



## Well Beyond

*A fairy tale set in Stockport, where fantasy, romance and crime combine forces until everyone gets what they deserve.*

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**Written for all the staff of Ward C6 in Stepping Hill Hospital with many thanks for their care and patience.**

## Chapter 1: Strange beginnings.

It started when Alex intended to raise the patient's bed and found she didn't need to touch the mechanism. The bed obediently rose on its own.

Well, perhaps it started before that, when she found equipment and things like the drugs she was dispensing always in the right place.

Or even earlier, when she was a teenager and her school things like pens and pencils kept themselves in order and her uniform was uniformly clean, tidy and correct. She'd thought that might be down to her mother but on second thoughts...

The bed, however, couldn't really be ignored so Alex looked around hastily to see if anyone had noticed. She was quite sure they hadn't and the patient was almost completely out of it on medication so she heaved a mental sigh of relief and continued with her nursing shift.

"A busy shift," remarked her friend and colleague Janet as they got ready to leave.

"Tell me about it," said Alex. "But at least it's still light out." It was the middle of summer after all.

Janet raised her eyebrows.

"Well," said Alex, "Wooster will want a walk when I get home. He'll be stir crazy after a day in the flat with just the cat for company."

"I suppose a walk might be as good as a rest." Janet sounded doubtful but then she had children rather than pets and probably saw parks and canal banks as just more supervision rather than freedom. "But I've always wondered. Why did you call him Wooster?"

"It was when I picked him up as a puppy. The plan was to call him Rover or something equally ordinary but I was listening to the car radio. Someone mentioned Jeeves and Wooster and the puppy gave a soft 'woof' so that was that. It was going to be Woofster but somehow lost the 'f'."

Janet grinned. "My kids have a rabbit called Bigbig," she said. "He was meant to be Bigwig but Lottie didn't manage to say that so Bigbig sort of stuck."

Alex had forgotten that Janet also had a pet, though she assumed the rabbit didn't need walks.

"Cute," she said. "Funny how pets get their names. But not funny when they miss out on daily activities. I must fly. See you tomorrow!"

By now they were at the exit doors of the sprawling Stepping Hill Hospital complex and Janet waved as Alex headed for the car park. Janet lived close enough to walk home but Alex lived a little further away, in Marple.

The rush hour traffic was over – one advantage, she supposed, of long shifts – so she was home in no time, greeted by Wooster with slobbery Labrador kisses and by Drat with a feline glare and a pointed look at the empty food bowl.

Then there was the second strangeness of a strange day.

“I’m so glad you’re home safe and sound,” said Wooster.

“So am I if it means dinner,” said Drat.

It was possible this was what they always said but this was the first time Alex had actually heard words rather than making an intelligent guess at the meaning. She stood stock still in her tiny living room, still in the act of taking off her jacket. Surely, surely, she was hallucinating. Or hearing voices? Or whatever?

“Come on,” said Wooster. “Feed that dratted cat then we can go for our walk.”

“And I can nap in peace with a full stomach while you’re out,” snapped Drat.

Alex shook her head, deciding her brain was tired and playing tricks. She hung her jacket up on the door hook and dutifully emptied a pouch of food into Drat’s dish. Then she took the lead from the other hook. The evening was warm, as well as light, so she felt she didn’t need her jacket and would be glad of the fresh air. The ward had been really stuffy in the current heatwave, however many windows they opened. Wooster stood obediently while she fastened the lead to his collar then led the way into the street and to the car.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“I thought maybe Brabyn’s Park,” Alex replied without thinking as she opened the car doors and attached Wooster to his harness on the rear seat belt.

“So you can hear me,” he said, and gave a kind of chuckle that sounded like a series of short woofs close together. “But you don’t seem to believe it. We need to talk.”

“Yes, we do,” said Alex. “But not while I’m driving. We’ll be there soon enough.”

They were, and she parked the little Honda Jazz, still in a bit of a daze but practical enough all the same. She let Wooster out and, checking there were very few people around, took his lead off. There were a few boys playing football but they were, she knew, used to Wooster, and sometimes let him join the game. He raced off now, all talk of talking forgotten in the joy of chasing a ball.

Alex followed more sedately, the lead wrapped round her wrist. You never knew when it might be needed. She waved to the boys, who waved back, and then Wooster was by her side again, ready for the river bank and the walk proper. Presumably, the talk, too. Alex thought Wooster could begin. She had no idea at all what to say.

“So you finally understand us,” said Wooster, shaking his head. “Goodness knows we’ve been trying long enough. Drat has been cat-whispering to you in your sleep but all that seemed to make you do was sneeze.”

“How was I to know?” Alex could hear that her voice was rather faint, and she looked around, hoping there was no-one else on the river bank. The only other living being she could see was a moorhen which was regarding them curiously from the edge of the water. She didn’t think it was likely to join the conversation and then shook herself mentally at the thought that she was worrying about being interrupted by a bird.

“Because you’re magic, of course.” Wooster sounded as though this should be obvious to a child, let alone an adult.

“I didn’t know I was.” More internal amazement as Alex realised she was justifying herself to a dog.

“You must have done. Look at how you move things without lifting a finger. And how you see through situations to the core without having to have things explained.” Wooster was adamant.

“Well,” Alex said, “I didn’t realise that was magic. I just thought I had some talents and didn’t really query them. The way people don’t query being brilliant mathematicians or musicians.”

“Oblivious.” Wooster sniffed then broke off to snarl at a dog that rushed past them shouting, ‘out of the way, out of the way’ at high speed. He, or she, was soon out of sight leaving just the sound of popping seed heads as they dashed through the clouds of Himalayan balsam.

“Do you mean your parents never mentioned anything?” Wooster sounded concerned now. Alex thought back to her childhood in Gorton. Her mother had always been pleased at how neat and tidy she could be, and her father was proud of her academic progress. They were both pleased when she decided to study nursing, but she couldn’t recall anyone ever mentioning magic although an auntie had suggested they were blessed with an enchanted child at which her mother had laughed.

“Nobody said anything,” she said at last. “I only really started noticing myself today. So this is quite a shock.”

“I suppose it must be,” said Wooster, thoughtfully. “Grimalkin has been so worried but perhaps we’ve been going about it all wrong.”

“Who’s Grimalkin?” Alex was thrown by the sudden use of a strange name.

“Drat, of course. You called her Drat because she came to the door as a stray in a storm and looked like a drowned rat, and I went along with it to tease her, but her real name’s Grimalkin and she’s your familiar. She turned up that way to get you to take her in. She’d tried other routes like the pet shop and begging in the street but you either didn’t see her or thought she might be someone else’s responsibility.”

Alex was too stunned at the thought of having a familiar to respond and Wooster seemed to respect her silence.

They had circled round the park and were almost back to the car. The footballers had left and the sky was turning almost violet as evening drew on. All the way home Alex pondered what the dog had said. Magic; a familiar, conversation with her animals. What on earth was going on? What had she, a young nurse from a respectable Mancunian family with Caribbean origins, done, or not done, to bring this on herself? Then it occurred to her that maybe it wasn't all bad. The magical lifting etc. was useful and maybe now she knew she'd be able to actually control it. The animal conversations would probably be fascinating. The insights might not be magic, just part of her personality. Whatever, there was probably nothing she could do about it all, so she might as well welcome it as just another aspect of Alex, like her quick mind, her love of caring for people, her beautifully corn-rowed hair and her dark eyes. She'd better not mention it to anyone else, though. She didn't want to be either sectioned or investigated.

She went into the little house in a better frame of mind. It was a tiny two up, two down, opening straight onto the street, where she had to park. No garage for her Jazz. No garden for the pets, either, just a small back yard with room for the bins and a little toolshed. Less room now that they all had a profusion of multi-coloured bins. At least she didn't need to pay extra for garden waste, since she didn't have a garden. She loved her little house and didn't resent the way the mortgage took up so much of her salary. It was hers, all hers, and she was proud of it. She knew her mind was trying to avoid the topic of magic and settling on the most mundane things she could think of, but she was sure the pets would remind her. And maybe she should start thinking of them as companions rather than pets, especially Drat. The huge tabby was fluffy and gorgeous, even if she did try to sleep on Alex's face rather than in her own basket. But perhaps that was what Wooster called cat-whispering and it would stop now that they were communicating. Meanwhile, she needed something to eat and Wooster did too.

She prepared something quickly – a bowl of soup she'd made the other day and a couple of bread rolls warmed in the microwave and buttered. Wooster's bowl was full of chopped meat and both animals had adequate water.

"You'd better eat quickly," she heard Drat say. "You're due visitors."

Visitors? At this time of the evening after a day like today? Whoever? Her family would never disturb her when they knew she'd been on shift. Not even her brother Michael at his most annoying. Nor would any of her friends, even Janet. Though Janet had her hands full with family concerns and would not be gadding about in the evening. She finished her soup and treated herself to a chocolate mousse to fortify herself for whatever was about to come. She didn't doubt Drat's statement. A cat who was a familiar and had wheedled her way into the house on pretence of being a half-drowned stray could probably tell the immediate future only too well.

Wooster and Drat both followed her into the living room where she had no sooner sat down than she heard a knock at the door. She rose to let in her mysterious visitors and found they were mysterious indeed and both entirely unfamiliar.

## Chapter 2: Strange visitors.

The first was a tall white man with a badly scarred face. Alex winced but hoped she kept her expression neutral. The scars looked old and she was certain the man wouldn't appreciate any reminder of them. One, white even against his pale skin, drew down his left eyebrow and went on to pull the left side of his mouth askew. As he asked politely if he could come in and she equally politely opened the door wide, Wooster woofed a happy greeting and Drat purred in welcome but then another slimmer figure, female this time, extremely pretty and perhaps of East Asian origin, slipped between them, entering without asking, and Wooster growled. Drat's tail was waving madly.

Both visitors seated themselves without being asked and Alex looked from one to the other inquiringly. They must, she reasoned, have a purpose, and they must, she thought, know each other, though were not necessarily a couple. What could they want with her?

"Welcome to Well Beyond," said the man. "I'm Jasper, BarberJ of our local community. I'm really pleased you've found your magic at last."

Alex thought she should say something but couldn't think of an appropriate response. Then she blurted out, "What's a barberjay then?"

The woman laughed, a high pitched tinkle that didn't somehow signify mirth. "Every town has a kind of mayor, chief of police, healer in chief, busybody. In the olden days it used to be the barber so now they all get called Barber as a formal title and add their initial to distinguish them from others. Jasper's our Barber. I think he ought to introduce me too."

Jasper scowled, quite a ferocious look since his scars pulled his brows into strange contortions. "This is Malvynda, a witch of Well Beyond, and before you ask, I have no idea why she has followed me to your house."

"Partly to add my welcome to yours, of course," said Malvynda, then continued, "And to make sure Alex would let you in. Very few people would welcome a strange man into their home at this time of day. Or any time, really, unless it happened to be a repairman of some kind."

Alex thought she might well have asked Jasper in. He looked foul but spoke and felt fair. Besides, Wooster and Drat seemed to approve of him. She wasn't sure about Malvynda. It didn't seem right to take a dislike to someone at first sight but the animals' reactions mirrored hers. She said nothing and waited till her guests gave her more explanation.

"I've been watching you for a few years now," said Jasper. "It was almost a relief when your magic fully manifested. I could have seen the spark from central Manchester and I've no doubt some people did. So I thought I'd better introduce you to our world. You'll find it strange at first but I'm sure you'll soon settle in. Tomorrow, after your shift at the hospital, I'll take you beyond the well to Well Beyond, show you round, let you meet a few people, and add more explanations if you've had time to think what you most want to know."

Alex looked at him blankly. Most of that had not made a great deal of sense. However, it appeared tomorrow evening was already planned whether she liked it or not. She doubted whether it was a date. Probably not. But she'd go along with it anyway because she was now intensely curious about the entire situation.

“And darling,” said Malvynda, “feel free to ask me to walk your lovely dog or feed that gorgeous tabby while you’re gone.”

“No need.” Jasper’s tone was sharp. “The dog can walk beyond the well with us and I’m sure the cat could find a way to come, too.”

Wooster, sitting pressed against Alex’s knee, nodded eager assent. Drat raised her head and purred softly.

“Well, any time you need a dog walker or a cat sitter, you know you can call on me,” said Malvynda, clearly unaware of the hostility directed at her. “After all, I’m your first friend from Well Beyond. And a friend will always help.”

Alex was sure she hadn’t actually accepted any overture of friendship from the woman. She felt at ease with Jasper, and even faintly attracted because he was good looking, despite the scars, with wavy brown hair and green eyes. His features were nice when they were at rest. It was only when his lips or brows moved in a frown or smile that the scars seemed as prominent as at first sight.

“I think it’s early days to talk about friendship,” Jasper said gently. “But Alex, I’m sure you will make friends beyond the well, and that you’ll soon feel part of our community. That’s all I came to say so I’ll leave you to mull things over and I’ll pick you up here tomorrow. I know your hours because as I said, I’ve been watching you for some time.”

Alex decided that didn’t actually sound creepy but she did wonder how he’d managed to survey her so thoroughly when she couldn’t ever recall seeing him. And his scarred face was memorable. As if he’d read her mind he smiled and said,

“I was doing postgraduate studies in Manchester when you were in your first year at Salford. I noticed you then and I’ve kept an eye on you ever since. I’m so glad you found your magic and as I mentioned, the spark of that would have alerted anyone in a ten mile radius.”

“And I just need to watch Jasper,” said Malvynda. “I meet all kinds of interesting people that way.”

“BarberJ to you,” said Jasper, sounding a little exasperated. “Anyway,” he went on, looking at Alex, “I’ll say goodnight and escort Malvynda home. See you tomorrow.” He rose, nodded, and stepped towards the door then stood, waiting for the woman to move.

She shrugged. “I’d better come with you then,” she said. “I’ll be on the lookout for you tomorrow, Al, and remember my offer to look after your pets.”

