaughter actually thinks I’ve had a good idea.” I could see how pleased she was, and that warmed my heart.

“It’s not a first,” I told her. “Not at all.” I paused, my pen ready to scribble down the details. “Does this sorority or branch of the Witches Institute or whatever you want to call it have an actual name?”

“Kappa Sigma Granma.”

Sitting diagonally from me, Charity roared with laughter and slapped the table.

The only thing I wanted to slap was my own head. “Granma?” I asked. “Why ‘granma’? That’s not a Greek letter.”

Gwyn shrugged. “Who cares. We mostly were granmas, so that’s what we’re called.”

I really should have known what to expect. The name gave it away.

Kappa Sigma *Granma*? Really?

Just ten days after the staff meeting in The Snug, I prepared to open the doors of Whittle Inn to a Witches' Institute convention. Gwyn had been as good as her word. She'd sent invitations by email and text (with a little help from Charity), letter, telegram, telephone, pigeon and owl post. We'd received in excess of a hundred responses and now every room had been booked, and part of the attic had been cleared to make room for more deceased witches. In total, we expected forty-three souls.

I'd had the Wonky Inn Ghostly Clean-up Crew set to with their mops and feather dusters under Florence's beady eye. Monsieur Emietter had been conjuring up a creative menu of spectacular delicacies from around the world and, to that end, I'd placed umpteen deliveries with Whittle Stores for everything from frozen frogs' legs to Vietnamese snails.

The boiler had been behaving itself for the most part. It seemed most temperamental first thing in the morning when we began to use a lot of water. I'd found that if I went into the boiler room and gave the boiler a sharp smack with the palm of my hand, it came on. I couldn't figure out why; I just went with it. So far, I hadn't bothered to pursue the idea of locating a new industrial-sized boiler for the inn. It wasn't as if I had the ready cash anyway.

Ned and Finbarr had chopped dozens and dozens of bags of logs from the fallen trees in Speckled Wood and we'd stored them in our large shed to dry out and season in case of emergencies. I'd arranged for a basket of logs and kindle to be left in every bedroom just in case the boiler failed, but I hoped that, for the most part, everybody would be downstairs in either the main bar, The Snug or The Hug, playing games and enjoying our hospitality and entertainment.

Sitting at my desk, I shut down a screen on my computer and glanced across at my planner. "What am I supposed to be doing again?" I murmured.

"Hooo-ooo." I peered up into the sparkling eyes of Mr Hoo. "Hoooooo. Hooo-oooo. Ooooh."

"Wasting time? How dare you suggest such a thing?!"

"Hoooo. Hooo."

"I was not playing a game!"

"Hoo-oo!"

"Alright, I was. But I'm on level forty-two of *Castles and Crones*. I've rescued the damsel in distress and I've located nearly all of the ingredients for the potion, but I keep getting trapped in the garderobe. I've played this level about a thousand times and I always get timed out trying to escape. It's impossible. I'm pretty sure the software cheats."

"Hoo-oo-oo." Mr Hoo laughed at me. "Too-wit!"

I grinned and put a finger to my lips. “Ssh. Don’t tell anyone.” I swung my chair back. I could hear the sound of a vacuum cleaner drifting upstairs, and floorboards creaking above my head. The last-minute touches were almost complete. “I really ought to show willing,” I said and grabbed my clipboard. “Do some supervising … and stuff. Try and look important.”

“Hoo hoo ooooh?”

I paused and gazed at him thoughtfully. “Who’s coming? Just a bunch of old witches. And ghosts. Or old dead witches, if you prefer.”

“I heard that, Alfhild.”

Old Bat Ears herself apparated out of nowhere. I should have thought before I spoke, but I swear she can read my mind anyway. “Sorry, Grandmama.” I tried to look sheepish.

“Hoo oooo hoo?”

“What’s he twittering about?” Gwyn asked, waspish despite my apology.

I reached out and stroked his soft feathery head. “What’s up?”

He knitted his brow. “Hoo oooo hoo. Hooo-oo?”

“How many familiars are we expecting?”

“Hoo.”

“I don’t know.” I turned to Gwyn. “I really hadn’t given that much thought.” I glanced down at my clipboard. All of the meetings and tête-à-têtes Charity and I had sat through, and nobody had thought about familiars. “Grandmama?” I asked. “Do you think we’ll have more familiars than usual?”

“Oh, no.” Gwyn sounded confident. “Not everyone has a familiar, do they?” She twirled a hand in the air. I nodded. I had never heard Gwyn mention a familiar. “About the same as we’d normally expect when the inn is full would be my best guess.”

“Well, there you are,” I smiled down at Mr Hoo. “Half a dozen, maybe a few more.”

“Hoo—”

“You’re not nervous, are you?” I asked as the internal phone began to ring.

“Hoo—”

“I just need to get this,” I told him.

“Hoo—”

I picked up the old Bakelite receiver. “Alf speaking.”

“I think the first guest is here.” Charity’s voice sounded as though she were several hundred miles and six decades away rather than downstairs. That’s the problem with old technology.

“Already? I thought we had another hour at least.” I grimaced. I’d spent too long playing *Castles and Crones* and not enough time doing my job. “We’ll be right down.” I replaced the receiver and nodded at Gwyn; she smoothed the front of her lacy Edwardian blouse and adjusted the high collar.

“Hoo—”

“I’ll be back soon!” I sang and, grabbing my clipboard and a pen, waltzed out of the office, Gwyn flitting past me in a rush to beat me down the stairs. There was no competition really, she left me for dust.

I pulled the door closed on Mr Hoo’s indignant twittering.

“Ah, there you are, Alfhild,” my great-grandmother announced in her most imperious tone as I followed her down the stairs and into the reception area less than sixty seconds later. “What kept you? Our first guests have arrived.”

Resisting the urge to cut my eyes at Gwyn, I rushed forwards to greet the newcomers.

"Oh, watch out Miss Alf!" Florence cried, but too late. I tumbled to the floor, my feet tangled in the vacuum cleaner's cord.

"Ouch." I didn't have time to wait for the pain to start. I hurriedly sprang up, my face burning.

"Are you alright, Miss?" Florence asked, evidently concerned. "I'm so sorry—"

"I'm fine," I smiled, resisting the urge to rub my knees and my right wrist, which had taken quite a jolt. I gestured with my head and Florence hurriedly twitched a finger at the vacuum cleaner's cord. It rapidly sucked itself into the machine and Florence ushered it towards the bar.

"Pleased to meet you!" I announced as cheerfully as I could manage and as though nothing untoward had happened. I thrust my throbbing hand out in the direction of the woman nearest me.

Three elderly women stood together, the taller, darker, most austere-looking one flanked by two smaller, altogether gentler creatures. Obviously witches, all three were dressed in traditional long black robes, pristine and neatly buttoned up, with polished leather lace-up shoes. Their outfits were topped off by freshly brushed pointed hats that stood tall and straight.

An awkward silence fell over us all, gathered there together in the hallway as the first witch, a woman in her eighties I imagined, and yet standing as upright as an Apollo rocket, regarded me with scarcely concealed contempt. Dark eyes glittered with hostility above her pinched nose and thin lips. My stomach flip-flopped. Had I done something to offend her? Already?

I glanced hurriedly at Gwyn.

“Phyllis, I’d like you to meet my great-granddaughter, Alfhild Yasmin Daemonne. Named after myself of course. Alfhild, this is Phyllis Bliss. She’s the highest-ranking *living* member of Kappa Sigma Granma.”

“Welcome to Whittle Inn,” I tried again. After another few seconds of uncomfortable scrutiny, Phyllis finally cracked and held out her own hand. Her handshake was light, her skin dry and her fingers cold.

“Alfhild is custodian of the inn at the present moment in time,” Gwyn said, her way of making it clear that although in the mundane world my name was on the legal documents as the owner, in the magickal world, I wasn’t the only person making all the decisions and pulling the strings. “How long has it been now, dear?”

“Nearly two years,” I said, although it was still four months off two years. I bristled, slightly irked by the turn the conversation was taking. I hoped Gwyn wouldn’t be claiming the high ground with all of our guests. That would be tiresome in the extreme and make for a rather long week.

“From what we’ve seen so far, you’re doing a marvellous job.” The soft voice of the witch on the right of Phyllis calmed me down a little. Probably in her late sixties and shorter than Phyllis and way more rounded, her hair was a soft yellow-blonde—obviously dyed these days—and her blue eyes sparkled. Evidently from somewhere in the south of the USA, she had an attractive drawl. It sounded as though she needed to giggle. I warmed to her instantly.

“This is Onnalee Mason,” Gwyn said. “I knew her grandmother, Prudence Beaujolais, very well for a time. Onnalee’s mother Roberta was a founding member of Kappa Sigma Granma, but sadly she is no longer around.”

"Pleased to meet you," I smiled, and this time when I shook hands, the grip was warmer in all the ways that mattered.

"I am *honoured* to meet you, honey. I've seen photos of my grandmama and yours together when they were young and oh my gosh, you look just like her with all that wonderful untamed red hair."

"You'll have to tell me all you know," I said, and cast a sly glance at Gwyn.

"There's nothing to tell." Gwyn rose to the bait.

"How can you say that, Aunt Alfhild?" protested Onnalee. "There is so much to tell." She turned to me and lowered her voice. "I declare, what a pair they were."

I rubbed my hands in glee, but Gwyn floated between us in an effort to redirect my attention. "And this is Sybil Torkelson." Sybil, also in her late sixties or early seventies, had hair as grey as a battleship, pale blue eyes and the soft milky skin of the Scandinavian races. "Welcome to Whittle Inn," I smiled, and she nodded pleasantly enough.

Charity bustled up behind us. "I've arranged for welcome drinks in the bar," she told me.

"Excellent!" I indicated the visitors should come with me. "I'll take you through and you can rest after your journey while I have your luggage taken up to your rooms."

"I'll give Ned a shout," Charity offered and skipped off.

"You caught us on the hop," I said, trying my best to make conversation. "We weren't expecting you quite yet."

"We prefer to be punctual," Phyllis said. "Punctuality is something young people today don't seem to understand."

I pouted. "I'm not sure that's strictly—"

Gwyn shook her head at me, ever so slightly, so I shut up. "Right this way, ladies." I bowed and indicated the door to the bar, allowing

first Phyllis, then Onnalee to go ahead.

Sybil brought up the rear. “Would it be possible to have my familiar brought in straight away?” she asked, indicating the front door. “She’s old, and it’s rather cold outside.”

“Of course.” I turned to go back, imagining I’d find a cat basket or perhaps a birdcage on the gravel drive with the witches’ luggage that I could bring in and perhaps redeem myself in everyone’s eyes.

Instead, I was faced with a mountain of trunks and cages that fair took my breath away. I found myself transported back to Perdita Pugh’s visit. She too had been someone who struggled to travel lightly.

“How, by all that’s green, did you get this little lot here?” I asked, trying to make light of it.

“We had help.” Sybil spoke slowly, looking down her nose at me, as though I was the simplest being she’d ever met. She crinkled her eyes—you couldn’t have called it a smile—and strolled off after Phyllis and Onnalee.

I stared at the vacant space she’d left and then back at the luggage and the cages and then at Gwyn.

“Jump to it,” said my great-grandmother, and apparated away.

An hour later, I was still at it. No sooner had I managed to clear one pile of luggage, than more guests began to arrive, and another load appeared.

“Wow,” I said, exiting the inn for the umpteenth time and finding a Mount Everest-sized pile in front of me. “I’m not the bellhop,” I muttered as I picked up yet another birdcage to transfer indoors. Ned cast a wary glance in my direction, took one look at my face and

scooted out of the way. “I don’t get where all these animals have come from. Where will I put them all?” I turned in a circle. The green eyes of several cats stared at me without blinking. Birds of all kinds including budgies, canaries, numerous owls, several ravens and the parakeet I held in my hand, twittered in excitement. “I wasn’t expecting this at all. There has to be more than one familiar per witch here.”

“That might be my fault.”

I blinked in surprise. A woman had suddenly appeared at the edge of the circle of luggage. Slight of figure and only a little older than myself, her hair hung in unwashed rats’ tails around her shoulders, a dull mousey colour that could easily have been lifted with some hair dye, had she cared enough. She had a strong Roman nose and a wide mouth. Wearing an old green woollen coat with a beige scarf wrapped several times around her neck, she still managed to look cold. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her nose raw. “Quite a few of these are mine,” she said. “In fact, I’d say over three-quarters are.”

“Really?” I asked. *What did she think I was running here? A menagerie?*

“Well, mine and my mother’s.” She nodded in the direction of the inn and pulled a gloved hand from her pocket, swiping at her nose. “Ugh. I have a rotten runny nose.”

Uh-oh. Avoid at all costs, I thought to myself, knowing full well I could catch a cold at the slightest provocation. “Well, come on in,” I urged her. “It’s warm inside. I can have my housekeeper put something medicinal together, or I’ll just ask the barman to pour you a brandy.”

The woman looked taken aback at that. “Oh no,” she said. “It’s a bit early to have a drink.”

"Is it?" I wondered what time it was. Just after midday? The goddess knew I could do with a stiff one.

She shuffled towards me, sniffling. "I just want to get this lot settled in."

I resisted the urge to back away. "No problem, I'll get one of my crew to help you out." I turned back to her, the parakeet in the cage dangling from my hand chirping sweetly. "Ooh!" I remembered. "What name are you booked under? I'll need to make sure this lot—I mean, this erm … your friends here—are sent up to the right room."

The woman widened her eyes. "Don't do that!" she screeched. "I have allergies. They'll need to be housed in a different room."

"A different room?"

"Yes. I get asthma if I share a bedroom with them all overnight."

"I see," I said, although I didn't really. "Where do you keep them at home?"

"We have a little granny annexe in the garden and most of them have free rein in there."

"Right." I scratched my head. "Did you mention that you'd need another room when you made your reservation? Only—"

The woman shrugged. "I assumed there would be an office or something we could use."

I regarded the pile of cages and baskets in horror. The inn had been fully booked out in order to accommodate Gwyn's sorority. I didn't have a spare bedroom to keep these animals in, the attic had been pre-allocated for the visiting ghosts, and the big shed out the back—the one that had most recently doubled as a stable for a lost reindeer—was full to the brim of Finbarr's chopped logs. I pondered on using the beer cellar. It could get very cold down there and there were no windows.

Which left The Snug and The Hug, both of which I'd earmarked for Gwyn's board game championships, at her behest.

I sighed. "I'm sure I can sort something out, Ms—?"

"Cuthbert. Delia Cuthbert." She snorted hard and I decided against shaking her hand. It sounded as though she had the makings of a nasty respiratory virus. I made a mental note to phone my friendly potioner, Millicent Ballicott, and see whether she could come up to the inn and subtly enquire about Delia's health. Perhaps she could create something to ease the symptoms. I hoped whatever it was she had wasn't contagious. The last thing I needed was an inn on lockdown.

That wouldn't do my profits any good. And it would scupper my plans for a new boiler.

"I wanted to ask," she said, hacking again and swiping at her nose, "would it be possible to walk in that forest?" She pointed in the direction of Speckled Wood.

"Oh, absolutely!" I enthused. A walk in the fresh air might help her boost her immune system, if she didn't freeze to death first of course. "You just need to follow the path to the outskirts, and you'll soon pick up a trail."

She blinked rapidly. "I wouldn't want to get lost."

"Honestly? I don't think that would happen as long as you stay within the boundary of Speckled Wood. The trees are marked with luminescent dots, and the trails are all well signposted."

"Perhaps," she hesitated. "You wouldn't be able to show me around, would you?"

I hated to turn her down. "I can't really. We're fully booked, and I have to work inside."

She shrugged and turned her face down to the ground. "Oh, that's fine. I get it. Really I do." She coughed hard and I grimaced.

A thought occurred to me. “I could ask Finbarr. He works here and knows the forest better than anyone.”

She smiled at me hopefully, then snorted again.

“I’ll ask Finbarr to drop by and you can set up a time. When would you like to go?”

“No time like the present.” She picked up the nearest cage but wheezed when she realised how heavy it was.

“Why don’t you go inside and grab a drink in the bar while I get someone to help me with these?” I suggested.

She coughed hard before nodding and mooching towards me. “Alright. I’d better see what my mother is up to anyway.”

I swung the parakeet’s cage in front of myself to maintain some distance between us as she passed.

“Please take care of that bird,” she said, stopping to inspect it. “It’s my ah, my favourite.”

“I promise I will. See you soon.”

I gave her a head start before grabbing the nearest cat basket and following her inside. Ned hovered by the stairs. I stared at him, askance. “Are you hiding?” Realising I sounded a little fraught, I modulated my tone. “Be a darling, Ned. Please can you bring all those animals in for me? There’s a chance of rain and given how cold it is, we don’t want them to freeze to death.”

“Yes Ma’am,” he replied, ducking his head. Of all the spirits that inhabited the inn, he was the shyest by far. “Where should I—?” he started to say, and I waved a hand at him.

“Just bring them into the reception for now and try and stow them out of harm’s way. I’m going to speak to Gwyn and then we’ll find out where to place them all.”

I glanced around. “You haven’t seen her, have you?” I asked on the off chance.

“Are you looking for Gwyn?” Charity appeared behind us, her cheeks unusually red, her brow furrowed. “She’s holding forth in the bar among all her old cronies.”

“What’s up?” I asked. Charity was generally the most even-tempered person I knew, but right now she seemed flustered.

“Some of those women are—” she fought for a way express herself politely, “—impossible!”

Ned hunched his shoulders and slipped past me, heading outside to the drive. “In what way?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

“I’ve had to reallocate three rooms already, because people have pulled me aside to whisper in my ear, asking to sleep as far away from such-and-such a person as possible.”

“One specific person?” I was thinking about Delia Cuthbert of course.

“No, someone different in each case.” Charity looked perplexed. “I’ve never had that happen before. Don’t any of them actually like each other?”

“I suppose we’ve never hosted this many people who actually already know each other before,” I said. “With the exception of the —” I pulled a face, “vampire wedding, and that doesn’t count because they were all in their coffins in the beer cellar.” I quivered in repulsion, a habitual reaction to the trauma I’d faced at the hands of those repugnant creatures. My right hand found its way into my pocket, seeking the reassurance of my wand. At such times I felt Silvan’s presence despite the fact he was away on business elsewhere.

It was a comfort.

“That’s true,” said Charity. “I’ve also got someone out there asking for some drink that I’ve never heard of. Zephaniah has, but we

don't think it's been brewed in this country for at least a hundred years."

That made me giggle. "But we have so much to choose from, can't you just tempt whoever it is with something different?"

"We tried." Charity swatted at her freshly dyed quiff, a deep ocean blue. "Honestly, boss. You wait till you get out there amongst them. They cackle like geese. They're a gaggle of ghastly grandmamas."

I snorted. "We need to keep them happy. I tell you what, why don't we create a tray of brightly coloured cocktails in shot glasses, different sorts, and hand them out? I know everyone is supposed to be paying extra for food and drink this week, but let's try and entice them with our goodies, loosen them up and mellow them out."

"Alright, good idea. I'll ask Zephaniah to do that," Charity nodded.

My arms had started to ache, so I placed the parakeet on the reception desk and the cat basket next to it. The cat uncurled itself and pressed against the bars to study the parakeet more closely. The parakeet shrieked—an oddly ugly sound—and the cat shot backwards and cowered at the rear of its basket.

"Oh, what's the matter, pussycat?" I asked, bending over to look at him. He ignored me. "It's just a little birdie," I sang, but I couldn't coax him out of his funk. I stood and retrieved a little yellow label from behind the desk to stick to his basket. *Cuthbert cat*, I wrote. You never knew how many black cats would be coming into the inn today.

"There's one more thing," Charity said.

"Go on."

"We have lots of older ladies in the bar, huddling around the fire and complaining about how cold it is."

"Stoke it up," I suggested. It was hardly rocket science, after all.

"That's not the problem. The problem is we have some slightly younger ladies who are currently hanging out of the opened windows."

"Open windows? They're too hot?"

Charity nodded. "Menopausal."

I opened my mouth, intending to offer a solution. Unable to find one, I closed it again. "Hmm."

"Miss Alf? Oh, there you are, Miss!" Florence rushed into view. "Monsieur Emietter is going crazy. I thought I'd better try and find you."

Oh no. What now? "Why?"

Florence skittered around, wringing her hands. "The water in the kitchen is running cold, Miss Alf. We're struggling to wash the dishes."

My stomach sank. "That'll be the boiler again."

"Do you think you could work your magick again with it, Miss? Only Monsieur Emietter is threatening to cut off your ears …"

"*My* ears?" I harrumphed. People seemed to have forgotten just who was running the show around here. "Leave it to me." I raised my voice. "In fact, leave everything to me. Why not? I seem to be the only one capable of solving all the problems." I stomped towards the bar. "While I'm at it, I'll sort out global poverty and world peace. Would that be okay with everyone?"

"Oh, Miss Alf," Florence called after me beseechingly.

"Leave her," I heard Charity say. "She's in one of her moods."

"Is she hangry again, Miss Charity?"

"Always."

I poked at the wires at the front of the boiler with the tip of my finger. Something sizzled and sparked and I jumped backwards, sucking on my injured digit. "That's not nice," I said. "Is it too much to ask that you play ball? Just for the next seven days? Let me get this week out of the way and then I'll have a little bit of spare cash and I'll get you fixed up again."

I placed my hand against the side panel, feeling the warmth there. It hadn't been off long.

"Come on," I soothed. "You don't want me to send for a man with a spanner again, do you? You know what men are like with their weapons. Act first and reflect later. We're different, us women."

I paused, cocking my head and studying the boiler. Something inside it ticked quietly. Why on earth did I think that the boiler was a woman? Maybe it was male. Logically, it didn't have any gender at all. Unless it was a French or a German boiler. I slipped my hand down to feel the raised area that would have told me the name of the maker if I had remembered to have the paint stripped from there.

"You know, you and I … we're at the heart of this inn. Without me it would still be shut up, gathering dust, with bats in the attic and mice in the thatch. Without you," I stroked the panel, "everyone would be cold, the dishes would remain dirty and the sheets and floors unwashed. And we'd all freeze."

I shivered, just to emphasise my words. "You see? You're incredibly important to everyone. Especially me."

The ticking stopped. I held my breath. I heard something mechanical clink from deep inside and then, with a whoosh, the boiler started up again. The pipes that led away from the body rattled a little before settling down into a gentle hum.

I relaxed, just a little. "Thank you," I said. "That's one less thing for me to worry about."

I edged away, frowning. "Are you going to be alright?" I placed my hand on the door. "Is it okay for me to go?"

The hum faltered noticeably.

Eek!

"I'll be back," I hastily reassured the boiler. "I just need to attend to a few things and then I promise I'll check in on you again."

The hum steadied and I laughed nervously.

"Alrighty then." I edged slowly out of the room, quietly closing the door behind me. I leaned my forehead against the wall opposite.

"What am I doing?" I asked aloud.

"If you don't know, Alfhild, I'm sure nobody does." Gwyn bustled past me on her way to the kitchen.

"Grandmama?"

"Not now, my dear. I need to have a quick word with Monsieur Emietter." Gwyn disappeared. I chased after her into the kitchen.

"Grandmama—"

"Alfhild—"

Monsieur Emietter slammed down a chopping knife. *"Je n'ai jamais travaillé quelque part d'aussi absurde."*

I ignored him because I had no idea what he was saying. "I've got a problem with the familiars," I told her.

"What do you mean? You knew our guests would bring their familiars if they wanted to."

"*S'attendre que je travaille dans de telles conditions … Incroyable!*" Monsieur Emietter slapped a pan on top of the stove so hard it made my ears ring.

"Well of course I knew that," I replied testily. "I just didn't factor in that there would be so many."

"When you say, 'so many', how many are you referring to?"

"*Je suis un professionnel*," Monsieur Emietter insisted.

"Of course you are," I threw over my shoulder, focusing only on the words I could really understand. Monsieur Emietter had been with me for eighteen months and he and I still struggled to communicate. I turned back to Gwyn. "Ned is currently bringing in several dozen animals of all shapes and sizes from the drive."

"Stow them in the bedrooms out of the way, Alfhild."

"You don't get it, Grandmama. These all belong to one person."

"One person?" Gwyn wrinkled her nose. "What is the attraction of so many?"

"*Pas que quelqu'un ici semble s'en soucier*."

"I have no idea, but I need to co-opt a space and I figured I'd use The Snug if you don't mind."

"Of course I mind," Gwyn protested. "I've set up those rooms as tournament rooms!"

"There is nowhere else," I told her.

"*Je suis absolument certain que je pourrais trouver un autre lieu ... de travail*."

"Oh, if you insist."

"*Sans aucun doute!*"

"I'll create a space somewhere in the main bar for you to set up your bagatelle table," I offered.

"That will have to do, I suppose," she sniffed.

I arched an eyebrow. "You're welcome."

"*Vous êtes les bienvenus! Elle est la bienvenue! Tout le monde est le bienvenu! Et moi?! Où est mon accueil?*"

"*Calmez-vous, chef,*" Gwyn turned her attention to our stressed-out cook. "*Tout va être parfait*."

With no idea what they were rattling on about, I took a deep breath and headed back towards our guests.

"Do you have the availability of an elevator?"

The halting English of Agneta Caspersen, a slender white-haired witch from Skagen in Denmark, stopped me in my tracks just as I was about to lead her and her roommate, Jamella De Paggio, a witch from somewhere in northern Italy, up and show them their rooms.

The bar was buzzing. Zephaniah's 'short' cocktails had been working their magick as more and more of our guests arrived. Gwyn, ably assisted by Archibald, greeted each and every newcomer as though they were a long-lost friend, while Charity reorganised a corner of the dining area in the bar to accommodate the bagatelle table. Ned and several of the other members of the Wonky Inn Ghostly Clean-up Crew brought in familiars and deposited them in The Snug, and gamely escorted the luggage upstairs to the bedrooms.

"An elevator?" I glanced back at Agneta. "Like a lift, you mean? No, I'm sorry."

"No elevator?" Agneta repeated in surprise, and turned to her friend. "What sort of hotel is this?"

I reached out to take her bag. “It’s not really a hotel,” I reminded her. “Not in the modern sense. It’s an inn and it’s been here for around six hundred years. Maybe more.”

“And you’ve never considered adding an elevator?” Agneta queried. A small group of women had gathered around us at the foot of the stairs. Charity hovered in the background, eager to show her own group up to the second floor. A number of ghost lights darted around us, waiting for me to welcome them to the inn so that they could manifest into their translucent spirit form and get on with whatever mischief they had planned.

Ghosts need holidays too.

“To be honest, nobody’s ever asked me about installing an elevator before.” I glanced around, wondering where I’d put something like that. Most of the downstairs was open plan these days and had been ever since Jed and I had taken a sledgehammer to the walls to open up the bar area.

Agneta sniffed. “Well, you should do it. It’s an inconvenience in this day and age to have to climb up the stairs.”

Agneta certainly looked more than fit enough. Perhaps the Danish lived in bungalows? “I can assist you, if you wish?” I offered.

“Broom service,” the witch standing next to Charity offered, waving her own broomstick. “I can give you a ride up the stairs on my mean machine?”

“No, no, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I intervened hurriedly. I had visions of witches—some of whom had drunk a fair few mini-cocktails—whizzing around the stairwells and landings and knocking the Daemonne family portraits off the walls. That would upset a few of my ancestors.

“Flying carpet, then?” someone else suggested.

“I can just help you up the stairs,” I repeated. Agneta surrendered her bag and I offered my arm.

“You’d have thought there’d be at least one elevator,” she protested once more, her voice ringing around the narrow confines of the staircase.

“I’ll certainly think about having one fitted,” I said. Behind us, more voices lifted in support of the idea. I had no room for an elevator. Besides, just imagine the cost!

“I can’t be trudging up and down the stairs every day,” Agneta complained.

“If you need anything fetching from your room, you just have to let one of us know and we’ll see to it straight away,” I tried to placate her.

“Goodness, no. That would never do.” Agneta dropped my arm as though I’d burned her. “I can’t have you going through my drawers.”

I painted on a smile. I couldn’t imagine Agneta had anything in her drawers that I’d never seen before. “No, of course not,” I replied smoothly. “But in any case, you be sure to let me or my staff know if there is anything we can do that will make your stay at Whittle Inn more pleasurable, won’t you.”

“I most certainly will,” Agneta nodded firmly.

I had no doubt of that.

“You know, I’m sure that if my grandson had inherited an inn like this, he would have turned it into a going concern in no time at all.”

I glanced sharply across the dining area. Phyllis Bliss, her fingers dripping with gold and diamond rings, expertly shuffled a pack of

cards. She occupied the large table next to the bay window along with Gwyn, Onnalee and Sybil and Mrs Cuthbert the elder. Of the snivelling Delia, there had been no sign for the past hour or so. Mrs Cuthbert, first name Isobel, appeared to be simply an older version of Delia. If anything she was even wanner than her daughter, her mousey hair hanging in long grey strings to her shoulders, her eyes barely alight with anything. The only thing she had going for her was that she didn't sniff and cough as much as Delia.

"You must understand that Whittle Inn had been in disrepair for a number of years. My own grandson Erik, bless his heart, had bigger fish to fry than this."

"Oh, that's right," Onnalee drawled. "If I recall correctly, you said he did something top secret for the Ministry of Witches."

"He does." Gwyn, sensing my stare, turned her head towards me. I narrowed my eyes. We weren't supposed to talk about the Circle of Querkus and what my father spent his time doing. The less people knew about it, the better. "But I really mustn't breathe a word," she smiled politely at Onnalee.

"Oh honey, I totally understand. But you must be so proud of him!" Onnalee clutched at her heart as though it would burst.

I could have told Gwyn's friends that as much as I loved him, Erik was just an overgrown child. He popped in to see me at the inn from time to time, but mainly—to my mind at least—so that he could hold cricket tournaments on the front lawn with the ghosts.

"We have such things in common, Alfhild, as you well know," Phyllis leaned closer to my great-grandmother. "My grandson is constantly called away on top-secret missions too. It's all totally hush-hush, so I completely understand why you can't say anything."

Phyllis flashed a withering look my way. I pretended not to notice and began wiping down the nearby tables in preparation for laying up the dinner settings. "The Ministry of Witches only recruits the best magicians and the most intelligent of witches. Erik most certainly took after his grandmother in that regard. What about your great-granddaughter? Does she take after her father? What did she do before she inherited Whittle Inn? Did she attend an academy? Go to university?"

"Erm …" Gwyn thought for a moment. "She sidestepped higher education. She worked in the City."

I snorted. *Good one, Grandmama*. She'd made it sound as though I'd been a bigwig in the world of finance when actually I'd spent nearly twelve years working in pubs, clubs and hotels. I'd certainly earned my stripes in the hospitality world, but snooty Phyllis with her amazingly gifted grandson probably wouldn't have seen it that way.

"Has anyone seen my parakeet?" A plaintive voice drifted into the bar from the door that separated us from the back passage.

