

Chapter One

Birthday with Friends and Enemies

A piranha was attacking my right foot! Needles were piercing me!

My name is Patricia Foster. I am known at school as 'Foxy' because I have red hair and am very crafty. When I grow up I am going to be a police detective, like my smashing Aunt Sarah. She is a real detective sergeant in the Met. She hunts criminals and so do I. I've already helped to catch burglars, a shoplifter, a gang leader, Jack Purchase, and his dangerous gang. I was eight when I went to my comprehensive school in London. On the first day, Miss Blackman, the teacher I really dislike and who detests me, called out when she took the register

"Pat Foster!"

I answered her. "My name is Patricia, not Pat. My Nanna told me Patricia comes from the word Patrician meaning a noble lady. I don't allow anybody to call me Pat or Tricia".

"Of course, your ladyship, just as you please! Children," she said turning to the class, "we must curtsy to her ladyship when we see her".

All the children sniggered, creeps that they are! For the rest of the term some girls thought it funny to call me "Your Ladyship" and curtsy to me. Nanna wanted to write to complain to 'Bossy' Mossy, our Headteacher. She said it was rude to assume that if your name is Patricia it can be shortened to Pat or Tricia without you agreeing but I wouldn't let her write. I can't wait to leave school and become a thief catcher like Sarah!

I have no friends at school because they all think I'm stuck up. They call me teacher's pet because Mr. Jones, my favourite teacher, plays chess with me. I don't care that I have no friends at school. Ever since I met Annabelle Martin, who is my best friend, I have made tons of friends in Dorset and I see them every holiday. Sarah tells me that prisoners write on the doors of their cells the number of days before they will be released and sometimes I tick off in my diary the number of school days before the next holiday.

I was lying in bed at Annabelle's house, the Rectory, deliciously sleepy. Mr. Martin has just heard he is to be made into a canon and Mrs. Martin and Annabelle are very proud of him. I must remember to ask Annabelle to explain what a canon is. It was 7.30 am and it was my eleventh birthday!! Annabelle had given me strict instructions that I was not to get up as she told me she would bring me cooked breakfast in bed with all my cards and presents!

Annabelle, Susan and Peter, our other close friends, had been scheming all last week so I guessed they were planning something exciting for my birthday. I suddenly remembered I needed to ask Peter to return my binoculars. He'd borrowed them to watch a white owl because he's a twitcher!

I put my arms behind my head and lay back feeling very happy.

"Ouch" I exclaimed.

Reluctantly I opened my eyes to find that Monty, Annabelle's ginger and white

kitten, had embedded his sharp little teeth in my toe and was working furiously on my foot with his back paws. He was telling me in no uncertain terms that he wanted his breakfast. I let him out and heard him mewling piteously outside Annabelle's door.

I walked over to the open window. I could smell the flowers from Mrs. Martin's rose beds, yellow, white, dark red and pink roses. I saw on the other side of the fence a meadow, part of which was rough grazing and part a cricket pitch. I thought of Peter, who plays cricket for the village team. Annabelle watches him when she isn't watching Susan play tennis or playing tennis or table tennis with me, she encourages us all. Beyond the meadow is a sparkling stream and on the other side of the stream a large number of dark trees known as Witch Wood. I shivered as I looked at the wood. In it, armed only with a sling and stones, I had confronted my enemy Jim Purchase, the fifteen year old nephew of gang leader Jack Purchase, when he threatened me with a knife. I still have nightmares about that horrible curved knife, Sir John Wylie, the Squire of the village, told me later it was a Malaysian kris.

My eyes surveyed the horizon then suddenly I stopped dead. Leaning on the trunk of a tree inside the wood was a large black and red shape. Could it be a motorbike? Without my binoculars I couldn't be sure and then my inspection was disrupted by a tap on the door and I forgot all about the dark object. It was my birthday and my detective instincts were off duty! When I think of the scary adventures which followed I often wonder what would have happened if only I had my binoculars with me that morning and had watched the shape just long enough to see the riders come back to it. Annabelle surged into my bedroom carrying a very crowded silver tray which she put down on my bedside table. On the tray were three tall glasses of fresh orange juice, grapefruit segments with brown sugar, three plates crammed with sausages, bacon, fried tomatoes, mushrooms, poached egg and fried bread, brown toast, butter, white hard honey and Mrs. Martin's home-made three fruit marmalade. Annabelle was quickly pursued by Susan carrying a tray piled high with cards and parcels. (Susan always reminds me of Winnie the Pooh). I wish I could say she was excited about my birthday but I think she was more excited about what was on the breakfast tray!