“Alex will do nicely,” said Alex. Only her family and closest friends ever called her Al and she disliked the way a total stranger presumed to shorten her name. It was, after all, already shortened from Alexandra.

She got up and opened the door, feeling a slight pang of regret as Jasper stepped out onto the pavement and a frisson of uneasiness as Malvynda joined him. She couldn’t help noticing that despite the comment about seeing Malvynda home, the pair separated and headed in opposite directions. Of course, they probably both had parked cars somewhere around. She closed the door again, bolted and chained it, and sat down again.

“What do you think?” she found herself asking her companions.

“We should go with Jasper,” said Wooster.

“All three of us,” said Drat. “And if you ever let that woman in here again I won’t be answerable for what I say or do.”

I’m glad you’ve confirmed my instincts,” said Alex. “But I’m not at all glad I met her in the first place, though Jasper seems nice, if a bit stalkerish.”

“He was looking out for you,” said Drat. “I know him. Not well, but enough to know he’s good through and through. You’ll be safe with him.”

That sounded right. Alex made a cup of herbal tea and watched the news before going to bed and dreaming of a well in which she could see angry cats and dogs encircling someone who could be Malvynda, and Jasper, remarkably unscarred but still recognisable, scattering them all then smiling up at her.

She woke later than usual and had to hurry to get to work on time. It was going to be another busy day.

The day passed as days do. Alex felt she was wading through a cloud of paracetamol and patient buzzers. It was warm and the few open windows didn’t do much to reduce the temperature. Everyone was thoroughly frazzled, even Janet, who was usually a model of calmness.

“Why can’t the manufacturers make equipment that actually works?” she asked Alex, clearly without expecting an answer because she whisked off to find another machine to take temperatures. Individual temperatures, not the temperature of the ward, which they all knew was rising steadily.

By the time they handed over to the night shift Alex was beyond tired and yet part of her was looking forward to the promised adventure. Would Jasper actually turn up? Where were they going? At least Wooster would find a new walk. But how would Drat manage to keep up with them? These thoughts occupied the short drive home then she quickly fed the animals and herself before changing into comfortable crop pants and a sleeveless T shirt. She definitely wouldn’t need a coat.

Jasper was at the door almost before she was ready. He ushered them all into a modest Toyota hybrid, simply saying bland things like how warm it was.

“I’ve been looking forward to this for ages,” he said as they set off. “Showing you around. It’s high time you learnt about our world.” He then concentrated on the road.

It was a short drive and they ended up near Chadkirk Chapel. It was a walk Alex and Wooster already knew and she felt a little disappointed but then Jasper led the way towards the well. It was an unremarkable spring in a wall opposite the farm, and Alex had once been to a well-dressing which was pretty. Local enthusiasts all over the north west created pictures using flower heads to decorate wells like this one. The well-dressings were usually in late

spring so by now the well was merely a hollow in the stones, with a hint of water trickling down.

“Here we go,” said Jasper, walking straight towards the well.

Oh well, the worst that could happen would be damp feet and feeling silly, thought Alex as she followed. Wooster was by her side but Drat, she saw, was ahead of them, beside Jasper.

The cat turned her head. “Come on,” she said. “It’s easy once you’ve done it once, and I’ve done it lots of times.”

Then she and Jasper seemed to vanish and Wooster whined. Alex was startled but resolutely followed where she thought they’d gone. Perhaps there was an opening hidden by vines or jutting stones. But as she came up against what she was sure was the well, she felt the air move, and suddenly there was no well at all. No wall, no plants, no water. Just a cobbled street leading downhill between old half-timbered houses with overhanging upper storeys, a bit like The Shambles Alex remembered from a trip to York. It wasn’t quite true to say there were no plants. There were window boxes and hanging baskets everywhere and even the occasional planter with lavender or in one case miniature roses. Just no woodland greenery like that at Chadkirk. And no trees. Wooster was pressed tight against her side but they could both see Jasper and Drat a little way ahead.

Jasper turned. “Welcome to Well Beyond,” he said, his smile pulling his face in odd directions but endearing at the same time. Alex smiled back.

“Thank you,” she said, “and I’m impressed, but I don’t understand!”

“Of course you don’t,” he agreed. “We’ll walk down to my office and you can take in the scenery and atmosphere as we go, then I’ll show you some maps that will help to orientate you.”

There were few people around. The shops were shut, just as they would be in Stockport, and only one or two people were out and about. Jasper waved to someone who was watering their hanging basket and shouted a greeting to an elderly man who was clutching a newspaper. Alex couldn’t get rid of the feeling that she might be in two places at once: the woods behind the well in Chadkirk, and this intriguing street in somewhere Jasper called Well Beyond. It was a pretty place, somewhere that would, she thought, appeal to tourists, but how they would get here she couldn’t imagine. It was with a sense of relief that she followed Jasper into a house at the bottom of the street. It was larger than some of the others and had carvings around the door. No plants, she noticed, and there was a feeling of formality about the room she found herself in. The office, she supposed. So she would get her orientation course and maybe things would start to make sense.

Jasper waved at some comfortable looking armchairs around a low table. “Make yourselves at home,” he said, then started rummaging in some filing cabinet drawers at the other side of the room. Alex sat. The chairs didn’t just look comfortable, they were perfect. Some kind of memory foam, she thought, that moulded itself to her. Wooster took a chair for himself and Drat perched on an arm. Both looked content.

## Chapter 3: Getting to know the way around.

Then a voice from the doorway said, “Here you are. How lovely,” in tones that they all recognised. Malvynda.

“You knew we were coming,” Alex pointed out rather frostily. She had no idea why she disliked this woman so much but she did.

“Well, yes, but I didn’t know whether your magic would be strong enough. And you’ve brought your delightful pets. Would you like me to walk the dog for you while you’re busy here?”

“Over my dead body.” Wooster growled and Drat hissed as he spoke.

“I think Wooster wants this orientation session as much as I do.” Alex tried to speak politely and mildly.

“But I’m sure the pussy cat doesn’t need it. She’s been here before, and I’ve been dying to stroke that beautiful fur. I have milk at my house. Cream, even.”

Drat hissed again and then spat. “Al,” she said, “don’t let that woman anywhere near me.”

“Don’t worry, Drat,” Alex murmured then turned to Malvynda. “I don’t think the cat approves of that idea,” she said, hoping she sounded firm but pleasant, using the kind of voice she would use on a patient refusing medicine.

Malvynda pouted then swept out of the room. Everybody heaved a sigh of relief, even Jasper who was now coming to the table with a handful of maps, the kind that were folded in origami-like precision and would open to show whole regions.

He shook his head. “She’s bad news, that one,” he said, “but this office is open to all so I couldn’t keep her away.” He didn’t elaborate but just laid the maps on the table and opened one.

It was, once folded out to its fullest extent, a map of the British Isles, with all the major cities marked in a glowing red, and the borders of Wales and Scotland marked in bright green. Stockport, Alex saw, was shown in its own right, not just as a suburb or town in Greater Manchester. No surprises, yet, and she wasn’t sure what to say so didn’t say anything.

“There,” said Jasper. “Now we have the basics, which must be familiar to you.” Alex nodded agreement and studied the map. She found that the closer she looked at anywhere she knew, the more detailed things showed up. She could pinpoint Gorton where she grew up, Salford where she studied, Chester and York, both cities she’d visited, and London, on closer inspection became a maze of individual districts. It was like zooming in on a version of Google maps but this was on paper. Or was it? Jasper grinned at her confusion. “So long as you know what you’re looking at,” he said.

Then he unfolded another map, this time made from a transparent substance and laid it over the first. Alex could see that it was also a map of the UK but with huge differences. To begin with, Wales was blank, other than the words ‘here may be dragons’ and Scotland was likewise blank with the words ‘watch out for unicorns and kelpies’. Ireland did not,

apparently, exist. England looked more familiar but instead of the main cities she was used to there were quite different centres of population. Jasper pointed to the largest.

“That’s Swan Below,” he said. “You might know it as Wells, the smallest city in human England, where the swans ring the bell for food near the cathedral. It’s our capital, and seat of government.” Then he pointed out Royal Below, which corresponded to Royal Tunbridge Wells, and various spa towns that were quite prominent, ranging from Leamington to Scarborough. “You see,” he explained, “access is usually via wells and springs, though there are sometimes other paths in. Here...” He pointed, encouraging her to zoom in on Well Beyond and she could see two other ‘main roads’, one seemingly in Woodbank Park and the other apparently through the base of the viaduct.

“It’s like a different country,” she said slowly.

“It is,” Jasper agreed. “There’s a chestnut tree in the park that gives access to Well Beyond’s Chestnut estate where there are a lot of posh houses, and that entry under the viaduct leads to Arches which is a kind of slum – whatever we do never seems to improve it for long.” While Alex thought about how some things never changed, Jasper brought a third map, this time of Europe, and a fourth, transparent again, to lay over it. Alex realised the brightest spot on this was Spa, in Belgium. It seemed to have the same name on both maps.

“That’s where the magical governor lives,” said Jasper. “All the others, such as ours in Swan Below, are answerable to them. I know the main seat in Germany is in what you call Aachen and we know as Spring Below, and in France they’re governed from Vichy which we call Spring Above. I’m not altogether sure about anywhere else. Magicals don’t tend to travel a great deal, because we hate crossing salt water, and we aren’t keen on flying. Outside Europe there must be magicals and magical lands but there isn’t much contact. The Channel Tunnel made life easier for anyone wanting to holiday in Europe but there was always a bridge from Dover to Calais, a prohibitively expensive one. You can reach Africa by a bridge from Gibraltar and you can reach America by a bridge from Eastern Russia. Australia is an unknown, though with a town like Alice Springs at the centre we assume there must be magicals.”

“When you say magicals...” Alex began and Drat interrupted.

“He means us. You and anyone else with magical powers. Familiars, too. Not Wooster – he just reflects our magic.”

“So,” said Alex, “do I belong to two countries?”

“Yes,” said Jasper. “England and England Beyond. Don’t worry. You’ll soon get them straight in your head. I’ll take you home now, and tomorrow I’ll bring you a little earlier because I believe it’s one of your days off. Then you can meet some of the people here. Some, like Malvynda and myself, and you, of course, can pass between the two countries. Others can’t – you’ll see why, tomorrow.”

He had certainly given her plenty to think about. Not least, he’d given her a possible explanation for the way her parents had had to give her a sedative to get her on a plane when they visited relatives in Barbados. They had, she remembered, missed their original flight because of her distress. Nobody had ever mentioned flying to her again.

There was no sign of anyone on the cobbled street on their way back up the hill. Even Malvynda was not in evidence. At the top there was a small spring bubbling from what looked like a drystone wall, and of course Jasper simply walked up to it and Alex followed. They were suddenly in the Chadkirk woods and Alex could see Jasper's car.

"You're very quiet," said Jasper as they drove back to Marple.

"There's a lot to think about," said Alex. She just hoped she would sleep. Still, as he'd said, she had a day off the next day and could sleep in if she needed to. Then later, perhaps she would meet some fellow magicals. So far, she liked Jasper and disliked Malvynda. She hoped the rest wouldn't be divided into such definite categories. In fact, she rather hoped to make some friends.

"That was a very short walk," she said to Wooster as they waved goodbye to Jasper and went into their house.

"It was interesting though," said the dog. "And it's given me plenty to think about, too."

"You can both think as much as you like," said Drat, "but perhaps you could use a tin opener at the same time. Revisiting old haunts has made me hungry."

Alex offered a mocking curtsey then opened some cat food. She made dinner for herself and Wooster then watched some TV till she could no longer keep her eyes open and went to bed. She dreamed of drifting through veils or portals or whatever they were all over Europe, and talking to all the animals she met, even earthworms. She woke at her usual time, remembered that she had the day off, and snuggled back down under the duvet until Drat delicately lifted one of her eyelids with a careful claw.

"Just checking if there's anyone in," said the cat. "Only, my bowl seems to be empty."

Alex sighed and got up. "Why," she asked as she filled the bowl, "if you're a magical, can't you use a tin opener or open a pouch yourself? Just asking."

"Because I'm a cat, of course," Drat retorted. "Cats don't open things. That's what humans are for. And humanoid magicals."

"I gather I'm one of the latter," said Alex, watching Drat tucking into her breakfast and thinking rather vaguely about her own.

"Well yes," said Drat, wiping her whiskers and looking replete. "You always have been," she added. "It's just that you didn't know till recently."

"Does it... I don't know... run in the family or something?" Alex wasn't really sure what to ask.

"I don't think so," said the cat. "Just occasionally, a magical is born, and eventually they all find their way to the magical realm, one way or another. Some of them stay and others move between the two. That's really as much as I know. Apart from the fact that both realms have tin openers and delicious food."

By this time, Wooster was also begging for breakfast and when she'd satisfied him Alex made herself some scrambled eggs on toast and a cup of tea.

Every time she asked a question the answer gave her more imponderables to ponder, she decided. But she liked what she'd seen beyond the well, apart from Malvynda, and maybe today she could get to know a little more.

There was no sign of Jasper that morning and she realised she had no way to contact him. Muttering about men who didn't make the schedule clear, she busied herself with all the chores that piled up while she was at work: laundry; changing the bed; a bit of vacuuming and dusting. It was soon lunch time and she made a tuna sandwich or rather two, one of which she halved and gave to Wooster and Drat.

Soon after that, Jasper arrived.

"Is everyone coming?" he asked. Wooster was already chewing the end of his lead, eager to be off, and Drat was sitting by the door, an expectant look on her face.

"Definitely," said Alex. "I don't want to leave these two home alone though I'm not sure what I'll do when I start my work shifts again. I don't trust Malvynda not to pay a visit when I'm absent, and I'm sure she could magic her way in if she wanted to."

"She could," said Jasper. "So could I, but I wouldn't. She might, though. I'm fairly sure they'd be a match for her now they've met her, but I can understand your feelings about it. Maybe we could get someone to sit with them while you're at work. I'll think about who is both trustworthy and available. We'll sort it out. We can't have you missing work."