Delia, dressed in a long nightshirt, a thick pair of mustard-coloured socks and a pom-pom hat, stood in the doorway, a dew-drop glistening on the tip of her nose. Automatically I reached out to feel the nearest radiator. It was on, and I'd managed to persuade the small but vocal group of menopausal middle-aged witches to shut the windows. The main fire was pumping heat out into the bar too.

Most of us were plenty warm enough, but not, by the look of it, poor Delia.

"Has the parakeet gone missing?" I asked. I hadn't seen it since I'd left it in the reception area. I'd abandoned Ned to the task of transporting the familiars to The Snug or the witches' rooms.

"The cage is there, but the door is open and poor Cuthbert has gone."

I blinked. "Cuthbert?"

Delia nodded, her pale face a picture of misery.

"Cuthbert Cuthbert?" I asked, carefully keeping any hilarity in check.

"That's right." Delia's eyes swam with tears.

I moved towards her, steering her back towards The Snug. "I'm sure we'll find him. Let me get someone to help you look."

Someone who isn't me, I thought. *Someone who isn't likely to catch whatever germs you are currently harbouring*. One of the ghosts would be ideal. I mean, I know ghosts get sick—okay, that's something I hadn't actually known until relatively recently, but I knew it now—however, as far as I understand it, sickness doesn't cross the spiritual plane.

"Archibald?" I called and, almost instantaneously, the ghost I'd first met at Castle Iadului appeared before me.

"Madam?" He performed a smart bow and smiled politely at Delia.

"Ms Cuthbert has lost her parakeet. Would you be a dear and help her find it? I'm hoping he's in The Snug somewhere, but if not, check throughout the inn."

"Of course, Madam." Archibald indicated the door to The Snug and Delia opened it and walked in.

"Let's hope Cuthbert hasn't found his way outside," I whispered.

Archibald touched the side of his nose. "I'll be thorough, Madam."

"I'd appreciate it." I watched Archibald disappear into The Snug and pulled the door closed behind him. I didn't want to run the risk of any of the other familiars escaping.

“Mind how you go, Miss Alf!” Florence’s warning stopped me before I could step back. I turned carefully. A towering pile of pristine tablecloths and napkins approached me, Florence levitating them down the corridor from behind. I squeezed against the wall as the linen passed by and Florence smiled as she drew level with me.

“I’m laying up for the evening meal, Miss. It’s going to be quite the banquet.”

“Has Monsieur Emietter calmed down?” I jerked my head in the direction of the kitchen, my stomach growling. I’d skipped lunch when Phyllis Bliss and her entourage had turned up earlier than expected, so the two slices of toast I’d hurriedly consumed first thing had long since been digested.

“I’d leave it a while if I were you, Miss.” Florence gave me a critical look. “Poor Monsieur Emietter is having to adapt a range of the dishes he planned. It is causing him a little anxiety, I think.”

“Why is he adapting the dishes?” I asked. Charity and I had run through the menus with him so that we could produce menu scrolls every evening with the range of options available to our guests.

Charity squeezed past the floating tower of tablecloths, clutching a notepad and a pen. She still had a high colour. It looked as though I wasn’t the only one being run ragged by our new guests. “He’s been inundated with last-minute dietary requirements. I’ve got a few more to add to the list here.”

“Oooh,” Florence grimaced. “Good luck with that.” She ushered her linen pile forwards and I craned my neck to take a look at Charity’s scribbles.

Her handwriting was worse than mine, and that was saying something. “We always check on dietary requirements when we take the bookings,” I said. “Why are they suddenly letting us know some-

thing different now?" I pointed at the page. "What does that say? Sost goof owly?"

"Soft food only."

"Oh!" I nodded. That made sense. "Hmm."

"And here," Charity pointed, "no salt, pepper or any spices."

"Ick. Don't these people like to taste things?"

"Perhaps they prefer subtlety, Alf. Maybe they don't want to be overwhelmed with strong flavours."

"You can't beat a decent curry!"

"Not everyone needs to take a mallet to their taste buds." She waved her notepad. "I'd better go and break the news to Monsieur Emietter that he shouldn't season his watercress soup."

Watercress soup? Urgh! "I'll take cover," I said, and slid away in the opposite direction.

"Thanks for your support!" Charity yelled after me.

"You're welcome!" I walked faster.

Me? A coward? Never!

"Would it be possible for me to have the garlic bread without garlic?" Mrs Cuthbert was asking.

I placed a bowl of soup in front of her and smiled. "I will sort something out for you," I promised, inwardly cringing at the conversation I would now need to have in the kitchen with my much put-upon chef.

"And … my dear?" An extremely elderly witch by the name of Adelaide Greenslade beckoned me over. "I'd like my garlic bread without butter."

"Certainly, madam," I nodded. "Should I substitute margarine?" Did we even keep margarine in our kitchen? I had a feeling if I asked that question I might end up wearing the chef's colander as a hat. "Or … erm … olive oil, perhaps?" Yes, olive oil. That sounded a little more refined.

"No, no," replied Adelaide. "Garlic on bread will be perfection."

"No problem at all." I backed away, bowing, before making a dash for the relative sanctity of the back passage. "So that will be one garlic bread without garlic and one garlic bread without butter," I muttered. "Perhaps I can offer somebody some garlic bread without any actual bread and have the whole shebang."

The door of The Snug opened as I approached. Archibald floated out ahead of an increasingly disconsolate Delia.

"Aww." I stopped. "No sign of Cuthbert?"

"None, Madam." Archibald's mouth turned down at the corners. "We have moved every cage and container and basket and unfortunately we have found no sign of him. I'm going to start looking in the guest rooms now."

"Alright," I said. "Be careful not to walk in on anyone unawares."

"Good gracious, Madam," Archibald's eyebrows shot upwards. "The very idea!"

"I'll go with him," Delia said.

"I'm sorry. I can't let you do that," I told her, softening my voice and regarding her gently. "You have to understand that our guests are entitled to privacy. I can't allow another guest to enter anyone's room without their express permission."

Delia glared at me. "Then get their permission! I have to find Cuthbert."

“If he’s seeking shelter in one of the upstairs bedrooms, Archibald will find him.” I nodded at my reception manager and he apparated away, leaving Delia and me alone in the passage together. “I’m really sorry about Cuthbert. We’ll do all we can to help you find him.” I indicated the door to the main bar. “After we’ve finished with dinner I’ll ask a few of my other trusted staff to help Archibald search. We’ll leave no stone unturned.”

Delia sniffed hard and reached inside her pocket for a tissue to mop her streaming nose. I still hadn’t been in touch with Millicent to ask her to come and diagnose whatever was wrong with Delia.

“Why don’t you go through to the dining area and join your mother? We’ve only recently started serving—”

“She’s already gone upstairs. And besides, I couldn’t eat anything,” Delia snapped. “Not knowing my little Cuthbert is potentially in danger.”

“I understand,” I soothed. “But a little soup might make you feel better.”

“You think?” Delia’s pale eyes drilled into mine. She was not a happy woman.

“We have two on offer this evening,” I continued, trying to maintain a positive mental attitude. “Just let Florence or Charity know which you’d prefer.”

She snorted into her throat and glared at me for another few seconds before finally dropping her head and swivelling. I watched her mope along the passage and pass through the door into the bar. I uttered a short prayer to the goddesses of lost animals that Archibald would find Cuthbert safe and sound, and that the little parakeet would not have fallen prey to someone’s cat.

Monsieur Emietter took the news about the garlic bread surprisingly well. Surprisingly well in the sense that the saucepan he threw at my head missed me by at least three inches.

"You know I'd treble your wages," I told him as I backed out of the kitchen, "if only I was paying you any." As the saucepan lid clattered against the wall, I ducked and turned tail, running down the passage and returning to the bar. Zephaniah was working flat out by himself, managing the drinks orders. I noted the empty bottles of wine that were beginning to accrue behind the bar. Excellent! That would bring in some pennies for my boiler fund.

Charity hastened towards me carrying a number of empty water jugs. "These need refilling."

I took them from her. "I'll do that. Can you start clearing tables, please? The main courses are just about ready to come out and they smell delicious! I don't want to delay Monsieur Emietter's masterpieces."

"Will do." Charity skipped off and joined Florence and several other members of the Wonky Inn Ghostly Clean-up Crew. Plates flew through the air—under control this time—to land on trays and be neatly stacked before they were cleared out of the bar.

I flicked a finger at a bowl of lemons, and a knife sprang to work cutting them into precise slices. I dropped them into the full water jugs, added a scoop of ice to each and picked up two in each hand, intending to circulate around the tables like a German beer maid.

"I'm surprised she's able to fit through the gap with a behind as round as that," I heard Phyllis Bliss say. I turned around, unsure whether to be annoyed at her objectification of me or hurt by what she'd said. I was no supermodel certainly, but curves are curves.

"Rude," I mumbled under my breath, glowering her way. Onnalee caught my eye and quirked an eyebrow, cooling my wrath.

Rise above it, her expression said, and I relaxed a little. Phyllis Bliss was an elderly lady with different experiences and expectations and a stubborn mindset. I couldn't take what she said to heart.

"My grandson works out every day," Phyllis was saying, "He's as fit as a fiddle." I turned away before anyone noticed me eye-rolling. Her grandson sounded like a complete bore.

Silver serving platters began to appear at the side of the room, and my ghostly waiting staff congregated, ready to serve up a delicious duck confit, crispy capons, or leek and potato gratin. There were numerous side dishes too, including cauliflower cheese—one of my absolute favourites. My mouth watered at the array of fragrances. I nodded at Florence and she gave the signal to the waiters. Within moments, trays and warmed plates were being deposited on the tables along with sauce jugs and accompaniments and steaming mounds of roasted potatoes.

I retraced my steps to where Phyllis, Onnalee and Sybil were sitting with Delia. "Is everything alright for you?" I asked, my tone saccharine sweet as I replaced their water jug.

"Honey, this is delicious!" Onnalee replied before Phyllis could get a word in. "My compliments to the chef."

"I will certainly pass that on," I beamed.

"Phyllis, what do you have there?" asked Onnalee. "I'm trying the duck and it is so succulent. It just melts in the mouth."

"I have the capon," said Phyllis, poking at its thigh with her fork. "I know capons are supposed to be small, but this is like eating a budgie or a parakeet or something."

Before I could even reflect on what Phyllis has just said, Delia jumped to her feet, wielding her own fork like a weapon and shoving the fully laden table away from her. Glasses and sauces, the wa-

ter jug and a bottle of wine tumbled to the wooden floor with an almighty crash. The rest of the room fell abruptly silent around us.

"What did you just say?" Delia demanded, her white face contorted in anger.

Phyllis leaned backwards, her eyes wide. "What? What do you mean?"

Onnalee reached towards the younger woman. "Delia! What are you doing?"

"Back off!" Delia snapped and jabbed her fork into Phyllis's cheek. Phyllis gasped and clutched at her face. Without thinking twice, I whisked out my wand. "*Abiciendi!*" I cried, and the fork whirled out of her hand, smacked against the window and fell to the ground. "*Abscondam*," I followed up quickly, and the fork vanished without trace, never to be seen again and leaving Whittle Inn a fork down.

Delia balled up her fists and leaned down into Phyllis's face. "Have you seen my parakeet, you old witch?"

"No, of course she hasn't." I reached for Delia's arm, trying to calm the situation. She snatched it away as though I had stabbed her.

"Get off me," she shrieked, and swiped at her dripping nose. "You're all in this together. It's a conspiracy!"

I held the palms of my hands up and backed away. "Nobody wants to harm Cuthbert, I promise."

"Your promises are meaningless! You promised to help me find him, but you haven't."

"Delia." Sybil reprimanded her. "You're making a scene."

"What's she talking about?" Phyllis asked the women seated at her table, her confidence returning now that Delia's anger had been redirected my way.

"Her parakeet," hissed Onnalee. "He's gone missing."

“Well, I don’t have him,” Phyllis boomed.

“Try the familiars’ room,” Sybil suggested.

“We’ve searched the familiars’ room,” I said. “From top to bottom.”

“Twice,” Delia added, her shoulders sinking and the fight ebbing from her. She burst into tears and I reached for her, not caring about her snotty nose and her germs. This was a woman in severe distress, worried about a bird she evidently loved.

“Come on,” I said. “Come with me. Let’s get you somewhere private.” She allowed me to lead her away as Florence descended on the table to help clear up.

I created a phone with my finger and thumb and gestured at Charity. “Can you phone Millicent?” I mouthed and she nodded.

“I’m very sorry about that,” Gwyn was saying. “The poor girl obviously has quite a temper.”

“Oh, don’t blame yourself,” Phyllis placated her. “These things happen. Although I have to say, I’m sure my grandson would have nipped that in the bud more quickly than your great-granddaughter. I’m lucky I didn’t lose an eye!”

I flashed a look at the clock behind the bar. Twenty to nine. Today had been a long day. I resisted the urge to reach for the cherry brandy and instead stuck a mug under the coffee machine.

Charity, loading wine glasses into the dishwasher, handed up a chipped glass for me to dispose of safely and whispered, "What time do you think they'll all retire to bed?"

I turned around to observe our guests. Most of them were still sitting around chatting. The remnants of the cheese course littered their tables, whilst a mix of glasses and cups and saucers vied for space. Florence moved dutifully around the room, making a start on fully clearing the tables and checking everyone had eaten their fill.

"Not too late, hopefully. I mean, they're all getting on a bit, aren't they? Won't they need a lot of sleep?"

"Maybe," Charity sounded doubtful. "My nan was the reverse. She used to stay up late. She said she didn't sleep so well."

"Is that right?" In the corner of the bar opposite me, Luppitt Smeatharpe, Robert Wait, Napier Harrow and the other members of the Devonshire Fellows were setting up, ready to play some jolly

Elizabethan tunes to the gathered witches. “Oh look, Luppitt’s arrived. If that doesn’t send them running to their rooms, nothing will.”

Charity giggled. “You are mean, Alf. The Devonshire Fellows have been working on new material for the last few weeks.”

“I’m aware of this,” I told her. There couldn’t be a living—or dead—soul within a five-mile proximity who hadn’t heard them rehearsing. “It all sounds great until the crumhorn kicks in.”

“You love it.” Charity slammed the door of the dishwasher closed and pressed the button. As if on cue, the Devonshire Fellows launched into their first number, a cheerful little ditty about elves dancing. A number of witches turned around to listen and bobbed their heads in time to the music.

To be fair, one or two did stick their fingers in their ears.

“I think I might take this opportunity to grab a little dinner, if there’s anything left over,” I said and snatched up my mug in one hand and the broken glass in the other.

“Did you want me to stay here and keep an eye on things?” Charity asked.

“Goodness me, no. Are you crazy? I’m not venturing into that kitchen alone. I need a witness in case Monsieur Emietter takes a carving knife to my innards.” I motioned towards Zephaniah. “Ned and Zephaniah can manage here for a while. We won’t be long.”

We walked away from the music and down the passage, passing first The Hug and then The Snug. I paused. The door to The Snug had been left ever-so-slightly ajar. Had I left it open? I thought I remembered closing it. I threaded the stem of the wine glass under the thumb of the hand holding my coffee mug and reached out with my now-free right hand to pull the door shut. Something stopped me, a slight feeling of unease tugging at my insides.

“You go on,” I said to Charity. “Plate something up for me, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” Charity said and took my coffee and the wine glass from me.

I pushed open the door and stepped inside. The lights had been left muted in here to take account of some of the animals in their cages who would prefer the dark. Taking my time, I studied the animals in their various holding pens. Several dozen pairs of eyes stared back at me, some curious, some cross, some that seemed incredibly sad and some with neutral indifference. None of them made a sound.

“Hi guys,” I spoke softly. “Sorry to disturb you all. I wanted to check you were all okay.” I knelt down so that I could get a better look into all the containers. “Does everybody have what they need?” A rabbit with red eyes blinked at me, the remains of a carrot between its paws. I’d asked Ned to make sure everyone had been properly fed. “You have the requisite vegetables?”

A large white barn owl in an ornate cage wiggled its head. “You’re beautiful,” I breathed and stood up, moving closer to him. “Mr Hoo would like you.” I laughed quietly. “Oh, that rhymes. Mr Hoo would so like you! I’m a poet and I didn’t know it.”

I moved along the row. A snake. A couple of rats. A tabby cat with one eye who curled and uncurled his tail as I approached. “Do you have enough water?” I asked. “Would you like some milk?”

That reminded me of the other cat I’d met at lunchtime. The black one with a green velvet collar and a shiny bell. Where was he? I retraced my steps, checking each cage and container and basket once more until, tucked in the corner and underneath everything else, I recognised the battered wicker carrier with the tell-tale yellow tag I’d stuck on it.

Cuthbert cat.

I bent low so I could get a look at him. "Hey, pussycat?" I sang. "Everything alright with you?"

He lay motionless at the rear of the basket. At first I thought he must be sleeping, but as my fingers made contact with the bars at the front and he remained still, I knew in my heart of hearts he wasn't.

"Oh!" My deep gasp of pain sounded loud in the room. Did the other animals understand what had happened here? Is that why they were all so quiet? I fumbled for the lock and threw the cat's gate open, reaching in to touch him.

I was far too late. He'd been gone a while.

I sank back on my haunches.

"Oh," I said again, riding a wave of sadness. "I'm so sorry, little fellow."

The room darkened as someone walked through the door, blocking the light from the hall.

"What are you sorry for?" Delia's worried voice.

I blinked up at her. I couldn't see her face; she was silhouetted in the doorway, her hair creating a frizzy halo around her head.

"Your cat," I stumbled for the right words.

"My cat?" she repeated, stepping closer.

"I'm afraid," my voice shook, "he's died." I felt bad because I didn't know his name.

"My cat has died?" Her voice seemed oddly emotionless.

"Yes. I'm very sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" she asked. "Did you kill him?"

I sucked in a breath and frowned into the darkness. She didn't really believe I'd kill her cat, did she? Why would she think that? "No, of course not!"

"Then why be sorry?"

I found myself lost for words. I shook my head. “Because I’m sorry that he’s dead,” I managed to say.

She took another step towards me and, slightly fearing for my own safety, I stood up. I could make out the features of her face now. Her pale eyes glowed with a strange light; her lip had curled with revulsion.

“Don’t be sorry,” she said. “Not about the cat—”

“But—”

Her laugh rang through the small room, strangely hollow and entirely without humour. “I don’t have a cat.”

I blinked in confusion. “You don’t? Only … I plucked the basket off the drive this morning. He was among all your other animals.”

“That’s as maybe, but he’s not mine. I have snakes, rats, birds and several mice. I have a tarantula too, named Aranea.”

“But no cat?”

“No. He must have belonged to someone else.”

“Yes,” I slumped, miserable in the knowledge that somewhere in the main bar area, an unsuspecting witch was sitting, merrily listening to the Devonshire Fellows. I didn’t relish having to break the news again.

I rubbed my forehead and sighed.

“You haven’t found Cuthbert yet?” Delia asked. Her relaxed, unconcerned tone had started to wind me up.

“No, I’m sorry. We’re still looking.”

“Is that so?” Delia walked the line of cages and suddenly lashed out, striking at the cage holding the white owl. It tottered briefly on the edge of the basket beneath it. The owl inside fluttered its wings in panic and screeched. I rushed forward and caught the large cage before it fell.

“Hey! There’s no need for that!” I wrestled with the cage, struggling to right it, as the owl whipped around inside.

She lashed out again, knocking another basket flying. The cat inside this one meowed loudly as it made contact with the floor. Fortunately, the basket remained intact and the cat, while ruffled, soon settled again.

“Stop it!” I ordered but she only laughed in my face and threw herself at the remaining cages and baskets of familiars, obviously intending to cause as much disruption and chaos as possible.

“Alf? Everything alright?” Charity called from down the hall, her footsteps hurrying towards us. “What’s keeping you?”

Delia skidded to a stop, her hands mere inches away from the towering pile of crates, baskets and cages. I held my breath. Her fingers twitched and then she changed her mind, swivelling and running to the doorway instead, colliding with Charity and knocking her flying.

I carefully settled the owl and its cage on the floor and rushed to Charity’s aid. She grimaced as I reached her. “I’ve just been hit by a truck,” she moaned.

“No, it was a Delia,” I told her, reaching down to help her to her feet. “Which way did she go?”

“Into the kitchen,” Charity said, and with that we heard the back door crash shut.

“And into the grounds evidently.” I brushed Charity down.

“Brrrr. It’s cold out there.”

I glowered. I had no sympathy for Delia. She’d confirmed she was batpoop crazy. “Maybe it will give her time to cool off.”

It turned out the cat had belonged to a sweet witch by the name of Grace Windsor. I caught up with Gwyn and explained the situation, and she took it upon herself to break the news privately to her heart-broken friend before leading her up to her room to grieve behind closed doors.

I wandered through to the bar where the Devonshire Fellows had started on a song about contrary women who needed taking in hand. I could tell by the bemused faces of the powerful women present that on this occasion Luppitt and his friends had missed their mark. Once they'd finished their song, I rushed over.

"Let's hear it for the Devonshire Fellows!" I called and began to clap. One or two people slowly joined in but I kept going and eventually, with some encouragement from Charity and myself, The Devonshire Fellows were able to depart the stage—or rather the corner of the inn where I'd hidden them—to almost-rapturous applause.

"We'll take a quick break now," I announced. "Please let Florence know if you'd like to order any more refreshments and we'll bring them to your table."

I made my way back to the bar to help pour more drinks. Behind me, conversation seemed subdued. Wasn't *anybody* having a good time? What kind of a hostess was I? We needed to bolster the general mood.

"Maybe we'd better switch to more modern music?" I suggested to Charity, and she waved her mobile phone at me.

"How modern?" she asked. "I can play some tunes from my app, if you like? I'll just Bluetooth them across to the music centre."

"How modern are we talking?" I asked dubiously. "Given the average age of our current clientele. I'm not sure Snoop Doggy Dog would be quite up their street."

"Snoop Doggy Dog?" Charity teased. "What decade did you suddenly travel from?" She waved her phone at me. "I have an app on here that'll allow me to access music from any era. So, what do you reckon?"

I glanced around at the tables and the ghosts on the periphery. I'd have to take an average. "I don't know … erm … something from the forties, perhaps?"

"The *nineteen* forties?" Charity baulked at the idea.

"No, no, as you were. The *eighteen* forties." I wrinkled my nose. "Of course the nineteen forties! Even Grandmama can't remember the eighteen forties."

Charity, a bit of a whizz on her mobile phone, quickly flicked through the options. She hummed and hawed before eventually making her selection. Glen Miller began to blast over the speakers. I reached out to turn it down a little.

"You know what they say if you have to turn it down," Charity giggled.

I did know. "You're getting old," I finished for her.

A couple of witches looked up at the opening bars to *In the Mood* and began to wiggle in their seats, but I noticed several pull faces.

"Oh dear. You can please some of the people some of the time …" I ran through a few options. "It might be an idea to take a straw poll," I suggested. "Perhaps see what sort of thing people would like to listen to." I reached under the bar where I kept a pad of yellow Post-Its. "I'll go around the tables and see what people would like."

The first table I visited wanted Gerry and the Pacemakers. The next table wanted Madonna. Onnalee wanted Lady Gaga but Phyllis asked for something 'classy'. "Dusty Springfield," she suggested. I decided not to ask what her grandson would prefer—no doubt he

was an orchestra-worthy violinist or some such, even more talented than Niccolo Paganini—and added Dusty to my list.

Within ten minutes I had garnered an impressive playlist, and Charity had begun to queue them up on her fancy-schmancy device. While some choices elicited a less than favourable response from some of the gathered witches, for the most part everyone was very good-natured and soon the bar was ringing with the sound of several dozen altos and sopranos singing *Son of a Preacher Man*.

Yes, it was.

I awoke with a jump, blinking into the dark, trying to work out what time it was. At some stage in the night I'd kicked all the covers off and now, with the window open so that Mr Hoo could come and go as he pleased, I shivered with cold. I reached out and grabbed the quilt, pulling it over myself and snuggling underneath.

Maybe Mr Hoo had disturbed me. It couldn't be time to get up yet. I yawned and wriggled and settled into a cosy spot.

Meeeee-aow

Was that a cat?

Meeeee-aow.

It sounded awfully close. Not outside. Inside my room. I opened my eyes.

Meeeee-aow.

Something light of foot jumped up onto the bed beside me and patted the duvet down. It twisted around a few times before curling up next to me in the crook of my legs.

I reached out, stretching to where the creature had settled … and found nothing except thin air. Whatever it was shifted impatiently. I

pushed myself up on one elbow and reached out again. My fingers found nothing, but my legs could definitely sense something there.

"What *is* that?" I mumbled, considering turning the light on.

Opting against it, I lay back down. I wasn't uncomfortable. In fact, the thing, whatever it was, had started to warm me up.

I wriggled about and closed my eyes.

Rrrrr-rrrrrr-rrrrr. A low growl to my left, near the door. Not particularly menacing.

There was a dog in my room?

Rrrr-rrrrrrrrr.

"Will you shush," I hissed. He'd have the whole inn awake in no time.

"Arf!" The dog barked sharply in my ear and I sat up hastily.

"What is going on?" I demanded in a loud whisper, and this time I reached for the cord of my lamp and switched it on, blinking in the sudden light. A small dog, a Jack Russell, stood by my bed wagging its tail as though its very life depended on it. It looked friendly enough. I reached out and again, my fingers found only air.

A ghost.

And now, when I looked down at my knees I could see the translucent outline of a black cat, very similar to the one that had passed away downstairs.

Ghost familiars.

"Smashing," I said. "Couldn't you both have stayed downstairs with the others though?"

The dog wagged his tail so hard, I worried he might take off. "I have to sleep," I told him.

He scampered to the door as though he needed to go out. "Definitely not," I told him and switched the light back off.

Rrrrr-rrrrr, he growled.

“No,” I told him. “Sleep first, walks in the morning. G’night.”

“Morning, Miss Alf. Coffee?” Florence trilled as I entered the kitchen a few hours later.

“A bucket, please.” Taking a seat at the table, I pulled a plate of toast towards me. Just after six and Charity had yet to appear. Monsieur Emietter and Gwyn were poring over a list. The chef looked puzzled and my great-grandmother appeared to be trying to explain something to him in her own French which, while a zillion times better than mine, still wasn’t fluent.

“Oui. Oui.” Monsieur Emietter shrugged, with gallic stoicism I thought, and rather than throwing anything at anyone, he pulled a tray of eggs towards him and began rapidly breaking them into a large glass bowl.

“Problem?” I asked Gwyn.

“Not really. I was just going through the list of breakfast requests.”

“I thought we agreed that to save too much hassle we’d stick to a fairly simple breakfast,” I said, nodding at Monsieur Emietter who was evidently about to prepare scrambled eggs.

“That’s as may be, Alfhild, but people do have dietary requirements.”

“What’s wrong with scrambled eggs?”

“Some of my friends don’t eat eggs.”

“Okay.” I munched on my toast.

“Some don’t like butter or milk, so they want the eggs scrambled but without butter or milk.”

“Right.”

"Some prefer poached eggs. Some have asked for fried."

"Hmmm." This had been exactly what I'd been trying to avoid.

"And some people want eggy-toast, or soft-boiled eggs with soldiers. I think we have to offer the full range of egg dishes, Alfhild."

"I see." I cast a wary glance at Monsieur Emietter. "And our evil-tempered chef doesn't mind?"

Gwyn smiled sheepishly. "I told him he could have Florence to help and that you would lay the tables in the dining area instead."

"Oh." I returned my half-eaten slice of toast to my plate. "I guess I'd better get on with it then."

"I'll send Charity to help you when she comes down," Gwyn called.

"Yes, do that," I said, as I reluctantly left the kitchen.

Florence floated after me. "Oh, Miss! You forgot your coffee." I turned and took the mug of morning nectar from the air between us. She'd gone to the trouble of using steamed milk, bless her. I do love a frothy coffee.

"Thanks, Florence," I said.

"Oh, think nothing of it, Miss. I'll make you some more toast once all the guests have had their breakfasts."

I made my way through to the bar clutching my coffee and set it down on the nearest table. I'd pulled the thick curtains closed the previous evening as I always did, and the fire had not been lit in here as yet, so the room was dark. The sun wouldn't be up for at least another hour and a half.

I fumbled around on the wall for the light switches and flipped them up one by one, childishly enjoying the snapping sound they

made and the soft tinkle as each of the lights flickered into action in turn. Then, steeling myself, I took a deep breath and turned to greet the task that awaited me, clearing the tables of any debris left over from the previous night and laying them up for breakfast. It shouldn't have been too onerous a task as we'd left the tables in position after dinner the previous evening, meaning I wouldn't have to move the furniture.

Except *something* had moved the furniture for me.

Tables had been upended and chairs scattered to make way for a huge wooden box-like contraption in the middle of the dining area.

"What—by all that's magickal—is *that*?" I asked aloud, moving out from behind the counter and slipping between the tables to get a closer look.

The wooden box must have been six feet wide, six feet deep and eight feet high. It had been encased in some kind of twisted iron lattice structure that stretched from the floor to the ceiling, a height of around fifteen feet or so. I craned my head upwards. Was that a *hole* in my ceiling?

"What the dickens?" I reached through the ironwork to touch the box. Solid. "I don't understand," I wailed. Inching around the contraption, I quickly realised I'd been looking at the reverse of it. Once I'd arrived at the front it all made perfect sense.

Perfect sense, in a manner of speaking.

It was an elevator. A Victorian or Edwardian elevator crafted from the finest polished walnut and ironwork. I pressed the shiny brass button that called it and the doors sprang open. Inside, the floor had been carpeted and the walls furnished with Art Nouveau designs on inlaid panels, and brightly coloured glass insets.

"How—?" I spun around, seeking any of my ghosts who might have been haunting the shadows. Nobody in sight. Highly

suspicious.

I pressed my lips together in fury. All that fuss about climbing the stairs yesterday, and then an elevator turns up in the middle of the room?

"Gwyn?" I called sharply, half expecting her to remain hidden. She had a habit of hiding away when things started to get a little challenging.

"Gwyn?" I repeated, louder this time.

She apparated beside me. "Hold your horses, my dear. I was priming myself for the day ahead." She wore a long black skirt and a white high-necked blouse, fastened with a glittering green brooch. No doubt this was her bagatelle outfit. "What can I do for you?" she asked, smoothing her hair into a sleek silvery chignon.

"This." I pointed in front of me. As if on cue, the doors closed with a cheerful ting.

"It's an elevator," Gwyn frowned, and part of me was relieved when I realised even she was surprised.

"How did it get here?" I demanded.

Gwyn looked taken aback. "How should I know, Alfhild? I didn't put it here if that's what you're insinuating. I'm not an engineer, after all."

"You don't know anything about it?" I double-checked.

"Of course not. Why would I agree to anyone building an elevator in the middle of our inn? Much less right here in the bar!"

