

CHAPTER I

My name is Melissa Johns and my story starts when I move to a village called Peaty Hallow.

I am employed as a Maths and Music teacher at the Peaty Hallow primary school and was travelling each day by bus from a town called Speckleton for three years before I actually moved here. There is also a train service but travelling by bus is cheaper. Unfortunately the buses only run Monday to Friday.

Speckleton, my home town, is a small market town and up to about two years ago that's where I lived with my mother and daughter Evie. I started calling my mum Mother, because Evie was already calling me Mum so in order to avoid our little girl becoming confused we both agreed to do this.

I love my job and I get on extremely well with Janice the headmistress, and the other teachers Bernie and Phoebe. There are two other teachers who visit once a week. Joe teaches Art, and Ryan teaches Drama. The children here seem to be motivated and on the whole are quite well behaved. I've met most of the villagers who I know through the children who attend school.

During the week we run several short classes after school for children who feel they need extra tuition in Mathematics and English. One of the children attending my maths class is Thomas, who is one of Henry Walter's grandchildren. Usually he is quite attentive and bright, but over the past two months he seems to be somewhat distracted. I have often noticed him looking out of the window watching people go by.

Henry Walter owns The Lodge at the top of the village. The Lodge itself is magnificent and the Walter family have been residing there for years.

I went over to Thomas and asked if he was alright. He just shook his head and said, "I don't like living at Grandpa's. The Lodge is too big. It's scary. There are too many people living there and I miss my Mummy." Tears were pouring down his face and mucus from his nose. He didn't seem to have a hanky so I offered him mine.

Fiona, his nanny, came into the room and said, "Now young man, what's the matter? Why are you crying?"

"I want my Mummy. I want my Mummy."

"I've told you before, Thomas, Mummy has gone away for a while. So you must stay with your Grandpa. Now if you are ready," she put her hand out and Thomas took hold of it. Thomas left my handkerchief on the desk and was led out of school.

I remember three years ago when Ian and Thomas, identical twins, first started school. I was told that they had come to live with their Grandpa after Jeffrey's wife had gone away with Mrs Walter. Jeffrey wasn't able to care for his children because of work commitments. He runs his own construction company and travels around

the country. He was forced to sell their home after a messy divorce and settlement. Jeffrey eventually moved back to The Lodge to be with his boys.

I did hear on the village grapevine that Mrs Walter had tired of her husband's philandering and had heard a rumour from some time ago, which was circulating around the village yet again, that Kim's son might belong to her husband. Apparently when she confronted Henry with what she'd heard, he totally denied ever having an affair with Kim. He doesn't understand why she's making so much fuss and why she's being so unreasonable. So one day, without any notice, she clears out their bank accounts and took some of the family's silver. She and her daughter-in-law are thought to be travelling around Europe on the proceeds. Kim is now the landlady of The Kissing Gate.

I do take Ian, for maths, but in a different class, and he doesn't seem to be having any problems. The boys would have been seven years old when they were moved to The Lodge.

Peaty Hallow is quite a large village, there are a lot of small businesses here and we also have a bank. There are two public houses, The Crooked Tree and The Kissing Gate, which I believe is named after the kissing gate at the front of the Community Centre. At the back of the centre there is a playing field and through the seasons some of the villagers play football, cricket and hockey. Some of the village events are held there, such as the village gala day and our school's sports day. The hall can be hired for celebrations and throughout the year there is an excellent choice of exercise and relaxation classes.

Janice, Frances, Trisha, Poppy and I usually attend an exercise class during winter when walking and other outdoor activities are hampered by the inclement weather.

On Thursday morning there is a small market held on the village green. Villagers don't have to rely too heavily on shopping at Speckleton because most items can be bought within Peaty Hallow.

I never intended to live here, it just seemed to happen.

One day Janice wanted to get some provisions from the local farm shop and she asked me if I would like to go with her. I wasn't doing anything in particular so we went in her car during our lunch break. The farm shop is quite large and it is part of a very large estate which is owned by Nigel and Linda Jack. The village post office is also located within the farm shop along with a bakery and a butcher. While Janice was doing her shopping I wandered around looking at some of the items on sale.

When Janice had completed her shopping I went over to help her with packing the bags. Frances was chatting to us as she operated the checkout.

“Mr Jack was telling me this morning that he's been advised by the estate agent to reduce the price of his cottage. It's been on the market for quite some time now.”

“Yes it's a shame, because it's quite a nice cottage.”

“While the cottage has been up for sale Mr Jack has tried on several occasions to let it, but it's unfortunate that no one wanted to stay. Lionel and Poppy are looking after the cottage and garden.”

On the way back Janice pointed out the cottage. It was rather small but quaint and stood in its own grounds. I noticed the long front garden sweeping along a narrow driveway which leads up to the lane where we were. The first thought that passed through my head was that it would be well out of my price range. Janice pointed to the cottage next door and said, "That's where Frances and her husband, Brendan, and two children, Katie and Justin, live."

I made a note of the agent's telephone number and rang them after school. To my amazement it was well below the current market value but within my budget. I booked an appointment to view the cottage. Apart from having a reasonable sized kitchen, bathroom, sitting room and a small dining room, there were two reasonable sized bedrooms and a conservatory which was accessible through the kitchen. On the outside I found that there was a good sized vegetable garden and orchard at the back. Apart from the allotments which run alongside the driveway at the front the rest of the garden is completely private. After some negotiation and once all the necessary formalities were completed the cottage was mine.

When I asked my mother if she would like to move with me to Peaty Hallow she said she didn't want to move away from Speckleton. She and my father had always lived there. First and foremost she didn't want to move away from her circle of friends and activities. She has many happy memories attached to our family home. She reminded me that I was born and grew up there. She had nursed my father until he died there and latterly this was where my daughter and I lived when my partner, Neville, didn't want us anymore. She also told me she felt too old to move.