"Do many magicals work in the human world?" Alex wondered why she'd never met one then thought maybe she had but hadn't recognised their talents.

"Quite a few," said Jasper, "but you'd never know. That's the point of those of us who can pass."

"Pass?"

He nodded. "Acceptable human colouring and no extras like pointed ears. And of course the ability to cover up their skills so that humans aren't suddenly aware. That goes without saying, I think."

"But if magicals are born in the human world..."

"Some are. A lot are born beyond, and a lot of those can't pass or only for a little excursion wearing a lot of disguise. You'd be surprised to find how many visit for Hallowe'en."

More to think about. Alex's brain was feeling overloaded and she reached for a jacket. The heatwave had broken and it was raining, not hard but persistently. Maybe meeting some of the people in Well Beyond would help to settle her mind somewhat. And maybe it wouldn't be raining there, but it almost certainly would when she came home.

She wondered if they would use the other entry points but Jasper headed for Chadkirk. Of course, it was the nearest entry to his office. She glanced at him as he parked the car.

"Do you have a job in the human realm too?" she asked.

“Yes,” he said, “and like you I have days off. I altered those recently to align with yours. I have a duty to mentor new arrivals to Well Beyond, you see.”

Alex saw, but she also saw that he hadn't completely answered her question and she wondered what job he had in Stockport – or anywhere else in Greater Manchester. With the M60 motorway people could easily commute all over the place, even if parts of the road were affectionately known as the M60 car park at rush hour. What sort of job might he do? Had he used magic to alter his shifts? Could she? Would she? She decided she wouldn't. She liked being a nurse and if she wanted to keep working in the human world she felt it would be good to abide by most of its rules. Little things like raising beds and organising meds probably didn't count. Or she hoped not.

When they'd parked, she huddled into her rain jacket as they approached the well.

“You know,” said Wooster, “you can get raincoats for dogs. Just saying.”

Drat purred a giggle and flicked the rain from her fur. Possibly in a magical fashion. Almost certainly, in fact, given her drowned rat appearance when she'd first arrived at Alex's door.

One moment they were facing the well, and then, as before, they were through.

## Chapter 4: Meeting the locals.

The cobbles glistened, weak sunlight highlighting the rain-slicked stones. So the weather extended both sides of the well, Alex noted. Everything seemed the same as last time. The hanging baskets were no doubt glad of their soaking. There were almost no people in sight though she saw a door closing and a curtain twitch.

Then the same elderly man she'd seen on her last visit came out of a house near the top of the hill, where they'd entered. He rushed up to Jasper, words tumbling out of him.

“BarberJ, you're here. Thank goodness. We didn't know what to do. Albert and me, that is. I haven't told Ma yet. But you're here. You'll know.”

“Calm down, Albert,” said Jasper, quite gently. Alex wondered at the use of the name when the man had clearly referred to another Albert. “This is Alexandra, a new magical. Alex, this is old Albert. The other Albert is his son, young Albert. Now, Albert, what seems to be the matter?”

“Young Albert found her, you see. I swear she wasn't there this morning. And we don't know what to do...”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Alex decided to join in. She wasn't just a visitor, after all. She belonged here. “I'm a nurse,” she added, so that Albert would know the offer was specific, not just the vague compassion of a bystander.

Albert shook his head. “Too late for that,” he said, then beckoned to Jasper and turned back to his house. Jasper followed, and Alex, having no idea what else to do, followed Jasper.

They went through a small house, just a living room and a kitchen, a bit like Alex's, and out into a similar yard. It opened onto what Alex thought of as a ginnel, a lane between

the back gates of two rows of houses. In Stockport (and elsewhere) the ginnel used to be for bin men and coal deliveries to access all the back yards. Nowadays, bins had to be dragged to the front of the house and she had no idea what happened in Well Beyond. But she stopped even wondering about local arrangements when she saw what Albert was showing Jasper.

A body lay in the ginnel. A very dead body. There was no point checking for a pulse. The throat was split from ear to ear and death would have been virtually instantaneous. There were already flies gathering and Alex felt slightly nauseous, despite her medical training. Still, death in hospital tended to be quite a clean affair and bodies were whisked away before any flies could be apprised of the situation.

Jasper had drawn in a breath, almost gasping. Alex thought deaths were probably not that common in Well Beyond and that murder, for this could only be murder, would be even less common. She stepped forward, still unaware of exactly what she was seeing, then realised what had made Jasper so horrified. Her eyes had been drawn to the gaping wound in the throat and she had not really looked at the face. Now she did and gasped herself. She knew this woman. It was Malvynda.

Alex had instinctively disliked the woman but had not wished her any harm. She distantly heard Wooster growling softly and Drat hissing before she felt faint. She saw a stone trough planted with flowers and sank gratefully onto its edge.

“Shouldn’t have to see something like this,” she heard Albert say. “Me and Albert were come over faint too when we found her. And we wouldn’t have done if it hadn’t been bin day and we was getting the bin in.” Bin, singular, she thought, not bins like in the human world, then chided herself for the triviality of her mind in the face of such awfulness.

“Just as well it was and you did,” said Jasper. “Has anyone else seen her yet?”

“Not as I know of. We were the last to get our bin in, and I’m sure if anyone else had seen her we’d all have heard about it by now.” He frowned. “But you’ll deal with it, BarberJ, won’t you? I mean, it’s part of your job, isn’t it?”

“There isn’t much call for murder investigation,” said Jasper, “but yes, I suppose it’s my job. Now that I’ve seen her we should probably move her somewhere less public. Could we, do you think...”

“Use our yard? Don’t see why not. Hang on, and I’ll get young Albert to help you.” He disappeared into the house and then appeared again, followed by a young man with long hair and a straggly beard. Young Albert, Alex thought. He didn’t resemble his father but of course she hadn’t met the mother. She watched as he and Jasper lifted Malvynda carefully, Jasper supporting her head so that the wound didn’t widen further, and carried her back through the gate into the Alberts’ yard. Her brain fluttered round ideas of destroying evidence and so on, but since Jasper was apparently the source of authority here, perhaps it was enough that he’d seen the murder site. Or perhaps he’d seen something to suggest that this wasn’t the murder site, but merely the dump site. She and the animals followed. They skirted round the body, trying to be respectful, which was difficult in such a small space. Wooster and Drat were both uncharacteristically silent. Everyone retreated to Albert’s living room and young Albert spoke for the first time.

“What will you do?” he asked.

“Start interviewing people, I suppose,” said Jasper. “And Alex here can help me.”

“Me? I’m not a detective,” said Alex, alarmed.

“No,” said Jasper, “but you have some skills that might be useful in an investigation. You’re observant, you’re kind, and as a newcomer people might talk to you more freely than they necessarily would to me.” He smiled ruefully, the corner of his mouth twisting down in what Alex decided was quite an endearing fashion. “I know I said I’d introduce you to a few folk but I certainly didn’t intend it to be in this way. Still, I think you’ll cope, and perhaps you’ll get to know people faster. They can’t all be guilty, and you might even make some friends along the way.”

Alex wasn’t sure about making friends via detective work but then everything seemed turned on its head just now so she merely nodded and followed Jasper to the street, leaving the Alberts guarding the corpse for the time being.

“You don’t think the Alberts...” she began, but Jasper seemed to know what she was going to say.

“I don’t think they killed her, no. Neither is in the least disposed to violence or even any display of quick temper. There was no evidence of blood anywhere, even on Malvynda, despite the wound, and why would they kill her elsewhere, drag her back to their ginnel and notify me?”

Put like that, it did seem unlikely.

Jasper headed downhill and after a moment they came to a halt beside a very old woman sitting in a deck chair outside her door, smoking a pipe. She bore an uncanny resemblance to young Albert, with long hair and even a straggly beard. She had, too, the hooked nose and chin Alex associated with fairy tale witches.

“Well, BarberJ,” she called, “what have my son and grandson been doing that you need to visit them and who’s this with you?”

“They found a body,” said Jasper, not giving any more detail, “and this is Alexandra, new to Well Beyond. I was going to introduce her to a few people then your family caught us just as we came through the well.”

“Call me Alex,” said Alex, hoping people would avoid her full name which always made her think of her mother being cross when she was small.

“Al?” said the woman.

“No, Alex. Only my nearest and dearest call me Al. Oh, and I ought to introduce Wooster and Drat.” Wooster woofed softly and Drat gave a sort of splutter.

“Oh, I already know Greymalkin,” said the woman. Her grandmother was my Groff. Didn’t know she had a new name.”

“She doesn’t really. It’s a sort of nickname,” Alex said, trying and failing to visualise Drat as a kitten.

“Well, dear, I’m pleased to meet you and Wooster,” the woman went on. “I’m Ma Watkins and you’ll have gathered that pair of gormless layabouts are my family. I’m a witch of course, but then you must be too. You’d certainly pass in the human realms.”

“I should hope so,” said Alex. “This is only my second visit to Well Beyond after all. And BarberJ,” she added, stumbling slightly over the strange title, “thinks I’m a witch. But I live on the other side of the well and work there too, in Stockport.”

“I used to shop in Stockport when I was your age,” said Ma Watkins. “Nowadays I’m lucky if I can get to the corner shop down the road, but young Albert does most of my shopping for me.” She pointed to a broom that stood by the door. “That helps me to get about a little but to think I used to drive a car.”

Alex thought. She couldn’t imagine Ma Watkins ‘passing’ in Stockport or anywhere else, but maybe if you took the beard away and did her hair so that her nose and chin weren’t as prominent...

“Where did you keep your car?” was all she asked.

“In the carpark for Woodbank Park,” came the prompt reply. I used to walk up to the Chestnut estate and go through that way. Anyway, that’s enough social chit chat for now. Whose body did the boys find?” Alex had to assume that the term ‘boys’ referred to the Alberts though she wouldn’t have classified either of them that way.

“Malvynda’s,” said Jasper, saving Alex from having to decide whether or not to answer.

“Dead? Malvynda? Deary me. I only saw her yesterday.”

“We all saw her yesterday, said Alex.

“What did she die of, then? I always said her mean ways would bring her to a bad end but I never thought she was the type to have a heart attack or a stroke or anything.”

“Someone cut her throat,” said Jasper, watching Ma Watkins carefully as he spoke.

“That would do it,” she said, nodding. “I can’t say I’m surprised she’s dead, or even that she was murdered, but I’m surprised anyone got up the nerve to do it. Where’s the body now?”

“Still at old Albert’s house, in the back yard,” said Jasper. “I’ll get someone to collect it later. I suppose I’ll have to organise a funeral. Till then, she can stay in the hospital.”

Ma Watkins cackled. “Funeral? Well, clearly you’ll have to dispose of the body but I shouldn’t imagine anyone will want to attend a funeral. There’s no love for that woman in this place. Or anywhere, I wouldn’t wonder.”

“We must get on. We have people to see; things to do. As a matter of interest, when did you see her yesterday?”

Ma Watkins frowned. “Latish,” she said after a moment’s thought. “I was just closing my curtains when she came through the well and headed back downhill. No idea why.” She turned to Alex. “Malvynda lives or rather lived up on the Chestnut estate, you see.”

“We saw her earlier in my office,” said Jasper. “She flounced out when we weren’t very welcoming, but I’ve no idea where she went. Home, I supposed, but maybe not. At any rate, she must have left Well Beyond later. I need to know more.”

“You mean you’re investigating?” The old woman sighed. “Nobody will care who killed her, you know. Just that she’s dead.”

“I care,” said Jasper. “She was by no means my favourite person but I don’t like to think there’s someone around who cuts throats for fun.”

“I suppose not.” The woman frowned. “Good luck to you, then.” She took a draw on her pipe and they were clearly dismissed.

So they continued downhill. Alex didn’t think Ma Watkins would ever exactly be a friend but perhaps she could be useful, showing Alex how to be a witch. Though she really hoped it wouldn’t involve growing a beard or even smoking.

## Chapter 5: Making enquiries.

“We’ll start at the bottom of the hill and work upwards,” said Jasper. “No real reason but we ought to have a plan and that one works for me.” Alex nodded, happy to go along with anything or rather, not happy exactly because that seemed the wrong attitude to take to murder.

“Don’t we need to inform the police or something?” she asked.

Jasper raised one eyebrow, which made his scarred face look very lopsided indeed. “I suppose I’m what you would call the police round here,” he said. “Constable, detective, judge, jury, etc. etc. Human police don’t come into Well Beyond, Alex, and magicals almost never join the police force. Don’t worry. When I took the barber oath I agreed to investigate all wrongs without fear or favour. And this is certainly a wrong.”

All Alex could do was nod again, and they walked downhill in a companionable silence. They passed the door to Jasper’s office, then found themselves in a small square. There was a fountain in the middle, looking for all the world like a woman with a snake’s tail instead of legs, pouring water from a cup held in either hand while more water spouted from the crown of her head. Exotic and weird, Alex thought, but she accepted it as part of Well Beyond. They crossed the square and Alex could feel a slight mist from the fountain as they passed it. On the far side of the square there was a small house with brown curtains and a brown front door. Jasper knocked, and then all thoughts of the fountain left Alex’s head as she saw the woman who answered them.

She was brown, all over. Not just brown skinned like Alex herself, but matt brown, almost as if she’d been painted over. Her eyes were brown with no visible whites, her hair was brown, and so were her nails. She had to be a magical who would never ‘pass’ in Stockport, Alex thought, then the woman spoke.

“BarberJ, how nice to see you. And you’ve brought someone new.” She turned to Alex. “Good to meet you. I’m Statice though my friends call me Stacey. As you can see, I’m a brownie. Welcome to Well Beyond. I hope we can be friends.”

“This is Alex,” said Jasper. “She’s a witch and she’s new to the world beyond, and yes, we’re hoping she’ll make friends but that’s not why we’re here at the moment. We’re interviewing people, starting down here in the square and then going back up the hill.”

“Interviewing? Whatever for?”

“There’s been a death, a murder,” said Jasper.

“Oh no! Who? Or can’t you tell me?”