"Hmpf." She had a point. She wouldn't have agreed to it either.

Gwyn circled the elevator slowly. "As useful as it undoubtedly could be, if you have an inn full of guests with wonky hips and knees, I'm going to hazard a guess that if neither one of us called anyone out to furnish the inn with an elevator, it must have been magicked into place."

"Well, fine," I grumbled. "I'll just magick it away again." I fumbled in my robe for my wand and levelled it at the elevator. My hand remained stationary for a few seconds while I thought about what to say. "Erm …"

Gwyn cocked her head. "What are you waiting for?"

"I don't know a spell that will get rid of an elevator."

Gwyn nodded. "Let me think …"

We stood staring at each other. The elevator pinged and, with a quick shudder, started to glide up the iron shaft. We tipped our heads back to watch it disappear through the hole in the ceiling's plasterwork.

"I could make it vanish," I ventured.

"Indeed." Gwyn sounded doubtful.

"But that wouldn't necessarily fix the hole in the ceiling."

"And," Gwyn indicated upwards with her own wand, "what if we made it vanish and someone was inside it?"

Yikes! I shuddered. Gwyn was right. How would we get them back? Causing harm to a witch was deemed a serious offence.

"I think we're going to have to find out who placed it here and ask them to undo the spell."

"That sounds like a good plan," I nodded. It sounded like the *only* plan, but I skirted over that. "Can I leave that to you, please, Grandmama? I really need to start setting up for breakfast." I indicated the scattered tables and chairs. "It's going to take me longer than I expected."

"Where will I start?" Gwyn mused. "Who do I ask first?"

"I'd start with Agneta Caspersen," I said. "She was the one creating merry hell about using the stairs yesterday." I nodded upstairs. "First floor, in the *Neverwhere* Room. She's sharing with Jamella De Paggio."

“Should I take the lift?” Gwyn asked, flicking her finger towards the call button.

“Don’t be lazy, Grandmama!”

Gwyn snorted. “Quite right, Alfhild. We wouldn’t want to get used to this being here,” she said, and apparated quickly away.

I couldn't quite believe the composition of some of the meals I brought out of the kitchen to serve our guests for their breakfast.

We had intended to offer a range of breakfast cereals, yoghurt, toast with jam, eggs, bacon and sausages but otherwise keep it very simple. So I have to admit to being flabbergasted when I served up crepes, waffles, pancakes, elaborate fruit cocktails, ham and cheese, an ice-cream sundae sprinkled with hundreds and thousands and even a Devonshire Cream Tea. Now I'm partial to a Cream Tea myself, but not for breakfast!

Besides coffee and tea—and by tea, I mean black tea, fruit tea, caffeine-free tea, green tea, white tea, slimming tea, Earl Grey, Lady Grey, English Breakfast and wizard's brew—we had several freshly squeezed fruit juices, milk in all its guises, hot chocolate and cocoa. So I was a little perturbed to be asked for diet cola, sparkling Cherryade, prune juice, green smoothies and even a Bloody Mary.

Both Monsieur Emietter and Florence were starting to look frazzled so Charity and I, with the help of Archibald and Zephaniah, worked as quickly and efficiently as we could front of house, while I

struggled to hold back all my acerbic thoughts about some of Gwyn's friends' dietary delectations.

The elevator pinged and tinged with monotonous regularity as increasing numbers of our guests realised what it was and began to use it in order to 'pop' back to their rooms. It whined a little as it ascended and then whirred happily as it descended, which it did astonishingly quickly. Gwyn was circulating, asking her friends about its sudden appearance, but so far as I could tell, judging from their alternately blank or amused looks, she wasn't getting to the bottom of things.

"Where's your strange friend this morning?" Charity asked me as we organised dirty plates on the counter of the bar, ready to be cleared into the kitchen.

"Which strange friend would that be?" I had plenty to choose from after all.

"The one that went ballistic and knocked me over in the hall last night."

"Ah, yes. Delia." I balanced a pile of plates carefully on a tray and turned around. Phyllis Bliss, Onnalee and Sybil were sitting around the table they had obviously commandeered, the one in front of the bay window with the best view of the frozen front garden, but of Delia and her mother, there was no sign. I scrutinised the other tables—those that I could see—the elevator effectively blocked my view of a number of them. "They might be having a lie-in, I suppose."

"Lucky things," Charity grunted, and I could only agree.

I wandered around the dining area, checking everyone had what they needed, sending Ned over with extra tea and coffee where required, and running my eye over the twittering collections of witch-

es grouped around the tables, wondering whether the Cuthberts had simply chosen to sit elsewhere.

When I couldn't see them, I didn't worry. I'd catch up with them later. I could always offer them toast and tea from the kitchen at whatever time they surfaced. Millicent, sadly held up the night before, had promised to pop by later in the morning to have a little chat with Delia about her sniffles or allergies, or whatever they were. Meanwhile, Archibald and several other members of the Wonky Inn Ghostly Clean-up Crew were still looking for Cuthbert.

Everything is fine, I told myself, pointedly ignoring the incessant pinging of the elevator, the ridiculous breakfast requests and the ghost familiars running riot around the dining room. The little Jack Russell, barking noisily, kept chasing a ghost chicken that had somehow made its way in from outside. However, nobody else seemed to be bothered by them so I decided not to be. For now.

Charity returned from the kitchen clutching several empty trays and handed a clean one over to me. "What are we doing with all the animals in The Snug?" she asked.

"I thought we'd leave it to the individual guests to decide whether they wanted their familiar with them or not," I replied. "Most of the cats and dogs have been reunited with their owners. In fact, I think the majority of the animals that are currently inhabiting The Snug actually came with the Cuthberts. They brought a veritable zoo along."

Charity frowned. "Well, it's not fair on the animals to be cooped up like that."

"It's probably okay for the spider …" I intervened quickly, before Charity suggested I free them all.

"It's getting a bit smelly though. Haven't you noticed?"

I had. Going to and from the kitchen umpteen times this morning had alerted me to increased whiffiness in the back passage.

"You're right. I should nip in there and make sure the animals are alright, maybe open the window a little to get some air circulating and then I'll go in search of Delia."

"Tell her she wanted to bring them all with her, so she gets to clean them out." Charity clacked a pair of mugs together so hard I was surprised they didn't break. "That's what my mum always used to say to me. It's just not fair. If you have pets you need to be responsible for their wellbeing."

"Wise words," I agreed, although secretly I didn't want to run the risk of upsetting Delia again. I decided I'd take a subtle approach and ask her if she needed any help cleaning out her pets' cages.

Not that I intended to help her, you understand. Ugh. The very idea of clearing up after rodents and spiders and a snake! No, no. That's why I kept the Wonky Inn Ghostly Clean-up Crew on standby.

"Leave it with me," I said, placing my still-empty tray on the counter. "I'll check on them now. You hold down the fort for five minutes."

"Yes, boss." Charity waved me away and I sauntered reluctantly out of the door and into the back passage.

Florence was floating towards me. "Miss Alf, the gentleman from the wholesaler's is at the back door with a delivery."

"Thanks, Florence," I said. "Can you ask him to unload the pallets into the storeroom?"

"I will do, Miss. He'll want a signature though."

"I'll be in here …" I indicated The Snug, "… just send him through."

"Yes, Miss."

"Give him a peg for his nose."

"Pardon me, Miss Alf?"

"Never mind." I shook my head a little, and she hurried away. I pushed the door open and recoiled. "Phooey. It's a bit honky-tonk in here. Who knew spiders made things smelly?"

I fiddled with the space on the wall where the light switch would be and finally found it.

Click.

The sudden illumination threw the room into stark relief and I shot backwards with a gasp, ice gripping my bowel. All around were the cages and pet baskets, some of them with their doors ajar. The large white owl gazed down at me, unblinking, from the corner of the mantelpiece. The snake had wrapped itself around a cushion, and one of the enormous spiders was spinning a web in the corner of the fireplace. A one-eyed tabby cat was playing with the corpse of what had probably been either a mouse or a hamster, but worse than all that, far far worse than any of that, Delia Cuthbert hung horizontally in the air at hip height, her head thrown back, her eyes and mouth wide open in a perpetual scream, held in place by a cold beam of goldy-coloured light wrapped around a single silken thread.

I yanked out my wand. *"Exolvo!"*

I rushed forward and caught Delia's head as the beam dissipated, the thread snapped, and she fell. I needn't have worried. She'd been dead a while and nothing I could do would bring her back.

"Oh no. Oh no. Oh no," I whimpered, sitting back on my haunches and feeling for a pulse. Her skin was cold to the touch.

Who could have done this to her? Evidently it hadn't been self-inflicted, given the way she'd been hanging in mid-air, supported by a magical beam. What had been the purpose of that?

"Oh, Delia," I whispered. This was why she hadn't been at breakfast. I caught my breath. Neither had Mrs Cuthbert. Was she okay? I would need to check on her straight away, make sure she was alright, and then break the awful news.

A loud knocking. I turned, expecting it to be Charity. "Ms Daemonne?" a deep voice asked and without further ado, the delivery driver pushed open the door and entered the room. He waved his little handheld electronic signature recorder device at me.

I hurried to stand in his way, but he was a good foot taller than me and at least three times as wide, so he could easily see around me. His name badge informed me his name was 'Harry C'.

"Oh my word," he said in a broad Devon drawl. "What's happened here, then?"

"I, erm …"

"Is she as dead as she looks?" he craned over my shoulder.

"She, ah …"

"Have you called the police?"

I glared at him. "Give me a chance, I've only just this minute found her myself."

"So, she *is* dead, then? Wow." He sidestepped me so he could get a better view, before suddenly keeling over in a dead faint.

"Have you never seen a dead body before?" I asked his motionless body.

Sadly I had. Too many times.

I tried to drag the delivery driver out of The Snug, but he was far too heavy for me. In the end, I had no choice but to call Charity. She rushed in but stopped short when she spotted the bodies on the floor.

"What on earth have you done?" she shrieked, clasping her hands to her face.

"What have I done? I haven't done anything!"

Charity pointed wordlessly, first at the delivery driver and then to Delia. Her finger shook as she took in Delia's pallor. "Is she—?"

"As a doornail," I muttered glumly. "But this chap isn't. We need to get him out of here. He's contaminating the scene."

We each grabbed an arm and, with a little groaning on my part and swearing on Charity's, we managed to drag him out into the hallway and prop him against the wall.

"Maybe I should get him some water?" Charity suggested.

"Good idea!" I squatted next to Harry C and fanned at his face. "Come back to us, Harry," I urged him. "You've got deliveries to make."

“What are you doing with that man, Alfhild?” Gwyn had appeared at the end of the passageway. “Leave him alone.”

“Grandmama!” Never had I been so pleased to see her. I called to her in a loud whisper, “Come here. I need you.”

“I’m sure you think I have nothing better to do than be at your beck and call all day,” Gwyn responded, but lifting her nose up she floated towards me anyway.

“Look in here.” I led the way back inside The Snug.

Gwyn, following, wrinkled her nose at the smell but pulled up sharply when she spotted the body on the floor. “Is that the Cuthbert girl?”

“It is,” I confirmed. “Delia.”

“And did that great oaf out in the hall do this?” Gwyn’s haughty voice, shrill at the best of times, carried down the hallway.

“Sssh, Grandmama!” I flapped my hand, indicating she should take the noise level down a little. “No. He walked in and saw her and fainted.”

Gwyn glanced around the room, spotting the snake and the spider. The cat had run off somewhere. Something else to worry about. “Was she bitten by something?”

“I really don’t imagine so. When I came in she was levitating in a pool of light.”

“Levitating?”

I nodded and pointed at a space about the height of the table. “Just about there. Splayed out on her back. As though she were lying on a bed, but in mid-air.”

“Curious.” Gwyn steepled her fingers together, and swivelled in place, creating the slightest of draughts. She turned back to face me. “Witchcraft,” she concluded.

I nodded. “I thought the same. We need to call the police.” I began to rummage in my pocket for my mobile but as usual, I didn’t appear to have it on me. I must have left it on my bedside table. It annoyed me because it weighed my pockets down.

“No, Alfhild, we don’t.” Gwyn raised a finger to stop me.

I abandoned my search in frustration. “Of course we do! We can’t just ignore a murder.”

“I’m not suggesting we ignore it, but I don’t want your friend and his kind involved.”

“George, you mean?” DS George Gilchrist, my one-time love. We were still working at being friends. “Who else can I call?”

“We need to get in touch with the Ministry of Witches. It’ll send out its own detectives.”

“The Ministry of Witches has detectives?” I’d never known that.

Gwyn tutted at me. “Of course it does, Alfhild. I swear, sometimes it’s like you’ve existed in a witching-free bubble.”

“I’ve done my best.”

From the hallway came the sound of a raised voice. Harry C seemed agitated and Charity was soothing him, although I couldn’t hear exactly what she was saying.

“You’re certain I should call the Ministry of Witches about their detectives?” I clarified. “It will take them a while to get here.”

“Only a couple of hours, my dear. They’re based in London, not Reykjavik. Just call 661.”

“Alright.”

Gwyn wagged a finger at me. “And be careful. Whatever you do, don’t misdial. You don’t want to summon a demon by adding an extra six.”

I mulled that over for a second, then nodded. “I’ll go and ring them now.”

I slipped out into the hallway. Harry C, still sitting on the floor, cowered away when he saw me. “It’s all in hand,” I told him, and carried on towards the bar where the nearest landline phone was located.

This phone was a solid black Bakelite with a dial face. I slipped my index finger into the six and paused. “Don’t stutter,” I told it, and quickly scooped the dial around clockwise. Six. And again, six. My stomach fluttered with nerves. My nail jammed in the hole and I fought to free it. “That was two, right?” I flexed my finger and, taking a deep breath, dialled the last digit.

A long pause. Something whizzed and sang down the wires. I tapped my fingers against the counter. Finally, the phone began to ring. I listened to the familiar burr-burr sound. It rang a dozen times before it was picked up.

“Good morning, Whittle Inn in Whittlecombe in East Devon. Thank you for calling the Em-oh-double-you police today.”

Wow. She had pinpointed exactly where I was calling from.

“Which department do you require?” the cheerfully efficient voice continued.

I wasn’t sure what to ask for. “Erm …” I kept my voice low, conscious that several dozen witches were still breakfasting behind me, “I need to report a murder.”

“A murder?”

“That’s right, yes.”

“At your premises?”

“Yes.”

“Are you the registered inn-keeper? A Ms Alfhild Yasmin Daemonne?”

“Yes.”

"Thank you. You'll need the Serious Crime squad. Putting you through, please hold."

I waited. This time the burr-ing sound seemed shorter, more abrupt. It was picked up after a fewer number of rings and a female voice responded, barely able to contain her boredom.

"Elise Liddell. Can I help you?"

"Hi, yes," I faltered again. "My name is Alfhild Daemonne. I need to report a murder."

"A murder?" The woman sounded slightly more interested. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I'm not really sure. I found the body of one of my guests. She was hanging in the air. We suspect witchcraft."

"Levitating?" The woman sounded intrigued. "Any obvious signs of injury?"

"Not that I can see," I replied. "But I'm not an expert and I didn't look too closely." I shuddered.

Why me? Why my wonky inn?

"No, that's understandable," the woman said, compassionate but brusque. "Is the victim known to you?"

That was an easier question to answer. "Her name was Delia Cuthbert. She was a guest at my inn. She only arrived yesterday afternoon."

"And have you any idea who might have wanted to harm Delia?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Well …" I wasn't sure what to say.

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes. No. I don't know." I shrugged even though the detective couldn't see me. "I mean, she was … difficult."

"Difficult?"

"She had a bit of a temper."

"Mmm." I heard the clicking of a keyboard. "Can you confirm where you are?"

"I'm at Whittle Inn," I said. "In Whittlecombe."

The clicking grew louder. "And that's East Devon, right?"

"That's right."

"I see it. Don't move the body, Ms Daemonne. I'm on my way."

Mrs Cuthbert could not be found. I took it upon myself to break the bad news to her, but when I tapped on the door of the room she'd been sharing with Delia there was no answer. I had a master key so, after hammering a little harder and calling out to her a few times, I let myself in. The room had single beds, and only one had been slept in. Of Mrs Cuthbert, there was no sign.

I checked the bathroom but that was orderly enough. The towels were dry. I didn't know what this signified; at this stage, I didn't know how long Delia had been dead.

Flummoxed, I made my way downstairs again. Charity stopped me as I headed towards the bar.

"The police are here. They're in the kitchen."

"The police?" I stared at her in horror. "The *local* police?"

"Yes."

"But I didn't ring them."

Charity pulled a face. "I'm sorry. I think the delivery driver did."

Harry C. What a nuisance. "I suppose that's understandable given how shocked he was." I tried to be magnanimous, but quite honestly I could have cast a hex that would have given his delivery truck a flat tyre every day for the next two months.

But that would have been uncharitable and bad-tempered. I was better than that, surely?

"Who have they sent?" I asked.

Charity instantly understood what I was asking. "I'm afraid so."

"Fab." I straightened my robes and smoothed my hair down, an impossible task given how wild it was. "Alright. I'll go and talk to him."

"Good luck," Charity called after me as I slunk along the hallway.

Most of the kitchen staff had made themselves scarce, apart from Florence who was kneading bread mixture, and Monsieur Emietter, standing by the stove concocting something for lunch. He glared at me, evidently blaming me for this latest intrusion to his service.

DS George Gilchrist and his young colleague DC Andy Borewick waited patiently for me near the back door. Borewick lifted his nose and sniffed the air. I was unsure whether he was enjoying the scent of fried bacon or, like a bloodhound, he was searching for the stench of death.

"Morning," I said as I walked in.

"Morning Alf," George raised a sardonic eyebrow. "I wish I could say long time no see."

"Believe me, so do I." I directed their attention to the stove. "Would you like tea? Coffee? Sausage sandwich?"

Borewick perked up at the offer.

"Florence, be a love and sort me out two sausage sandwiches, strong black coffee for George and …" I looked at the young DC.

"Coffee for me too, please. White and two."

George was all business, serious-faced and ready for action. "Can we have a look at the scene?"

I nodded and led them down the hall towards The Snug.

"Why did I get the call from a delivery driver?" George asked. "Why didn't you call us?"

"Ah," I paused at the closed door. "It's complicated." I cast a quick glance at Borewick.

George rolled his eyes. "Andy, go and grab those coffees for me will you, please?"

Borewick stared at us uncertainly. "But Sarge—"

"Just give us a minute."

I waited until Borewick had pattered back down the hall to the kitchen then turned back to George. "The victim is a woman called Delia Cuthbert. She's a witch."

"Well, that's not anything new, is it?" George had grown accustomed to my magickal world and nothing tended to surprise him anymore.

"The thing is, the inn is currently full of witches, and with my hand on my heart, I really don't think Delia was well-liked."

George pulled out his notebook. "Why do you say that?"

"She wasn't a particularly nice person. A little bit—" I thought for a second, "—aggressive in her tone and in her actions."

"Alright." George scribbled a few things down. "So she's not a nice person and you have an inn full of witches." I had a feeling the latter statement wouldn't end up in his final report. "But that doesn't explain why the delivery driver called us, and not you." He tapped the end of his pen against his lips and waited.

"Gwyn told me I needed to contact the Ministry of Witches."

"Aha."

"They're sending a detective down. In fact, I've already spoken to her."

"Down? As in they're sending a detective down from London?"

"Yes."

“But that’s crazy. This is our jurisdiction. They can’t just turn up here and start poking their noses into a murder that’s on our territory.”

I held my hand up. “I know, George, but the thing is,” I shot a nervous glance towards the kitchen, making sure we couldn’t be overheard, “this is witch on witch. That’s a serious crime where I come from.”

George looked pained. “Murder is a serious crime where I come from too, regardless of who has committed it.”

“My point is, what the Ministry of Witches will want to investigate may be different to what you do … and given how I found her, they may be able to find the cause of death in a way that you and your mundane pathologists can’t.”

“I see.” George’s eyebrows knitted together. He pulled a pair of latex gloves out of his trouser pocket and snapped them on. “Let’s have a look then. Walk me through what you saw.”

I unlocked the door and pushed it open. Gwyn had been standing guard and now she moved respectfully away. She’d managed somehow—and I have no idea how but I guessed she’d used magick—to get both the snake and the spider back in their respective homes. All of the familiars were quiet, observing George, the newcomer, with interest.

He narrowed his eyes. “Phew. It stinks. What are all these animals doing in here anyway?”

“For the most part, they belonged to Delia and her mother. Delia told me she had allergies, so I agreed to house them in here for now.”

“Her mother?”

“Mrs Cuthbert is staying here too.” I jabbed a finger towards the ceiling. “Second floor, but she’s not in her room and none of my staff has seen her this morning.”

“Interesting.” George pointed his pen at the body. “Tell me what happened?”

I stared down at Delia. She lay on the floor where I’d left her, her face pale, her eyes and mouth open. I breathed heavily and averted my eyes. “I came in here and I found her suspended in mid-air.” I indicated where she had been. “As though she was lying on a high bed or something.”

“How is that possible?” George asked.

“She was being held up in a beam of light.” I shook my head. “To be honest George, I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“Hmm.” George carefully walked up to the place I’d indicated and glanced around the room. “She wasn’t suspended by ropes or … something?”

“A thin thread.” I removed my wand. “I had to use magick to make her drop.”

“Put that thing away,” George said, probably flashing back to the time I’d turned him into a toad.

“I checked on her, but she’d already been dead a while.” I thrust my wand back in its pocket. “Not that I’m an expert, as I say.”

“You’ve been on almost as many murder scenes as I have.” George knelt down next to Delia and placed a finger against her neck. “Do you think this magickal beam of light you’ve described killed her?”

I shook my head. “I really don’t know.”

“Okay.” He stood up again. “I’m going to call in my forensic team to do a complete sweep of the scene.”

“But—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. The witchy detective is on her way. If she’s here soon there won’t be a problem. I can delay things a little, but I

do need the coroner to have a look at the body and I want photos taken straight away."

"Alright," I agreed.

We moved back into the corridor. "You say you have an inn-full?" he asked.

"I do. Gwyn's sorority is here."

George looked puzzled. "A what? Sorority?"

"Kappa Sigma Granma. I think she borrowed the idea from something they have at American universities. It's like a support network, social type thingie."

"Right." George seemed none the wiser. "Well these members of Capper Signal—"

"Kappa Sigma Granma," I repeated.

"Them … I'm going to need all of them to remain inside so we can conduct initial interviews."

"I'll sort that now," I promised.

"And we will need to locate Mrs Cuthbert as a matter of priority." George pointed down the hall as he pulled his phone from his pocket. "Could you ask Andy to stop stuffing his face and come and give me a hand, please?"

"Yes, Sir!" I replied and clicked my heels together sharply.

George thumbed his screen. "Let's get the wheels turning and hope your witchy detective turns up *tout suite*."

Elise Liddell quite literally rocked up to Whittle Inn. I heard her before I caught sight of her. In spite of the freezing weather outside, she had the window of her relatively new silver Volvo cracked open and had some kind of loud retro heavy metal music blaring out. She sped along the tree-lined track that led from Whittle Lane to the inn and skidded along the drive, scattering gravel as she came.

I'd been keeping an anxious eye out since George had barred me from The Snug, and had been sitting near the window in the company of Phyllis, Onnalee, Sybil and Gwyn, listening with half an ear to them reminiscing about the old days and trying not to be irritated by Phyllis's constant references to her perfect grandson. What a heavenly specimen he must be.

I'd decided I already hated him and congratulated myself on the fact that I'd never have to meet him. Someone that wonderful would never stay at Whittle Inn. I'd been about to lose all hope of Elise showing up before the coroner when I spotted the flash of the vehicle between the naked oak trees and in seconds, there she was.

I stood hurriedly and rushed for the front door, but Elise was faster. She was out of her car and standing in the reception before I made it that far. Her colleague, an older man with silver-white hair, probably in his sixties, with a weathered face and a bulbous nose, wearing a dark olive trench coat, was slower.

"Hello," I said and reached out to shake her hand. "You must be Elise. I'm Alfhild Daemonne, the owner of Whittle Inn."

Elise rolled a sweet around in her mouth and stuck it in her cheek. "Pleased to meet you. Thank you for calling us." She shook my hand with a firm grip, then took a good look around at the oak panelling and the wooden floor, the impressive staircase and the portraits of my ancestors on the walls. While she was distracted I was able to study her.

We were about the same height and the same age, maybe she was a little older, I spotted some fine lines around her eyes. She had a wonderful mane of hair, but I couldn't tell you what colour it had been originally, because now it was all the colours of the rainbow. She wore tight black jeans and a black motorcycle jacket with a sapphire blue scarf at the neck, and matching blue lace-up boots. She moved with an assurance that I recognised. George had it. They also shared the same watchfulness. Their eyes were never still, their heads regularly swivelling as they paid careful attention to their surroundings, constantly on the alert.

"What a fabulous old place you have here. It reeks of history." She pulled out her warrant card, making her visit official. "I'm DI Elise Liddell. This is my colleague, DS Ezra Izax."

He nodded at me, his brown eyes glittering. I could tell he liked to smile. "Ma'am."

"I see the local police are here." Elise jabbed a thumb towards the drive where several marked cars had been parked.

"Yes. Unfortunately, we had a delivery driver on site when I discovered the body and he called them."

"Yeah, that's a nuisance, but don't worry, we come up against that kind of challenge all the time," Elise reassured me. Ezra nodded at her. "We'll take care of that."

She sounded so sure of herself that I couldn't help but feel a sneaking sympathy for poor George.

"Shall I show you the way?" I asked and Elise nodded.

"After you."

I led them through the bar. Heads turned as we walked, and a general hush fell over the room. I felt a little self-conscious, but Elise smiled and waved. "Morning ladies! As you were."

There were a few titters and I spotted both Phyllis and Gwyn peering over their spectacles at the newcomer. As we passed through the door into the back passage, Phyllis's imperious voice rang out. "Did you see her hair? Whatever next?"

I cast a glance over my shoulder at Elise and she winked at me. "I get that all the time."

"I should imagine your hair makes you stand out from the crowd," I ventured. "You'll be giving my hotel manager ideas."

"Elise likes to stand out from the crowd," Ezra said. "When she's after a murderer, she wants them to know she's on their trail."

That seemed a little contrary to George's softly, softly approach but I figured there was room for both types of detective.

A small group of people in plastic coveralls had congregated outside The Snug. Elise pulled out her warrant card again.

"Who's in charge here?" she called, and after a moment George emerged from the room. "That would be me." He pulled off one of his gloves and extended a hand. "DS George Gilchrist, Devon and Cornwall Police."

"DI Elise Liddell, Ministry of Witches Police. Pleased to meet you." A couple of the overalled scene of crime officers snuck a look at Elise with a mixture of bewilderment and unease.

"DS Ezra Izax," Ezra offered.

Elise flipped open her notebook. "I understand we'll be working together on this one." She pointed into the room. "Before you go any further, would it be possible for me to have a quick look?" It didn't sound much like a request to me. "I'd like to get a feel for what happened."

George stepped back. "Of course. Please don't touch—"

"I can assure you I know what I'm doing, Sergeant," Elise smiled.

"Of course, Ma'am." George backed down. "It's all yours."

Elise turned to me. "You found the body, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Right. I'm sure this is getting boring for you but it's really important that we hear it straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. Can you take us through what happened?"

I stepped inside with Elise, Ezra following closely at her heels, George hanging back but obviously listening to every word.

Elise regarded the cages and baskets with interest. "Familiars?"

"Possibly some of them, but most of these belonged to Delia and her mother. I'm not sure how many were familiars and how many were simply pets."

"Is there a difference?" George asked. Elise turned a cool gaze his way. He shuffled in place and coughed.

"Go on, Ms Daemonne," Ezra said.

I explained again what I'd seen, how the snake and the spider and a cat had been out of their cages and how Delia had been hanging in the air. Elise stopped me there. "Hanging? Right above where she's lying now?"

I looked down at Delia. Her pale face had turned slightly mottled now, her eyes taking on a cast. I wanted to close them for her. "Yes."

"And at about what height?"

I stepped a little closer and indicated the height. Almost the same as the table.

"And you said she was held in a beam of some kind."

I nodded. "Wrapped round a thin thread."

"What colour was the beam?"

"A kind of goldy colour? Cold. I don't know if that makes sense. Not sunshine gold like a wedding ring. Almost silver but with a yellow tinge."

"Is that important?" George had his notebook out and his pen poised.

Elise nodded. "It is to us, sergeant. It won't help you though." She stepped towards him and glanced at his notes. "You and I will be investigating very different things."

"In the interests of co-operation—" George started, but Elise cut him off.

"In the interests of co-operation you and I can work very closely together, but I should imagine that while you may get your man—or perhaps woman in this case—you're unlikely to actually solve the crime. You'll have to leave that to me."

George frowned.

Elise stepped closer to him, so close she could have leaned in and kissed his cheek had she wanted to. "Let's face it, George, no-one at your nick would ever believe what happened here." She smiled and his eyes widened.

Was she flirting with him?

I quelled a slight feeling of jealousy. *Water under the bridge and all that, Alf*, I reminded myself. "Do you think you know what hap-

pened here, then?" I asked.

Elise crinkled her eyes. "It's early doors. I have a few ideas I'd like to pursue. There's lots we need to establish, like who she was and what all these animals are doing here."

She knelt next to Delia and, much as George had done, reached out to feel the woman's neck. "Have you taken all the photos you need of her in this position?" she asked George, and he stepped out into the hallway to ask the photographer.

"Yes," he said. "But we will need a few more when the coroner gets here."

"That's fine." Elise pushed the woman's hair away from her face and scrutinised the neck and under her fringe before standing up again. "Alright," she told George, her face serious. "Your coroner can come in and do what he or she needs to do. When the body is removed I'm going to need photos of the scene, and then I want every animal in this room categorised. They'll need to be taken out one by one and stored somewhere else. I want to examine this room when it's empty."

"No problem," George said.

"Great," she rolled her shoulders back. "Has anyone found the mother yet?"

I shook my head. "Not as far as I know."

"We need to get onto that," she said. "And any chance of a cuppa? It's a long way from London and I'm gagging."

George and Elise took to the dining room to make a formal announcement to the guests. They sketched over the finer details of what had unfolded this morning but were both firm in their instructions that nobody was to leave the inn under any circumstances until they had been interviewed. Even after that, they were to remain within the confines of the grounds and the building itself.

As Charity and I cordoned off an area of the dining room near the new elevator to facilitate a little privacy, Gwyn apologised profusely to Kappa Sigma Granma about the disruption to the week's activities, promising that normal service would be resumed as soon as possible. I raised my eyebrows at that.

Poor Delia. Did nobody care about her?

As subordinates, Ezra and Andy Borewick were tasked with interviewing the staff and all of the inn's guests, although Ezra had the additional task of interviewing the ghosts. That was a first for me. Some witches can see ghosts, and some can't, pretty much the same as ordinary people. I had a particular knack—for some reason that

I'd never been able to fathom—of being able to summon ghosts to me, even those caught between two spiritual planes.