"Happy Birthday Patricia" they chorused.

Breakfast in bed and presents to boot, what more could I ask for?

How can I best describe my friends?

Annabelle is just under five foot tall, slim and beautiful. She has lustrous black hair and dark eyes. She has the kindest, smilingest face I've ever seen.

People smile in different ways. I remember overhearing a teacher describe Miss Blackman's smile (on the rare occasions when she does smile). "It's like the moonlight glinting on the brass rings of a coffin!" Some people smile like a light, which switches on briefly and goes off almost immediately. Some people have smiles which never reach their mouths and Sarah told me they are not to be trusted. Nanna once said to Sarah that she wished I would smile more and I well remember Sarah's reply, "Poor lass. She doesn't have much

to smile about". She was referring to the deaths in a car crash of my Mum and Dad when I was seven. My Mum was a teacher and my Dad was the Clerk of a Magistrates Court. I am very proud of them and I miss them dreadfully!

Annabelle's whole face lights up when she smiles and you know she is truly happy to be with you, she has time for everyone. In the village she is known as "Princess" (after Princess Di). I saw Princess Di on the telly holding a child with only one leg on her lap and she was talking to him as if he was the only person in the whole world and I could imagine Annabelle doing the same. Susan teasingly sometimes calls her "Dumbelle" because she comes either at or near the bottom of every class at her school except in R.E. and music, subjects in which she is always easily top. She has a strong and beautiful voice. Singing has always been a big part of her life, she has been professionally trained in singing since she was small, and she often wins cups in singing competitions.

Susan grins rather than smiles (particularly when she has just beaten me, again, at table tennis!). She is tall, broad shouldered and has short brown hair. She typically wears black jeans because she has big muscular legs from playing tennis and she says she looks stupid in a dress. She is brilliant at tennis and table tennis, she plays for the junior county teams at both. She has been described in newspapers as the next Virginia Wade (the last British woman to win Wimbledon) and our best prospect for Wimbledon. She is very determined, I have seen her win from 5-1 down in the final set. Annabelle and Susan are like sisters because they have grown up together. They're always bickering with and teasing each other but they're very close and each seems to know at any time what the other one is thinking. I was quite jealous of Susan's friendship with Annabelle when I first met Susan but when I told Nanna she told me off and said I should try not to be so possessive.

"Grub first, prezzies afterwards" demanded Susan.

"It's Patricia's birthday not yours. You're so bossy" cried Annabelle horrified.

"It's all right for you Annabelle. Your Mum isn't on a muesli kick, mine is".

Mrs. Rose Thomas, Susan's Mum, has one enthusiasm after another. Sometimes I see Huw Thomas, her husband, and Susan blench when she rounds them up and they hate the prospect of her latest plan. However, she is always very kind to Annabelle, Peter and me and will include us in her plans.

Susan continued "I play tennis and table tennis three hours most days and I need a big breakfast! Dad has taken to having working breakfasts with his clients so that he can have decent cooked ones."

She complained to us that he gets out of it but she is left with her Mum's muesli! (Susan's Dad is a solicitor and the terror of the local courts. He is as crafty as I am).

We ate our piping hot breakfast each in our own individual style. I had put the last piece of toast on my plate when I noticed a large hand reach absent-mindedly for it. I had to smack the hand away with a buttery knife!

After breakfast I sat cross-legged on the floor, replete. Annabelle stacked the dishwasher while Susan sat beaming at me.

"I came over specially early to help Annabelle with breakfast. She burnt the bangers while I burnt the toast" she chuckled.