“Malvynda,” said Jasper, and Alex waited for Stacey’s reaction then realised the brownie didn’t look surprised.

“Then you’ll need to interview everyone in Well Beyond,” came the quick response. As she spoke, Stacey headed for the stone benches that surrounded the fountain and sat, clearly waiting for Jasper and Alex to join her there.

“Why do you say that?” Alex asked, taking a seat beside Stacey and wincing slightly at the coldness of the stone. Wooster sat at her feet and she noticed that Drat had wandered away. Wooster growled softly at Stacey and Alex wondered why. Still, she trusted Wooster’s instincts and resolved not to take anything Stacey said at face value.

“Because everybody hated her,” said Stacey, answering Alex as she sat down.

“Enough to kill her?”

“Probably not everyone,” Stacey conceded, “but an awful lot of people anyhow. I certainly did, and I’m glad to hear she’s dead. I wish I knew who did it. I would shake their hand and congratulate them.”

“But why?” Alex asked. “I mean, I disliked her on sight, but not enough to cut her throat. And I wasn’t sure why I felt that way, but you must have known her better than I did. I only met her twice.”

Stacey shuddered. “Once would be enough,” she said. “She was wicked. And cruel. I’ll sleep easier now she’s dead. So will Mouser, my familiar. And so will your lovely dog.”

“I don’t think Wooster liked her, but why would the animals take against her?” Alex remembered that Wooster might be able to answer that for himself, and glanced at him, but the dog just whined and pressed himself against her legs. Alex felt curious though she knew Drat had been horrified by Malvynda. She noticed that Jasper was leaving the questioning to her. Maybe he thought a newcomer would get more information more easily.

“Well, of course, you wouldn’t know. I lost my dog, Bouncer, to her, and at first I thought he’d just gone through the well and couldn’t find his way back. I couldn’t exactly go looking for him. But he never reappeared and then Flopsy, my rabbit, went missing from her hutch. I still didn’t make the connection till Tanmalkin, my old familiar, disappeared. You see, next time I saw Malvynda she was wearing a new fur cape, and I was sure it was Tanmalkin’s fur.” Stacey’s eyes filled with tears as she recounted the losses and her suspicions.

Alex gulped. “You mean like that woman in 101 Dalmatians,” she said, wondering as she did so whether television or any streaming sites reached Well Beyond. It seemed they did because Stacey nodded.

“Exactly,” she said. “It was bad enough when it was people’s pets but to take a familiar...”

Alex didn’t think she would cope well if either Wooster or Drat were turned into garments and thought back to Malvynda’s offers to walk Wooster. She shuddered.

“You understand, don’t you?” said Stacey. “You care about animals, I can see. I think we’d get on well, you and I.”

Alex managed to smile. Perhaps she could be friends with Stacey but first they had to continue with the interviews. “When did you last see Malvynda?” she asked. “She came to BarberJ’s office yesterday so maybe she crossed the square?”

Stacey frowned. “Maybe, but I didn’t see her. I was visiting my sister up on the Chestnut estate. Clarice has been ill and I’ve been walking her dog for her. I was out all day and only came home after dark.”

“Thanks,” said Jasper, finally breaking into the conversation. “We thought you might be able to help us with a timeline but obviously not. And now we must get on, but I’m sure Alex will come to see you again soon.”

Stacey waved as they got up and left, then seemed to relax on the stone bench as a huge orange cat came up to her and climbed onto her lap.

They knocked at a few more doors, but nobody had seen anything, and most of the people seemed human to Alex, so perhaps they were all witches like her. Robert, the butcher, had seen nothing. Nor had Bard, the librarian. She wasn’t sure if men were witches or wizards, so asked Jasper.

“Witches,” said Jasper. “We don’t believe in wizards.”

“Really?” Alex grinned. “But you believe in dragons, and...”

“You mean the map?” he interrupted her. “Well, no, that just means Wales could be full of strange things. I started my studies in Edinburgh and never saw a unicorn, though I did hear rumours of kelpies.”

“And of course brownies are just normal,” said Alex, grinning again. Jasper grinned back, and she decided the way his mouth twisted was actually quite endearing.

They had reached the last house in the square and Alex met the Simplekins. They were miniature – no signs of dwarfism but they barely reached her hip. Mrs. Simplekin talked to them on the doorstep while five or possibly six minute children played in the living room behind her. Mr. Simplekin just watched, listening, and nodded his approval of everything his wife said.

“I saw her go into your office, BarberJ, and then saw her come out again, scowling. But I couldn’t tell you where she went because one of the children needed my attention. I

would say she was heading across the square towards Stacey's. They used to be friends though I haven't seen them together for a while."

"Thanks," said Jasper. He introduced Alex who got a warm welcome from the tiny people, then said they had lots more people to interview.

"There are some more interesting magicals for you to meet," he said. Since they had been round every house in the square he now headed for the first one on the uphill lane. It had a green door and a profusion of hanging baskets. When Jasper knocked, a musical voice told them the door wasn't locked and they should just come straight in.

There was a small porch area then they found themselves in a pretty lounge with a green three piece suite and a low coffee table. A woman sat on one of the armchairs. She had clearly been reading but laid her book aside. Alex's first thought was that the woman was wrapped in a green quilt, then she gasped.

"Viridiana," said Jasper, "I'd like to introduce Alex. She's new to Well Beyond."

Viridiana smiled a welcome and pointed to the sofa. Alex sat, still unable to take her eyes off what she was seeing. Instead of legs, Viridiana had a – tail? Alex imagined a mermaid then corrected the image to give a snake's coiling tail instead of a fishy one.

"You must be finding us all very strange," said her hostess gently. "But you'll soon get used to all the different people here."

Alex nodded, embarrassed and suddenly shy. Viridiana had reacted so kindly to her obvious incredulity.

"Don't worry," the snake woman said. "I know humans find me extremely worrying. When I go to Stockport or beyond, Jasper takes me in a wheelchair and we use a throw to cover my coils. So I'm used to humans even though they would never accept me if they knew."

"They accept your talent," said Jasper, and he pointed to the upright piano in one corner. Viridiana smiled and somehow slithered from her chair to the piano stool. Then she played – something classical and haunting. Alex could hardly believe her ears.

"You're brilliant," she said when the piano fell silent.

"Yes," Viridiana agreed. "The disabled pianist... what a shame the poor girl can't walk but she makes such lovely sounds. We must patronise her." She sounded bitter but Jasper laughed.

"Don't forget that's where your money comes from," he said. "But although I'm sure Alex is interested that isn't why we're here. We're investigating a death."

"Oh? Who, where, how?"

"Malvynda, here, and someone cut her throat."

It was Viridiana's turn to gasp. "I never wished her ill, though I disliked her intensely." She glanced at Alex. "She used to make sly remarks about my coils," she

continued. “Said what lovely shoes my skin would make.” Hardly, Alex thought, the kind of conversation that would dispose anyone to friendship.

“Did you see her yesterday?” Jasper asked.

Viridiana frowned then licked her lips. Alex couldn’t help noticing the slightly forked tongue. Presumably, the pianist was careful not to open her mouth in the human world. A disabled pianist, yes, but an alien one would not go down well.

“I half remember seeing her pass my window yesterday,” she said at last. “But I was concentrating on practicing a new piece. Well, new to me and quite difficult. Debussy,” she added, as if that explained everything. “I can’t even tell you which direction she was going in, just that I was vaguely aware of her.”

Since they both knew Malvynda had come to the office then left again, there seemed to be little point in questioning Viridiana further. Alex found herself invited to visit whenever she wanted, and Viridiana offered her a discount on concert tickets.

“I’ll take you up on that,” Alex said. “Provided you include my friend Janet in the invitation. We sometimes go to concerts when she can get a babysitter.”

“You like music then?” Viridiana smiled encouragingly.

“Yes,” said Alex. “Everything and anything from Beethoven to hard rock though I’m not wild about modern rap artists.”

She was thoughtful as they left the pianist’s house. Here was someone else she felt might become a friend.

They crossed the road to another house festooned with flowers. Window boxes ran riot, hanging baskets dripped colour, and there was a planter either side of the door, each with a miniature rose bush.

The woman who answered their knock looked human at first glance then Alex noticed she had literally green fingers. She noticed Alex noticing and laughed. “Hi,” she said. “I’m Rosaline, though people call me Rose. And yes, they’re always that colour but I can pass in the human world.” She gestured to a pair of long sleeved flesh-coloured gloves hanging beside a coat in her hallway. “I have to, at times.”

“Rose is our gardening expert,” said Jasper. “She’s the source of most of the delightful greenery you see in Well Beyond.”

Rose laughed again. “Yes, and my own source tends to be that garden centre just down the road from the well. You know the one I mean?”

“I do,” said Alex. “I like it and I’ve had coffee there. They do gorgeous cakes. I’m Alex, in case you hadn’t heard, and I live in Stockport, not Well Beyond.”

“Yes,” said Rose, “I was chatting to Ma Watkins so I know who you are. And those cakes aren’t a patch on the ones Stacey bakes.” She rolled her eyes and sighed. “So delicious and so bad for the figure. But I gather you’re doing some kind of door to door thing. Is this to introduce Alex?” She looked inquiringly at Jasper who shook his head.

“We have a death to investigate,” he said, and told Rose who had died and how.

“Hm. I’m not sure anyone will miss her but obviously you can’t leave a killer on the loose in case next time they take against someone quite innocent of anything. In Malvynda’s case, I imagine there was at least some provocation.”

She hadn’t seen anything. She had been busy in her nursery and offered to show Alex her greenhouses and raised beds behind the house. Jasper, however, said they had no time but that he was sure Alex would come back soon. Alex felt quite sure he was right.

Within a brief time they’d made enquiries at every house in the street but were no further forward.

“Tomorrow’s another day,” said Jasper, glumly.

“Yes,” said Alex. “But it’s a work day for me so I can’t be of any help. Not that I’ve done anything today other than meet people.”

“You’ve helped a lot,” Jasper disagreed. “You got people chatting and you let me see some of them from a new perspective. Not that I have any suspects yet, but at least we have some witnesses to Malvynda’s comings and goings and some idea of who didn’t see her at all. That will have to do for now.”

It would. Wooster had stayed close to Alex throughout and now Drat rejoined them, apparently aware that their initial enquiries were over. They were near the top of the hill and Alex could see the back of the well.

“Can I…” She stopped, unsure how to ask.

“Can you what?”

“Come here on my own?”

“Of course. You belong here just like other magicals. Now that you know the way, Well Beyond is your second home. I don’t need to tell you not to tell people about it.”

Alex tried to imagine telling Janet about a way through a well or a chestnut tree and failed. It seemed she would be living a double life, with friends on both sides of the well who would never meet. Apart from at a concert by Viridiana, she corrected herself. But that was something in the hazy future. Meanwhile, she would think about what they had learnt – and not learnt – and about work tomorrow. So she was thoughtful as Jasper drove her back to Marple and left her to feed Wooster and Drat, who were both inevitably starving.

## Chapter 6: Through the well alone.

The next day, Alex asked Drat directly for her opinion about Malvynda.

The cat shrugged, a ripple moving through her fur. “I just know I’m glad she’s dead,” she said. “I don’t know why, but my tail was telling me she was evil in some way.”

And Alex had to be satisfied. She had hoped for more detailed information from the animals but clearly they couldn’t articulate their instincts about the witch. Or perhaps about anyone else, but they’d know good from bad and that was something she’d do well to note.

Work was busy, as usual. Janet was full of a shopping trip she'd made on her own day off, and some bargains she'd snagged in the town centre. Alex simply said she'd had a long walk with Wooster and enjoyed it enormously. She had, although she felt she shouldn't really feel enjoyment in the face of murder. But it had been fascinating to meet some of the people in Well Beyond and she'd been more and more relaxed in Jasper's company. She was humming to herself as she doled out meds and gave injections. One or two of the patients noticed her happiness and asked if she'd enjoyed her day off. Again, she talked about a long dog walk and said the fresh air had done her good. It was hot again, and the ward was stuffy, whatever they did. Alex wished British architects thought about air conditioning but it was what it was and she at least felt refreshed. She felt, in fact, as if she'd had more than a day away from work. She should probably visit Well Beyond frequently if that was the effect the place had. And walking Wooster was the perfect excuse if anyone asked about her downtime activities.

Janet couldn't show her the actual items she'd bought – they were all too heavyweight for the current weather – but she shared pictures on her phone. Alex made a mental note to take photographs of things like Chadkirk Chapel and the woods to back up her accounts of walks. She was glad not to have been included in the shopping trip but Janet knew she hated shopping so would not have invited her.

“There were crowds looking at all the summer sales,” said her friend. “You'd have been most uncomfortable, Al.”

“Wooster would, too,” said Alex, laughing. “As it was, he got to sniff lots of trees and flowers, so I think he's a happy dog. Though of course I'll still take him out as usual tonight.”

It was a relief to get out of her uniform after her shift and into something sleeveless and floaty. She wore shorts, and strappy sandals, having decided the weather seemed to be similar both before and beyond the well. She fed both animals and herself quickly – just a salad for her because cooking in this heat was not something that appealed. Then she took Wooster's lead and hesitated at the door.

“We're going to Well Beyond, Drat,” she said. “Do you want to come?”

Drat yawned. “Not this time. You know your way around now, at least on the main street and square. I'll just stay here and enjoy a snooze. You might find another pouch of that delicious chicken mixture when you get back.”

Alex grinned. Drat's appetite was constant and large.

She took Wooster to the car and set off.

“I like Well Beyond,” said the dog, “but why are we going this time?”

“I'm hoping to get to know people a little better,” said Alex. “I have no idea who killed Malvynda and until we know I shall feel a little nervous about everybody, but that just means I have to continue investigating. Jasper wants me to, anyway.”

“If Malvynda flayed animals to make clothing she got what she deserved,” said Wooster, sniffing.

“Perhaps, but I’m not judge and jury, Wooster, and besides, I don’t like the idea of a killer on the loose. Their next victim might not deserve anything of the kind.”