George, of course, was well aware of the inn's older inhabitants and, with a little prompting from me, had been able to see and converse with them, but that was certainly not true of everyone he worked with. Those who flatly denied the existence of spirits were not gifted with the sight.

I sat down with Ezra first, so that he could take a statement from me. George and Elise had returned to The Snug to begin the laborious task of processing the scene. Being the nosy soul I am, I desperately wanted to follow them out there and watch what was going on. Instead, I repeated what I'd told both the senior officers already. Ezra took copious notes, writing down the gist of what I'd said.

"She was a strange one," I said. "She had allergies—"

"How did you know she had allergies?" asked Ezra.

"Mmm, she told me. When she arrived."

"Food allergies?"

Ting.

Ezra flicked his eyes over my shoulder. I turned around. The elevator had been called upstairs. The little brass arrow ran around the semi-circle on the iron panel above the doors.

Ezra coughed and I faced forwards again. "Were they food allergies?"

"No. To her pets, familiars, whatever they were."

"Did she say they were her familiars?"

I cast my mind back. It seemed an absolute age. Had it really been less than twenty-four hours? "Erm … no. She didn't call them her familiars, I don't think. Is that important?"

Ezra raised one eyebrow. "I'm asking the questions, Ms Daemonne."

Ting.

I couldn't help it. I had to look. A small doddery old dear called Tempestas Darkskull, a witch with the biggest and hairiest wart on her nose, shuffled forwards with the aid of a walking stick.

Ezra coughed again.

"Sorry," I said. "Where were we?"

"The familiars—"

"Oh yes. No. She told me she was allergic to her animals and asked me to house them separately, which, although I hadn't been expecting that many of them, I was happy to do." Not strictly true, of course, but the customer is king. "I was frankly amazed by how many animals she had with her. I've never known a witch with more than one or two familiars, have you?"

Ezra's cheek twitched. "It didn't put you out at all? All these animals?"

I sat back in my chair. What was he suggesting? "Mmm, no."

"You don't sound certain. You said earlier you thought people found her difficult. Did you find her difficult?"

Ting.

I cast a distracted glance over my shoulder. The elevator wound its way back towards the ceiling once more.

"Ms Daemonne?"

"Yes. No. Well, kind of."

Ezra's pen hovered over his notes. "Which is it?"

Ting.

I rubbed my forehead, irritated by the sound of the elevator. Its cheerful call was always followed by a whine or a whirr, depending on which way it was travelling. The rhythm of it was starting to grate on me. "I found her oddly and unnecessarily aggressive, if the truth be told. She was one of those people who are thoughtless in

what they say and what they do." I told him about the final encounter we'd had the evening before. "She ran off and I didn't see her again after that."

"Where did she go?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea. She ran off in the direction of the kitchen and the back door. From there she could turn left, walk in a north-west direction. Speckled Wood lies at the end of the back garden. Or I have chickens—ghost chickens—out there, and there are a couple of large sheds, a greenhouse, a few outbuildings."

"You might show me around a little later if you don't mind?"

"Of course. No problem."

"How was Ms Cuthbert with your other guests?" Ezra asked.

I gestured around at the witches, gathered together on their tables, no doubt gossiping about the unfolding events of the day. "She had a knack of putting everyone's backs up."

Ezra nodded and wrote that down. "Do you think everyone is going to say the same? That Delia was aggressive and difficult?"

"I would imagine so."

Ting.

My fingers curled into claws in my lap. I had to take steps to get rid of the elevator. There had to be a way.

"Did you overhear anyone threatening Ms Cuthbert at all?"

That was an easier one to answer. "No. Nobody."

"Alright, Ms Daemonne. Thank you. That will do for now." He checked his watch and wrote the time on his notes. "I may need to ask you a few more questions later …"

Undoubtedly, I thought.

"… but for now, that's all."

I breathed in relief, aware of the tension I was carrying. Ezra's cool questioning had me feeling like I'd done something wrong.

"If you could ask your housekeeper …" he scanned his notes, "Florence, is it? Florence Fidler? Do I know that name from somewhere?"

"*The Great Witchy Cake Off*?" I suggested and stood up.

"Of course!" Ezra's face lit up. The man obviously had a sweet tooth. He and Florence would get on very well.

I smiled. "I'll get her to bring you a snack."

Ezra beamed, practically dribbling at the idea. "I'd be honoured."

Ting.

I whirled about in annoyance. Given half a chance I'd have throttled whoever walked out of that darn elevator at that moment. The doors slid elegantly open, but there didn't appear to be anyone inside.

I frowned and stepped forwards, cocking my head to peer inside.

Mr Hoo waddled out, without a care in the world.

"Excuse me?" I bent over him and he craned his little round face up at me.

"Hoo—oo?"

"What do you mean, 'what's up?' Why are you taking the elevator?"

"Hooo-ooo-ooo. Hoo." He wanted to sit by the huge fire in the main bar.

"What about the fire in my office?" I asked.

"Hoo-ooh!" Not lit. "Hoooooo."

Oh.

"But you don't need to use the lift," I pointed out. "You're a bird. You have wings."

"Hoo-oo." He couldn't deny that.

"It's lazy," I said.

"Hoo-oo-oo."

“You cheeky blighter.” Mr Hoo jumped into the air and soared gracefully across the bar to the large wing-backed chair next to the fire. He liked to hang out there on chilly afternoons.

“Ah, Ms Daemonne?” Ezra prompted me.

I’d forgotten about him. “Oh yes. Beg your pardon. Florence,” I reminded myself. I nodded and walked away.

“Too-wit,” Mr Hoo called after me. “Too-wit.”

Impossibly annoying owl.

Several hours later and Mrs Cuthbert had still not been found.

I’d sent Finbarr, Ned and Zephaniah into Speckled Wood to look for her. They knew that area of the forest better than anyone, and I had high hopes they’d spot some signs of her. She’d slept in her bed overnight, so she couldn’t have gone far.

George had sent a PC down into the village to enquire at the café, the post office and at Whittle Stores as to whether anyone had seen her. He’d also asked me to pass on her address and so I wearily climbed the stairs to the first floor, intending to scan through my paperwork and the databases we maintained on the computer.

I pushed open my office door and pulled up sharply.

The twisted iron frame of the elevator dominated the centre of the room. It had nicked the corner of my desk, knocking it sideways, and the leaning tower of paperwork that was a permanent fixture of my personal space had been scattered all over the floor.

“What?” I dashed forward. “No!”

I rattled the ironwork, but to no avail. The elevator was as physically permanent here as it was downstairs.

Ting.

The wooden top of the elevator appeared in the hole in the floor and moved sedately upwards.

Ting.

It didn't stop, it simply tinged to let me know it was passing through. I tipped my head back to watch it disappear through the hole in the ceiling.

Ting.

It halted on the floor above. Footsteps walked into it.

Ting.

Here it came again.

Ting.

This time it stopped. I stood back as the door open. Tempestas Darkskull hobbled out. "Alright, my dear?" she asked in a tremulous voice. I recalled that she was both hard of hearing and very short-sighted.

"Yes," I returned, because really, what else could I say?

She gazed about herself in evident confusion. "This isn't downstairs, is it?"

"No, erm, I mean, it's downstairs from the second floor," I spoke loudly and slowly so that she could hear me, "but it's not downstairs-downstairs on the ground floor. This is my office on the first floor."

"Ah! My mistake." She cackled merrily. "Wrong floor." She retraced her steps, literally walking backwards to get back inside the lift. She thrust out a bent thumb and jabbed at a button then waved her walking stick at me. "Cheery-bye, my dear!"

"Cheery-bye," I echoed.

Ting.

The doors drifted slowly closed. With a click and a whirr, the elevator disappeared through the hole in the floor.

"Seriously?" I muttered and squatted down to start gathering up my scattered paperwork.

Ting. Click. Whine.

Ting.

The doors opened again, and Phyllis Bliss blinked at me.

"Hello Phyllis," I said, without standing up.

"This isn't the second floor?" She held out a hand to stop the doors closing automatically.

"No. This is my office. On the first floor."

"So I see," she said. "Goodness me. It could do with a tidy up." She dropped her hand.

I couldn't fault that observation. "Indeed."

"I don't know how you can work in that sort of chaos. You know, my grandson—"

The doors closed.

Ting.

I crumpled up a piece of paper and threw it at the elevator.

By dinner time I'd managed to create some sort of semblance of order in the office, and the papers had been re-stacked neatly enough. I'm not saying that I'd grown used to the incessant rumbling, whirring, clanking and tinging of the elevator, but certainly popping a pair of earbuds on and listening to some Cocteau Twins—vaguely reminiscent of a choir of wonky inn ghosts singing sweetly and tunefully in the dead of night—had provided some light relief to the situation. My cheek muscles hurt from the benign smiling I'd been doing every time the doors opened and someone mouthed, "Oops, sorry! Wrong floor!" at me.

Knowing that I'd be needed downstairs for the evening dinner service, I reluctantly turned my music off and began shutting down my computer systems.

Ting.

Puffing out my cheeks, I pivoted to face whatever distraction was heading my way this time.

Tempestas Darkskull again. Except this time she was stark naked. Her long grey hair tumbled over her pale shoulders, her wondrous weathered body, with all its glorious scars and wrinkles and skin folds and blemishes and warts and all, on show for anyone—or me at least—to see.

She cocked her head, regarding me the way a blackbird might cast its wary gaze at a hungry cat. "Oh, it's you again, Alfhild. I thought I'd hit the right button for the ground floor. Am I late for dinner?"

Out of habit I checked the time, even though I knew exactly what time it was. "Noooooo. Not yet."

"Jolly good." She held the doors for me. "Will you be joining us?"

"Erm, yes." I waved my hand in an abstract way. "Did you forget —?"

She peered down at her bare-naked self and did a little jig. Parts of her moved that I really didn't need to see. I adjusted my gaze. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Is there a dress code?"

"I, erm, no. To be honest, there isn't."

"Excellent," she smiled. She shook her walking stick at me. "Well come on in here, if you're coming downstairs. We'll get out at the right floor this time," she said. "Hurry, hurry. I'm famished."

I took the stairs.

Delia's body was removed from The Snug later that evening while most of my guests were chowing down on either a pan-fried sea bass with a mint and pea dressing, boiled potatoes and an asparagus mousse, or a three-bean chilli for the vegetarians.

Or plain toast with a smattering of dripping and a Farley's rusk on the side in one case.

I know, I know, don't even go there.

Zephaniah had returned from Speckled Wood without any positive news. I instructed him to keep everyone topped up with their beverage of choice while I checked on the detectives. George, supping on the umpteenth cup of coffee of the day, appeared weary. So, too, did Elise. She conferred with Ezra down the corridor but looked up as I approached.

"We're just about done with the body," she told me, "and tomorrow I'll need to get in there for a closer look at those animals."

"Alright," I said, wondering if she thought one of the animals had killed Delia. That seemed unlikely to me. Of course I'd heard of

animals who could perform magick, usually basic stuff, but I'd never seen one with my own eyes.

Elise stretched and groaned.

"Do you have somewhere to stay tonight?" I asked. "Only, I'd offer you a room here but we're completely full."

"Ezra has booked us into a hotel in Whittlecombe," Elise answered.

"The Hay Loft?"

Ezra nodded. "It was called something like that, yeah. Modern, clean."

Pfft. "Oh. It's nice and close at least," I said. "We'll see you bright and early then."

"You will," Elise agreed. "No word on Mrs Cuthbert yet?"

"No."

"She has to be a person of interest right now. I believe George—DS Gilchrist—has drafted in extra officers to look for her."

"I hope they find her," I mused. "It's going to drop below freezing overnight."

"Peculiar, isn't it?" Elise mused aloud. "I wonder where she could have gone."

One of the scene technicians came out of The Snug. He glanced from George to Elise. "We're ready to move the body now."

George nodded. "We'll take her out the back. There's a private ambulance waiting for her there." He acknowledged me. "I'd hate to put your guests off their dinners."

I clasped a hand to my chest, feeling genuinely hurt by his insinuation that life was carrying on as normal. What did he imagine I could do? The entire contingent of Kappa Sigma Granma had been ordered to stay within the grounds of Whittle Inn until the police

had finished with them. Most of them were elderly. I had to ensure they had sustenance else I'd have more than one body to deal with.

He noticed the gesture and shook his head, a tiny movement that signalled an apology.

"You know I'm happy to feed any and all of you." I indicated the kitchen. "There's plenty to go around."

"It smells delicious," Elise enthused. "We might take you up on that."

Increasingly grumpy, George huddled deeper into his coat. "Br-rrr," he said. "Has someone left the back door open? It's freezing in here."

I placed a hand on the radiator. Cold to the touch. The heating had gone off again. It never rained but it poured. "Can you excuse me for a minute?" I asked. "I need to attend to my boiler."

"Is that a euphemism for something I don't want to know about?" Ezra asked without breaking a smile, but his eyes wrinkled in amusement. Detectives tend to have a weird sense of humour.

"No-oooo," I said. "I really do. It's been playing up."

"Is that so?" He scratched his chin and looked around, as though he could see through the walls into every room in the inn. "I might be able to help you with that."

"Really? Are you a central heating engineer?"

He shook his head. "Not me. But my brother-in-law is."

"Local to us?"

"Based in London."

I pulled a face. "Not much use down here, really."

"Well, if you need someone who's a specialist in certain makes of boilers, just give me a shout."

Ezra obviously thought I lacked the capacity to Google my own plumbers and engineers. I smiled my thanks, trying not to look too

patronising.

"Can we come through?" A woman dressed in blue plastic coveralls bobbed into view, wheeling a trolley.

"Yes, come on in." George shepherded us out of the way. We lingered outside The Snug, awkwardly standing around, while inside Delia was covered in a body bag and loaded onto the gurney. We didn't have long to wait; the process was relatively quick. We bowed our heads as she was wheeled past us and taken down the hall and through the kitchen.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I hadn't known her long at all, and she'd been a challenging person, but I felt so sorry for her.

And her mother.

Where on earth could Mrs Cuthbert be?

"We'll see you in the morning, Alf," George said as he prepared to follow the ambulance to the hospital. "In the meantime, don't let anyone in that room."

"I won't." I followed the detectives to the back door and closed it after them. Frost had already started to coat the grass outside and the back lawn sparkled in the moonlight. I shivered, reminded of the boiler, and quickly ducked inside.

As I'd expected, it had turned itself off again. I prodded the exposed wires with the tip of my wand. Something crackled and fizzed and a spark leapt out at me. But not an electrical spark. I would have expected an electrical spark to have been yellow or white, something in that colour range, but this had been noticeably green.

Interesting. What sort of wire emits green sparks? I hesitated because, having burned wire in a fire before, I'd seen the different

colours it could give off. But I'd never seen a green spark from an active electrical device before.

I tapped my wand against my chin. Ezra's words resonated with me. He'd suggested I might need a specialist boiler engineer.

What if the specialist I needed was some kind of magician? What if the boiler for my wonky inn was a magick boiler?

"Ned?" I called, knowing wherever he was either he'd hear me, or one of the other ghosts would and tell him he was needed.

He appeared a few seconds later.

"Do you know if we have anything to remove the layers of paint from the side of the boiler here?" I asked, tapping the side panel where the maker's plate was located.

Ned examined the area. "Not an easy job, that. There must be half a dozen layers of paint on there."

"If not more. I wonder how long this baby's been in place."

Pointing at the pipes, Ned nodded. "Lead pipework. A long time."

"So what do you think?" I asked.

"Let me see what there is in the shed."

A little later he returned with Finbarr in tow, clutching a handful of rags and a bottle of something cloudy. "Ned said you wanted to remove some paint."

"Not just some paint." I pointed at the area I wanted to uncover. "Look. See where the paintwork is chipped here? There are loads of layers there."

Finbarr scratched at the area with a stubby thumbnail. "Who, in their right mind, paints a boiler pink?"

"Some of my forebears certainly had dubious taste in home decorating," I said.

"I seem to recall that was your great-grandmother, Miss Alf," Ned offered.

I turned to him in amazement. "Gwyn painted the boiler pink? Why would she do that?"

Ned shrugged. "There'd been a war on."

"Oh." I considered this. It sounded feasible. Kind of.

"Alright," said Finbarr. "Let me see what we have here …"

He uncapped his bottle and tipped the liquid onto the cloth, wetting a patch. The room instantly filled with an eye-wateringly strong scent of chemicals. I blinked, wishing I had a mask. Finbarr seemed oblivious, however. He carefully dabbed at where the paint had chipped away. Ned and I leaned forward to watch.

"You're in my light there," Finbarr complained, so we stepped back. Or rather I stepped back and Ned fluttered to the other side of Finbarr where the light fell at a different angle. It didn't make any difference. Ned didn't have a shadow.

Finbarr rubbed harder. Nothing seemed to be happening. He upended his bottle once more, soaking the rag in his hand. I rolled my head on my shoulders. This could take an age and, after the day I'd had, I was shattered.

"It's good, but it's not right." Finbarr stepped back and admired his handiwork. "You know what would help here?"

"More elbow grease?" Ned suggested.

"A flame thrower?" I asked.

"No. Easier than any of that." Finbarr pulled out his wand. He tapped the side of the boiler gently. "*Arcana relevant!*"

I watched entranced as the paint liquified, first to a tacky consistency like fresh paint, then to more of a sludge where all the colours

came together in a globular pinky-beige mess, then a jelly-like blancmange substance, which finally thinned out until it was no thicker than coloured water.

Finbarr swiped at the boiler with his rag, wiping away the remnants of the paint, and exposing the original silver iron of the contraction itself. The maker's name stood proud.

Virtuoso.

"Bingo!" I said. "That's who I need to track down."

"It's a Spellbinder model." I doodled on the pad of A4 I had in front of me with my green felt tip, the phone clamped to my left ear. All of my normal-coloured biro pens had gone walkies. I blamed Charity for that. She often used my desk when she needed to email guests about reservations or update our database and mailing list, then she'd sashay off with all my precious pens. All she'd left me with today were a blunt pencil, an ancient fountain pen that had probably belonged to my father when he was a kid—and which had long ago run out of ink anyway—and this felt tip.

"That's right," I repeated. "The company was called Virtuoso."

Ting.

The elevator zoomed past me. I tried to cover my right ear with my right hand and only succeeded in stabbing myself with the green felt tip, tattooing myself just below the eye.

I listened to the woman on the other end of the phone while colouring in the petals of a flower. "You've never heard of it? Oh … Yes … No, I appreciate that it was installed a very long time ago …"

I cricked my neck. This was my eleventh phone call in succession. If I didn't get a biscuit and a cup of tea soon I'd pass out from low sugar levels. "Absolutely," I said. "Thanks so much for your time. Bye now. Bye."

I replaced the receiver and swung back in the chair, glaring at the elevator as it whined on its way back to the floor above me. Fortunately, the sheer number of witches alighting on the wrong floor had abated, but even so, the interruptions were frequent and distracting.

I had another two central heating engineers on my list, but to be honest I didn't hold out much hope. Nobody had heard of a make of boiler going by the name of Spellbinder, or the Virtuoso company that had created it in the first place.

Zephaniah turned up, hovering in the doorway. "Here's another one, Miss Alf. Where would you like it?"

He wafted a cage closer to me so that I could examine it. This one must have been a hamster or a mouse or something. All I could see was a huge fluffy bed and a wheel. I felt rather like a hamster on a wheel myself, so I would have appreciated burrowing into a big squidgy bed and hiding away from the eyes of the world.

"Hoooo," Mr Hoo, perched on the back of my chair, announced behind me.

"Her name's Portia, is it?" I asked him. For some reason, he felt it important to fill me in on every single animal that was brought into the office, and yes, you've guessed it, there were an awful lot of them. Elise had requested they be moved and of course, I needed to accommodate them somehow. I didn't have any available space except the large cold rooms behind the kitchen, which simply wouldn't do, or my office.

And so here they were.

Ned, Archibald and Zephaniah had been carefully carrying them —or escorting, if you prefer—up the back stairs as the police catalogued and released each one from The Snug. By now we had identified the last of the familiars belonging to the other witches staying at the inn and they had all been reunited with their owners. That still left an unbelievable forty cages, baskets, crates and vivariums, all containing Delia's pets.

What on earth had convinced her that bringing all of them here would be a good idea?

Already my office was beginning to smell like the ape house at London Zoo.

"Hoo. Hoo-ooo."

"No, you can't have her for lunch." I scratched out the phone number of the firm I'd just dialled.

"T-wit."

"Same to you, with brass knobs on."

Archibald appeared at the door with an empty birdcage. I recognised it as belonging to the parakeet. "This is the last of the cages, Madam," he said.

I stared at it, wondering if the loss of the parakeet had set in play a series of events that had ended up with the murder of Delia, or whether that had been a sad coincidence. She'd said the parakeet had been her favourite. I could understand how upset she must have been. I'd be distraught if I lost Mr Hoo.

I stood up and walked across to take it from the air in front of Archibald. "You didn't have any luck tracking Cuthbert Cuthbert down?" I'd asked him this dozens of times.

"No, Madam. Unfortunately not," he confirmed. "I am still keeping an eye out for him."

"Hooooooooo," Mr Hoo interjected. "Hooooo-ooooo."

Archibald regarded Mr Hoo with interest. "What's he saying, Madam?"

"He's claiming that Cuthbert Cuthbert was a girl parakeet, not a boy parakeet."

"Hoooo," Mr Hoo said.

I shrugged. "I guess Delia didn't know that. It must be hard to tell boys from girls in the bird world."

"Hooo-ooo-ooo!" Mr Hoo sounded most indignant.

Archibald smiled. "I'll carry on looking, Madam, of course I will, however we are very busy, what with all the requests from your guests."

"They're *our* guests," I reminded him, not unkindly. I liked everyone who worked at Whittle Inn to have some sense of ownership. They didn't—couldn't, usually—benefit from their work economically, but Whittle Inn provided a safe haven for us all.

"Of course they are, Madam," Archibald agreed readily enough. I think he'd struggled to find his feet a little in such a small environment compared to what he was used to. But it beat Castle Iadului hands down. Let's face it, anything did.

"What sort of things are they requesting?" I peered into the empty cage dangling in my right hand.

"Oh you know, bingo daubers, eye drops, indigestion remedies, incontinence pads, Paracetamol, weather almanacs, chalk, candles, hair of bat, wing of fruit fly, a vial of the blood of a virgin—"

I held my spare hand up. "I get it."

"Oh, there's more."

"I'm sure there is." I placed the forlorn parakeet cage on top of my desk. "Are you managing to find everything you need?"

"I struggled with the blood of a virgin, Madam."

“You do surprise me.” I hid a smile. “I’ll give Millicent a call and see if she can spare any.”

“I’d be grateful, Madam.”

“I’ll do it now,” I reached for the phone again.

I needed some air, so when Millicent offered to meet me at the end of the lane, I agreed. Throwing on my long coat and winding a multi-coloured scarf around my neck, I raced outside. It felt good to get away from all the old folks hanging out in the bar. The novelty of the police presence had worn off and most of them had grown bored now, so they had begun to play their games in earnest. Besides the bagatelle, there was Monopoly, Cluedo, Trivial Pursuit and a chess tournament to choose from, along with cribbage, bridge and even—and this pleased me way more than it should have done—a Buckaroo tournament. Every time I passed that table I’d hear the clattering of small plastic pieces and a witch hollering in deep dismay.

Weak sunlight filtered through the skeletal branches of the oak trees as I skipped down the lane. I could smell burning wood, the scent of several dozen wood-burning stoves and perhaps the odd bonfire. The grass still sparkled with a frost that had yet to melt off. The air was so cold today, I doubted that it would.

Millicent waited for me at the bottom, a large basket over her arm. At the sight of me dashing towards her she smiled, and her two dogs rushed to greet me. Jasper, an enormous hairy lurcher, and Sunny, a small and fluffy Yorkshire Terrier, danced around, sniffing my pockets for titbits as I reached down to fuss them.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get up to see you the other night,” she said without much ado. “I was attending to a lady in Abbotts Cromleigh

who has some weird flu."

"Ugh. Well, don't worry. It's all a bit late now."

"So the rumours in the village are true?" Millicent pounced. It didn't surprise me in the least that the news had travelled so quickly. Whittlecombe was a tight-knit community and the amount of police activity over the past few days would not have gone unnoticed.

"Do we have another mysterious death, you mean?" I stood up, pulling a face. "Yes, we do." I sighed. "Why me, Mills? Am I cursed?"

She gave that serious consideration. "It's a possibility."

"Oh, don't say that."

She grinned and reached up to straighten her rather baggy woollen hat which had fallen over her eyes.

"What are you wearing?" I asked.

It was a familiar greeting where Millicent was concerned. She was a witch without even the slightest fashion sense at all. Today she had on an oversized woollen coat, quite obviously hand knitted. I think it was supposed to be a kind of orange colour, but at some point the person who had knitted it, and possibly that had been Millicent herself, had run out of orange wool and substituted beige in parts and baby yellow in others. It was ghastly. By contrast, the hat had been knitted in rainbow-coloured wool and had obviously been made especially for someone with a head the size of Humpty Dumpty. A dozen or so crocheted flowers in shades of puce and puke had been attached, adding to its weight, resulting in it constantly slipping down over Millicent's eyes.

"It's a sweet little combo, isn't it?" Millicent replied and handed over the basket.

I took it from her and pulled aside the clean chequered tea towel covering the contents. She had carefully arranged everything I'd

asked for. Numerous different coloured candles, small jars of creature parts—each neatly branded with its own label, and several jars of homemade jam.

"Any virgin's blood?" I asked.

"Underneath the lemon curd." Millicent reached in and pulled out the tiniest vial I'd ever seen. The label that had been tied to the neck of the bottle dwarfed it.

"Good gracious! Is that it?"

Millicent snorted. "This stuff is like gold dust. Be careful it doesn't get spilled." She glanced up at me. "Who wants it anyway? And what are they going to do with it?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, I think it's a good idea you check that out. This is potent stuff."

"Okay, I will," I sighed. "I promise."

"You sound a little stressed," Millicent commiserated.

"You don't say?" I rubbed my eyes. "Besides this mysterious death we've had, I'm up to my neck in familiars and witches. There are more witches staying with me than I've seen in one place since my mother's funeral, and then some."

"And this murder? How did it happen?"

I glanced around, as though the murderer might have been listening to us. I suppose that wouldn't have been an impossibility. He or she was still out there somewhere. "It's mighty peculiar. I found her being held up in a beam of energy. As though she were being levitated by somebody or something."

"Ooh. That's an odd one." Millicent mulled it over. "And she was already dead?"

"Definitely," I said. "She was cold."

"A witch-on-witch killing?" Millicent shuddered. "That's not something to be blasé about."

I leaned closer to her. "We have a couple of detectives down here from the Ministry of Witches. Someone up there is taking this very seriously."

Millicent looked impressed. "Treading on George's toes, are they?"

I laughed. I shouldn't have done but I did. Poor George. "He's not best pleased."

A sudden breeze alerted me to a ghost apparating alongside us. Zephaniah.

"Beg your pardon, Miss, but we have a problem."

So what's new, I wanted to ask.

"What's happened now?" Millicent asked.

"It's Finbarr," Zephaniah said. "I think the police are going to arrest him."

"What's going on?" I confronted Elise in the reception area, where she and Ezra were huddled over their phones.

She held a hand up. "Hey, it's nothing to do with me. DC Gilchrist seems to have a bee in his bonnet."

That didn't sound like George. "It's DS," I reminded her and stomped off through the bar, ignoring the gatherings of witches around the various tables. All of my guests were getting on with their lives as though all this was normal. I had begun to feel uncomfortable about it. How could anyone play games at a time like this?

I located George and Andy Borewick in the kitchen. Finbarr was sitting on a bench at the table, his face woebegone.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

George headed me off before I could reach my Irish friend, ushering me gently out of the kitchen. "What are you playing at?" I asked him.

George looked uncomfortable. "Sorry, Alf. It does seem that Finbarr has been a little liberal with the truth."

"What does that mean?" I glowered up at him.

"It just means that he didn't tell us he'd been out on a walk with Delia the day before she died."

Ah. Of course he had done that. "I set that up for them. It doesn't mean that he killed her."

"It doesn't mean that he didn't either," George replied. "My guv'nor is on the case. I think he's a bit spooked by your friends from London."

"They're not my friends—"

"Whatever. He wants us to produce some results." George nodded in the direction of the kitchen. "DC Borewick thinks Finbarr is our man."

"Well, he isn't." I folded my arms across my chest. "Borewick is a fool."

"I don't think he's a fool. Mistaken maybe." George sighed. "Look, Andy is young. He's a graduate. He wants to make a name for himself. He'll soon see there's no evidence to base this assertion on. In the meantime, he wants to interview Finbarr under caution. It won't hurt."

"Here?"

"No. Down at the station."

"You can't do that," I said automatically, and the more I thought about it, the more I realised that taking Finbarr away from Whittle Inn would be a disaster all round. Finbarr maintained the perimeter boundary that kept The Mori at bay. More than that, he lived for the outdoors. It was all he cared about. If the police threw him in a cell, how would he survive? "Please don't," I begged. "Can't you interview him here? Can't I be with him?"

"He's not being very forthcoming, Alf. That's why we need to take him into town."

“Let me talk to him.” I grabbed George’s arm. “I’ll ask him to tell you everything he knows and if you still think that he’s the one to blame then you can take him … but you won’t.”

“I don’t know,” George frowned. “I’d have to persuade DC Borewick.”

“You can do it.” I gripped his shoulders. “For me. Please.”

His face softened, a soft crinkling of the skin around his eyes. “Alright. Wait here. Let me see what I can do.”

Five minutes later, I was sitting next to Finbarr and DC Borewick was scrutinising the pair of us with much distrust.

“You need to tell them everything, Finbarr,” I reiterated. “I’ve promised them that you’ll tell the truth.”

“There’s just not that much to tell, Alfhild,” Finbarr avoided my eyes. Obviously there was.

“Let’s start by how you came to be in the forest with Miss Cuthbert,” George ventured.

Finbarr cast a sideways glance at me, and I knew he thought he’d be incriminating me. “The truth,” I said, my voice firm. “All of it.”

Finbarr took a deep breath. “Alfhild here approached me two days ago, when all of our guests had started to arrive. She said she had been asked to take someone on a tour of Speckled Wood, but because she was busy she wouldn’t be able to do it.”

“And you were happy to do that?” the young DC asked.

“Aye, to be sure.” He sounded anything but sure.

“Finbarr,” George prompted.

“Well, alright, maybe not. Alfhild said this woman, Delia Cuthbert, was a bit of a special case. A bit strange, like.”

“So you’re suggesting Alfhild didn’t like Ms Cuthbert?” Borewick asked. He had his notebook and pen out and was poised to take notes.

“I didn’t say that,” Finbarr protested.

