

face and hands scratched, but he didn't dare let himself focus on the pain – he gritted his teeth and kept on running.

All he could hear now was the pounding of his own blood. *How close were they? Had he escaped?*

A branch caught the side of his eye socket, and he was temporarily blinded by his eye watering. As he reached up to wipe it clear, he saw to his horror that it wasn't a branch, it was an arm. Arms were reaching out of the darkness to seize him.

“Get away from me!” he screamed, struggling to free himself. “Leave me alone!”

He twisted away from them and fell, the head torch catching against a sapling and tearing off. He was in complete darkness now, losing all sense of direction. He scrambled to his feet and without pausing to catch his breath, he started running, and suddenly he was falling again, and then ... nothingness.

The shepherd stopped for a moment and closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of the sun on his back. There was no better life than to be among the Cotswold hills, whatever the weather. But on this perfect June day, he felt sorry for anyone who had to work indoors, especially those trapped in cities.

It was time to move the flock to a new pasture. The thick-fleeced Cotswolds sheep were tough enough to survive anywhere – a group of them were grazing contentedly at the foot of the old quarry – but the shepherd wanted them in the neighbouring meadow.

He opened his eyes and looked down at the sheepdog crouched beside him, waiting for her instructions.

“Walk up,” he commanded, and the dog headed towards the sheep at a slow, steady pace that wouldn’t send them scampering off.

“Come by,” he called, and the dog began circling the sheep, herding them in the right direction for the meadow.

The shepherd squinted at the scene. There was something in the quarry, something dark.

“Come by,” he ordered the dog again, and as the sheep were expertly rounded up, he strode towards the quarry to see what it was. It almost looked like a person, someone lying sleeping. It was. A man. Could it be the druid who had got permission to camp on the land? But would even a druid be able to doze undisturbed among grazing sheep?

Something was wrong. He ran towards the figure. And even before he got close enough to see the injuries, he knew it was too late for him to help.

1. ALFIE'S VISITOR

Windermere Cottage reverberated to the sound of the Hallelujah Chorus. Alfie jumped at the sudden noise of the doorbell. He had been on tenterhooks all day, unable to settle to anything, waiting for this visitor.

He had attempted to make some oatmeal and raisin biscuits, but while he was a more-than-decent cook, baking had never been his forte. The biscuits emerged brittle and charred. Even though he had opened the kitchen window, the odour of burnt biscuit followed him as he went to answer the door.

A middle-aged woman with a leather-bound folder in the crook of her arm, stood on the

doorstep. She had mousy hair, unremarkable features, and wore a nondescript skirt and jacket. The sort of woman who would pass unnoticed in the street or supermarket. A distinct advantage for a private investigator, Alfie thought.

“Good afternoon. My name is Lorna Fielding,” she said. Her voice was as innocuous as the rest of her, with no strong regional accent. She held up an identity card for him to inspect. “I’m here to see Mr McAlister.”

“I’m Alfie McAlister,” he said. “Please, come in.”

For all he knew, she had shown him her bus pass. He had no idea what her identity card was supposed to look like, but he already knew she was appropriately licenced. And she came highly recommended by his best friend Oscar for her efficiency and discretion. Alfie wondered whether this information came from