“You mean like when a dog gets a taste for fighting or biting and then doesn’t care much who the target is?”

“Exactly.”

It felt quite daring to walk up to the well and through without Jasper at her side. She took a deep breath and was relieved to find herself at the top of the hilly street. Her brain had evidently been bracing itself for yet another reality. But here was Well Beyond in all its quaint charm.

Wooster was happily trotting beside her as she headed downhill and paused expectantly as they drew level with Ma Watkins who was sitting outside smoking again. Alex greeted her and the old woman smiled, showing rather sharp and extremely yellow teeth.

“Here of your own accord, then. We’ll soon make a citizen of you, young Alex,” she said. “I could even,” she added, “lend you my broom and show you how to ride it.”

“You mean it actually carries you and isn’t just a crutch?”

“Oh, it carries me all right. But it’s missing the fun we used to have. That’s why it let those young hooligans take it for a joy ride the other day, I have no doubt. Still, BarberJ caught them and brought the broom back. I don’t mind folks borrowing but I do prefer them to ask permission. Those lads are going to regret not asking.” She shook her head.

“Is there a punishment for joyriding here?” Alex thought of the human world where there were indeed punishments if the culprits were ever identified.

“Oh yes. They’re doing community service in all their free time until I say they can stop,” said the witch, sounding satisfied.

“How do you enforce that?”

“I don’t. BarberJ does. He’s the police force and the court around here, you know. Healer, too, as often as not.”

“Well, thank you for your offer. I’m honoured but I usually have Wooster with me so I can’t just go riding off.” Alex knew she must sound rather wistful – it did strike her as a bit like a fairground ride. Perhaps one day...

“Wooster could always stay and keep me company,” said Ma Watkins, and Wooster woofed agreement.

“She’s good people,” he told Alex. “Not like that one whose throat was cut.”

“I think I knew that but thank you for confirming it,” said Alex.

“Hmm,” said the witch. “So one of your talents is talking to animals. Useful. Greymalkin, of course, can speak a human language whenever she wants to, but Wooster isn’t magical, so...”

“He’s magical enough to me,” said Alex, smiling. “But for now, we’re going to continue with our walk. I’ll see you on my way back.”

“Enjoy yourselves,” was the reply and Ma Watkins returned to puffing contentedly on her pipe.

Out of the corner of her eye Alex thought she saw the broom droop a little, perhaps in disappointment, or perhaps it was just an illusion created by the swirling pipe smoke.

They walked on until they reached the square. Jasper’s office was closed, so he must be busy elsewhere, but Stacey was watering her hanging baskets and called out cheerfully.

“Hey, Alex. Good to see you again. Walking your dog I presume. Have you been up to Woodbank yet? I can show you the way to the Chestnut estate then you can get to the park through the tree. That’s what I do when I walk my sister’s dog.”

“Another day, perhaps,” said Alex. She thought about a woman and a dog appearing as if from nowhere in Woodbank park which would be full of dog walkers, cricketers, and others on such a lovely evening and decided firmly that if she did ever explore the chestnut tree entry point she would make sure it was in rain, fog or darkness. She admired Stacey’s baskets, did a couple of turns around the square, (which was actually more of an oval) and waved to Mrs. Simplekin who was trying unsuccessfully to persuade a couple of her children to come indoors because it was bedtime, a concept with which they clearly did not agree.

On the way back up the hill she saw Rose’s shop was open and stepped inside to admire some of the plants and flowers. Rose came bustling through from behind the shop, carrying a tray of small plants, and greeted Alex warmly.

“Getting acclimatised, I see,” she said. “Hey, I’ll never sell all these. Why don’t you pick one to take back to the human world? It’ll make you feel you have something of Well Beyond in your home there. And it’s definitely a gift,” she added. “To say welcome.”

Alex was surprised and pleased. She chose a cyclamen in a ceramic pot and Rose put it into a small paper carrier bag to make it easier to manage.

“Because you have a dog lead to deal with as well,” she said. “Actually, you could just let him off the lead here, but you’ll need to have it on when you go through the well.” Alex nodded and thanked her profusely for the gift.

“Are you going back to the well?” Rose asked. “Or are you going up through Chestnuts? Of course you aren’t – you’ll have a car near the well I assume.”

Alex explained why she wouldn’t be trying the chestnut route in any case and Rose giggled. “I’ve only been that way at night,” she admitted. “We used to go and use the children’s playground there when we were little.”

“Stacey was trying to persuade me to go. She says she walks her sister’s dog there.”

Rose frowned. “You must have misunderstood. Stacey doesn’t have a sister. I know her quite well because we’re the same age and went to school together. She’s an only child. Maybe it’s a friend she visits.”

“She definitely said ‘sister’ – twice,” said Alex, puzzled by the needless untruth.

“Well, whoever it is, it isn’t a sister because she hasn’t got one,” said Rose. “Would you like a cup of tea? I make all kinds of herb teas here and I have a new lavender one you might enjoy.”

“Another time, thanks,” said Alex. “I just got sidetracked by your gorgeous display of orchids. But I’m glad I’ve seen you again and I’d love to try the lavender concoction some time.”

She left, and walked on up the hill, still frowning about what Rose had said about Stacey.

Ma Watkins was just closing her door as they passed but she waved and called goodnight. Alex waved back and went on up to the well. Soon she and Wooster were in the car on the way back to Marple. She felt quite proud of having visited Well Beyond alone, or rather without Jasper, and had a strange feeling that she had somehow learnt something that might contribute to the murder investigation but wasn’t sure what.

“Besides, Wooster,” she said as they reached home, “I still can’t work out how anyone managed to lug a corpse up into the ginnel in between all the householders taking their bins in, in broad daylight. None of it makes sense.”

“It doesn’t,” agreed the dog, “but it will, I’m sure.”

“You’re back,” observed Drat, unnecessarily. “Now you can look for that pouch I mentioned. I know you bought a whole pack of them recently.”

Alex went obediently to the kitchen and opened the treat. If Drat was her familiar that made her some kind of independent adult rather than a pet, so it was hardly Alex’s job to oversee her diet. And anyway, she never seemed to gain weight.

Soon, Drat was satiated, Wooster was asleep after his walk, and Alex was getting ready for bed. She put her little cyclamen on the windowsill and admired it for a moment. Rose was kind, she thought. Everyone seemed kind, and welcoming. But she must not forget that a murderer lurked amongst them. Maybe she hadn’t met them yet, but on the other hand, maybe she had and just didn’t know it yet.

## Chapter 7: Thoughts stirring.

Alex didn’t go to Well Beyond during the next few days. She didn’t see Jasper either, and found herself missing him more than was reasonable for such a short acquaintance. She walked Wooster in Brabyn’s Park again, and in Etherow where she contemplated the rushing weir but recalled Jasper implying that most entries to the magical world were through wells and springs, although there might be subordinate routes such as the chestnut tree and the viaduct. A weir, she decided, was an unlikely place to access Well Beyond.

They walked along the canal too, especially the Marple Locks which were a favourite with Alex, and with Wooster too.

“I like frightening the ducks,” he explained. “I wouldn’t hurt them but I love the way they flutter and rush and look horrified.” Alex had to laugh.

“Drat,” she said, when they’d got home from that particular outing, “is there a name for the magical world? One that means all of it, not just Well Beyond.”

“Spa Beyond,” said Drat. “That’s the only one I know but I suspect it only refers to Europe. Other regions will have their own names but as we don’t communicate with them much, it hardly matters. Jasper told you Spa, in Belgium, is our capital.”

“He did,” said Alex. She wondered about her next holiday. She had nothing planned but it might be interesting to visit some of the spas shown so brightly on Jasper’s map. Even to take a trip through the Channel Tunnel and get as far as Spa. Her French and German were a little rusty, not having been used since she left school, but she was sure she could manage things like asking directions and ordering meals. But it would all be nicer with a companion. She sighed. She could hardly ask Janet, who had her own family to consider, and she wasn’t really close to anyone else. She found herself day dreaming about exploring Spa Beyond with Jasper, then shook herself. He was only ever being nice to her because she was new to the whole concept and he felt responsible. And just what was it about the scarred face she found so enticing anyway? She’d do better to forget about him and try making more friends on both sides of the well.

Janet visited on one of their rare days off. She came with a toddler in tow. Her older child was with Janet’s parents, a treat for everybody concerned. The little one made a bee line for Drat who hastily took herself to a high shelf in the kitchen, then for Wooster who kindly let him stroke his fur the wrong way and pull his tail.

“Before I forget,” said Alex, “I’ve got us tickets for a concert. There’s a disabled pianist playing at the town hall and I thought it might be interesting. I think the music’s a mixture of classical and jazz.”

“Sounds good,” said her friend. “Give me the details and I’ll get a baby sitter if Derek isn’t going to be in.” Derek, her husband, was a fireman and was sometimes on duty or on call at inconvenient times. Alex wrote the information down for her and then made them a pot of tea. They chatted as they drank.

“That’s pretty,” said Janet, pointing to the cyclamen. “Did you get it at that garden centre near you?”

“No, my friend Rose gave it to me,” Alex said, without thinking.

Janet’s eyebrows rose. “I’ve never heard you mention her,” she said.

Alex thought quickly and went with half truths. “I knew her from home,” she said. “Last time I visited I went into the shop she manages and I admired these. She said she had lots and insisted on giving me one. She isn’t a close friend.”

Janet seemed satisfied with the explanation and Alex reminded herself to be more careful. There were pitfalls to living in two worlds. Obviously she could talk about Stockport in Well Beyond, but the reverse was, she realised, an impossibility. She didn’t think she could even take someone non-magical through the well with her to prove that it wasn’t just a product of her imagination.

Wooster groaned. “How long are they staying?” he asked plaintively.

“Oh, he must be getting tired of being poked and prodded,” said Janet, saving Alex the worry of not replying to the dog. “Come on, you, we need to go. The doggy doesn’t want to play any more.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow at work,” said Alex. “I hope this weather breaks. We could do with rain and it’s so tiring working in this heat.”

“The forecast was hopeful,” said Janet. She drank the last of her tea, hugged Alex and left, taking Wooster’s tormenter away to his great relief.

“We could go for a walk,” said Alex, when they were alone again.

“Well Beyond?” Wooster sounded hopeful.

“If you like,” she said. It was almost a week since they’d been there and she really ought to show her face, if only to her new friends.

Once through the well she was glad they’d come. Even the cobbles seemed to welcome her. Old Albert raised a hand in greeting as he passed her and his mother beckoned to her from her usual seat outside her front door.

“We haven’t seen you for a few days,” she said, as soon as Alex got near enough to hear.

“I’ve been busy,” she said. “I have a hard job, and friends and family outside, you know. But Wooster wanted to come here today and I did too.”

“Still no nearer catching that killer, I hear,” said the old woman. “I might not have liked Malvynda but I just hope we’re all safe in our beds.”

“I’m sure you are,” said Alex. “We suspect the killer was provoked, and I’m certain you wouldn’t provoke anyone.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure,” said Ma Watkins, cackling. Then she called to two boys who were loitering in the street. “Oi! You two! If you have nothing else to do you can come and sweep my floors.” She turned back to Alex. “That’s the pair that swept off with my broom,” she said. “Dot and Carry, they’re called, though for all I know they have proper names too. Cassandra’s lads. She has her hands full with her baking, and with her wife, Eglantine. Using a wheelchair, she is, since she lost her legs in a car crash in Stockport. So Cassy has to do everything for everybody. Nice girl, too, but can’t keep track of this pair.”

“I thought Stacey was the baker round here,” said Alex.

“Oh, she is, and she’s brilliant, but Cassy could give her a run for her money if she had enough time and if anyone were to invest in her business. We’re lucky to have both of them. Stacey for the sweet stuff and Cassy for pies, in my opinion.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” said Alex. She wondered whether she’d met Eglantine and whether the woman had been a patient in Stepping Hill. Quite possibly, because anyone who could pass as totally human would not stand out in a hospital setting.

“Hmm, well, you could always take BarberJ a pie or a Danish,” said Ma. “Way to a man’s heart and all that.” She looked keenly at Alex, who knew she was blushing but hoped her dark skin might hide the fact from this clearly observant old woman.

“I haven’t seen him for a while,” was all she said.

“No, well, maybe it’s time you at least called at the office,” came the reply.

Alex thought she probably should, but first she’d call on Stacey and then Rose. She went straight to Stacey’s where she found the brownie with her front door wide open, on her knees scrubbing her living room floor. She looked up, flustered, when Alex’s shadow fell across the floorboards.

“Sorry,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting visitors. I spilled a jar of pickled beetroot and the stain is the devil to get out of the floorboards.”

“I’ll bet,” said Alex, though she didn’t think the stain was exactly the colour of beetroot. It was redder, more like blood. But then she didn’t know whether beetroot here might be a different colour from the normal Stockport variety.

“I don’t want to stop now that I’m beginning to get the better of it,” said Stacey. “So unless you want to help...”

Alex laughed. “I did all my own housework this morning,” she said, “so I’ll give yours a miss. Carry on and good luck.”

She headed back across the square and reached Rose’s place. Something was bothering her but again she wasn’t sure what. Rose was busy too, tending her plants and arranging a floral display she said was for someone’s wedding. “Though you’re welcome to watch,” she said.

“I just wanted to say hello,” Alex assured her and left.

The next door house was a small shop and on impulse she went in. It was a veritable cornucopia of foodstuffs, some familiar, and some not, but she did spot some pickles and beetroot, she observed, was the colour she was used to.

“Can I help you?” A cheerful voice rang out from somewhere behind the counter and then a woman emerged. Alex recognised her from their house to house enquiries although she’d used the private door rather than the shop one. She couldn’t recall the woman’s name but she smiled and shrugged.

“I’m just looking, really,” she said. “You have a wonderful variety of things here.”

“Yes, and we have some fresh stuff too. Stacey brought a batch of donuts this morning if you’re interested.”

Alex decided she was and bought a small paper tray of six. Money, it appeared, was money here too. She also bought a biscuit bone for Wooster.