I interjected. “It’s not that I didn’t like her. I’m sure I didn’t know her properly at all. It’s more that she did seem to need a lot of attention, I suppose.”

“Thank you, Ms Daemonne. I’d just like to remind you that it’s Finbarr we’re interviewing here.”

My eyebrows shot up into my hairline. Cheeky little man. My wand hand itched.

George narrowed his eyes at me, and I slumped on the bench and sulked.

“Go on,” said Borewick. “What happened next?”

“I sought out Delia in the bar where she was sitting with some other ladies.”

“Her mother?” George asked.

Finbarr shrugged.

“I don’t believe so,” I said, casting my mind back. “I think it was Phyllis Bliss, one of my great-grandmother’s oldest friends, and Phyllis’s chums.”

Borewick glared at me and Finbarr jumped in quickly. “Ah, that’d be right. I remember that lady now. Phyllis, ye say?” He checked with me and I nodded. “Rather strait-laced and old-fashioned in a buttoned-up kind of way, I’m thinking?”

“That’s her,” I confirmed. A perfect description of the old battleaxe.

“Because now that you mention it, she and Delia were having a difference of opinion.”

“What about?” I squinted at him in surprise.

"Ms Daemonne?" Borewick interrupted.

"You're not supposed to be asking the questions," George reminded me, but I heard the barely suppressed amusement in his voice.

I looked up at both officers. "Sorry. But that's important information, isn't it? That Delia had a bit of a tiff with Phyllis?" Was I dumping Phyllis in deep do-do? Possibly. I decided it was payback for all the times she'd criticised me over the past few days, and although deep inside I recognised that it did seem to be a mean thing to be doing, I had to sow some reasonable doubts into young Andy's mind, before he got carried away and ended up arresting my Irish friend.

"And what about Charity?" I continued. "You know she had a difference of opinion with Delia too."

George cleared his throat and tipped his head at me. A warning that I was pushing my luck. I pressed my lips together.

"Do you recall what Delia and Mrs Bliss were discussing?" Borewick asked.

Finbarr looked perplexed. "To be sure, I have no interest at all in what women gossip about." He slapped his hand on the table and leaned forwards to address Borewick more forcefully. "That's why I prefer to live in the grounds of Whittle Inn, then I don't have to listen to all the sniping that goes on in here."

I gaped at the Irish witch. "Finbarr!"

He smiled, his face suddenly sheepish. "Ah, well, I didn't mean to cause offence, Alfhild. You know that."

"It's just banter," I explained. "We all love each other really." Did that sound desperate? I couldn't deny we weren't exactly The Partridge Family here at Whittle Inn. We had our differences.

"You took Delia into the forest?" George asked.

"I did. We had about an hour of decent light before dusk fell, but it was cold and she wasn't dressed for a decent walk, and I really don't think she was well. I suggested turning back—maybe getting a warm bath and a hot toddy—but she wanted to press on."

"Why?" I asked. "Where do you think she wanted to go?"

Finbarr shook his head. "I don't know." He remained quiet for a moment, casting his mind back. "I really don't. But now, thinking about it, maybe she was looking for something or somewhere?"

"And did she find it?" Borewick asked.

"Well if she did, I don't know what 'it' was."

"So what was your disagreement about?" Borewick asked.

Finbarr leaned back against the wall, eyeing the DC with evident frustration. "I wasn't disagreeing. I don't do disagreeing. I'm a simple man. I like to keep the peace."

Borewick sighed. "Well, alright. But—"

"If you're wanting to know why Delia was upset, I'd suggest it was because I told her it was getting dark and we needed to come back to the inn." He gestured down at his feet, clad in his thick-soled, mud-encrusted leather walking boots. "I know my way around the woods but, with the greatest of respect, Delia didn't strike me as anything more than a city dweller." He leaned over the table once more and began to spell it out for the detectives. "She wasn't wearing the right footwear. She didn't sound well. It was beginning to get dark. That's all."

I folded my arms and lifted my chin. "There you have it!"

Borewick tapped his pen against his lips. George shifted his weight from one foot to the other. We all waited. Finbarr drummed his fingers on the top of the table, his knee jiggling until I reached out and lay my hand on it.

"Under the circumstances—" Borewick began.

I glared at him.

George coughed.

"We—I—it's fine," the DC relented. "Mr Finbarr, you can go about your business for now." Finbarr whooped and jumped to his feet.

"Just don't leave Whittlecombe without talking to me f—"

But the back door had slammed shut and Finbarr had already disappeared.

I clasped my hands together and smiled up at George. "That went well, I thought."

Of course all actions, direct or indirect, lead to consequences, and less than five minutes later, George and Borewick were interrogating Phyllis Bliss in the corner of the bar. Elise had also taken an interest by now, and she sat next to Ezra, both of them regarding Phyllis with undisguised interest. I shouldn't have been taking such a mawkish delight in ruffling her feathers, I suppose …

… but I was.

I hovered behind the bar, ostensibly drying glasses and filling the shelves, slicing lemons and that sort of thing, but all the time I had my ears craning to pick up the conversation. Phyllis Bliss happily played her part. Her voice was like a foghorn in a funeral parlour.

Borewick had cut straight to the chase. "We understand you had a slight difference of opinion with Delia Cuthbert the evening before her death, Mrs Bliss. Would you care to tell us about that?"

Phyllis glared at the young detective over the top of her tortoiseshell spectacles. "Who told you that?" she snapped.

"It doesn't matter who told us." George lounged against the wall, notebook in hand.

"Someone with a grudge against me, I'll wager?"

"Why would someone have a grudge against you?" Borewick asked.

Indeed, I thought. *Why would they?* Sometimes it seemed to me that my guests had more secrets than Harry Potter's chamber.

"There are plenty of witches staying here at this inn, members of my own sorority, who are jealous of all I have achieved in my lifetime. I'm very well thought of—"

"That's right," Elise chipped in. "I checked you out, Mrs Bliss—"

Phyllis flushed. "Of course, I—"

"You are certainly *known* to the Ministry of Witches," Elise said, choosing her words carefully.

Ooh. I raised my eyebrows, forgetting for a moment I shouldn't have been eavesdropping.

George shot a knowing look my way and I hurriedly dropped my gaze and set to drying glasses again.

"Is that something I need to make a note of?" Borewick asked Elise.

She shook her head. "It's not relevant to what has happened here."

"Oh." For some reason, Borewick found Elise more formidable to work with than George. I guess Elise was an unknown quantity. She certainly didn't suffer fools gladly. She was polite and sharp as a tack. Her winning smile hid a core of steel.

"Putting aside that someone may have a grudge against you," George said, "what was your argument with Delia Cuthbert about?"

Phyllis huffed. "I think it would be too strong a word to call it an argument," she reiterated. "It's just—" she fumbled around for the words. "Well, if I'm honest, I found her an incredibly rude young woman."

“In what way?” Borewick probed.

Phyllis glowered. “In every way, quite frankly.” She wrinkled her nose. “All that coughing and sniffing … she had no manners to speak of. Never seemed to have a handkerchief or a tissue. Quite revolting.”

“So, you called her out for her lack of manners?” Elise suggested.

“No,” Phyllis shook her head. “Well yes, I may have done, but that wasn’t what we … differed over.”

Elise leaned forward. “Go on.”

“She insulted my grandson.” Phyllis looked most aggrieved. “I may have taken offence at that.” I had no doubt whatsoever that she had. The way she spoke about her grandson constantly, you could be forgiven for thinking that the sun shone out of his nether regions.

“So she and your grandson have some sort of history together?”

Phyllis shook her head, her eyes blank. “Do you know, young man, I have no idea. Prior to being invited here to celebrate all things Kappa Sigma Granma, I had never come across the Cuthberts before.”

From my vantage point behind the bar, I stopped. That struck me as odd. Why would one of the founding members of Kappa Sigma Granma not know each and every member? I made a mental note to ask Gwyn about that.

“What did Delia Cuthbert say that you felt was an affront to your grandson?” Elise asked.

“She suggested that … in her words … he was all mouth and no trousers.”

Elise tried to hide a smile. “And what did you take that to mean?”

“My grandson is a great witch. One of the finest of his generation. I find it hard to believe that anyone could think he is all form

and no substance. I believe he will go on to do many more great things."

I rolled my eyes. Who was this chap she kept going on about? I could envisage him now. Jason Momoa with neatly cropped blond hair, because he would be taller, fitter and more handsome than any other man ever. He'd have graduated from the University of Witches with a Double First and gone straight to work for the Ministry of Witches on full pay, despite everyone else working at apprentice rates for the first seven years. He'd have been made head of his coven within the first twelve months and would no doubt have an equally perfect girlfriend. All of this, and he'd be what age? Twenty-three? Twenty-four? It irked me that someone could be so successful while I cleaned up bits of congealed egg from the tables in my wonky inn.

Phyllis was undoubtedly laying it on with a trowel. The person she was really describing was a kid barely out of short trousers, surely? Someone who could still remember playing with Lego. Not a grown-up like me who had almost forgotten the joy of playing Buckaroo.

Okay, I hadn't forgotten that particular joy.

But … think of how many young people showed great promise at school, then attended an academy somewhere and lost the plot. Puberty has a lot to answer for.

Especially in male witches.

Still. I couldn't help harbouring some silent sympathy for Phyllis. She was his grandmother. Of course she was proud of him and of course she would want to stick up for him. If Delia had bad-mouthed Gwyn, I'd have taken offence equally quickly.

"Hi Alf."

I jumped. Ezra had crept up on me while I'd been earwigging.

"I don't suppose there's any chance of a cup of coffee, is there?"

"Of course," I said, and flipped the switch on the coffee machine. It glugged and gurgled, effectively drowning out the conversation from behind me.

"How's your boiler?" Ezra asked, and waggled his eyebrows.

I laughed. "It's working again this morning, but it's very temperamental." That reminded me. "You said you knew a specialist heating engineer?"

"I do. My brother-in-law. He has an office and a workshop in a little lane behind Celestial Street."

"He might be just what I need, after all," I nodded, holding a mug under the dribble of coffee emanating from the nozzle in front of me. "The boiler is a Spellbinder model and not only is it now obsolete, but not a single one of the companies I've contacted has any recollection of it."

"Well, exactly," said Ezra, sounding pleased. "That's because it's specific to witches."

Just as I'd started to suspect.

Ezra pulled his notebook out of his pocket and wrote a number down, before tearing the page free and handing it over. "Give my brother-in-law a call. He can fix anything."

"I'll do that, thank you." I folded the slip of paper up and slipped it into my wand pocket, then handed the coffee over to Ezra. He winked and headed out towards The Snug.

I resumed my polishing of pint glasses, wondering what the interview with Phyllis had thrown up.

"Do you know how Delia had had contact with your grandson previously?" Elise was asking.

"I have no idea, Officer. Perhaps you'd better ask him."

"Perhaps we had," said George, and stole a look at me.

Phyllis hauled herself to her feet. As far as she was concerned, the interview was over. “I’ve had quite enough of this. It was supposed to be a fun week—and goodness knows it wasn’t cheap—” she glared at me. I gave up all pretence of not snooping. “I want to go home.”

Oh no! The last thing I needed was for every member of Kappa Sigma Granma to swan off home in a huff. If that happened, I’d be sorting out refunds for evermore and my boiler would never be fixed.

“Oh, Phyllis!” I dashed out from behind the bar. “Please don’t leave. We love having you here.”

Phyllis curled her lip. “I’m not sure that’s true, Alfhild.”

“Oh, it is,” I lied. “Gwyn especially, you know she values your company so much.”

“Indeed.” Phyllis considered this. “I suppose it would be difficult to get my transportation back here.”

“It would.” Another lie on my part. It had been a cab. I only had to make one phone call and I could summon another one to the inn … to whisk Phyllis away forever.

“Never mind. I’ll ask my grandson to come and collect me.” Phyllis swivelled on her heel and stormed away.

“So Phyliss’s grandson is coming all the way down here to drive her back to London?” Charity looked as confused as I felt.

“Apparently so.” I pulled a face and flopped down on the kitchen bench as Florence pushed a cup of tea my way. “Gwyn won’t be happy with me.”

"It's not your fault though." Charity stirred her drink, steam floating in the space that separated us.

When did that ever bother Gwyn? I grunted and pulled the sugar bowl over, absently spooning a couple of teaspoons' full into the mug. I had started to feel jaded. In need of a nap.

Florence slid a small empty plate in front of me. "Would you like a slice of cake, Miss Alf?"

I perked up. "That would be lovely, Florence." I craned my neck trying to see her latest work of art. She brought over a large three-layered cake covered in soft pink icing.

"Strawberry?" I guessed.

"Raspberry," said Charity.

"No, you're both wrong," Florence smirked, smoke drifting upwards from her fire-ruined clothes. "This is beetroot and white chocolate, with a lemon meringue buttercream."

"Beetroot?" I tried not to sound too disgusted. "In a cake?"

"Try it," Florence scolded me. "You'll love it, Miss Alf."

"How come the icing is pink if the buttercream is lemon?" Charity asked, scooping a huge spoonful onto her fork.

"It's a … what does Ross Baines call things … an 'arch ball'."

"An arch ball?" I cut into my huge wedge of cake. "Oh, you mean like a curveball?"

"That's the one, Miss!"

"Clever," I nodded at Charity. "She's misdirecting our taste buds."

"Suggesting that something is one thing when really it's something else?" Charity shovelled her forkful into her mouth and groaned. "Mmmm."

I tried to be a little more ladylike but failed. "Ommm," I moaned, my mouth full. "Is good."

Florence nodded in satisfaction. “That’s what I like to hear. I hope it cheers the pair of you up.”

“We’re not down in the dumps, are we?” I questioned Charity.

“You are. You’re a right old misery,” she replied.

Florence swept up a couple of cake crumbs from the table. “It’s because she’s missing her beau,” she declared.

I pretended to look shocked. “It most certainly isn’t! My life does *not* revolve around the men in it.”

Charity didn’t buy that. “I think you’ve hit the nail on the head there, Florence.” She winked at me, “How long till you see Silvan again, Alf? How long till we can expect the return of sweet Alf?”

“Soon, I suppose.” To be honest, I didn’t know. He’d been called away to who knows where. I hadn’t heard from him in nearly two weeks. That happened from time to time. He had to go where the money took him, and the money tended to take him to dark places that he didn’t want me to know about.

“You must miss him,” Charity sympathised.

“Nah.” I finished off my slice and stared at the remainder of the cake. Above the top layer of sponge, Florence met my gaze, her eyes knowing.

“Have another slice, Miss Alf. You look a bit peaky, like you could do with a sugar uplift,” she said.

I didn’t need telling twice.

Meow.

I rubbed my tired eyes and looked up from the computer screen, then down at the rug beneath my feet. The spirit cat curled around my legs and I reached down to pet it. There was nothing there to stroke, however. Meanwhile, the Jack Russell, doing a good impression of a doughnut, lay in front of the fire. I'd allowed the flames to die down now. It was nearly one in the morning and I really needed to turn in.

Ting.

I watched the lift ascend. It didn't stop on my floor but disappeared through the ceiling.

Ting.

Footsteps overhead. A door opening and then closing. The rattling of pipes as one of my guests used the bathroom and then the inn lapsed into silence once more. With any luck, that was the last of the witches heading to bed.

Silence, after a fashion at any rate. It seemed the animals in their cages, inhabiting one whole wall of my office, mostly came alive at

night. The snake slithered around its large glass atrium, the spider jumped at its walls, the hamster ran on its squeaky wheel, endlessly trying to get somewhere it never could.

I watched it for some time, until the fire guttered and died. I shivered.

"Time for bed, boys and girls," I sang softly. At least they had each other, even if they were separated by glass or bars for their own good. This was probably just as well when I thought about it, otherwise 'having each other' might take on a whole different context.

Tonight I felt lonely. I'd sat for a while with Gwyn and her sorority, enjoying the laughter as the witches played their games and relishing in their competitiveness. I'd even had a go at Buckaroo, and been knocked out first in two out of three attempts, a reminder of just how heavy-handed I could be.

As the wine flowed and the music was turned up—with plenty of guests bickering about which decade everyone wanted to listen to—I retired upstairs for the interim, intent on catching up on my paperwork. From eleven onwards there had been a flurry of elevator use. At first I'd watched the wooden capsule shoot up and down, but quickly I'd grown inured to the disruption.

I slid open my desk drawer and drew out a ring of keys. Any Tudor housekeeper would have been proud to sport such a heavy collection of ironwork. These were the keys for the front and back doors of the inn, the cold store and the kitchen, the pantry, the boiler room, The Snug and The Hug, my office and bedroom, the attic rooms and the door between the bar and the back passage. Guest room keys were kept behind the reception desk.

Feeling weary, I almost considered calling the lift, but deciding against it made my way downstairs on foot to check all the doors and windows before calling it a night. Zephaniah and Ned had been

busy clearing up, and only a couple of stray wine glasses remained. I picked them up and carried them to the bar. I'd wash them up in the morning.

Making my way back through the bar, I came to the heavy front door and reached up to slide the top bolt into place. A light tapping came from the other side, just a few inches from my ear. I screeched and fell backwards, heart hammering in my chest.

The tapping came again, a little heavier this time.

Who could be out there at this time of night?

I pressed my ear against the wood. I couldn't hear anything.

"By all that's green, Alfie, open the door!" A muffled voice. "It's freezing out here!"

I stared at the door as though the wood itself had spoken to me and was, in fact, a some kind of alien. "Silvan?"

"Open the door!"

I fumbled with the lock and pulled the heavy door inwards.

"Oh, at last!" He stepped inside and dropped his bag. You must be getting hard of hearing. I've been knocking for ages."

Dressed head to toe in black as always, he had donned thick black robes and had a black woollen scarf wrapped tightly around his neck, covering his mouth and nose. His witch's hat had been pulled tightly down over his brow. Only his dark eyes were visible, and they sparkled down at me.

We stared at each other for a good long time before finally he opened his arms and I flew into them. I wrapped him tightly in a hug, inhaling the scent of bonfires and tallow, lavender and warm musk.

"Urgh," he laughed. "I can hardly breathe."

I loosened my grip on him and reached up to pull down his scarf. He had faint bruising under one eye. Someone had given him a good

wallop. There was a deep scratch on his cheek too.

I stroked the dried-up scratch gently with my finger. "What happened to you?"

He shrugged and winked at me. "It's nothing. Just adds to my boyish good looks." He caught hold of my hand. "Any chance of a drink?"

"A hot one or—"

"No," he shot me a stricken glance. "I've been teetotal for weeks. Something long and strong would be good."

I pulled him into the bar, sidestepping all the tables and chairs. He stared at the elevator as we passed it.

"Don't ask."

I poured him a double whisky and a bit more, and added a few cubes of ice. He unwrapped his scarf and dropped it over the bar, then tipped his head back to neck the liquid in one, closing his eyes to savour the last dribble in the glass. "Oh, that's better." He tilted his head forward and back and rotated it a few times. "I'm so stiff."

"Would you like another?" I lifted the bottle.

He considered it. "No," he said reluctantly. "I haven't eaten much today, and I'm shattered. I think it would go straight to my head."

"Fair enough," I smiled. "Let's go upstairs. You can tell me a little about what you've been doing before we drift off to sleep."

"I can't," Silvan said.

"You can't? You can't talk to me what you've been doing?"

"I, well, you know I can't talk to you about what I've been doing anyway. But, er, I can't go upstairs with you either."

My heart skipped a beat. What was he saying? Had he come here to tell me he had found someone else? He was finishing with me? I stared at him in sudden fear. "Why can't you?"

“Don’t look like that.” He reached out to caress my cheek, his voice soft. “Darling Alfie, it’s nothing to worry about.”

Did he have some awful disease? Should he be in quarantine?

“Then—?”

He slouched on his stool and pulled a face. “It’s my grandmother.”

“Your grandmother?” I hadn’t even known he had a grandmother. In fact, he’d never mentioned a family at all.

“She’s here.”

“Your grandmother’s here in the inn?” My brain raced through all the women staying with me, a kind of ‘Guess Who?’ game of witches. Who met the criteria to be Silvan’s granny? Sudden realisation dawned on me and I grimaced in horror. “Oh my word. Phyllis Bliss is your grandmother!”

With Florence's help, I—rather tetchily if the truth be known—made up a bed in front of the fire in the bar. Florence stoked it to give extra warmth, and Silvan settled down for the night.

"I don't really see what difference it will make if I'm honest," I told him. "It's not like Phyllis is going to see you in my bedroom, is she."

"Trust me," Silvan said. "She sees all and senses all and knows all. I love her to death, but she's a liability for my social life."

Oh-ho. I widened my eyes and giggled. Silvan had been caught *in flagrante* previously, by the sound of it. His eyes lit up and he reached to pull me down next to him.

I resisted the urge to snuggle up next to him, pulling away instead.

"No, no. You made your bed, now you have to lie in it," I told him, and with a saucy wiggle headed for the stairs. I paused and turned back to wink at him, flicked the lights off and plunged the ground floor into darkness.

He laughed softly. "Goodnight, Alfhild."

“Goodnight, sleep tight, don’t let the bedbugs bite,” I sang, and climbed the stairs.

A few minutes later I was sitting on the edge of my bed, my window open to allow Mr Hoo to come and go as he needed. A freezing fog had settled over the landscape beyond and I shivered in the draught.

It would have been nice to have some extra warmth in the bed. I left the daytime throw on top of my duvet, pulled my teddy bear from his corner and wrapped myself around him. Out in the woods I heard Mr Hoo hunting. Downstairs, Silvan was probably already snoring.

I smiled. My man was home.

Everything would be alright.

“Would you like more toast, Mr Silvan?” Florence queried as I entered the kitchen the next morning, just after six.

“That would be wonderful, thank you,” Silvan enthused. “And more of Monsieur Emietter’s fine poached eggs, if he doesn’t mind?”

Monsieur Emietter, hearing his name, turned around from the stove where he had been busy crisping bacon. He beamed at Silvan and piled his plate high with another spoonful of beans, a couple of extra sausages and half a dozen strips of bacon.

“That looks good!” My mouth watered.

Monsieur Emietter studied me for a second, muttered something in French, the tone of which sounded less than complimentary, and nodded at Florence. She handed me a plate with two slices of toast on it.

“Hey!” I complained, and Monsieur Emietter and Silvan laughed together.

“Oh, ho ho ho,” I grumbled and slid onto the bench beside Silvan. He bumped shoulders with me and turned to kiss my nose.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Like a log. Did you?”

“Not a wink,” he replied cheerfully. “I think I must have a case of jet lag.” I raised my eyebrows in a query, wondering whether his jet lag had been caused by being occidental or oriental. I knew he wouldn’t tell me.

“And the tinging of that rotten elevator—”

Monsieur Emietter piled some bacon and an egg onto my toast. “Ah, thank you!” I cried, and he nodded happily, obviously in a good mood because Silvan had turned up and sweet-talked him somehow.

“Are you hungry, Alf?” Charity joined us, and Florence slipped a pot of coffee onto the table for us to share. “Hey, Silvan! So good to see you!”

“What a coincidence, isn’t it?” Florence said. “We were only talking about Mr Silvan yesterday.”

Charity grinned. “That’s right. It’s like magick.”

“Is that so? Was Alf missing me?”

“I most certainly was not,” I mumbled between mouthfuls of smoky bacon. Salt and the sweetness of maple-cured pork exploded on my tongue. “I’ve been far too busy to miss you.”

“She pines, you know,” Florence said.

“I don’t!”

“Wastes away,” Charity nodded.

Silvan snorted and I dug him in the ribs with my elbow before he risked life and limb and said anything else.

I polished off my toast and glugged half a mug of coffee in double-quick time. “That’s set me up for the day. I’d better get started with laying the tables for breakfast.” I squeezed out from under the table.

“I’ll be right out,” Charity said.

“No rush,” I nodded.

“Ooh, she is in a good mood,” Charity laughed. “You should come to stay more often, Silvan.”

Silvan held up a fork, waving a piece of sausage at me. “Would you mind if I used your bathroom, Alf? I’d like to clean up.”

Charity looked from me to him. “Eh?”

“He slept on the floor of the bar last night,” I confessed. “He was worried his grandmother would find us together because she’s staying here too.”

“No?” Charity’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Who?”

“Only Phyllis Bliss,” I told her. Her chortle of amusement followed me down the passage to the bar.

I spent the next two hours serving breakfast and refilling mugs, wiping up spillages, locating baby rusks—don’t ask—and ordering more and more toast. Zephaniah kept the coffee pots filled while Florence wafted backwards and forwards with our colourful china teapots.

I’d given up hope of seeing Silvan again when he didn’t reappear—how long does it take a man to shower and shave after all—but I assumed he’d taken a nap on my bed. A sudden disturbance among the witches on the table by the big bay window alerted me to his arrival.

Smiling, I turned about, happy to witness Phyliss's face when she caught sight of him. Instead, I reeled in surprise.

The Silvan that greeted his granny was not the Silvan I had come to know and love, the hard man, the wily magician, the dark witch. My Silvan was a rogue with dangerous eyes, wild hair and clothes he'd been living in for weeks on end. My Silvan disappeared for lengthy periods on dangerous missions to do who-knows-what to earn his living.

Phyliss's Silvan was a choir boy. Neatly shaven, in a white button-down shirt over expensive trousers. Even his normally curly hair had been smoothed down and neatly tied back in a low ponytail.

I snorted.

I definitely preferred my version.

"Horace!" Phyllis had jumped to her feet and locked him in a tight embrace, and now she was showing him off to all of her friends. Onnalee, pink of face, was gushing in her praises, exclaiming several times how handsome he was. Silvan graciously accepted this, nodding his head, smiling, kissing her hand.

Phyllis drew him down on to the chair next to her, forcing Sybil to move up one. "You must have breakfast," she was saying, and raised her hand to summon me.

Forcing myself to keep a straight face, I hurried over to the table. Silvan avoided my eye by engaging Sybil in conversation.

"Alfhild, as you can see my grandson, Horace, has arrived. If you could bring him some breakfast—"

I opened my mouth to tell her he'd already eaten half a pig at my kitchen table, but Silvan cleared his throat and scratched his head, and I took that as a sign that he wanted me to stay mute.

"And, when the detectives get here, tell them he'll see them when he's had a chance to recover from his long journey."

I'd forgotten. The detectives wanted to speak to her grandson. That would explain why George had given me such a knowing look the previous afternoon.

"Of course." I offered her my brightest smile.

"Horace has been in Kuala Lumpur, you know," Phyllis told Sybil, "but it's all top secret so he can't say any more."

Silvan looked up at me, his eyes glittering with unspoken merriment.

"Hmpf," I grunted. Phyllis regarded me with suspicion.

"I do have a few adventures I can tell you about, Gran," Silvan said, distracting her before she could have a go at me.

I retreated and located Florence. "Silvan's grandmama wants him to have breakfast."

"But he's already eaten breakfast, Miss Alf," Florence frowned.

"I know. And rather a lot of it," I smiled. "But what Phyllis Bliss wants, Phyllis Bliss gets, remember?"

"Alright, Miss. I'll ask Monsieur Emietter to plate up another breakfast."

"Thank you. And Florence?" She had turned to go. "Can you make sure Monsieur Emietter knows it's for Silvan and that he's still famished."

Florence paused, studied my face and burst out laughing. "Oh, Miss Alf! You are naughty!"

Thoroughly podged, fresh-faced Silvan turned up on time to his interview with the detectives. On the pretence of being helpful, I went in search of him to escort him to the corner of the dining room at ten

thirty, although I'm absolutely certain he knew his way around the inn sufficiently well to have located the bar himself.

Ho-hum.

He shook George's hand as he entered and the two exchanged some small talk before George indicated where he should sit and introduced him to Borewick, Elise and Ezra.

I sidled quietly behind the bar, concentrating on melting into the background, but of course, George noticed me there and headed straight for me. "You really shouldn't be listening in, Alf," he scolded.

"I'm not," I protested. "But I have to get the bar sorted out for lunch. That means checking my stock of wine and spirits."

"But—"

"Look," I asserted, putting my hands on my hips and drawing myself up to full height. "I'm letting you interview people here out of the goodness of my heart. You'd have to take them to the station otherwise, and you know that would be onerous, to-ing and fro-ing all day long." He couldn't deny that. "So, why don't you let me do my job and I'll let you do yours." I pretended to busy myself with a stock list.

"Sheesh," George sighed, but he left me to it, and I hid myself behind a couple of crates of wine I'd piled onto the counter just for this very purpose and listened in to the conversation.

"You're Horace Silvanus?" Elise was asking, and Silvan nodded.

"I am."

"And Phyllis Bliss is your grandmother? Is that correct?"

"She is. My mother's mother."

Elise consulted her notes. "Were you aware that there had been a murder here at Whittle Inn?"

Silvan hesitated. "Ye-es … A number of them."

"She means in the last few days," George butted in.

"Oh, yes. My grandmother filled me in on that over breakfast. I wasn't sure which murder you were referring to."

George turned to Elise. "We've had a couple of incidents here in the past—"

"Is that right?" Elise wrote that down. "I didn't know that."

"One of the producers from *The Great Witchy Cake Off*," Silvan told her, endeavouring to be helpful.

"Among others …" George muttered, keeping his eyes on his own notepad.

Elise took up the mantle once more. "Yesterday, when we interviewed Mrs Bliss, she told us that she and the victim in this case had a disagreement over you."

Silvan returned Elise's piercing stare with a look of total nonchalance.

"The victim's name was Delia Cuthbert. Does that mean anything to you?" Elise leaned forward.

"Delia Cuthbert …" Silvan swung away from her, the front legs of his chair leaving the floor tipping his face to the ceiling as though he were thinking. "Delia … Delia …" He tipped the chair down again. "Nope. That name means nothing to me."

"I have a photo of the victim, here, Sir. If you'd care to take a look for me," Borewick handed over a snapshot, maybe six inches by eight. I couldn't see it, but I imagined that it would be of Delia after death.

I shuddered.

Silvan studied it. He rubbed the corner of his eye, as though to ease a sudden tic.

"Do you recognise that woman, Mr Silvanus?" Elise asked.

Silvan returned the photo. “I don’t believe so, but you know I’ve met an awful lot of people over the years.”

“What exactly is it you do?” Elise asked. “I ran you through our databases and I couldn’t find even the slightest trace.”

Silvan didn’t answer immediately. From somewhere in the inn came the sound of a vacuum. The fire in the bar’s grate spat and crackled. The floorboards creaked overhead.

“Mr Silvanus?” Elise prompted.

“I pretty much live my life off-grid,” Silvan said eventually, his tone cavalier. “That’s the way I like it. I’m hired to do a bit of work here and a bit of work there. You know how it is.”

“I’m not sure I do,” Elise retorted. “I couldn’t find any tax records for you—”

“I’m not sure I make enough money to pay tax.”

“Or even a birth certificate—”

“You’d have to take that up with my parents,” Silvan responded quickly, “if you could find them.”

Elise changed tack. “Mrs Bliss told us that Delia had insulted you and the work you do.”