I asked Evie if she would like to move with me and she said that she was settled staying with her Nan and didn't want to move until she had completed studying pharmacy at Tinville University. At this moment in time she didn't want any disruption.

When I eventually moved into my cottage it felt so strange yet very exciting both at the same time. It felt so good to be independent and to have control over my own space. I had a freedom which I've never experienced before.

It has taken a long time for me to get used to being on my own and adjust to the sounds of the countryside. When I first moved here I was constantly being woken up at four o'clock in the morning by the dawn chorus, but in particular by a blackbird perched in one of my trees singing to his heart's content. Although I do like to hear the birds singing I didn't appreciate being woken up quite that early.

Also from time to time, I can hear cows bellowing after their newly-born calves for a few weeks on end. That's such a heart-felt noise because they know that they have given birth but they don't have calves. I did find out that the calves are taken from their mothers and hand-reared for veal. I find it very upsetting and find it much harder to get back to sleep once I've been disturbed.

I wasn't alone for long. I noticed a cat mooching around the garden. I tried several times to make friends with her but she would run off or climb one of the trees to get out of my way. I used to leave out my leftover meals and a bowl of water, just in case she had been abandoned in the lane.

One day I must have left the kitchen door open because I found her fast asleep on one of the chairs in the conservatory. At first she did not appreciate a lot of fuss.

She would glare at me as if to say what do you think you're doing? I did take her photograph and made a poster which I placed on the notice board in the farm shop, just in case she belonged to someone in the village, but no one came to claim her.

Now she's a different cat and when I'm relaxing in the sitting room or conservatory she'll sometimes jump on my lap, settle down and fall asleep. When she's like this we are friends and she is a lovely cat, but the other day she did annoy me big time. She brought home a trophy, a baby rabbit. She was so proud of her achievement when she dropped it on the kitchen floor. I thought it was dead.

Luckily she was thirsty so while she was having a drink, I very quickly scooped it up and ran up my driveway. Meanwhile the rabbit, realising that it had been saved, was trying to free itself. I leaned over the small stone wall into the allotments and released it. Within a few moments the rabbit was making its way towards the field adjoining the allotments.

Occasionally, when I'm out in my front garden weeding in the evening, I do see a few of the people working in their allotments. I know some of them by sight but not by their name.

I must confess that I do get help with the garden. There's far too much for me to manage by myself. I do love having a garden but my knowledge and skills are still very poor. Lionel, who also works for Henry Walter

and Nigel Jack, comes once a week to manage the vegetable garden and the orchard.

The front garden is looking very pretty and the vegetable garden is well stocked. In the orchard there is a good variety of fruit trees and all are bearing fruit. There is another tree growing in the orchard. It's not like the other trees, it is unusual yet hideous. The trunk is crooked and its branches are twisted, bent and winding. Just a few months ago the tree came into flower which was very impressive to say the least. The fragrance was overwhelmingly pleasant and it was a mass with honey bees. The tree literally hummed. I don't know its name nor its origin but I find it fascinating.

The previous owner of the cottage, Nigel Jack, told me that he believed that the cottage was cursed. He had previously offered the cottage to let and a couple of tenants claimed they saw something come out from the shadow in a corner of the sitting room. Maybe it was haunted, I found myself thinking.

No! I don't believe in ghosts and there is usually a perfectly good explanation for most things that go bump in the night, but some of these sightings had been claimed to be happening during the day. So I am a tad sceptical. Up to now I have nothing to report but am keeping an open mind.

When the fruit and vegetables are ready Lionel harvests them and stores everything in trays which he stacks in one of the outbuildings. It's nice and cool in there so it's an ideal store.

"Why don't you have a go at making some jam or chutney, Melissa?" asked Lionel.

“Do you know I’ve never made any preserves before. Frances is trying to encourage me to make some jam. In fact she’s left me copies of some of her jam, chutney and jelly recipes.”

“It’s not that difficult to do because me and Poppy have always made our own preserves. We’ve been doing it for years.”

So one evening after tea I have a go at making some jam and chutney.

The next evening when in the orchard the twisted tree has what appears to be fruit hanging from its branches. On the ground there are some windfalls. I pick one up and on closer inspection the skin is brown, hard to the touch and wrinkled, as a fruit it doesn’t look very appetizing. I’m curious to know what it tastes like so I take a batch back to the kitchen. I wash the fruit under the cold water tap I then puncture the skin with my teeth and some juice comes into contact with my tongue. The taste is extremely bitter and it instantly dries my tongue and mouth.

Beyond the hard exterior the texture of the fruit is soft, fluffy and clear and I wondered if it would make a good jelly. So I made a small amount of jelly which turned cloudy and didn’t completely set. I taste a little on a spoon and there is a distinctive flavour which I find pleasant. It’s not too sweet nor too sour. I don’t know why but I add this so-called jelly to jam already made which was set aside to cool slightly before transferring into jars. I decide to name this jam Melissa’s Special Jam.

There was a little left in the bottom of the pan so I scraped it out and spread it onto a piece of toast, it’s

delicious. This is the best part of making preserves. The special fruit seemed to enhance the flavour of the other fruit that it's mixed with. So the following evening I collected more of the special fruit and repeated the process. When I look at all the jars on the shelf in my pantry I feel so proud of what I have achieved.

On the spur of the moment I took a jar of my special jam around to Frances. She was surprised because even though she had been trying to encourage me to make jam she didn't think I would.

Next day at school I gave a jar of my special jam to Janice. Apparently her mother makes jam and I was interested to know what they thought of it.