“Don’t tell Drat,” she said as they left. She gave him the treat and he munched it gratefully. “I haven’t got her anything but I’m sure she’ll be hungry when we get home.” Wooster nodded but his mouth was too full of biscuit to comment.

They crossed the street and Alex was relieved to see the office doors wide open. Anyone, she knew, could go in, and so she did, finding Jasper at his desk, chewing a pen and frowning at a pile of forms. Just like the human world, she noted as she placed the tray of donuts in front of him.

“I come bearing gifts,” she announced and he looked up.

“And since you aren’t Greek I don’t need to be wary,” he said, and grinned. He took a donut and a look of bliss spread across his face. “Stacey’s, I believe,” he said.

“Yes, but from the shop, not from the baker herself,” said Alex.

They munched in silence for a few minutes then Alex decided to ask him about the thing that was bothering her.

“How could anyone manage to kill Malvynda then carry the body to the ginnel in broad daylight without anyone noticing?”

“Fairly easily,” he said. “People dump stuff in those ginnels. Fly tipping you’d call it in Stockport. However hard we try, they still do it, and I can only think they rely on the bin men to pick up the rubbish whether it’s in a bin or not. So if whoever our killer was wrapped the body in something like a rug, they wouldn’t attract any attention at all.”

“But they’d have to be quite strong,” said Alex.

“Of course, but a lot of magicals are. Witches, obviously, can move things you’d expect to be beyond their powers, brownies are extremely strong for their size, and in Arches estate we have a couple of giants. Not quite your fairy tale giants, but big enough to carry a dead body quite a way.”

So that was that. Or was it? It didn’t really narrow down the field of suspects which was just about the entire population, but Alex thought if she could just tidy up the various threads in her mind she might reach some kind of conclusion.

She said so to Jasper, who smiled. “I hope so,” he said. “I’m getting nowhere. So I’m sort of relying on you.”

“I wasn’t sure if I still featured in your plans,” said Alex. He raised one eyebrow, which along with the scar gave him quite a rakish appearance.

“Of course you do,” he said. “I’ve been too busy to contact you the last couple of days but you feature a lot in my mind.” He grinned again and Alex bit her lip. He really was a fascinating man.

“I’ll take Wooster home now,” she said, “and I promise to spend a lot of time thinking.”

“Not while you’re taking patients’ blood pressure and temperature,” he said, and Alex laughed. Work was too intense to spend any time thinking about anything else, but on walks with Wooster she could let her mind roam. And she would.

## Chapter 8: Suspicions.

Alex didn't see Jasper for a few days but then on her next day off he arrived at almost the same time as Janet. Janet had both children with her, the toddler Cheryl and the five year old Nathan. Cheryl simply made a determined grab for Wooster who sighed, and decided to play nicely for a while. Nathan stared at Jasper all the time Alex was introducing him to Janet. Janet seemed to accept that Jasper was a friend from 'home' though neither Alex nor Jasper specified that 'home' was Well Beyond rather than Gorton.

Nathan, however, was fascinated by Jasper's scars.

"What happened to your face?" he demanded, with all the lack of tact of a young child. Janet was shocked and told him he was being rude but Jasper smiled his lopsided smile.

"I don't mind," he said. "Children often comment on things adults would like to mention but think they should ignore." He turned to Nathan. "When I was a teenager, a lot older than you but long before I was grown up, I was messing about with some friends. We'd got hold of some fireworks – I think it must have been round about November 5<sup>th</sup> – and our parents didn't know. We decided to have our own firework party and one of my mates knew about an abandoned allotment with a dilapidated greenhouse that would make the perfect venue. Out of sight of any houses, you see. Jack, one of the gang, fixed a Catherine wheel to the wood of a greenhouse window frame. He lit it and stood well back. It didn't go off and I was stupid enough to go and look closer to see why. Of course, at that moment it decided to work perfectly but a combination of old wood, glass that was no longer well fixed, and fire, well, this was the result. I was lucky, I suppose. I didn't lose an eye and I wasn't severely burnt. We scarpered. I didn't dare go home because I knew my parents would be furious. I was in shock because I didn't realise just how much damage I'd suffered. I went to Jack's and tried to get cleaned up. By the time his parents saw me and took me to my own home, everyone was frantic. I remember being held down while someone used tweezers to remove splinters and glass shards. My aunt was a nurse and she treated me with antiseptic, antibiotics and so on. Nobody wanted to take me to hospital because the police would be informed and my father pointed out that I didn't need a criminal record as well as scars. I healed quite quickly but it was too late to prevent the damage you can see."

Nathan was wide eyed. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

"It hurt a lot at the time," said Jasper. "But it doesn't hurt now. Every time I look in a mirror I remember you should never play with fire, so I suppose some good came of it."

"You could have had plastic surgery," said Janet.

"My parents thought they'd have to pay, since there was nothing life threatening, and again, didn't want anyone informing police or social services. Anyway, I can see the point of plastic surgery for serious deformities or massive burns, but this just makes me ugly and I might have been that anyway."

"Not ugly," said Alex. "Interesting, but definitely not ugly." Jasper gave her a look filled with gratitude but shrugged.

"Anyway, Nathan," he said. "You'll never play with fireworks having seen me, will you?"

Nathan shook his head vigorously then went to join Cheryl in torturing the dog. Drat, as usual, had found somewhere to hide.

Janet clearly felt it was time to change the subject. “What do you do, Jasper?” she asked.

“I’m an office manager,” he said and if Alex noticed the slight hesitation, Janet probably didn’t.

They all had coffee and chatted, mostly about the weather, and then Jasper said he’d really come to see if Alex was going for a dog walk in which case he’d accompany her.

Janet looked longingly at them. “I wish I could come too,” she said. “When this pair are older I’ll think about getting a dog and then we can join you on your walks, but you go too far for little ones at the moment.” She had once or twice been with Alex round Brabyn’s or Etherow when Nathan was still in a buggy and Cheryl was just a plan.

“We’ll look forward to that,” Alex told her.

They left the house at the same time, Janet fastening the children into child seats in her husband’s car which she’d borrowed, and Alex loading Wooster into Jasper’s car.

“Sorry if that was awkward,” she said once they’d driven off.

“Not at all,” he said. “I’m quite used to living in two worlds and fielding questions in this one. You will be, soon, I think.”

They reached Chadkirk and wandered round the chapel gardens before heading for the well. Wooster chased a squirrel up into the beech trees but came straight back when Alex called.

“I know,” he said. “They always climb and I could never actually catch one, but it’s fun, you know?” And Alex had to laugh.

“Can you hear Wooster?” she asked Jasper. She thought Ma Watkins could but wasn’t sure. It hadn’t occurred to her that Jasper might.

“Not really,” he said. “I hear all the usual dog noises, of course, and I get the gist of what he’s telling us, but not the actual words or details. It’s one of your special talents. I can understand Drat, of course, because she speaks just like us since she’s a familiar.”

Curious, Alex thought. She had never seen herself as talented. She knew she was quite clever. She’d done well at school and then at uni but she hadn’t thought she was anything special. It seemed she was learning about herself as well as about the magic of Spa Beyond, and Well Beyond in particular.

“So we all have different talents?” That was a fascinating idea.

“Yours are telekinesis, that’s moving things without touching them, keen observation of people and their motives, and communicating with animals. Mine are healing, at least of minor wounds, compelling people to some extent, and recognising their talents and flaws. Rose has, of course, green fingers, not only in the literal sense but also in her ability to make plants thrive. Stacey and Cassie can bake. And of course Stacey’s a brownie so she can cloak

– not exactly make herself invisible but cast a kind of ‘take no notice of me’ spell. Ma Watkins can read minds – not the details but in general terms. Her sons have inherited that ability but in a weaker form. She can also ride that broom of hers. Dot and Carry couldn’t but they were hopeful. The Simplekins are good with children though it’s not an especially useful talent given their size in relation to most other people. Viridiana has music, of course.”

“What did Malvynda have?” Alex wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

“She was able to charm most people and make them believe her. It didn’t work on people like you or Ma Watkins. It worked on me initially but I soon saw through her.”

To her surprise they didn’t go through the well. Jasper had evidently changed his mind. He’d led them back to the car and left the well and chapel behind. She mentioned her misgivings about using the chestnut tree in Woodbank Park.

“We won’t do that.” Jasper laughed. “I share your feelings about it and only ever use it at night.”

“Why do we have the other routes when we have the well? And how does it work? Drat led me to believe all the towns had wells or springs as entries.”

“They do. But sometimes there are subsidiary entry points for convenience. They only exist when there’s a well or spring as the main point of contact.”

They turned right and went uphill, soon reaching the main road between Hyde and Stockport. When they headed for the centre of Stockport Alex realised they were going to use the viaduct.

It was a strange entry, quite unlike the Chadkirk well. It looked for all the world like a garage set into the base of one of the viaduct arches and indeed, once the doors swung open to admit them she could see they were in a kind of underground, or at least under-viaduct, car park. So this was where Jasper kept his car. And where he could get Viridiana and a wheelchair loaded for transport to music venues.

“Do you live in the Arches estate?” she asked, as they emerged from the parking area into daylight and a rabbit warren of terraced houses.

“No,” he said. “I have a flat above the office, but I find it convenient to keep my car here. I thought it was time you saw this entry point for yourself.”

He parked and they walked through the narrow streets and eventually came to the square where they waved to Stacey and a couple of the Simplekin children before going to the office.

Alex wasn’t quite sure what the purpose of today’s visit was. It seemed unlikely Jasper just wanted to spend time with her, but here he was, getting cold drinks from the fridge in the mini kitchen at the back of the office and gesturing to the seats near his rather imposing desk. Oh well, she’d soon find out whether there was something else he wanted to teach her, and meanwhile she was observing him at work. She had no idea whether he had a job in the human world, as she did, but decided he probably didn’t have time, just as she didn’t have time to work in Well Beyond.

Jasper sighed. “Any further ideas about our killer?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” said Alex. “I keep having thoughts but they won’t settle if that makes sense. And I’m afraid of accusing someone when I’m trying to make friends here.”

He frowned. “Better that than make friends with someone who turns out to be a murderer,” he said. “And with your talents you should trust your instincts. You’re not likely to be wrong. Tell me your thoughts and we can make a list and see if it points to any conclusions.”

He was right, she knew. She hadn’t actually made any friends yet. The people she’d met were still at the stage of being friendly acquaintances. But that was the trouble. They were all so friendly, and yet her instincts were telling her there was a murderer hiding behind the apparent niceness of everyone here.

“All right,” she said at last. “So long as we make sure we have plenty of evidence before we start on accusations.”

“Of course,” said Jasper, “and don’t worry. If you’re talking to me in my official capacity as BarberJ then everything is confidential.”

Alex took a deep breath and began. Her vague thoughts that had been shimmering somewhere in the background solidified as she spoke and as Jasper wrote.

“To begin with,” she began, “there’s the matter of Stacey’s non-existent sister.”

“I agree she doesn’t have a sister,” said Jasper. “If you thought she mentioned one maybe you misunderstood.”

“No, she was quite definite about it twice,” said Alex. “Remember she said she was visiting her when Malvynda visited the office.”

“I wasn’t listening very hard,” admitted Jasper. “I thought she mentioned someone called Clarice but that could have been a friend.”

“Then there’s the question of who’s strong enough to have moved the body and able to do it in daylight,” Alex continued. “There’s the matter of motive, too, and who hated Malvynda enough to kill her. I suspect it was some kind of sudden provocation that resulted in the killing rather than any preplanned attack. I went to see Stacey again the other day and she was busy trying to remove a stain from her floor...So you see, I half suspect her, but I don’t want to.”

Jasper looked at his notes. “Means, because she would always have kitchen knives around and she could move the body easily. Opportunity because she couldn’t have been visiting a sister she doesn’t have and might well have been at home when Malvynda left us. Motive: stealing and skinning a familiar would provide that all right.”

They looked at each other.

“What do we do?” Alex asked. “We can’t just go and ask her.”

“No, but...” Jasper thought for a moment. “When Malvynda came to the office, did you notice what she was wearing?”

“A filmy summer dress and a sort of velvety shoulder cape, I think,” said Alex.

“That’s what I thought, and she was in the same dress when we found her in the ginnel. But there was no cape. That might just be the evidence we need. One of us should find out whether Stacey has it.”

“Surely she’d dispose of it?” Alex thought back to various crime shows she’d watched, fictional ones and true crime series.

“Not if it was Tanmalkin’s skin,” said Jasper. “She’d treasure that. So somehow, one of us needs to get invited into her house.”

“I think I could manage that,” said Alex.

“I think you could, but perhaps not today. Stacey isn’t going anywhere and we should probably sleep on it all – let the thoughts take full root in our minds so that we’re sure about what we’re looking for. After all, if you don’t see the skin, you can just enjoy a cup of tea and a pastry with her. No harm done.”

They walked back to the car park in silence, mulling over their conversation. Alex could hardly believe the conclusion she’d reached, but she also remembered Wooster hadn’t taken to Stacey, and nobody else had got a growl from him.

So all of a sudden she was a detective who was going undercover to catch a killer. She wasn’t sure she appreciated the change of career. She’d rather be doling out paracetamol in the ward.

## Chapter 9: Conclusions

Or would she? She was almost on automatic pilot the next morning at work, and Janet had to speak to her twice to get her attention.

“Daydreaming about your new boyfriend?” she asked, smiling, when Alex eventually heard her.

Alex could feel herself blushing. “He’s not my boyfriend, just a friend,” she said. “From uni,” she added, thinking some kind of explanation was needed.

“And I’m a monkey’s uncle – or aunt,” said Janet. “I couldn’t help seeing the way you looked at each other, you know.”

“I have to admit to thinking he’s attractive,” Alex conceded.

“I suppose he is, once you get over the scars,” said her friend. “But he was looking at you the same way, so...”

Alex felt flustered. She was glad when Elsie Gardner in bed six claimed her attention.

Could Jasper really be attracted to her? Janet was very observant as a rule. But maybe she was just seeing what she wanted to see.