Silvan shrugged. “There’s no accounting for some people. Haters gonna hate, isn’t that what they say?”

I frowned and peered through the gap in the crates. Anyone with only a passing awareness of Silvan might have mistaken his laid-back posture and devil-may-care attitude as relaxed apathy, but there was just something in his irreverent responses that suggested *studied* indifference to me. He wanted them to think he knew nothing and didn’t care. He wanted them to think of Delia as something of a crackpot.

A woman who was strange and not dangerous.

Instinctively, I knew that he had lied to the police, and from the way that Elise was looking at him, I think she knew that too. Why would he do that?

It didn't sit comfortably with me, hearing him lie in that way.

Suddenly I didn't want to be in the room with him anymore. Or any of them. What is detective work, but a series of questions designed to elicit a series of responses? Unless you ask the right questions, you can't necessarily get to the truth. Nobody seemed any nearer to knowing who Delia was or why she had been killed.

Did I think Silvan had killed Delia? Of course not. And neither had Finbarr or Phyllis or Charity. Somewhere along the line, we were all missing something vital.

Hearing Silvan give such pat answers to the police seemed a ridiculous waste of time. I abandoned all pretence of hiding and marched for the door. Pulling it closed after me, none too quietly I confess, I paraded down the hallway to The Snug. The door had been locked to keep out idle gossipers, snoops and other ne'er-do-wells. I had the key, of course, but not on me. That would have been far too straightforward.

I tapped the door with my wand. "*Reserare!*"

The lock clicked and I turned the handle, pushing it away from me and stepping inside. I flicked the light switch. The day was dark and dreary, typical of early February, and I needed some illumination.

To a casual observer, there would have been nothing to see. The Snug looked like it had before I'd agreed to use it as a storeroom for Delia's pets, but I could smell the animals. I could see the faint trace of the spider's web in the corner of the grate.

And more than that, in my mind's eye, I could see Delia suspended in mid-air, almost as though she herself had been held in gos-

samer silk threads spun by an enormous spider.

"Alfhild?"

Gwyn's voice startled me. "Grandmama!"

"You're unusually jumpy, my dear."

I puffed out my cheeks and flapped at her half-heartedly. I hadn't spoken to her properly for what seemed like days. She'd been busily entertaining—or appeasing, depending which way you looked at it—our guests.

I collapsed onto the bench, reaching for a cushion and plumping it up. "What went on in here?" I asked her, resting the cushion on my lap where I could beat the living daylights out of it if I wanted to.

"I'm sure I don't know, Alfhild."

"Everyone has been interviewed," I said, "except you."

"There's nothing I can tell anyone."

"You must know something about the Cuthberts." I scratched my head.

"Why would I know anything about them?" Gwyn harrumphed. "I've never met them before."

"What do you mean, you've never met them before?"

Gwyn started to turn translucent, a sure sign she was about to apparate away. "I'm sorry about your friend, but you needn't get chippy with me."

"Wait! Grandmama?"

She'd almost disappeared. Only a soft glow remained where she'd been standing. If you hadn't known the signs to look for, you wouldn't have seen her there at all. "What?"

"Wasn't she a member of Kappa Sigma Granma?"

"Good heavens, no. We have certain standards, you know." The air popped delicately, and she vanished completely.

“Well, that casts a different light on things, doesn’t it?” I said to myself and went in search of Charity.

We sat together in my office, the ghost cat on my feet, Charity petting an enormous white rat, the hamster running miles on his wheel. Mr Hoo and the white owl that we’d freed from its cage chirruped together conversationally on a perch next to the fire, the white owl keeping a hungry eye on the prize in Charity’s casual grasp.

I couldn’t help feeling nervous.

“Are we able to tell when a booking is made?” I asked as Charity cycled through a number of screens on my computer, clicking the X button and trying to create some semblance of order.

“Why don’t you ever close some of these down?” she complained. “I mean, look, what’s this game?”

“*Castles and Crones*,” I said. “It’s brilliant!”

“Well you don’t need it open now, do you?” She clicked on the cross and shut it down.

“Noooooo!” I reached for the mouse, but Charity slapped my hand away. “I hadn’t saved what I was doing.”

“Chill, boss. It will have automatically saved your progress, I’m sure,” Charity said, and handed me the rat. “Now focus.”

She opened our database and in a few quick clicks, we were at the search screen. “What are we looking for? Cuthbert?”

“I presume so.”

Her fingers danced over the keys. “Well, that was easy. Here it is.” She jabbed at their name. “We wouldn’t have checked them in unless they had a reservation.”

"But if they're nothing to do with Kappa Sigma Granma, then how come we even gave them a reservation?" I puzzled.

Charity studied the screen. "There's your answer. The date of the booking is the third of January."

I leaned closer and the rat sniffed my face. "The third of January. That was before we decided to run this event."

"Right."

"So this is a pre-existing booking and nothing whatsoever to do with Kappa Sigma Granma."

Charity nodded. "That would seem to be the logical inference."

"Thank you, Mr Spock."

I sat back and thought through my encounters with the Cuthberts. "I made the assumption that one or the other, or possibly both, were with the sorority, because Mrs Cuthbert, well, and Delia come to that, elected to sit with Phyllis Bliss on her table. It made sense that they were known to each other." The rat jumped into my lap.

"Maybe that's what they wanted you to think?" Charity suggested, taking the rat from me before I dropped him.

"Why would they want to do that?"

Charity smirked. "You know I love you, Alf, but you can be so naïve sometimes."

I folded my arms. "Go on. Amaze me with your genius."

"Have you never gate-crashed a party? Or scammed your way into a gig or a club?"

"Of course." Only about a million times. "When I was younger."

"What did you do if you were discovered?"

I thought back to those days in my late teens, early twenties, and probably middle twenties if I dared to recall more recently. "I pretended I was with someone that had been invited, of course."

“Exactly.” Charity stood and popped the rat back in his cage, much to the white owl’s disappointment. “Had we realised at the time of check-in that Mrs Cuthbert and Delia were not part of the party, we would have welcomed them—”

“Of course we would have.”

“—but we’d also have arranged separate spaces for them away from everyone else. A separate dining area. Separate activities if they’d wanted them. We would at least have had a conversation with them about their requirements and expectations.”

I nodded. “That’s true.”

“But they were happy to remain under the radar, so to speak.”

I frowned. “Are you suggesting that they wanted to blend in?”

Charity shrugged. “It’s one possibility.”

I leaned over, resting my elbows on the desk and sinking my head into my hands. “But I don’t understand why. I mean, if someone from Kappa Sigma Granma killed her, that’s a weird coincidence. Delia was annoying, yes, but not so much that you’d purposefully kill her. Would you?” I glanced at Charity, hopeful that she could cast some light on the situation.

“I wouldn’t,” was the best she could come up with.

“So that leaves her mother.”

“Who has disappeared without trace, oddly enough.”

“She’s a person of interest. Elise told me that.”

“So somebody needs to find her.”

I pretended to be amazed. “I do admire how you cut to the chase that way.”

Charity thumped my arm. “Oh get away, you. Go and tell George what we just found out. I’m not sure it makes a difference, but he definitely needs to know.”

George and I sat together in the kitchen, coffee in hand, biscuits ready for dunking. Almost like old times.

Almost.

"Your boyfriend is holding out on me," George said.

"I know." I didn't feel like beating around the bush. I hated game playing.

"What else do you know?" George asked.

I shook my head and signed. "Honestly, I don't know anything. Only what I've shared with you."

George picked up the last chocolate Hob Nob and I narrowed my eyes at him. "Would you tell me if you did know anything?" he dangled the biscuit in the air between us.

"Probably not," I admitted. He stuffed the whole biscuit in his mouth at once.

"That's callous!"

"You said you didn't want to share," he said, his mouth still full.

I plucked a Jammy Dodger from the plate before he could take that one. "I'm doing my best here. Trying to keep this event going for Gwyn, while pacifying my frigid boiler—"

George stopped chewing. "What?"

"Never mind. My point is, I've a lot on. And yet again, as you so rightly pointed out to DI Liddell earlier, I'm up to my neck in another murder. This isn't going to do my reputation any good."

George snuck out a hand and pinched the Custard Cream. "Maybe that's the point."

He'd lost me. "What is?"

"Back when I first met you, we found out that people were deliberately trying to damage your reputation. Do you remember?"

How could I forget? "Yes."

"Maybe that's what's happening now." George performed a swift dunk with his biscuit and popped the whole thing straight into his mouth.

"But these are all Gwyn's friends," I reminded him.

"Are they?" George tapped the side of his nose and took a large gulp of his coffee.

"With the exception of Mrs Cuthbert and Delia, yes." I thought out loud, "You're discounting the Mrs Cuthbert-murdering-her-daughter theory, then?"

"Not at all, but strictly between me and you, I'm beginning to doubt that woman even existed." He waved his coffee at me, and I automatically reached for the pot to refill it, like the well-trained waitress I was. "Elise may not have been able to do any background checks on Silvan, but I know for a fact she's come up a blank on Mrs Cuthbert, and Delia too."

"So they're not who they said they were?"

"That's quite likely." George offered me the plate of biscuits. All that was left was a plain Rich Tea and a plain Digestive. I opted for the Digestive on the grounds that it was bigger and would contain more sugar.

George turned his nose up at the poor little Rich Tea.

"Do you have any butter?"

"Butter?"

"I like to spread butter on my Rich Tea biscuits."

I stared at him, quite frankly appalled at the idea. "You can't dunk a biscuit if it has butter on it!"

"Hmm." When the butter didn't instantly materialise, he ate his poor little Rich Tea in all its naked glory anyway. "What I'm thinking now," he said, brushing a crumb from the corner of his mouth, "is

that one of your guests killed Delia Cuthbert or whoever she is, to make your inn look bad. That's a strong motive to my mind. I have no idea why you make so many enemies."

"But I'd never met any of these women before," I said, struggling to come up with a plausible explanation as to why any of them would seek to damage my reputation.

Unless this wasn't about *me,* and as George had suggested, it was about the inn.

That begged the question of whether there was a witch staying at the inn who wanted the inn to fail. I shivered to think that anybody could be that malevolent. Bad enough that they had targeted Delia for no other reason than she'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Could it be a historical grudge of some kind?

George drained his second coffee and reluctantly stood. "I'd better get back to it. You know we still haven't managed to nail Gwyn for an interview yet."

"Ezra mentioned that earlier," I said. "I'll try and persuade her to speak to him."

"I also meant to ask you about the parakeet."

I'd forgotten about her.

"Did you find him?"

"Her, apparently. No, we didn't," I said. "Archibald looked everywhere."

"Because you said the parakeet went missing the night before you discovered Delia."

"That's right."

"Only, we think she must have found it shortly before she died, because the forensics have come back. They show numerous green parakeet feathers on her jumper and a couple in her hair."

“Really?” I asked. “How weird.”

I'd searched high and low for Gwyn but, as was generally the case, if she didn't want to be found there was no way I was going locate her. I grabbed my coat and ventured outside.

As I always did, when I needed to think, I headed for the secluded clearing in Speckled Wood. The ground was hard beneath my feet, the frost an almost-permanent feature of the landscape at the moment. Full of pent up angst, I charged along the trail lost in my own thoughts, but about halfway to the clearing I realised I was depriving myself of nature's blessings. I forced myself to slow down, relax my shoulders, and take note of my surroundings. Half of the trees in the wood were devoid of their summer greenery, the rest, the evergreens, seemed resplendent in their winter trimming. I inhaled the cold fresh scent of pine and found a perfect kind of bliss.

This small wood that formed part of the larger forest around it, and the great outdoors generally, tapped into the essence of me. The air was never purer than amongst these trees, my mind never clearer, my heart never stronger. Like some dancing princess in a Disney movie, I swung my arms out and trailed my fingers against the

trunks of trees or caressed the cool tips of branches, pausing to study some impressive spider webs that glittered in the dappled sunlight.

By the time I reached the clearing I felt calmer, more in control. I plonked myself down on one of the wooden benches there, mindful of the cold and damp but not really caring.

I tipped my head back and closed my eyes, my face bathing in the cool rays of the sun. "Glorious benevolence, I thank thee."

"Why? What's she done for you now?"

I opened one eye. Gwyn stared down at me. I could never quite get used to seeing her outside. Her translucence was more noticeable out here.

"She has created," I said. "And that is enough."

"She sounds a bit like Florence, then," Gwyn quipped. "Isn't Florence the most creative person we know?"

I reluctantly opened the other eye.

"You were looking for me?" Gwyn asked.

She had heard me, then. My hands were starting to get cold. I yanked my gloves out of my pockets and pulled them on. These had been a present from Millicent, and they were made from lots of left-over double-knit wool, incorporating myriad clashing shades. Cheerful, totally non-matching and utterly bonkers.

But boy, they were warm.

I sighed. "We need to have a chat, Grandmama." I patted the bench next to me, indicating she should sit if she could. She did so, her bottom hovering a couple of inches from the seat.

"You said you didn't know the Cuthberts?"

"That's correct, my dear."

"Well, I didn't know them either." I fiddled with a loose strand of wool at the thumb, trying to thread it through the glove to the inside. "But now George has suggested that Delia's murder wasn't personal

to her, that maybe someone was trying to damage the reputation of the inn."

"It wouldn't be the first time," Gwyn nodded. She wafted my hand with her own. "Don't do that, dear, you'll make the hole bigger."

I stopped fiddling. "You're right that it wouldn't be the first time. But if it's not The Mori in this instance, is it personal against *me* or personal against *you*, or is it just an attack on the inn?"

"Are you asking me whether I have any enemies you don't know about, Alfhild?"

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"Dozens." This time it was she who lifted her head to the sunshine. She blinked up at the sky beyond the skeletal branches over our heads. She wouldn't feel the warmth of the rays and that made me sad. "And dozens. Where would we start?"

"What about among the witches who are gathered inside our inn at the moment?" I prompted. "Any fake friends?"

"Fake friends?"

"Like pseudo-friends. Those ones that are as nice as pie to your face and say all the right things, but bitch about you behind your back."

"I weed that sort of people out of my life, Alfhild. I don't have time for them."

I nodded. Knowing Gwyn, who called a spade a spade, that was the truth.

"Those women gathered in our inn have proved their mettle in one way or another. They are women I've worked with, many of them on missions for the Ministry of Witches—"

I widened my eyes, hoping I'd hear more about Gwyn's secret life, but she pressed her lips together as soon as I demonstrated my

interest.

"So you trust them all?" It was a rhetorical question. I slumped forward, suddenly aware of my damp robes. My mother would have warned me I'd end up with rheumatism or some such. "If it's not you, then it's me, or it's against the inn."

"You're discounting what a disagreeable person Delia was. You surprise me."

"I agree with George that she wasn't particularly pleasant, but wouldn't you have to have an exceptionally short fuse to take such umbrage that you killed a woman for being disagreeable? Any of your friends fit that description?"

"Quite a few," Gwyn said. I shot her a look. She held her hands up. "Nobody can ever know anybody else in every way. You of all people know that."

"Argh!" I cried. "This is all so frustrating."

"Don't take on so," Gwyn said in her infuriatingly calm way. "Leave it to the police. Your job is to run the inn and keep everyone happy."

"Not much to ask, is it?" I grumbled.

"You wouldn't have thought so, would you? You do tend to make a meal of it, my dear."

I pouted. "I do my best. It would help my cause enormously if all of our guests were happy and loving to each other in the first place."

"That's never going to happen, Alfhild. What's that saying? There's none so queer as folk, and none queerer than witches." Gwyn stood and twirled, her long skirts swirling around her. "Besides, I spent a little time with Mrs Cuthbert at dinner that first evening, and even she didn't have a good word to say about her daughter."

"What did she say?" I asked, curious about the relationship between the odd pair.

"That she'd tried her best, but her daughter's behaviour was out of control. She intended to take her home, wherever that was. If I were the police, Mrs Cuthbert is definitely the one I'd be looking at as responsible for this—"

"If anybody could find her." I held out a hand to prevent Gwyn from suddenly apparating away before I'd had a chance to ask her one more question. "What was she like?"

"Who? Mrs Cuthbert?"

"Yes. Was she as objectionable as her daughter? I never had a chance to speak to her."

"An older version of Delia, I think. Lived for her animals. That seemed to be her main topic of conversation. How much she loved those animals. Particularly the parakeet."

That darned parakeet.

"They didn't strike me as being particularly close," Gwyn said. "Was that your impression?"

I considered the pair of them. "I don't think I ever saw them in each other's company, if that's what you mean?"

"Presumably you checked them in, my dear?"

But I hadn't.

I'd met Delia out on the drive. She had referred to her mother, but the first time I'd *seen* her mother had been later when she'd been sitting with Phyllis, Onnalee and Sybil. "No, I didn't," I frowned. I needed to verify that with Charity.

I lifted my head at the sound of a branch cracking down the path. "Someone's coming," I said, entirely unnecessarily. Gwyn had the acute hearing of a wild animal.

"It's your young man. I'll make myself scarce." She disappeared from view, but her voice lingered. "Be nice to him, Alfhild. Not everyone is lucky enough to have a grandmother like yours."

I wanted to point out a few pertinent facts in response, but I sensed she'd fully apparated and I'd be wasting my time. I stood to greet Silvan, smoothing my damp, mossy robes down at the back.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said as he walked into the clearing. He'd donned his heavy outdoor robes, so he looked more like himself. I still couldn't quite get used to the smooth hair and clean-shaven face.

"It's too weird," I blurted.

"What is?"

"How you look. How you behave with your grandmama. All of it. You're like a different person."

He threw his head back and laughed. "I expect it is weird, but she's my granny."

"Does that mean you have to preserve her image of you as a child?" I was genuinely confused. "Would she not accept the man you've grown into?"

He didn't quite know what to say to that. "I just want her to be happy."

"Surely nobody can ever make anyone happy by pretending to be something they're not." I didn't mean to sound harsh, but the words just came out of my mouth that way.

Silvan, being Silvan, did not take offence.

"I suppose I've never given her a chance. She's proud of me, and," he smiled gently, "the child inside likes that. He wants it desperately."

I studied his face, this man I loved. I felt ashamed that I'd doubted him. Moved that he could confess his feelings in that way.

He held out his hand and beckoned me closer. “Come here.”

I stepped towards him, a little reluctantly, but he grasped my hand firmly and pulled me closer.

“You’re right, of course, as you so often are.” His face remained solemn.

“It’s a side of you I never knew about,” I told him. “That’s all. I shouldn’t be so judgemental.”

“There’s lots you don’t know about me,” Silvan answered, his dark eyes boring into mine. “And that’s alright. There’s lots I don’t know about you.” He prodded my chest, just above my heart, “But I know that *this* is true.” He lifted his finger and tapped the side of my head, “and *this* is strong. And more than anything, *this*,” he patted his own heart, “belongs to you. I know that I can trust you.”

I melted. I reached up and pulled his hair free of its neat ponytail. It fell around his shoulders, perfuming the air around us with apple-scented shampoo rather than llama dung. I mussed it up a bit more so that he looked a little wilder, although still tame by his usual Wild Man of Borneo standards.

“That’s better,” I said, albeit grudgingly.

“I always knew you had a penchant for a rougher man, Alfie.” He leaned forward and nibbled the top of my ear.

“Pfft, who says I have a penchant for you at all,” I scolded him.

He chuckled softly and crushed me against his chest.

Feeling refreshed and much calmer, I returned to the inn with Silvan a little later than anticipated. Florence had seen to the fires and lit plenty of candles in an effort to drive away the drabness of the afternoon. Judging by the hollering, whooping and general hubbub, all the tournaments were in full swing.

Zephaniah had been collating tables to show the current leaders of each game, with categories for the non-retired witches, non-retired to seventy, seventy-one to eighty, eighty-one plus, and dead. I noted that Gwyn's name appeared near the top of the bridge table, with Phyllis at the top for poker in her eighty-one-plus category. I might have known. She and Gwyn could only have been such good friends if each was as formidable as the other.

Phyllis glanced up from her cards when she spotted Silvan and me walking in together and I swear her chin dropped down further than Marley's ghost's would have done. I cut my eyes at Silvan and headed off, leaving him to it, but distinctly heard Phyllis asking him why he looked like something the cat had dragged in. I tittered quietly to myself.

In the kitchen, Charity and Archibald had been helping Florence prepare afternoon tea by dressing the plates for the tea stands. Monsieur Emietter, obviously not involved in making cakes now that that duty fell entirely to Florence, had started to prepare for the dinner service by taking a nap on his chair by the range. He snored loudly while I inspected the cakes Florence had baked and iced this afternoon.

She'd opted for winter favourites; fruit cake with soft icing, ginger cake with cream cheese topping, and tiny lavender and bergamot cupcakes, piped with soft lilac buttercream, delicately topped with purple roses. She'd also assembled a full range of biscuits on some of our pretty china plates, some plain, some chocolate, and some old favourites.

I reached out a hand towards the chocolate Hob Nobs but Florence stopped me. "Ah-ah!"

"I was just tidying the plate up," I lied.

"These aren't for you, Miss Alf. If you're hungry I can make you a sandwich once I've served tea."

Hunger is an impossibility in my wonky inn. If Florence wasn't feeding you up, Monsieur Emietter was. No wonder I remained as curvy as I did.

"I wanted to ask you guys …" I said, as Charity lifted a couple of the stands ready to take through to the bar, "… did any of you three check-in the Cuthberts on Monday?"

Florence shook her head. She didn't tend to operate the reception desk; she didn't like the computer.

"Mmm, not me," Charity answered.

"I believe I did," Archibald said. "It was all such a rush. We were very busy around that time."

"We were," I agreed. "And they were together, were they? The Cuthberts? When they checked in?"

Archibald looked at me, his face blank. "Good heavens, that's difficult to remember."

Rats.

"No! Wait!" Archibald lifted a finger. "I do remember. It *was* the younger one. The one that died. I remember now, because she made rather a song and dance about her mother being along in a moment, and did we have a lift because her mother was elderly …"

"She wanted an elevator?"

"Yes. Of course, that was before we actually had one. I offered my assistance to help her mother up the stairs, and then I was called away and I forgot all about it. I'm guessing there wasn't a problem at the time, because I would have expected someone to come back to me about it."

"No, no problem." I backed away to allow them the space they needed to manoeuvre the plates off the work surface. Charity took the lead, Archibald followed, and Florence brought up the rear. Once my housekeeper's back was turned I snuck a chocolate Hob Nob off the plate.

"I saw that, Miss Alf!" she called behind her, and I guiltily returned it.

Rotten ghosts.

George and DC Borewick had been called back to Exeter on another case. I found Elise and Ezra in The Snug with a tape measure and torch.

“Hi,” I said, popping my head around the door. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“Not a problem,” said Elise. “We’re going round in circles anyway.” She collapsed onto a chair and indicated I take the bench. Ezra leaned against the wall and watched us.

“What’s up?” she asked, rummaging around in her jacket pocket.

“It’s probably something and nothing, and maybe I’ve got this all about-face,” I began, feeling a little silly, “but it has occurred to us today—”

“Us being?” Elise asked, she extracted a packet of mints and offered them to me. I took one. Slightly warm and extra strong.

“Erm, my great-grandmother and myself.” Elise exchanged a glance with Ezra. I guessed they were still a little annoyed that Gwyn hadn’t made herself available for an interview.

“Go on.”

“None of us ever saw Delia and her mother together.”

Ezra pushed himself off the wall. “Is that right?”

I shrugged. “I believe so. It hadn’t occurred to me until my great-grandmother told me that earlier.” I pointed in the direction of the bar. “Not only did we not see them at dinner time or breakfast together, but only Delia was at the check-in.”

“Is that unusual?” Elise asked.

I screwed up my face. “You know, I actually think it is. Generally we like to meet and greet our guests, and of course, it’s an additional layer of security if we see our guests face to face.”

“So what happened this time?” Ezra wanted to know.

“We were busy,” I shrugged. “It’s as simple as that. Delia had turned up with all those animals and Archibald was trying to deal with a number of check-ins at once.”

Elise and Ezra exchanged a meaningful glance. “That’s very interesting,” Ezra said.

“Is it?” I asked. I didn’t have a clue as to whether this was useful information or not.

“It’s a theory we’ve been working on,” he added.

Curious, I leaned over the table. “Can I help in any way?”

Elise sucked on her mint for a moment, then flicked her eyes at Ezra. He gave a short single nod.

“We think we might be dealing with a shifter of some kind.”

A shifter? I’d heard of them. I’d never seen one. “Wow,” was all I could think of to say.

“We need to take a closer look at all those animals again, Alfhild,” Elise said. “Maybe we could arrange to bring them back down here, and that way we won’t be trampling all over your office.”

Bring down all those cages and baskets and crates again? The Wonky Inn Ghostly Clean-up Crew would be thrilled. “No problem,” I said.

Ezra nodded. “And we need to find that blasted parakeet.”

I helped my ghosts begin to move the animals back downstairs and then it was a matter of cleaning up all the wool and fluff and sawdust and hair and droppings that they’d left behind. Fortunately, I had the best housekeeper in the business, and she was on the case immediately.

Up and down the stairs we went, up and down, until I thought my calf muscles would explode. I took a break, but only so that I could help Charity and Archibald with the dinner service. The weird

thing was that some of the animals had disappeared. The white owl was noticeably absent, along with his cage, but also the snake and the spider.

I asked Gwyn to quiz her sorority about it, imagining someone must have decided to adopt a few of the animals. If that was the case, I'd be grateful. They needed homes, and witches provide wonderful homes for their pets.

For the most part.

Tonight, unusually, Monsieur Emietter had elected to serve British favourites, something he rarely did simply because he was French and it went against the grain. We offered Toad-in-the-Hole, both a meat and vegetarian version, with mashed potatoes, garden peas and gravy, or beer-battered fish and chips with mushy peas and a lemon wedge, or steak and ale pie with boiled potatoes and steamed cabbage.

After I'd served the last apple crumble with custard dessert, I was near to collapse. I took a seat at the bar so that ostensibly it looked like I was 'managing' my staff and the evening's entertainment—refereeing squabbles about whether we should have nineties Madonna or early Lady Gaga for example—but really, I was resting my eyes.

Finally, after midnight, only Ezra remained, sitting on a stool at the bar drinking a pint of the local brew, Otter Ale, while Phyllis Bliss and Silvan occupied the table in the bay window and Mr Hoo perched on the high-backed chair next to the fire with his eyes closed. Silvan had been nursing the same whisky all night. He and his grandmother had been engaged in an avid conversation about one of Phyliss's neighbours, to whom she'd evidently taken a dislike. Silvan nodded at appropriate moments and laughed when the situation seemed to warrant it. I didn't sense any artifice on his part; he

was a doting grandson indulging his ageing granny. Sensing me watching him, he caught my eye and winked.

I yawned and mimed turning a key, indicating I intended to lock up in a minute. He took the hint, standing and helping Phyllis to her feet. She'd had several glasses of red wine after dinner and now swayed a little on her feet.

Ezra, noticing movement, looked up. "Closing time?"

"It sure is," I smiled. "Tomorrow is another day." I gestured towards the rear of the inn where his car was parked. "I'll see you out that way if you like?"

We strolled together down the passage and into the kitchen, where only the light above the stove and the fire in the grate gave off any illumination. "How's The Hay Loft treating you?" I asked.

"It's alright." He didn't sound overly enthusiastic. "Not as full of character as this place is, and the breakfast is a bit bland."

Secretly pleased to hear that, I tried to look suitably dismayed on his behalf. "Skip their breakfast and have it here," I said. "There's always plenty to go around."

"Sounds good to me, I'll see you in the morning. Goodnight."

"Excellent! We serve between seven and nine. Sleep well!" I waved him off, then closed and locked the door before walking the full circuit of the doors and windows on the ground floor. When I returned to the bar, Silvan was on his own, gazing at the elevator as though he'd never properly considered it before.

"Is this staying here?" he asked.

"No." I joined him, looking at it with fresh eyes. I'd almost grown used to it being there. "It most certainly is not. I just have to find a way to get rid of it."

Silvan drew his wand out, but I reached out to stop him before he banished the elevator—and anyone inside—to some black hole of in-

finite nothingness. “We haven’t figured out how to get rid of it safely yet.”

He stretched out with his wand hand, running it along the crack of the door and then along the top of the wooden cabin and around the floor.

“It’s spellbound,” he announced.

“In what way?”

“Whoever conjured this wanted it to stay here for a set amount of time.”

“How long?”

He shrugged. “I can’t tell. But I’ll wager it can only be removed by the person who put it here.”

Recalling my conversation with Archibald earlier, I groaned. “What if that person were dead?”

Silvan smiled. “Then you’d have inherited an elevator permanently.” He stroked the iron cage-work. “It would take some magician to get rid of this.”

“Great.”

I could only hope that it hadn’t been Delia’s work. Kappa Sigma Granma would be heading home in a few days. If this belonged to one of them—Agneta Caspersen maybe, although she denied all knowledge—then with any luck they would take it with them. If it didn’t belong to them, I’d have to burn the rotten thing down. “Can’t you get rid of it?”

“I’m good, but I’m not that good,” Silvan said.

He walked clockwise around it, studying the edges and joins with interest, then staring up into the hole in the ceiling. “Why is it here?” he asked.

What a daft question. “Presumably because some witches struggle to use the stairs.”

"But, as beautiful as it is, it's big and it's boxy." He pressed the call button.

Ting.

A clank and a whirr and the elevator started to descend to our floor.

"Why not just use a broomstick, or a transportation spell, or even conjure a stairlift?" he asked.

Ting.

The doors opened. Holding his wand out in front of him, Silvan stepped forward. He scrutinised the inside, the beautiful walnut panels and Art Nouveau glass, the brass buttons and the gilded mirror—without stepping in.

"Have you ridden it?" he asked.

"No. Why would I? I'm quite able to use the stairs." Not tonight maybe. My calf muscles were as solid as rock after all the exertion of the day.

He sidled into the lift, half in and half out, his wand held steady. His whole demeanour, watchful and defensive, sent a ripple of unease down my back.

"Where does it go?"

"My office, most annoyingly," I said, "and then the second floor and the attic."

He peered more closely at something I couldn't see. "Ground, first floor, second floor, third floor, right?"

"Right." I moved closer to him, trying to see what he was looking at.

"That's four buttons."

I was tired and beginning to lose patience. "Yes."

"So why are there five buttons on this panel?"

“Does it go down to the beer cellar?” I asked, craning my head around him to see.

He grabbed me by the top of the arm and hauled me away from the door. “Be careful. I don’t want you going anywhere without me.”

“Ow.” I stared at him in surprise. What did he mean? “Go anywhere? Do you know how many people have used this lift since it first appeared? Dozens,” I told him. “And no harm has befallen any of them.”

“That’s good news at any rate.” He scanned the rest of the lift with his wand again, before returning his attention to the panel. “The buttons are labelled in the European way. G, one, two, three, four. No mention of a basement, or a cellar, or an underground, or anything else. Where does button number four take you?”