Anyway, attraction or not, they’d agreed on Saturday, her next day off, for her visit to Stacey.

Between then and now there was the concert at the town hall and she reminded Janet, who said Derek would be at home and she was looking forward to a night out.

The concert was good. Viridiana was a brilliant pianist and played a mixture of pieces, all of which the audience found familiar but with Viridiana's own interpretation. There was a great deal of applause. Alex didn't see Jasper, which was quite a relief because she'd have had to make up some story for Janet. Town hall staff wheeled the pianist in and out, so Jasper must, she thought, be waiting in the car park.

She and Janet called at a pub and had a glass of wine each before Alex drove Janet home and then went back to Marple. The next day loomed large in her thoughts and she went to bed in a sombre mood despite having enjoyed the evening. She must remember to go and congratulate Viridiana. Yes, the audience had clapped, but it must be nice to get personal validation too.

After breakfast she slipped on a light jacket. Rain was threatening, though the weather wasn't actually cold. Wooster was eager for his lead and then Drat joined them.

"I think I'll visit Well Beyond today," she said, making sure she got into the car and hid under the passenger front seat. Wooster had a clip on harness and they all knew cats were not legally allowed to travel unrestrained in a moving vehicle. But restraining Drat was not something Alex intended to attempt.

They parked the car and Alex gave Wooster a run in the field near the chapel. She knew they would be busy once they reached Well Beyond and she wanted him to work off some of his energy first. Drat simply headed for the well and went through on her own.

She was out of sight when Alex and Wooster eventually followed and Alex assumed she was visiting old haunts.

She waved to Ma Watkins as she passed but didn't stop to chat. She wanted to get this over with. Then she could start socialising in earnest. She shivered when she thought that at first she'd hoped Stacey would be a friend. But then, maybe all this was in her head and Stacey would prove to be innocent. She muttered some of this to Wooster, who growled, predictably.

"For what it's worth, I didn't like her," he said. "I couldn't tell you why, but there's something not right about her."

Animal instincts were often, Alex reflected, good ones. Less prone to error than human reactions which could be based on all kinds of prejudices.

She passed the office without even looking to see if Jasper was working. They'd agreed she should not visit him first since the office was visible from Stacey's house.

She knocked at Stacey's door and after a moment it swung open, Stacey's face breaking into a welcoming smile as she recognised her visitor. Alex felt like some kind of traitor but smiled back.

"Is now a good time for a visit?" she asked, and Stacey ushered her inside.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I was just about to make a pot of coffee. I’ll get some water for your dog, too.”

She bustled about and soon the coffee table had mugs and a coffee percolator on it, plus a plate of large chocolate cookies. There was a bowl of water under the table for Wooster and a bone-shaped dog biscuit.

“I know I can’t give him chocolate,” said Stacey, “but I wanted him to have a treat. I have lots left from when I had Bouncer so I keep them for other people’s dogs.”

Alex took a cookie. She glanced around the room, noticing that there was, instead of a red stain, an irregular light patch on the floorboards. “You managed to clean up after your spill, I see,” she said.

Stacey looked flustered. “Yes, but I brought the polish off the boards in the process. I’ll have to see if I can get some stain to match,” she said.

“I might have some,” said Alex. “I stained the floor in my kitchen last year and I think it’s about the same shade. I’ll have a look and bring it over.”

“Thank you.” Stacey took a bit of her cookie and poured the coffee. Then she leaned back on the couch where she sat – against a velvety throw that looked for all the world like...

Alex couldn’t help gasping.

And Stacey couldn’t help noticing.

That was when everything seemed to happen both extremely fast and in slow motion.

Before Alex could say anything to diffuse the situation Stacey had grabbed Wooster’s collar and pulled him towards her. She was twisting the collar so that he was clearly finding it hard to breathe and then suddenly the brownie had a knife in her hand. It had, Alex supposed, been under one of the cushions. It was now being held against Wooster’s throat.

“You’ve realised, haven’t you?” Stacey’s voice was hard. Alex wondered how she could ever have thought this woman could be a friend. She hadn’t wondered for long but still, just at first, she had liked the look of her. “Well, you won’t say anything. I’ll make sure of that.” The knife was pressing into Wooster and there was a bright bead of blood where it broke the skin.

“Please, don’t hurt him,” was all Alex could say.

“I won’t hurt the dog. I’ll let him go if you come over here and take his place.”

“I promise not to say anything to anyone.” Alex was glued to the spot, paralysed with fear, unable to take Wooster’s place even though she wanted to.

“Easily said,” came the reply. “But once you’re out of here I can’t control you. So I’ll have to make sure, instead.”

Stacey meant to kill her. Just as she’d killed Malvynda. But Alex couldn’t let her kill an innocent dog instead.

“But why?” she asked, aware of tears streaming down her cheeks and even more aware of Wooster’s fear.

“Because she came over here wearing Tanmalkin like a coat, either flaunting the skin or thinking I wouldn’t notice,” said Stacey. Her voice was flat, unexcited, as though this was all just everyday stuff to her. “I could ignore the other animals, but not my Tamalkin.”

“Keep her talking,” said Wooster. “If she lets me go I can alert Jasper and Drat.”

“Stop growling and whining, you stupid dog,” said Stacey, twisting the collar further.

“Let him go. I’ll come and sit beside you. We can talk about this,” Alex said.

She didn’t believe they could, but maybe she could keep Stacey talking just long enough. So long as Wooster was free. The front door was ajar, sunlight spilling through it onto the bleached area of floor. Maybe he really could get away and maybe... She got up and moved towards the couch, holding both hands in the air to show she was unarmed and didn’t intend to try anything. Stacey waited till she had reached the couch then let go of the collar. Wooster shot out of the cottage like a rocket, barking furiously as he went.

“And now, Alex, to silence your busybody mouth for good,” said Stacey. She looked down at her knife, red at the tip with Wooster’s blood. “Don’t think to escape. I’m faster than you. Brownies are, you know. I can overpower you before you reach the door. Nobody will investigate that barking in time to save you.” She leaned forward, the knife held firmly.

Alex was so taken aback that she froze. She had felt something was less than perfect about Stacey, especially given Wooster’s reaction, but she hadn’t thought there was any real malice in the woman, only, perhaps, a tendency to be careless with the truth, and then, in the last few moments, an even greater tendency towards striking first and talking later.

The next moments were a blur of grey cat fur as Drat launched herself into the room and landed on Stacey, digging her claws into the brownie’s face. Stacey wouldn’t have understood Wooster but she certainly understood the cat.

“It will be your eyes next,” said Drat.

“And I’ll help,” said Mouser, who had come into the room and was clearly motivated to side with a fellow familiar rather than the brownie he was bonded to. Perhaps the bond was not as firm as it could have been.

Stacey was struggling but Drat was firmly attached to her cheeks. She dropped the knife, presumably hoping to use both hands to dislodge the cat but Alex was able to pick up the knife and throw it away.

Just as Jasper entered the room.

Wooster was at his heels and so was young Albert who it turned out had been talking to Jasper when Wooster had reached them. Drat, it seemed, had been in the square, worrying. It was all over in seconds, Stacey in handcuffs, the knife and the skin taken as evidence, and Alex weeping with relief.

“You’re evil.” Drat spat and hissed. “You may well claim that Malvynda wearing Tanmalkin’s skin provoked you, but before that, you enabled her. You might not have

encouraged her but you certainly didn't report it when your pets went missing. You must have known what was going on and you could have told BarberJ as soon as you even had suspicions. It was only the loss of your familiar that drove you to action and then you took the law into your own hands instead of going to BarberJ as you should have done." The cat had detached herself from the brownie and was now sitting on the tawny skin by Jasper's feet. "Tanmalkin was my sister," she hissed. "I hold you as responsible for her death as that woman you killed."

Alex was feeling faint from shock. When she'd agreed to come to Stacey's house she'd never envisaged a confrontation like this, let alone an immediate confession. Wooster's peril had terrified her, even more than her own, but now that she was safe she realised she might well not have been and that the ginnel might have had another body dumped. At that point, presumably Stacey would have left Well Beyond. Obviously not into Stockport, but perhaps to one of the other magical towns.

She wondered how far Stacey had been aware of Malvynda's actions. She must have had some idea, and surely she should have mentioned it to someone. Surely. If she hadn't, then Drat was right to think her culpable.

"Are you all right?" Jasper's question penetrated her thoughts and she nodded. She was, really. She wasn't hurt, and nor was anyone else. Wooster had a small cut and Stacey had cat scratches, but that was all.

"Thank you so much," she said to her dog and cat.

Wooster woofed softly.

"You're welcome," said Drat. "I assume there'll be something special for tea after this."

"Absolutely," said Alex.

## Chapter 10: Aftermath

Jasper organised everyone. Stacey was put in the small lock-up behind his office. It was comfortable enough but also escape proof. Jasper intended to drive Alex and Wooster home. He asked Alex to give her keys to young Albert who would bring her car, directed by Drat. He locked Stacey's house and they set off.

"I could have driven myself." Alex hoped she didn't sound petulant.

"You could, but you've had quite a shock and I want to see you safely back in your house."

"Then please can we stop at a supermarket en route. I've promised Drat and Wooster a special dinner and I thought I'd do some salmon. For us – myself, you and young Albert too if you want."

"Sounds good!" Jasper grinned. He drove to the big Tesco near the motorway and Alex bought salmon for five, plus peas and oven chips for the people. She grabbed a

cheesecake too. She didn't often have guests for dinner and it was a kind of celebration after all. Not least of Drat's bravery and quick thinking.

Dinner was soon ready and young Albert seemed quite touched to be included. Drat tucked into her salmon then sat cleaning her whiskers, Wooster bolted his and sat by the table making eyes at everybody in the hope that they might drop something.

"What will happen to her?" Alex asked.

"We won't be sure until I have a tribunal summoned," said Jasper. "I'll send word to all the barbers in the north of what you call England and once there are three of us gathered together we can make a decision then put it to a general vote at a meeting of everyone in Well Beyond who wants to attend.

"We don't exactly have many murders," put in young Albert.

"As I said, I can't be certain," Jasper continued. "But I imagine she'll be exiled from Well Beyond and one of the other towns will take her in, but she'll be tagged, for tracking, and although she'll be expected to continue baking, she'll only get a bare minimum from her work and any real profit will go to the town. I have no idea what length of sentence people will think suitable but Malvynda was about thirty five so had at least another thirty five years of active life ahead of her. Stacey will probably serve a thirty five year sentence."

"That all sounds reasonable." Alex was impressed. She wasn't sure what she'd expected – maybe either a savage execution or an over-liberal short community service.

"We'll know more when I have my fellow barbers here." Jasper finished his salmon and sat back with a sigh of repletion. "That was delicious, Alex. We can add cooking to your list of talents."

Alex laughed. She was glad the men had enjoyed the meal and was even more glad she'd thought of something special for Drat.

The cat now joined the conversation. "When you've finished holding it as evidence," she said, "I'd appreciate being allowed to keep Tanmalkin's skin. She was my sister and I would feel closer to her. And what will happen to Mouser? Will he have to go into exile with Stacey? He hates her now, and he did nothing wrong."

"I'm pretty sure the bond was broken when he sided with you in the scuffle," said Jasper. "He can roam free in Well Beyond until someone needs a new familiar. I don't think your mother's Groff has long to live?" He looked inquiringly at young Albert who nodded.

"Groff's nearly thirty which is a good age, even for a familiar," he said. "Mouser might well make a good replacement."

"Does everyone have a familiar?" Alex hadn't seen too many dogs or cats around.

"Usually, yes," said Jasper, "but not necessarily ones you'd think of. The Simplekins have a family of white mice, Viridiana has a chameleon, and Rose has a parrot who blends so well with her flowers that you barely notice him."

"Until he keeps reminding you of what a pretty boy he is," said Drat.

“My father has a cat,” said young Albert. “Whitemalkin, another sister to your Greymalkin here. And I have a rat called Maximus.”

“And before you ask,” said Jasper, “yes, the cat and the rat live happily in the same household.”

“And since it’s time they got their dinner too, it’s probably time we went,” said young Albert, rising from the table and thanking Alex profusely for the meal.

Alex got the impression Jasper would have liked to stay longer and was internally berating himself for his careful organisation that had somehow backfired. However, he also rose.

“We’ll let you know when the town vote is to be,” he said. “I assume you’ll want to be there.”

Alex agreed that she would. She saw her guests to the door and waved as they got into Jasper’s car.

“So that’s that,” she observed to Wooster and Drat when she’d closed the door and locked it for the night.

“Until the sentencing,” Drat agreed. “But that might take some time. Travel in the magical lands is by coach and horses or by broom so things happen at a snail’s pace. Incidentally, Jasper’s familiar is a snail. I expect you’ll see your young man again before then.”

“He’s not my young man.” Why did everyone think he was? Wondering took her mind off the snail.

“If he isn’t, he wants to be,” said the cat, then turned her attention to a whisker that still bore a film of salmon.

Whether he did or not, there was no sign of him during the next few days. Alex went to work as usual, took Wooster for walks as usual, and generally lived her normal and to be honest rather humdrum life. She didn’t go to Well Beyond, not wanting to have to talk to the other people she knew about the arrest or the frightening moments before it. Instead she chose the parks, and the canal bank. She was really grateful to Wooster and Drat and made sure they got lots of treats.

“I’ll have to look for other ways to save you if this is the result,” said Drat.

“Just this once will keep you in treats for quite a while,” said Alex.

Work continued as work does. Nothing special of note until one Thursday morning there was uproar when Alex arrived and she quickly gathered that there had been what the emergency services were referring to as a major incident. There had been a gas explosion in a big office building on the A6. It had caught people coming to work, people walking past, and passing vehicles including a bus which had then ended up piling into each other. Total chaos.

Casualties were being taken to all the local hospitals in South Manchester, and medical staff were being asked to help the overstretched A&E. Alex left Janet in sole charge of the twenty bed ward, albeit with auxiliary staff, and went to see what she could offer.