“But if G is this floor and three refers to the attic, it can’t take anyone anywhere.”

“Nobody has mentioned this mysterious button to you?” he asked.

I shook my head.

Silvan pursed his lips, staring at me without really seeing me. “Interesting,” he said. Without further ado, he stepped into the elevator. “Coming?” he asked me as the doors began to slide shut.

Instinctively I put my arm out to stop them closing completely, but still I hesitated.

“You said no harm has befallen anyone who has used it,” Silvan reminded me, and his eyes shone with devilry. “What’s the worst thing that can happen? We end up on the roof and freeze to death?”

“That sounds fun,” I grumbled. “Should I get my coat?”

Silvan grinned. “Well?”

“Hooo-oooo.” Mr Hoo had suddenly woken up. I heard the flutter of his powerful wings and he soared across the bar. I barely paid

attention to his warning.

"Oh, alright," I said, reluctant but intrigued all at once. "In for a penny, in for a pound." I stepped over the threshold.

"Hoooo!" More urgent.

The door slid smoothly closed behind me before I could turn and speak to my owl.

Ting.

The elevator lifted and I heard the whine of the mechanism above us. The ride itself was smooth.

Ting.

I could imagine my office on the other side.

Ting.

The corridor on the second floor.

Ting.

The attic, where dozens of the Whittle Inn ghosts would be whiling away their afterlives.

Ting.

The elevator began to slow, before shuddering to a halt.

Silvan aimed his wand at the doors and, feeling a deep sense of unease about the unknown, I reached into my pocket and grabbed my own as the doors began to slide open.

"Speckled Wood?" Silvan asked.

I scrutinised the landscape before us. Skeletal trees beneath a black, starless sky. Wisps of winter mist rising from the ground, a frozen layer of permafrost covering the botanical debris left over after the long, wet autumn we'd endured.

"No," I said, and my wand tingled in my hand. I glanced down at it, fabricated as it was from a branch that had fallen from Vance, the Ent that lived deep in the marsh at the centre of Speckled Wood. If this had been Speckled Wood, I'd have known it. "Definitely not."

"Shall we?" Silvan motioned towards the trees.

My muscles had tensed up. I held my wand out directly in front of my chest and nodded.

Indicating he would go first, Silvan stepped over the threshold, his head swivelling, searching for obvious danger. He reminded me of the action heroes I'd seen in the movies, ex-special forces soldiers who'd been trained to sweep their environment seeking out enemy insurgents. Where had he gained his knowledge and experience

from? Not for the first time I wished he wouldn't be so secretive about his life.

Unlike mine, his movements were fluid, his breath deep and regular. My heart beat hard against my rib cage, my intestines twisted in knots. I took a deep breath, willing myself to relax, but memories of Castle Iadului and the ledge we'd clung to when I was sure we'd both die, invaded my thoughts, sapping all my confidence away.

"Alfie?" Silvan's voice, soft and loving, broke into the doubt, fear and chaos partying in my head.

He had trained me better than this. I owed it to him to keep it together.

"Coming," I said and stepped out of the sanctuary of the elevator.

A harsh, icy breeze slapped my face and I recoiled. Colder than Transylvania in October.

Ting.

I spun around, my breath catching in my throat. The lift doors had closed. I panicked, reaching out to call it, worried that it would disappear and we would never find our way back to my wonky inn again.

Ting.

The call button lit up and the doors opened once more. The elevator wasn't going anywhere.

"Do you want to back?" Silvan asked. I loved him for sounding more concerned than judgemental despite my evident weakness.

Yes.

"No." *Get a grip, Alf!*

I backed away from the elevator, watching the doors slide gently closed once more. When I was sure it would stay where it was, I turned to face him. "Where are we?"

He shrugged, his eyes busily scanning the trees ahead of us. "If this isn't Speckled Wood then I have no idea."

"How is it possible? That the lift brings you somewhere completely external to the inn?" I puzzled.

"Remember Gorde's Gimcrack?" Silvan reminded me.

"Do you think we've travelled back in time?"

"It's a bit difficult to tell. It's impossible to know whether we're still in Whittlecombe or somewhere else entirely." He was right. All we could see were trees in front of us and the elevator behind us, the shaft buried in the earth. There was no going up from here, only down—presumably to return to the safety of my inn—or into the woods. "I'm thinking we've accessed some sort of portal. Whether we're in the same time zone as Whittle Inn or not, we may find out." He illuminated the tip of his wand. "It looks like there's a trail, see?" He swept the light in front of me and I spotted the rough path. It seemed well worn. Other people had been here before us.

He reached out with his free hand and took my elbow, pulling me gently towards him and kissing my forehead. "You can do this," he breathed into my hairline. I leaned against him, momentarily, drawing on his strength. I knew he understood. The trauma I'd experienced in Transylvania had been hard to work through. It had robbed me of self-belief.

"I can," I said, but my voice seemed to stick in my throat. *Words have power*, *Alfhild,* I could hear Gwyn say. Magick is all about intent. You have to imbibe every word with meaning. "I can," I repeated and this time my words were loud in the clearing. I nodded at Silvan with more certainty. "Let's investigate what this is all about."

The wood-that-wasn't-speckled was as silent as the grave. Not a hint of animal life, nothing scurrying in the undergrowth, nothing sheltering in the trees. Given the frequency of my visits to my own

wood—come rain or shine, night or day—I knew what sounds I expected to hear, and their absence gave me pause.

"I'll go first. We'll take it steady." Silvan slipped ahead of me, holding his wand out to light his way. I lit the top of mine and followed in his wake.

Besides the silence, the oddest thing was the lack of evergreen trees. Every tree in this wood was deciduous. The majority were silver birches but with a scattering of oak and sycamore, and the odd beech. There were no alders either, which suggested to me that this wasn't a marshy land in the same way that Whittlecombe was. We could be high up, which might explain why the land was drier, but I couldn't tell in the darkness, and the light on my wand only illuminated a circle of around five or six feet.

Most unnerving and unnatural of all, the mist moved around us, drifting here and there, defying the breeze blowing steadily in from the east.

How could it do that?

"Do you get the sense this place is enchanted?" I called. Silvan had outdistanced me. I could see his light but not him. He paused, waiting for me to catch up.

"I thought the same," he agreed.

"I've never known a wood with such a limited assortment of trees." I held my wand up and we craned our necks to stare up at what would be a leafy canopy for seven or eight months of the year. But in February, and without any coniferous trees, we were in an entirely barren land. "And this mist—"

"Doing its own thing." I heard something in his voice. A minuscule ounce of trepidation. I was reminded of the tic by his eye when Elise had asked whether he recognised the photo of Delia Cuthbert. What did Silvan know?

We remained in place, listening to the silence. My breath sounded strangely loud. Silvan peered into the darkness. Eventually he huffed out a tense breath. “Come on. Let’s keep going.”

We moved off again, and this time I kept up. It wasn’t that I thought anything was chasing us, because I really didn’t. I couldn’t sense anything breathing, anywhere. Not a rabbit buried deep in its burrow, or a badger in its set. Nothing huddled beneath the earth, waiting for the spring to come. Nothing alive at all, except for us.

We tramped on, the cold biting. Fortunately, I’d donned thick robes that morning, with black woollen tights and sensible shoes, the uniform I tended to wear around the inn. However, I’d have preferred my winter coat, walking boots and even Millicent’s badly knitted mismatching gloves.

I stopped to get my breath and leaned against the nearest tree, a horse chestnut. Had this been Speckled Wood, I would have felt the heartbeat of the tree beneath my hand. I’d have sensed the vibration of thousands of tiny beetles and other insects attending their daily business. But there was nothing. This was a wood devoid of life. A world where nothing existed.

“What is this place?” I wondered aloud, but Silvan had moved ahead again, and I spoke only to myself, my breath wafting away, mingling with the mist. “Eerie,” I shuddered, and scampered after him once more.

He heard my footsteps clumping up a short incline towards him and stopped to wait. The light of his wand illuminated his face, his welcoming smile.

“Come on, slowcoach,” he said. He took a step back to give me space beside him. “Watch your step. There’s a steep drop here. I thought I’d lost—” Suddenly the smile disappeared from his face. He thrust his wand towards the ground.

We'd walked into a carpet of hedera, a woody vine that Ned often used in our raised borders in the grounds of Whittle Inn. This was the first hint of life we'd found. It sprang from the base of the trees, growing thick, as it liked to do, but it hadn't climbed the trunks as other ivy would have. I found it oddly welcoming, a hint of life and colour in an otherwise monochromatic world.

Without warning, Silvan shot a dense beam of energy at his feet. "What—" He fired off a second round. "Ouch!"

"What is it?" I targeted my own wand at the ground. The hedera around his feet trembled.

"Get back, Alf!" he urged me. "Move away!"

"Let me help!" But as I reached out to him, not really understanding what was happening, his feet were pulled away and he fell, landing on his rump. "Silvan!"

"Alf—" He started to say something else, but no sooner was my name out of his mouth, than he'd been yanked away, over the edge of the rise where we stood. His shriek chilled my blood, and I screamed too, clamping my hands to my mouth, dropping my wand. What little light there'd been, went out. I fell silent, listening as Silvan's shriek died away.

Shivering with fear more than cold, I squatted on the ground, panting painfully.

"This isn't happening!"

I grappled around among the hedera, my skin crawling as I felt thin threads brush against my fingers. Something curled around my little finger and I yanked my hand sharply upwards, freeing it by snapping the fronds that tried to hold me in place.

"I need my wand!"

With nothing else for it, I plunged my right hand down into the hedera once again, scrabbling about until I touched something hard

and warm.

My little piece of Vance.

I plucked it up and rolled backwards out of the way of the intrusive ivy, shining my wand in the direction Silvan had fallen, my breath exploding out of me in short wheezes.

From behind came the sound of dull thudding. Footsteps. A man. Heavy boots on the packed icy earth. Someone was coming. Not knowing whether he would be friend or foe, I edged sideways. Off the trail and behind a wide oak. I held my breath as the footsteps came closer and craned my neck to peer around the trunk. A circle of light travelled my way.

Another witch?

As they tramped closer I heard the whistling sound of their breathing. Whoever this was, they were a little out of condition.

Distracted by this new arrival, I didn't hear the sound of an enormous bird flying towards me until its wings were beating down at me from above. I shrieked, fumbling with my wand, imagining I was being attacked from all sides. In my shock, I almost obliterated the creature with a death spell without thinking twice.

"Hoo-ooo!" it called urgently, and I stumbled backwards, partly in disbelief that Mr Hoo had found me, and partly terrified that I'd nearly killed the very creature that meant more to me than any other.

"By all that's green," I whimpered.

"Hooo-ooo!"

The footsteps stopped close behind me.

"Alf?" a familiar voice asked, sucking air greedily in and out of his lungs, so noticeably loud in the otherwise silent wood.

I blinked in surprise and jumped into the light of his wand. "Ezra?"

He had doubled over, struggling to catch his breath. “I heard someone scream,” he puffed. “I thought it was you.”

“It *was* me.” I placed my hand on his shoulder. “What are you doing here? You shouldn’t have come.”

“This fella—” Ezra flapped a hand towards Mr Hoo but ran out of breath before he could finish.

I rubbed his back, waiting for him to get it together. Ezra wasn’t a young man, after all. When he seemed a little more in control, I directed my wand light onto the hedera in front of us. “Mind out for these plants on the ground here.” I illuminated the green carpet climbing the slight hill. Ezra followed my beam of light. Together we watched as the ivy trembled and stretched itself first one way and then another.

“What is that stuff? Is it alive?” He stood up, clutching his hand to his chest. “Where’s Silvan?”

I had been trying to keep a lid on my mounting anxiety. “He went over the edge, beyond this ivy.” Now that Ezra was here, I knew I had a stark choice. I clamped a hand around my throat. “I have to go after him.”

Ezra stepped forward as though he meant to go and look but I grabbed him and pulled him back. “Wait!” Lifting my wand I focused on the writhing, living carpet of evil in front of me. I summoned the coldest hatred I could find inside myself, the stuff I usually reserved for vampires. “*In infernis arderet*,” I intoned, and flung my wand hand at the foot of the path in front of me. I traced a line up to the rise.

Burn in hell.

Sparks flew. My wand emitted a line of fire, much like a flame thrower, and I directed it along the path, burning the ivy to ash in a

matter of seconds. Smoke rose from the path and I prodded the scorched remains of the plants with my foot. They didn't react.

"Come on," I said and darted up the path, Mr Hoo leaping from his branch and soaring ahead of us. At the ridge he paused.

"Hoooooo. Hooooo."

I scrambled to the edge and looked down. Not as bad as I'd feared. Not a sheer drop by any means, more a steep incline. I couldn't see the bottom. Maybe I could slide down it. I'd seen that done in movies.

"You can't go down there," Ezra said, as I hesitated on the edge.

Can't? What choice did I have? "Silvan's down there somewhere," I replied. "He might be hurt. Or worse." I didn't want to think about that.

Ezra grabbed my arm. "We'll go back. We'll get help. There's an inn full of witches we can call on for assistance. We can talk to the Ministry of Witches."

"You can go back," I said, "But I can't. I know that Silvan wouldn't leave me here and I won't abandon him." With that, I climbed over the lip of the ridge.

Intention is one thing, the courage to follow through quite another. I wavered in place on the edge of that incline, shivering with fear. I think I'd imagined that I could somehow navigate my way down by using handholds, but the moment my centre of gravity was over the edge I began to slip. There was nothing for it; I either had to go back or get on with it.

I let go.

Within seconds I was sliding down the incline and picking up speed, the cold night air buffeting my face and my stomach looping the loop.

If I lost control, I'd spill my brains on a rock at the bottom. Instinctively I thrust my wand into the air above me, envisaging a huge silk parachute dragging me backwards. "*Modero!*"

I jerked as the spell took effect. It yanked me backwards—somewhat painfully—before the pull of gravity caused me to slide forwards again. "*Tempero!*" I called, and this time the descent became gentler, rocks and pebbles scattering alongside me as my feet loosened them. I held tight to my wand and readied myself for a bumpy landing. When it came, I tumbled forwards, landing on my belly, the wind knocked clean out of me.

I gasped and lay face down in the earth, softer here, not frozen, the way it had been up above. I stretched my fingers and arms and wiggled my jaw. The sound of wings above alerted me to the belated arrival of Mr Hoo.

"Hooo? Hooo?" he worried.

"I'm fine. I'm fine." Everything seemed to be in one piece. Gingerly I pushed myself into a sitting position. A little battered and bruised, nothing to worry about.

"What took you so long?"

Silvan! He was lounging against a fallen tree, looking like something the cat had dragged in. Covered in leaf mulch and muck, I could only wish his grandmama could see him now. He had an arm wrapped around his chest.

I almost laughed in relief. "By all that's green! You're here! You scared me to death."

"So did you, when you followed me over."

He pointed up at what, from this vantage point, looked like a sheer cliff. I pulled a face. Had I really tried to *slide* down that?

"Who's your friend?" he asked.

Ezra had followed me over and now he fell through the air, his velocity accelerating. "Wooooooooooah!" he yelled.

Silvan directed his wand at him. "*Mollis nube super terram*," he said softly, and Ezra instantly slowed down and floated softly to the ground.

"Aye aye aye!" the detective gasped, his eyes rolling around like a scared dog's.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"I'm fine!" He laughed—with a faint trace of hysteria—and tottered about the clearing. "That was an experience."

Silvan groaned as he pushed himself up. I dashed to his side. "What about you? Are you hurt?"

Silvan grimaced and cradled the side of his chest. "My old war wounds are playing up." He meant his recently broken ribs. I threw his arm over my shoulder and allowed him to lean on me, all the while taking stock of where we were. The stony-faced cliff wrapped around us in a horseshoe shape, there were more trees ahead of us, but only a smattering. Beyond that, I could see a few lights.

"Look there!" I directed everyone's attention through the line of trees. "That's where we're headed."

I thought perhaps we'd stumbled across a small village or something, but it turned out to be a single large red-bricked structure, similar in size to Whittle Inn but not as old. It had a central building, flanked by two wings, with dozens and dozens of windows in a late Georgian, early Victorian style, a slate roof, and quasi-marble pillars at the entrance. Lights burned in numerous windows, and thick black curls of smoke poured out of the chimneys.

We followed the track up to the front door. A painted sign, depicting a gold cage with an open door, had been attached to the building by an iron bracket. It swung above our heads, rocked by the cold breeze. Mr Hoo landed on it and stared down at us with burning eyes. "The Gilded Cage?" I asked. "Does that mean anything to anyone?"

"Oh yes," said Silvan, dropping his arm from my shoulders and studying the sign. "It does. It means bad news."

My heart sank. If I'd been hoping for rescue, we'd obviously come to the wrong place judging by Silvan's face. "What do you mean bad news?"

He pressed his lips together and flicked his eyes at the windows, searching for something or someone.

"You've been here before?" Ezra asked from Silvan's other side.

"I'm …" Silvan hesitated, probably intending to say he couldn't tell us, but he changed his mind. "Yes. Yes, I have."

Ezra and I waited for further explanation. None came.

"I can't say anything more," Silvan shrugged. "But I think we should turn back."

I rolled my eyes. "Seriously?" If he wanted us to somehow navigate back up that cliff face to the land of man-eating hedera, he had another think coming. Someone had to take charge here. I stomped up the steps to the main door.

"Alf, I wouldn't—" Silvan called after me.

Too late. I hammered on the door.

"Oh," Silvan moaned. "I *really* wouldn't have."

"Tooo-wit," Mr Hoo called from above.

I waved dismissively at Silvan and glared at my owl. "A lot of help you are." From behind the door came the sound of something slithering. I curled my lip, not liking it at all, and stepped back. The door opened just the tiniest of cracks and light filtered through. I waited, imagining that someone would pull the door wider and ask us what our business was.

Nothing happened.

"Hello?" I shuffled forward.

"Alf, we should go," Silvan called from behind me.

"Go where?" What was our alternative? I reached out with the tip of my wand and pushed the door. It swung open easily, revealing a compact reception area. Beautifully decorated with black and cream tiles on the floor, the walls lined in deep green silk above the dado rail, cream paint below. Art Nouveau mirrors were hanging on

the walls, reflecting the light originating from half a dozen gas lamps that were dotted around. Numerous tall, thin palm plants had been arranged in the corners, and the reception desk, carved from English walnut, had been polished to a glimmering red shine.

To the immediate left of the desk was an arch leading to a short hallway. To the left of that was an elevator. An exact replica of the one that had suddenly taken up residence in Whittle Inn, right down to the curly ironwork, the brass buttons and the coloured glass.

Beautiful.

But who had opened the door?

With nobody in sight, I called out again. "Hello?"

No answer.

"Alf?" Silvan whispered. "Let's go."

Something darted across the reception, above my eyeline. A green flash. It disappeared through an archway to the right. I didn't hesitate. Stepping into the hallway, I rushed to the arch and stared through into a room approximately half the size of my main bar. This looked like a sitting room, with four or five worn leather sofas arranged around large coffee tables. The small green bird alighted on the fireguard set before an empty grate. It cocked its head at me, its black eyes unblinking.

"Ezra!" I hissed, turning my head to glance back at the detective still standing at the front door while trying my hardest not to move too abruptly and frighten the bird away. "The parakeet!"

Silvan sighed and closed his eyes, his shoulders drooping as Ezra followed me indoors. With no option other than to remain outside or join us, he sloped after us. "We shouldn't be doing this," he said and held up his wand with evident intent.

That gave me pause.

If he'd been here before and felt the need to defend himself then I probably needed to follow suit. Silvan was no coward. Something had him rattled.

I raised my own wand, although I couldn't see anything that might threaten us in any way. As Silvan joined us at the arch, the front door swung closed with an almighty clatter. Already feeling nervy, I squeaked in alarm.

"And so it begins," said Silvan, swivelling slowly about to inspect the other doors and hiding places.

The parakeet took flight. We watched it circle the sitting room, almost slowly, before it suddenly picked up speed and changed direction. It headed straight for us, a streamlined feather bullet determined to cause maximum harm.

We scattered in alarm.

I stumbled over the hem of my robes and took a tumble. Quick as a flash I was on my feet again, wand at the ready. The parakeet circled once and then disappeared down the corridor beside the reception desk.

"After it!" cried Ezra. I dipped behind the reception desk and chased the bird.

The narrow corridor opened into a massive Victorian-style conservatory. A huge glass structure, perhaps twenty-five or thirty feet in height, supported by thick iron struts that had been painted a fresh cream. Enormous potted plants, like something you might have found at Kew Gardens, had been arranged around the space, including several trees. Above our heads, a rope swing with a wooden seat hung from the central iron pillar. The overall effect gave you the impression of being inside an enormous birdcage. The parakeet flew up to the swing and settled on the seat, peering over the edge at us, dwarfed by its surroundings.

The slithering noise that I'd heard while waiting outside the front door came again. The sound of something heavy and papery gliding smoothly over the tiles. Curious, I turned around. At first I wasn't sure what I was seeing. My mind rushed to deny it, but Ezra, following closely behind me, spotted it at almost the same time.

"No!" he blurted. "*What* is that?"

A snake. As fat as a man's head, fatter maybe. At least fifteen feet long. It slithered past us, so close I could have reached out and touched it had I wanted to.

Needless to say, I didn't want to.

I held my breath until it had passed. It slithered to a corner and coiled itself up, staring at us malevolently through hooded eyes.

In all the excitement I hadn't paid much attention to the rest of my surroundings but now I could see the cages and the crates, the baskets and the vivariums, all piled up, one on top of another, scattered among the enormous potted palm trees and the ferns. Dozens and dozens of creatures stared back at us from behind their bars or glass walls. Birds, bats and cats, rats, mice and other rodents, snakes, spiders, frogs and toads, a badger, a fox, even a hedgehog.

"These are similar to the animals that Delia brought to the inn," I said. "Are they familiars?"

A green feather floated down in front of my face. I peered up, searching for the bird, but it had hidden itself.

"They're not familiars," a woman replied. "Are they, Silvan?"

In place of the parakeet, a woman appeared. About the same age as me, perhaps slightly older, her frizzy hair created a halo, shining in the low light.

"No. They're not familiars." Silvan had limped in after us, still clutching his ribs. He smiled up at her, but I noticed the grim set of his jaw, the lack of warmth in his eyes. "Hello again, Meztli."

She laughed, a high-pitched discordant sound, like fingernails on a blackboard. She arched her back and kicked her legs out. The swing began to rock. I batted away a shower of green feathers in distaste as they floated down and scattered over me.

"I thought we talked about all this before?" Silvan called, keeping his tone conversational.

"Is that what you choose to call what happened?" Meztli asked. "Us *talking* about it?"

Silvan shrugged. "For the most part."

"Oh, when you put it like that, I suppose we did have a little chat about my untoward habits. But honestly, what's a girl supposed to do? I couldn't stay where I was forever. Where you *sent* me, I mean." She glared at him. "At the end of the day, I'm a collector and a hoarder and I just can't help myself." She propelled the swing in a wide arc, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, creating a downdraught and scattering more feathers.

"Protective circle," Silvan muttered and, without needing to be told twice, Ezra and I turned our backs to Silvan, wands held up and out. I couldn't see an immediate threat, but there was no brooking with the quiet urgency I heard in Silvan's voice. "Use your wands to defend yourselves if you have to, but be careful not to harm any of the animals in the cages."

Our activity was met with another peal of laughter from above. "Oh, Silvan, my darling. What folly is this? You only just escaped with your life the last time we met. Did you know, you were the prize I dreamt about throughout those long years in prison?"

"You exaggerate, Meztli. You've only been in prison for ten months. Hardly years."

I risked a glance at the woman swinging above us. She returned my stare with a look of absolute venom. From its corner, the snake

turned its glassy expression on me too. It began to uncoil itself, almost as though she had silently bidden it do so. I swallowed.

"She was in prison?" Ezra asked. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Meztli Kuthbeorth. Does that mean anything to you?"

Ezra shook his head. "I don't think so."

"That's as it should be."

"But you said she'd been in prison," Ezra said. "Surely that's a matter of public record. I would have expected the Ministry of Witches to know something about the case."

"A private prison." Silvan narrowed his eyes at the woman above us.

She cackled and started to slow the swing down. "What Silvan isn't telling you is that he was employed by an interfering old gangster—"

"A grieving father."

"—to hunt me down." She glared at him. "And paid a pretty penny, no doubt."

"That's none of your business," Silvan told her.

"You're a whore for gold, Silvan. You'd do anything for a pouch full of coin."

"Taking you in was the right thing to do, regardless of payment."

"Why was the father grieving?" I hesitated to ask, but I wanted to know what we were dealing with.

Without taking his eyes from Meztli, Silvan pointed his wand at the animals in the cages. "Each one of those animals actually shelters a person's soul."

I stared in horror at the creatures before me. No wonder they were so still and watchful, no wonder their eyes burned with dull hope. "That can't be," I whispered. "There are so many of them."

"On my previous visit there were two or three times as many," Silvan answered.

"Are they all witches?" I wanted to know. "Wizards?" Cold fingers of panic were squeezing my insides. *What was this woman capable of?*

Silvan shook his head, his face bleak. "Some. Some are mortals."

"What does she want with them?" Ezra asked, eyes flicking between the cages and the massive snake in the corner.

"She's a parasitic shifter," Silvan said.

I had no idea what that might be.

"She captures the animals and appropriates their souls?" Ezra asked.

"Yes. And uses their energy in her magick."

Ezra shuddered. "I've heard of such things. Keeping the host alive allows her to change shape at whim."

"Yes, she needs to keep the animals alive for the magick to last," Silvan nodded. "One of the most distasteful aspects of what she does is that once she takes the animal's soul away from its body, it appears dead to onlookers. While it's at its most vulnerable it can be attacked or eaten by another animal.

"So, if she wants to reuse that animal, she has to keep it safe. That's why she cages them." I could hear the disgust in Silvan's voice. "She assimilates a fair amount of the animal's particular talents, whether that's flying or burrowing, and she can assume its form. Once she's sucked enough energy from it, its soul will wither and die, but to be able to continue using those abilities she needs it to remain alive."

"But that's barbaric! It allows them no peace. Why not kill them and be done?" I demanded. "Why not simply find another owl or

badger or whatever?" I gagged at the cruelty of it all. "Why use witches or humans to populate the animal's body?"

"Because she's a complete raving psychopath," Silvan replied. "No other reason than that she enjoys ripping good people away from their homes and families."

Bile burned in the back of my throat. "So she steals human souls too?"

"To keep her hosts warm," Silvan said. "She doesn't care what happens to the human bodies she leaves scattered around. Most of them are buried or cremated and then the souls have nowhere to return to."

I couldn't bear that idea. A soul with no purpose, nowhere to go, was an unhappy soul. My inn was populated by many of those who had once been lost. I could only hope I'd given them some joy in their afterlife. And there was always, always the option to be sent to the next plane.

I harnessed my disgust and gathered my resolve. "We have to set them free." I directed a short burst of magickal energy at one of the birdcages. "*Libero!*" The lock snapped free and swung open. The bird remained inside, rolling its eyes in the direction of Meztli, high above on her swing.

It was scared. I sensed its fear, and my own heart fluttered in my chest in response, my stomach squeezing painfully in empathy. How dare she? She'd cowed every creature here. Why? And what gave her the right?

Meztli responded in her own way, by sending a blast of energy at me, knocking me to the ground. Silvan furiously levelled his wand at her as I quickly pushed myself up, my shoulder smarting where her wand strike had made contact. My arm tingled, pins and needles in my fingers. "Don't make me hurt you, Meztli," he cautioned her

between gritted teeth. “Give yourself up. Let us take you back. It’s for your own safety as much as anyone else’s.”

“Oh, Silvan.” She reproached him the way a mother might quietly chastise a child. “You of all people should know that I have no intention of ever going back there.”

“Where’s there?” Ezra wanted to know.

“Some dungeon in some royal castle somewhere,” Meztli replied, her mouth turning down at the corners. “Not that I ever saw much of it, certainly not the parts of it that were above ground anyway. And the hole they kept me in didn’t come equipped with any luxuries whatsoever.”

A royal castle?

“That’s what prison is usually for,” Silvan called up. “How did you get out, anyway?”

Meztli giggled. “I worked my magick.”

“I’m guessing it was Delia,” Silvan said.

“Delia?” I queried.

Meztli sighed and swung on the swing once more, before suddenly tipping over backwards and falling out of the swing by somersaulting through the air. For a fraction of a second, she hung there above our heads, suspended in mid-air, a beautiful white owl, perhaps the one that had befriended Mr Hoo. The light altered fractionally and she was a raven, and by the time her feet softly hit the floor ten or so feet in front of us, she’d assumed the shape of a sleek black cat.

She settled into a sitting position and calmly observed us, her gold eyes glinting. Then she bared her teeth and I scuttled backwards as she morphed into a huge tiger, eyes of fire, sharp incisors that caught the light from the lamps, shoulders with muscles that

rippled as she moved. She could shuffle through her available shifter personas with the greatest of ease.

"Ah yes," the tiger said, its voice a throaty growl, "my poor little sister." With that, she assumed her human shape again and now I could see a resemblance. Thinner than Delia, as though she needed plumping up a little after months on a restricted prison diet, this is how Delia would have looked had she taken care of herself, her hair clean and conditioned, her eyes sparking with fierceness.

"With a little help from my friends," she waved her hand vaguely at the caged animals behind her, "I sent a message to Delia and had her track my whereabouts and come and rescue me. You can't keep a decent shifter down. It's all a matter of working with the right animal. Or insect, of course." She clicked her fingers. With a flash and a pop of air she disappeared. A moment later I wafted a fly away from my face. It buzzed around us all before retreating to a safe distance. Another bright flicker of light and Meztli reappeared. She dropped a low curtsey, evidently pleased with her skills.

"The problem was," she continued, "Delia lacked my talent. Months and months of planning went into securing my escape. We coordinated back and forth, and yet she still managed to mess up the finer details. I couldn't trust her with anything. She was constantly making mistakes. I'd given her the coordinates that would allow us to access The Gilded Cage, but she messed them up. I'd told her to go into Speckled Wood and find the portal I'd set up, but she couldn't even manage that."

That would explain Delia's frustration when she'd walked around Speckled Wood with Finbarr. She'd been searching for the portal. What she couldn't have known was that with our magickal perimeter in place, the boundary that Finbarr worked so hard to

maintain would not have allowed anyone else to create a portal either from or to Speckled Wood. Meztli was mistaken about that.

"So you *killed* her?" I asked.

"She'd served all useful purpose," Meztli shrugged. She wrinkled her nose at me, faux sympathy. "You were most put out about that, weren't you? For the life of me, I couldn't understand why. Delia was such a horrid, annoying little witch. Constantly complaining about her allergies to my pets. I was doing the world a favour, getting rid of her."