The scene was a nightmare but it was actually well organised. Patients were triaged quickly and assigned to specialists or to nurses. There were a lot of broken bones, a lot of shards of glass embedded, and a lot of people in some degree of shock. There were no reports of any deaths though one patient was worrying about someone at the office who hadn't been heard from. Hopefully, they were simply and fortunately late for work. The work was unremitting and it wasn't until after lunch time that Alex looked up. When she did, she saw something entirely unexpected.

Two of the doctors were working on a patient and had their backs to her but she heard one say, "Jazz, you need to rest. You're no good to them if you fall over from tiredness."

The other turned towards the speaker and Alex saw with a sense of shock that it was Jasper. She couldn't be mistaken. His scars were too obvious and too identifying. She'd had no idea he was a doctor and he'd never said, though maybe his odd comments about university should have alerted her. Stepping Hill was a huge hospital and it was perfectly possible to be totally unaware of other people working there, if they were in entirely different departments, but somehow she felt she should have known.

"Jasper," she gasped. Both men turned towards her.

"So you know Jazz?" The other unknown doctor smiled at her tiredly. "Help me convince him that everybody would be better off if he took a break."

"They definitely would," she said, noting Jasper was indeed showing signs of strain and tiredness. "You need lunch at the very least. I was just going to go and grab something. Why don't you join me?"

He did. They got sandwiches, coffee and flapjacks from the hospital shop, and sat outside on a wall, away from the choreographed chaos indoors.

"I didn't know," was all she could say.

"Well, now you do," he said, and his lips twitched. The scar that pulled his lips down to one side was standing out starkly white against his skin.

"How on earth do you manage this and your other role?"

"The same way you manage to nurse, look after your animals, and your house," he said. "I don't have any housework to worry about because Mrs Simplekin does it all for me, and I could dine at other people's houses every day if I wanted to."

"And I suppose a snail doesn't take a great deal of maintenance." Alex grinned.

"Just some lettuce now and again." Jasper grinned back.

"I've got used to you as Jasper or BarberJ," Alex told him. "Now I hear a colleague call you Jazz."

“That’s for my nearest and dearest, or at least close colleagues,” he said. “You’re welcome to use it if you want to.”

“Thank you.” Alex knew she was blushing. “In that case, you’d better start calling me Al.”

They stared at each other for a moment, knowing it was a turning point in their relationship and neither of them sure what to say next.

“The tribunal should be next week,” he said suddenly. “I’ll let you know – I imagine you’d like to hear their deliberations and anyway they might want to hear your evidence and thoughts.”

“Thank you.” She would indeed like to be involved and knew she might be needed as a witness to everything from finding the body to Stacey’s attempt to kill her.

She felt shy. Suddenly, ‘Jazz’ seemed to be a different proposition from ‘Jasper’ and a long way removed from ‘BarberJ’.

She was casting around for some neutral topic of conversation when she heard someone calling them. Their lunch break was over, but at least they had eaten and some of the strain had left Jasper’s, no, Jazz’s face.

There was still plenty of work to be done and no time for further talk. Eventually, the cubicles and trolleys cleared and everyone could breathe again. Jazz’s colleague, the one who’d wanted him to take a break, made it his business to find Alex.

“I’ve realised,” he said. “You must be Alex. I’ve heard a lot about you. Jazz seems really smitten.” Alex gulped. Did everyone except her think she and Jazz were an item?

She floundered, not sure what to say, and the doctor laughed. “I gather it’s mutual then,” he said, and walked off.

She went back to her own ward and helped Janet get ready to hand over to the night staff, regaling her with an account of the day as they worked. A tailored account that didn’t mention Jazz.

Dusk was hovering as she drove home. It would soon be dark earlier and earlier and she would have to restrict Wooster’s walks to the streets. Or maybe she could take him to Well Beyond and find a field there where he could run in safety. She’d have to ask Jazz – or someone. Wooster never seemed to mind the constraints of winter but she felt sorry for him. He was an energetic companion and deserved long walks and freedom.

It was possible that freedom was just a short drive away, in Well Beyond. There couldn’t be many Malvyndas or Staceys after all.

## Chapter 11: Decisions.

The next week Jasper called for her as promised.

“The tribunal is ready to hear your story,” he said. “Just tell them exactly what you remember. They already heard from me and from the Alberts. I’ve recused myself from

sitting since I'm both a witness and an investigator, so there are three new barbers for you to meet. They're all friends of mine."

Both Wooster and Drat accompanied them. Drat could make a witness statement anyway but Jasper pointed out that one of the other barbers had Alex's talent for talking to animals so Wooster could add his part of the story too.

Once through the well they went straight to the office. The lock-up faced the main room and Alex could see Stacey, looking sullen and miserable. However, she was more interested in the three people sitting at the table where she and Jasper had studied the maps. Jasper introduced her, and Wooster and Drat too, just as though they were people.

"Alex," he said. "Please meet my fellow barbers who have met as a tribunal to consider Stacey's case." He gestured to each as he named them. "This is BarberG from Peak Beyond, the town you call Buxton." The man in question looked human enough so was presumably a witch. He nodded at Alex and smiled. "And this," Jasper went on, "is BarberK, from Cave Beyond, which you'd know as Knaresborough." An elderly woman with a hooked nose and chin a bit like Ma Watkins smiled at Alex. Probably another witch. "And finally," Jasper said, "we have BarberN from Dale Beyond, which is the Peak District village of Tideswell." The man who now smiled at Alex was a brownie, like Stacey and Alex had to remind herself that as with any group of people there would be good and bad. She shouldn't let Stacey prejudice her against brownies.

She soon told the story, hoping she hadn't left anything out but was sure the tribunal would ask questions if she was unclear. Drat and Wooster added their accounts, and were both praised for their part in the arrest.

The tribunal then said they were 'retiring' to discuss matters which Alex took as a signal to leave the office. She heard Stacey hiss as she left but the brownie was impotent behind bars and Alex could ignore her. To her surprise, Jasper joined her in the square.

"I told you I wasn't on the tribunal," he said, noting her look of astonishment. "Like you, I'm leaving them to it. When they've made their minds up we can arrange the town meeting. For now, we could walk Wooster. There's a lovely field just outside town that I think he'll like."

It was indeed lovely, full of wild flowers. Alex asked about the possibility of using it as a winter walk and was told she would be welcome. "And Wooster will be welcome any time," said Jasper. "Drat has been singing his praises and everyone thinks you're all heroes."

Alex let Wooster off the lead and they watched him chase butterflies and bark at squirrels which of course scampered safely up the trees at the field's edge.

"Al," Jasper said eventually, "I hope this whole affair hasn't put you off Well Beyond. We're usually a peaceful sort of place, I can assure you."

"I believe you, Jazz." Alex laughed. "I'm looking forward to spending lots more time here."

"I'm rather hoping you'll spend more time with me," he said, almost mumbling and uncharacteristically shy.

“Of course I will. We’re friends,” she said.

“And if I wanted more than friendship?” He looked hopeful and yet ready to be disappointed. Alex felt a wave of emotion. He must think she might be less attracted because of the scars. He couldn’t know just how very attracted she was, despite them.

“I think more than friendship might be quite a good idea,” she said quietly.

They linked hands as they walked back towards the town, Wooster by Alex’s side. It was ‘early days’, Alex thought, but maybe, just maybe, this extraordinary man might be the answer to her dreams.

When they reached the office BarberG met them and said a decision had been reached and that BarberJ should call a town meeting for the next day.

“BarberK and I will find a hotel in Stockport,” he said. “BarberN is talking to the Alberts who gave evidence, and they have offered to put him up for the night.”

“Alex looked at Jasper. “You said you were all friends but you’re so formal with each other,” she said.

Jasper grinned. “Only when we’re in a formal situation like this,” he said. “Now that the main tribunal is finished, let me introduce you all over again. This is my friend Grant. He’s a librarian in Buxton but also the barber of Peak Beyond.”

“And you’re not just Alex but Jazz’s friend,” said Grant. “I’ve already had him tell me how wonderful you are. It’s really good to meet you.”

As he spoke, the other two came out into the square.

“Meet Katrina, or Kate to her friends,” said Jasper. “She’s the custodian of Mother Shipton’s Cave in Knaresborough.”

“Ooh, I’ve heard of that,” said Alex. “Isn’t it the place where things turn to stone if you leave them long enough?”

“It certainly is,” said Katrina. “You must come and visit some time. I’m sure I can find you a stone trinket when you do.”

“I’ll bring her soon,” said Jasper, then flushed. He glanced at Alex who nodded vigorous acceptance of the plan and he gave a relieved smile.

“And this,” he said finally, “is Nathan or Nat, who lives in Tideswell and is, like Stacey, a baker.”

“I hope that’s all we have in common,” said Nathan. “Apart from being brownies, of course. Gives brownies and bakers a bad name, that one does.” And everyone could only agree.

Alex had a day off the next day and she went to Well Beyond quite early, wondering how the town meeting would be called and where it would be held. She found old Albert in

the square, drumming on a brass gong that must surely be heard all over the town. People drifted into the square in ones and twos and soon enough there was quite a crowd. Ma Watkins came down the hill on her broom and Alex joined her by the fountain.

“Good job it’s not raining,” the old witch remarked. “We’d have been hard put to get all this lot into BarberJ’s office.”

They would indeed. As it was, Jasper threw the doors wide open and the tribunal stood in the doorway. Jasper introduced BarberG who was apparently to be spokesperson.

“We, the tribunal,” he began, “have carefully considered the behaviour of Statice the brownie. Not only the murder of Malvynda the witch, but the enablement of Malvynda’s crimes by not reporting her suspicions about the taking and killing of animals. And then of course we have the threats to Wooster, the dog, and the attempt to kill Alex. We find Stacey guilty on all counts.”

The crowd gave a collective gasp. Some of them hadn’t known about everything until that moment.

“We sentence Statice to exile from Well Beyond. We know she was your baker but we are assured that Cassandra will be willing and able to take her place.” He gesture to Cassie, who seemed flustered but pleased. She was standing at one side of the square with another young woman in a wheelchair.

“Stacey will continue to bake,” he continued. “BarberN is also a baker, in Dale Beyond. Stacey will work for him and be given sufficient money to live on. Not well, but adequately. She will wear a tag so that she can be monitored at all times and she cannot leave Dale Beyond, which is quite a small town. Any profit from her work over and above her absolute necessities will go to the town, not to her or to BarberN.”

The crowd was murmuring approval. Someone called out, “How long for?” and BarberN stepped forward.

“We think Malvynda would have had at least another thirty five years of life,” he said. “And then of course we have to consider the death of Tanmalkin who could have expected at least another fifteen years. So we think fifty years is a minimum sentence and after that we will reconvene and reconsider.”

Stacey, who was standing shackled to two guards near the tribunal, went pale. It was a disturbing effect on a brownie because she turned a sort of beige colour. Alex, however, didn’t feel sorry for her, and gathered nobody else did, either.

BarberG spoke again. “We need your agreement to our decision. Yours is the community that has been injured by this woman’s crimes. What say you?”

There was a roar, and Alex could only make out that many voices were shouting ‘Aye’ all together.

So it was settled, and all that remained was to arrange the transportation of Stacey to Dale Beyond.

Alex found herself chatting to Wooster about the decisions and her own part in the whole affair.

“If I’m supposed to be so good at reading people, why didn’t I sense there was something wrong? I did with Malvynda, after all.” She wasn’t really asking the dog, just voicing her own thoughts, so she was surprised when after a moment’s thought he answered.

“Perhaps because she wasn’t inherently evil like Malvynda,” he said. “She was careless, lazy and uncaring, yes, but she wasn’t actually intending wickedness. Until Malvynda provoked her beyond bearing. So you didn’t get that sense of badness.”

“Perhaps.” Alex hesitated. “But the murder wasn’t an instant reaction. She had to find a knife, so it was to some extent cold-blooded and planned, even if only over a few minutes. She could just as easily have reported what she knew and left it to the authorities.”

“Perhaps she carries a knife,” said Wooster. “She’s a baker...”

“Bakers don’t carry knives,” said Alex. She had a moment’s vision of Stacey pretending to be friendly, offering Malvynda cake, then getting a knife, ostensibly to cut it. It was an unpleasant thought, made even worse by the fact that Malvynda would be congratulating herself on her treatment of Stacey and all the animals.

“Then you’re right,” Wooster agreed. “It was premeditated. But not for long. So the sort of badness inherent in Malvynda wasn’t there and you would have had to meet Stacey a few times to notice anything in her. In the event, you only met her a few times anyway.”

“And that was quite enough,” she said. Wooster had given her food for thought. Her people-reading skills clearly needed work, or at least she had to realise she couldn’t necessarily rely on them.

Alex found herself chatting to Rose and Viridiana, promising to visit both in the near future, and then Jasper was pulling her away to say goodbye to his friends.

“I’ll be seeing you in Knaresborough,” said Katrina. “Till then, take care of yourself and your wonderful animals.”

“And never fear,” said Nathan. “I’ll take good care of Statice and she’ll never threaten you or yours again.”

“It was good to meet you,” said Grant. “Take care of Jazz, won’t you.” He grinned at her and all three waved as they left, Katrina on a broom, Nathan on a cart which had a kind of cage for Stacey, and Grant on a beautiful horse.

“It’s usually you taking care of me,” said Alex, as she walked up the hill towards the well. Jasper was holding her hand again and she enjoyed the feeling of their clasped fingers.

“I’m sure you can think of ways to return the favour,” he said, his eyes dancing.

He kissed her goodbye; their first kiss and an entirely delicious one. Alex hoped it would be the first of many. She knew Jasper had a lot of paperwork to sort out in the

aftermath of the decisions that had been made, but she would see him the next day. They arranged to meet for lunch now that she knew he, like her, worked at the hospital.

“Take care of yourself,” he called as she headed through the well. “And think about taking care of me, too,” he added, grinning as he spoke.

And Alex thought she could, both in Stockport and in Well Beyond.