Meztli paced. "She had this plan. She thought I didn't know about it, but I received word. She seemed to think that after she'd rescued me, she could keep me cooped up in a birdcage in that stinking hovel of a back room of yours. She thought she could control me. She'd always been jealous of my powers. But she was absurdly transparent, useless at hiding secrets, and her skills just weren't up to containing me."

She wagged a finger my way. "I know she was getting on your nerves too, Alfhild. I couldn't be doing with her for a moment longer."

"And Mrs Cuthbert?" I asked. "Your mother?"

"She's been dead for years. Delia just about had the skills to shift from herself to our mother, so I utilised that. I imagined that having mother disappear would throw people off the scent if anyone was sent after me. Then I had to create a new portal in a hurry. I'm guessing that's how you found me."

"That rotten elevator," I glowered. "You have to undo that spell."

Meztli sniggered. "You're in no position to make any demands, Alfhild. By the time I've finished with you, the location of my portals won't matter a jot."

“You killed Delia,” Ezra repeated, “so you’re aware we’re going to have to take you in?”

“To the Ministry of Witches? I don’t think so. What do you say, Silvan?” her merry eyes settled on Silvan.

He didn’t crack a smile. I could sense his growing fury. “DS Izax will do what needs to be done. You must face the consequences. You killed Delia.”

“You can’t pin that on me, not really. Only kind of …” she waved at the corner of the conservatory. “I had a little help.”

I followed the direction of her hand. At first, I couldn’t quite discern what I should be looking at, but there, among the tallest of the potted plants at the far end of the conservatory, I could make out slender threads hung across the ceiling. They sparkled with a cold, silvery-gold light, reminiscent of the ones I’d found in The Snug holding Delia up.

Among them, something stirred. It skittered across the threads, light as a feather, making the light bounce, before gliding smoothly down from the ceiling. The size of a pony, with black and brown stripes, it landed gracefully on all eight legs and twisted about to look at us.

“Silvan,” I hissed, my bowels turning to liquid. There are many things I’m frightened of: drowning; vampires and by extension bats; and recently I haven’t been that keen on heights, but spiders? They took the biscuit.

How many eyes does a spider have? Six? Eight? Whatever, all of them were trained on me. My skin crawled in disgust. Unable to help myself, I hopped backwards.

“I think that evens up the numbers a little, don’t you?” Meztli’s smug grin dripped with malice.

Silvan sent a warning blast of heat towards Meztli's feet. She leapt into the air, took the shape of a frog, then a sparrow, before landing on four paws as the sleek black cat again. Ezra trained his wand to my left. The snake slipped a little closer. The sound it made, its dry skin rasping over the tiles, made the hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

"Call them back, Meztli," Silvan ordered.

Meztli swirled in place, taking the shape of a flamingo, a boxing hare, a hummingbird before assuming her human form once more.

"Oh Silvan, you're such a disappointment to me," Meztli lamented. "I so looked forward to meeting you. You and I, with all our powers, could have been so good together."

"That was never an option," Silvan responded calmly, taking a confident step towards her. "You're deluded, Meztli. You live in a fantasy world and think only of yourself. You're a danger to society and you must be stopped."

The snake glided a little closer, its tongue rasping from its wide mouth. I couldn't decide where to look first, but given the spider had its eyes on me, I opted to point my wand at it.

"Anguis?" Meztli called, and the snake swivelled its neck to look at her. "Aranea?" The spider rotated slightly, lifting its front two legs from the floor. "Deal with them!"

The air lit up around her as she jumped for the swing, a kangaroo that morphed once more into parakeet. Rapid clicking noises hastening across the tiles diverted my attention. The spider made a beeline for me, faster than I'd imagined it could. Only half-ready, I fired my wand in haste, missing by a country mile. Meanwhile, the snake had rushed Ezra. The force of its attack pushed us all back and we scattered like skittles. I missed my footing, slipping on the tiles and falling to one knee. The spider leapt into the air, velocity carrying it for-

wards. Time stood still as it flew my way, its front two legs raised like some crazy spider ninja. My brain screamed that it didn't know any anti-spider defence spells, and I fiddled while Rome burned around me.

But not Silvan.

With one hand raised towards Meztli sheltering on the swing above us, to ward off any attack she rained down on us, he flashed his wand at the massive spider. "*Aranea mori!*" he cried, before instantly redirecting his attention back to Meztli and firing at her. The parakeet's song filled the room, sounding oddly sweet, yet surreal amidst the heat and drama.

The spider crumpled in mid-air and fell to the tiles. It twitched once or twice before rolling onto its back and curling into itself, tucking its legs around the huge bloated sack of its body. Grimacing, I stood up and poked it with the tip of my wand.

Dead.

No time to celebrate, I whirled to go to Ezra's aid. The snake had started to coil itself around the detective, his arms trapped by his sides. I fired off a number of heat spells at the coils from a relatively close distance but to no avail. "Help me!" Ezra moaned, his face contorted in agony.

"Hold on!" I begged.

Meztli, beside herself with fury, began to rain down short bursts of heat.

Silvan, still watching out for Meztli, and using blocking spells against her magick, backed towards us. "Kill the snake, Alf!"

Meztli howled in anger. "Not Anguis!" She fired straight at us, scorching my cheek and knocking Silvan backwards. He clattered against the wall and collapsed to the ground, temporarily winded.

I sucked in my breath and clamped my free hand over the burn on my cheek. "Yowza!"

Ezra's wand clattered to the floor, his head sinking over his chest. "Kill it, Alf!" Silvan yelled at me.

I didn't know any spells that would kill anything the size of this snake. Except one.

The one spell I'd sworn never to use again.

The Curse of Madb.

I inhaled, relaxing my knees, feeling the weight of my body grounding myself through my feet. Then I summoned every ounce of intent and shot a wave of death energy at the snake. Anguis hissed and choked and writhed, swinging violently back and forth, knocking Silvan and me against the glass of the conservatory and throwing poor Ezra around like a sock puppet. I kept my wand trained on it, shooting energy its way, until finally it arched its back and collapsed in front of us, the light dying from its eyes as it loosened its grip on Ezra.

"Murderers!" shrieked Meztli from above us. "I'll string the pair of you up by your intestines!"

"I most humbly beg to differ," Silvan growled and took aim at the swing. "*Cadunt ad terram*," he ordered, and with a high-pitched squawk, the parakeet lost its footing on the perch, tumbling end over end, its wings floppy and useless, until it smashed into the tiles at our feet.

She lay there, her chest heaving, her neck broken.

Silvan advanced on her, wand ready to deliver a final blow. The parakeet shifted into Meztli's form, her mouth opening and closing, her eyes glassy.

I crept towards Silvan, grabbing his arm. "It looks like she wants to say something," I whispered, my stomach knotted in horror.

“There’s nothing she can say that will change all the awful things she’s done over the years,” Silvan replied. But as the light faded from her eyes, he glanced away, and I felt the tension in his muscles as he swallowed.

He hated killing as much as I did.

There was nothing we could do for Ezra.

I knelt next to the detective's broken body, my trembling fingers searching for any signs of life but finding none. Silvan stroked my hair. "He's gone, Alfie," he said.

"Can't we bring him back somehow?" I sniffled, my heart hollow.

Silvan pulled me up and wrapped his arms around me. I listened to the steady beat of his heart while sobbing into his clothes.

"Shhh," he soothed. "We'll do right by him, I promise. But for now, we need to decide what to do with all the animals."

My knees shook as I turned to look at them, swiping at the tears that ran down my face. "Wh-wh-what do you suggest?"

He led me to the cages and began to tap his wand gently against each one. Locks clinked, straps unfurled, doors fell or slid open. The animals inside regarded us, some in wonder, some in sadness. "How can we tell which are still animal and which were captured?" I asked. "And which of those captured humans or witches still has a body to return to?"

Silvan put his arm around my shoulders, speaking softly. “I think it’s probably best to assume that what we see before us is all that we have to work with for now. We should set them free and allow them to decide for themselves what is best for them in the long run.”

“We can take any who wish to come with us back to Whittle Inn,” I suggested, and Silvan nodded in agreement.

“And any that wish—” my breath hitched in my chest, “any that wish to journey over to the Summerlands, I can release.”

“That’s my girl.” His eyes glowed and he brushed my hair away from my dusty face and wet eyes.

We began ushering the animals out of the cages. Some made a run for it and we let those go. Others gathered before us, waiting patiently, sadly, to be led to a place of safety. Only the white owl remained in its cage. I reached out to touch the bars. This had to be the one that had been at the inn. The one Mr Hoo had befriended. Somehow, Meztli had brought some of those animals here.

“That’s all of them,” Silvan said, having performed a final check. “I guess we’d better head back to the wood.”

I darted a glance at Ezra. I didn’t want to leave him here. How would we get back to The Gilded Cage to find him again once we’d returned to Whittle Inn? On the other hand, we couldn’t take him with us, there was no way we’d be able to carry him up that cliff face.

The thought of him tumbling down the incline only an hour or so before, when we’d cushioned his fall and saved him from death, only to see him succumb here, had me in tears once more.

We’d failed him.

“I want to take him back to the inn,” I said.

“Alf—”

“We can create a portal!”

“I don’t know of any magick portal-opening spells, do you?” Silvan asked, picking up a hamster and a mouse and inserting them in his pockets.

Where was Mr Wylie when you needed him? “There has to be another way back,” I puzzled. There’s no way Meztli was trekking backwards and forwards from up beyond that cliff.”

“Maybe we should just call a taxi from reception, eh?” A raven fluttered onto Silvan’s shoulder, forcing the pigeon that had taken up residence on his head to shift over a little.

The reception.

There was an elevator there!

“What if—”.

The elevator in reception was a carbon copy of the one that had turned up at the inn, in almost every way. Five buttons, even though, as with Whittle Inn, The Gilded Cage only had four floors. However, in this case the button at the bottom had been labelled Four, and the one on the top was labelled G.

“Bingo!” I said. “But why did we end up in that horrible desolate frozen wood with the man-eating ivy, if our elevator could have brought us here?”

Silvan shrugged, and a mouse popped its head out of his collar. “Maybe Meztli created a safety mechanism. The elevator was spell-bound. None of your other guests ended up in the wood. It simply transported them to the floor they needed. But when we entered, it took us to the wood.”

I shuddered. “This was all about *you*! She wanted you to find her.”

He nodded; his mouth set in a grim line. “It seems she had it all planned out.”

We exchanged a look. I’d been afforded a glimpse into the part of his life I didn’t often get to see. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know any more.

Not for now. Maybe another time.

We loaded most of the animals inside before I pressed the button for G and stepped out. I turned to face my attentive audience of small mammals, rodents, winged creatures and goodness knows what else. “I’m hopefully sending you to the bar at Whittle Inn. You can wait for us to join you,” I told them, “or you can go your own way and do your own thing.” The doors began to slide closed and I crossed my fingers that they would end up where I assumed they would: on the ground floor of my wonky inn. “May the Goddess speed. Oh, and be good!” I instructed them as they disappeared from view.

Ting.

The elevator began to climb.

Ting.

It passed the next floor.

Ting.

A muted sound.

Ting.

The faint sound of the doors opening somewhere a very long way away.

I took a deep breath.

That left Ezra and the white owl that couldn’t be coaxed from its cage.

And Mr Hoo of course. I unlocked the front door and popped my head outside, searching for my feathered friend. Mr Hoo had re-

mained in place on the swinging inn sign.

"Hoo-ooo-ooo hoo?"

"What kept me so long? I've been busy." I lifted my right arm. "I need your help."

"Hoo!" He fluttered down and pecked at my ear, his way of saying he'd missed me I think. I carried him through to the conservatory. He spotted Ezra lying on the floor.

"Hoooooo?" he asked sadly.

"Yes." My eyes welled up again.

"Hooo-oooo." He snuggled against me and I took in a shuddering breath.

"Okay, little fella," I said, and showed him the white owl in the cage. "I need you to coax the big guy out, as quickly as you can."

"Hoo!"

Mr Hoo jumped off my arm and landed in front of the large white cage. He twittered at the owl inside, which regarded him with great solemnity.

"Oo ooh," it said. "Oo ooh."

"Hoo-ooo. Hoo! Hoo-oo?"

"Ooh. Oo-ooh. Tooo-weet."

"Hoooooo." Mr Hoo's soft hoot sounded mournful.

"Alf?" Silvan called me over from where he'd been rearranging Ezra's limbs. "If I take his shoulders can you manage his feet?" He stooped to pick up Ezra's wand and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

Ezra was a big chap, but fortunately Silvan was strong, and in spite of his sore ribs we somehow managed, together, to move Ezra along the short passage to the reception. Silvan had wedged open the elevator door with a stool, ready for us to manoeuvre our precious cargo inside.

“Carefully now,” Silvan said as we swung Ezra into a sitting position on the floor. Silvan rearranged the detective’s coat, tidying the man up. When he looked my way, I saw the pain on his face. “I should have done more. I should have taken Meztli out at the beginning.”

“Maybe,” I said, but I completely understood why he hadn’t. It would have been against the witches’ honour code. Witch-on-witch killings were anathema to our creed. Ezra had wanted to arrest Meztli. Sadly that hadn’t been possible. Perhaps, without Ezra, Silvan would have behaved differently.

I reached out and linked my fingers through Silvan’s. “You did your best. It all happened so quickly.”

He turned his face away and cleared his throat.

Deciding he needed a little space, I stepped away. “I’ll grab Mr Hoo so we can get out of here,” I told him softly and retraced my steps to the conservatory.

I found Mr Hoo and the white owl with their heads together, twittering so quickly I’m surprised either of them could hear what the other was saying. By some miracle, Mr Hoo had persuaded the white owl to leave the safety of its cage. They had perched on top of a pile of empty cages.

“We need to go,” I called.

Mr Hoo swivelled his head to level his bright orange eyes on the white owl. “Hooo?”

“Ter-woo,” it replied.

I lifted my arms, and first Mr Hoo and then the white owl soared across the room to settle on me. Even between the pair of them they weighed nothing at all. Just two enormous fluffy balls of feathers. The white owl, obviously nervous, turned its head away so that I

couldn't scrutinise it, but Mr Hoo twittered conversationally, making every attempt to put it at ease.

She's alright most of the time, he was saying, *you can trust Alfhild*.

After glancing around one last time at the cages and baskets, mindful that I didn't want to leave anyone behind, I gently carried the owls back to Silvan, waiting for me at the elevator, fully in charge of his emotions once more.

"Ready? Silvan asked, and I nodded.

"Let's get Ezra back to the people who matter." I stepped in ahead of him, and he removed the stool. The doors slid smoothly closed.

Ting.

I stared at the buttons. Upside down. Four, three, two, one, G. "What if these don't take us back to the inn?" I asked.

Silvan's index finger hovered over the G. "Then we'll be in for another adventure." His dark eyes met mine. *All will be well. Trust in the magick.*

"Hoooo!" Mr Hoo agreed.

I sucked in a breath.

"Alright then," I agreed. "Let's go home."

I can't explain that journey. What should have taken ten or twenty seconds seemed to take much longer. I avoided looking in the mirror at the back of the lift, staring straight down at my feet instead, but by gazing at my feet I could clearly see Ezra's, and that brought a lump to my throat.

Ting.

It had taken long enough to get to the first passing point.

Ting.

My arms were aching from holding them out at my sides as I supported the owls.

Ting.

The white owl, probably sensing my discomfort, fluttered uneasily, and I had to duck to avoid having my eye taken out by the corner of its wing.

Ting.

Finally.

I held my breath as the doors slid open, revealing the concerned faces of Gwyn and Elise waiting for us in the bar of Whittle Inn. My instinct had been right. Delia had connected the elevator at The Gilded Cage to the one she had created in my bar.

Elise gasped and clamped a hand to her mouth when she spotted Ezra on the floor of the lift. She scanned our expressions, searching for good news. I gently shook my head and she rushed towards us, as though she would scoop Ezra up and breathe fresh life into him. Silvan caught her and held her as she collapsed on the floor at his feet.

"Not Ezra," she wept. "Not my friend."

The Ministry of Witches were on the ball, as they always were. Gwyn contacted them and within no time at all, by breakfast in fact, they had sent representatives down to transport Ezra's body back to London, while other forensic investigators undertook a thorough examination of The Gilded Cage which they accessed, as we had, by using the elevator.

Our guests, waking up that morning and drifting down to the bar expecting a fry-up, took everything in their stride. Some of them chose to eat in The Hug but others were happy to use the kitchen table, and we created a number of sittings to accommodate everyone. Monsieur Emietter, in his element surrounded by so many adoring witches, filled and refilled plates, all the while gesturing extravagantly, waving his spatulas around with wild abandon while conversing in his own language with those who could do so.

I perched on a stool at the bar, leaving Charity, Florence and Archibald to look after our guests. My own heart beat with a hollow monotony, compounded by my empathy for Silvan and his misery, and I watched the comings and goings of the investigators while nursing endless mugs of strong coffee. They tracked backwards and forwards from the elevator and through the inn with evidence they'd collected at the scene, neatly labelled and bagged—all of the baskets and cages and crates, for example—before also assembling all of Elise's and Ezra's original investigative notes as well, intending to hold a proper enquiry once they'd returned to London.

Silvan and I were taken aside separately by the investigators from the Ministry of Witches to answer all of their questions. I did so openly and honestly, explaining all I knew about Delia's death and all that had happened after we'd stumbled on The Gilded Cage. I didn't mention that Silvan had been there before, some time ago, on a secret mission. That was for him to share.

Or not.

"But I don't understand how Ezra ended up there," I mourned. "He'd headed back to The Hay Loft. I let him out myself."

"I think I can help you with that," Gwyn intervened. "I heard Ezra at the back door and I let him in. He said he'd left his mobile phone contraption thingie here in the bar somewhere, and when I

showed him in, we found Mr Hoo creating a merry kerfuffle because you'd disappeared into the lift without him."

"So he followed us?"

"Mr Hoo was most insistent."

I glanced over to the fireplace. Mr Hoo had taken his habitual spot on the high-backed armchair there, but he'd shuffled over a little to allow the white owl some space. They warmed their feathers and dozed, the trauma of the event behind them at last.

"They should have stayed here, where they were safe," I lamented. "Although it probably wouldn't have made much difference to the outcome."

"Except by all accounts you would have been outnumbered," Gwyn replied in her crisp, no-nonsense way. "And then Silvan would be standing in front of me now, trying to explain what had happened to you." She had a point. "And believe me, Alfhild. The day he returns home without you, I'll make jam out of his innards. Now buck up. We have an inn to run."

EPILOGUE

When the investigators had finally gone and the scene had been released, I gathered all of our guests into the bar. We stood shoulder to shoulder, forming a large circle around the elevator. I couldn't bear its presence in my inn for one more minute.

I didn't know how to undo the spell Meztli had cast that had created this portal between The Gilded Cage and Whittle Inn in the first place. Nobody did. But the one thing I was sure of was that as a community of witches, we were stronger together.

I stood in front of them and called them to order. "My friends," I began, "you are a wider part of the Whittle Inn family. Thank you for your friendship, and for maintaining your relationship with my beloved great-grandmother even after death called her from this plane." There were murmurs of appreciation.

I took a deep breath. "You who congregate here with Alfhild Gwynfyre Daemonne and myself today, share hundreds of years of experience between you. What I'm asking is that we pool our collective wisdom and our knowledge," I indicated the elevator, "and that you join me in an effort to banish this grim monument to an un-

hinged and unhappy personality, so that we can truly make Whittle Inn a happy place to be once more."

A chorus of ayes greeted my words, and with no dissenters, I lifted my wand. The other witches followed suit. I banished thoughts of Ezra from my mind, accepting that he'd found a better place on the other side, and focused entirely on my own spell. I blocked out what everyone else was doing, imagining the elevator being erased, along with The Gilded Cage and the skeletal wood on top of the high cliff that surrounded it.

I brought my focus back to the elevator itself, imagined the brass of the buttons and the ironwork, so curly and ornate, simply melting away. The ores pooled to form a large puddle that poured through the floorboards and sank deep into the earth a long way below. And I imagined the wood losing its shine, ageing and beginning to decay, gradually rotting away, crumbling into dust until I could blow it away with a single breath. I scattered it on the breeze, and Florence's feather duster swept it away.

And when I looked up, the elevator had disappeared and the hole in the roof had closed over … and all was as it should be.

Pleased, but feeling a little shaky, I organised several trays of sherries to be handed around for everyone to indulge in while the Wonky Inn Ghostly Clean-up Crew reset the tables and chairs so that we could get back to the serious business of holding games tournaments. Perhaps it would have been better to cancel, but I sensed that everyone at Whittle Inn needed a little light relief. For my part, I intended to hit the Buckaroo table with a vengeance after I'd grabbed a shower and had something to eat.

I returned my wand to my pocket and found a slip of paper there. The telephone number of Ezra's brother-in-law. A man who could fix my boiler. I remembered how Ezra had smiled at the unin-

tentional euphemism and my heart ached for his loss. I intended to call his brother-in-law and invite him down to the inn and, while he fiddled with my workings, I'd ask him to tell me stories about the sweet detective I'd known for too brief a time.

"Ooh, Miss Alf!" Florence hopped up and down, beckoning me over to the bar.

I meandered over to where she and Charity were huddled together reading a newspaper that one of the investigators had left behind. "Have you seen this?"

"What is it?" I leaned over to get a better look. "Next Cam Vendez *Witching Impossible* Movie to be filmed in East Devon." My mouth dropped open in astonishment. "Whoa! No way!"

"I know, right?" Charity grinned in excitement. "Wouldn't it be amazing if they filmed somewhere near Whittlecombe?"

"It would." I read below the headline, unable to hold back a squeak of excitement. "Ooooh. Tough guy actor Dom Bruise to team up with hot Witchywood icon Brian Ben-Olds in the latest instalment of the *Witching Impossible* franchise."

Silvan, alerted by my sudden excitement, came to join us, squeezing Florence out. She wiggled her feather duster at him in annoyance.

"*Witching Impossible 7*, as yet untitled, is the high-octane follow-up to *Witching Impossible 6: Wall Doubt*. Destined for a 2021 release, filming is scheduled to take place in Venice, Hong Kong, New York and East Devon, UK. Sources have confirmed that Brian Ben-Olds will co-star with Dom Bruise!" I jumped up and down. "So exciting!"

"Who's Brian Ben-Olds when he's at home?" Silvan asked.

I jabbed my finger at the photo that had been included with the story, a library shot of him, taken a few years earlier when he'd been

the lead in a war movie. “Only the handsomest hunk to ever grace the planet earth,” I enthused. “His hair is longer now.”

“Really?” Silvan narrowed amused eyes at me. “You like long hair, huh?” He shook his own mane at me. Neither of us had cleaned up from the previous night’s activities. His clothes were caked with mud and muck, his face streaked with dust and grime, and his hair full of forest detritus. He needed a bath.

I probably didn’t look much better myself.

“He’s a great actor too, Mr Silvan,” Florence told him. Trust her. She was addicted to *Witchflix*. No doubt she’d seen all of Brian Ben-Olds’ movies.

“I don’t doubt it for a moment,” he replied, smiling at me.

I pretended to fan myself. “He’s scorching.”

“Hmmm,” he snaked an arm around my waist.

“Why, I do believe you’re jealous, Mr Silvanus,” I said, in my best Vivien Leigh southern belle accent, batting my eyelashes at him.

He grinned and bent his head to kiss me.

“Really, Horace.” Phyllis Bliss’s dulcet tones broke into our moment. I sensed Florence fade away, while Charity made a beeline for the exit. Phyllis stood on the other side of the bar, holding up her sherry glass. I waited for her to reprimand him for his appearance and for his choice in women, but instead she beamed at us, an enormous smile that dispelled the gloom of the day.

She raised her glass at us. “Alfhild, I’ve been watching you this week. At first I imagined you were a grumpy sloven, no matter what your great-grandmother told me—”

Blooming cheek!

“—but now I see that the way you balance your life coupled with the strength you demonstrate in adversity is a credit to your great-grandmother. You are every bit as bright and brave as she was, and

in many ways, given your tendency to be overly emotional, rather more sensitive and compassionate."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I settled for a heartfelt, "Thank you!"

Phyllis turned to Silvan "You've found a good one there, my boy. Don't let her get away. In fact," she leaned towards him and lowered her voice as though that would prevent me from hearing what she would say next, "when will you make an honest woman of her?"

Silvan gaped at his granny in horror, but I picked up my own sherry glass and clinked it against hers.

"Cheers, Phyllis!" I laughed, flushing a bright pink.

"Cheers!"

Need More Wonky?

Magic, Murder and a Movie Star: Wonky Inn Book 10

Woo-wee for Witchywood!

Some of North America's top film stars have descended on Whittlecombe. Is the tiny village ready for such an intrusion?

Apparently not.

Magic and mayhem, a murder and a movie star. It's the usual chaos at our beloved wonky inn!

Available to pre-order now!

PLEASE LEAVE ME A REVIEW

Have you enjoyed *A Gaggle of Ghastly Grandmamas*?

Book 10, *Magic, Murder and a Movie Star* will be out in July 2020.

If you enjoyed *A Gaggle of Ghastly Grandmamas* and you'd like to see more *Wonky Inn*, please leave me a review on Amazon or Goodreads.

Reviews help spread the word about my work, which is great for me because I find new readers!

And why not join my mailing list to find out more about what I'm up to and what is coming out next?

If you'd like to join my closed author group you'll find it here at

www.facebook.com/groups/JeannieWycherleysFiends
just let me know you've reviewed one of my books when you apply.

The Complete Wonky Inn Series

The Wonkiest Witch: Wonky Inn Book 1
The Ghosts of Wonky Inn: Wonky Inn Book 2
Weird Wedding at Wonky Inn: Wonky Inn Book 3
The Witch Who Killed Christmas: Wonky Inn Christmas Special
Fearful Fortunes and Terrible Tarot: Wonky Inn Book 4
The Mystery of the Marsh Malaise: Wonky Inn Book 5
The Mysterious Mr Wylie: Wonky Inn Book 6
The Great Witchy Cake Off: Wonky Inn Book 7
Vengeful Vampire at Wonky Inn: Wonky Inn Book 8
Witching in a Winter Wonkyland: A Wonky Inn Christmas Cozy Special
A Gaggle of Ghastly Grandmamas: Wonky Inn Book 9
Magic, Murder and a Movie Star: Wonky Inn Book 10
O' Witching Town of Whittlecombe: A Wonky Inn Christmas Cozy Special (TBC)

Spellbound Hound

Ain't Nothing but a Pound Dog: Spellbound Hound Magic and Mystery Book 1

A Curse, a Coven and a Canine: Spellbound Hound Magic and Mystery Book 2

Bark Side of the Moon: Spellbound Hound Magic and Mystery Book 3

Master of Puppies: Spellbound Hound Magic and Mystery Book 4 (TBC)

Midnight Garden: The Extra Ordinary World Novella Series Book 1

Beyond the Veil

Crone

A Concerto for the Dead and Dying

Deadly Encounters: A collection of short stories

Keepers of the Flame: A love story

Non-Fiction

Losing my best Friend: Thoughtful support for those affected by dog bereavement or pet loss

Follow Jeannie Wycherley

Find out more at on the website www.jeanniewycherley.co.uk

You can tweet Jeannie

twitter.com/Thecushionlady

Or visit her on Facebook for her fiction www.facebook.com/jeanniewycherley

Sign up for Jeannie's newsletter

eepurl.com/cN3Q6L

More Dark Fantasy from Jeannie Wycherley

Crone

A twisted tale of murder, magic and salvation.

Heather Keynes' teenage son died in a tragic car accident.

Or so she thinks.

However, deep in the countryside, an ancient evil has awoken … intent on hunting local residents.

No-one is safe.

When Heather takes a closer look at a series of coincidental deaths, she is drawn reluctantly into the company of an odd group of elderly Guardians. Who are they, and what is their connection to the Great Oak?

Why do they believe only Heather can put an end to centuries of horror?

Most important of all, who is the mysterious old woman in the forest and what is it that feeds her anger?

When Heather determines the true cause of her son's death, she is hell-bent on vengeance. Determined to halt the march of the Crone once and for all, hatred becomes Heather's ultimate weapon and furies collide to devastating effect.

Crone – winner of a *Chill with a Book Readers' Award* (February 2018) and an *Indie B.R.A.G Medallion* (November 2017).

Praise for *Crone*

'A real page turner, hard to put down.'

'Stunningly atmospheric! Gothic & timeless set in the beautifully described Devon landscape .... Twists and turns, nothing predictable or disappointing.'

– Amazon reviewer

'Atmospheric, enthralling story-telling, and engaging characters'

– Amazon Reviewer

'Full of creepy, witchy goodness'

– The Grim Reader

'Wycherley has a talent for storytelling and a penchant for the macabre'

– Jaci Miller

Beyond the Veil

Upset the dead at your peril… Because the keepers of souls are not particularly forgiving.

Death is not the end. Although Detective Adam Chapple has always assumed it is.

When his ex-wife is killed, the boundaries between life and death, fantasy and reality, and truth and lies begin to dissolve. Adam's main suspect for the murder, insists that she's actually his star witness.

She claims she met the killer once before.

When she died.

As part of his investigation, Adam seeks out the help of self-proclaimed witch, Cassia Veysie who insists she can communicate with the dead. However, the situation rapidly deteriorates when a bungled séance rips open a gateway to a sinister world beyond the veil, and unquiet spirits are unleashed into the world.

Can Cassia and Adam find a way to shore up the breach in the veil and keep the demons at bay?

With time running out and a murderer on the loose, the nightmare is only just beginning …

Praise for Beyond the Veil

'A 5-star winner from Queen of the Night Terrors'

– Amazon reviewer.

'Really got my heart pounding'

– Amazon reviewer.

'A nerve racking, nail-biting, spine tingling, sweat producing, thrilling storyline that keeps you on a razor's edge the entire tale'

– ARC reviewer.

'Female Stephen King!'

– Amazon reviewer.

The Municipality of Lost Souls by Jeannie Wycherley

Described as a cross between Daphne Du Maurier's *Jamaica Inn*, and TV's *The Walking Dead*, but with ghosts instead of zombies, *The Municipality of Lost Souls* tells the story of Amelia Fliss and her cousin Agatha Wick.

In the otherwise quiet municipality of Durscombe, the inhabitants of the small seaside town harbour a deadly secret.

Amelia Fliss, wife of a wealthy merchant, is the lone voice who speaks out against the deadly practice of the wrecking and plundering of ships on the rocks in Lyme bay, but no-one appears to be listening to her.

As evil and malcontent spread like cholera throughout the community, and the locals point fingers and vow to take vengeance

against outsiders, the dead take it upon themselves to end a barbaric tradition the living seem to lack the will to stop.

Set in Devon in the UK during the 1860s, *The Municipality of Lost Souls* is a Victorian Gothic ghost story, with characters who will leave their mark on you forever.

If you have previously enjoyed *Crone* or *Beyond the Veil*, you really don't want to miss this novel.

Sign up for my newsletter or join my Facebook group today.