I noticed that Annabelle, as well as Susan, was fully dressed while I was still in my dressing gown and pyjamas. Why would Annabelle bother to dress before eating breakfast in her own home? A very faint suspicion that they might be up to something crossed my mind but perhaps it was only my detective instinct waking up?

Annabelle came back in.

"Present time!"

Susan and Annabelle crouched like expectant gun-dogs watching me fingering the cards and parcels with wonder. What an enormous difference Annabelle had made to my life! On my last birthday I only had two presents, a dress from Nanna and "The Hound of The Baskervilles" a thrilling Sherlock Holmes' story from Sarah, and four birthday cards, from Mr. Jones, Miss Edgington, a sports teacher at my school, Sarah and Nanna.

That was my tenth birthday but now I had stacks of presents and cards! When I open presents I like to feel and squeeze them beforehand to see if I can guess what they are. In the first parcel was a green striped shirt from the Martins with a card saying "to go with your red hair". I held it up to myself and looked in the mirror. They were right I thought, feeling embarrassed about my self-indulgence.

"I'll wear it today because it's so special" I promised Annabelle and her face shone.

I had a heavy table tennis bat from Susan. As I hefted it Susan explained that a heavier bat is better for driving, and when I heard this I bared my teeth at Annabelle. Susan is much too good for both of us but Annabelle and I have needle matches. I drive better but she places the ball better. She had won our last two games and I was itching for revenge, best friend or no best friend, I like to win!!

Peter and his Dad, Douglas Johnson, gave me a book of best games of chess of the world chess champion, Gary Kasparov. I would need to ask Sir John Wylie to explain the moves Kasparov makes as they are far too deep and complicated for me to understand on my own. Douglas is a police sergeant and he is engaged to be married to my Aunt Sarah. I wish they would hurry up and get married as I have never been a bridesmaid before and I fancied myself in white. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas gave me a tape of "The Who", my favourite group. Nanna gave me a red swim-suit and Sarah gave me alligator slippers, I slipped them on and shuffled round the room. They were great!

Two presents left. Sir John Wylie and Lady Mary, his wife, gave me a fabulous Staunton chess board and pieces. I couldn't wait to take them to school to play against Mr. Jones as I had had to make do with a battered black pocket set when I had played chess before. That left a huge brown parcel with something heavy inside, which was from Annabelle. I was completely flummoxed what it could be so I left it to the end and opened my

cards.

Major and Mrs. Warr, Sam the black alsatian's owners, had sent me a birthday card with a photograph, taped inside the card, of me throwing a ball to Sam and Sam jumping up to catch it in his mouth. There was a hand drawn flower card from Annabelle and a rude one from Susan so I kicked my alligator slippers at her, catching her in the chest. Some of the villagers sent me a card with a drawing of Hercule Poirot on it. Inside it read "To the girl detective who caught the gang who burgled our houses. You're the greatest". I was so proud of it! Peter had made up a card with a picture of a boy playing chess simultaneously against twenty girls and muttering "Easy, easy". I thought, I'll have you when I next play you! Nanna and Sarah, Mr. Johnson and Miss Edgington also sent me cards.

I read the final card in astonishment. It was from Jill Spencer, she is the girl who had spied on me at school and told London crooks, who wanted to kidnap me, where they could find me. I had to hide from them in a chiming clock and I had escaped but that was no thanks to her. She had been suspended for a term because of it but she was now allowed to return to school. Inside the card was a letter which read:-

"Dear Patricia,

I hope you have a lovely birthday. I am very sorry I told on you to the men. I never dreamt they would try to attack you only they promised me a walkman. Other kids have walkmen but I haven't because my Mum says she can't afford it Will you forgive me and can we be friends?

Love Jill.

PS Bossy Mossy has broken her leg skiing. She will be off school all next term and Miss Blackman will be in charge, worse luck!!"

I crumpled up the card disgusted and was about to bin it when Annabelle, who had been watching my face, asked if she could read it. She read the card twice whilst I nerved myself for a battle with her. I knew what Annabelle would try with me but there was no way I would forgive Jill whatever Annabelle said. I would **NOT!!**

"What's Jill like?" she asked.

"She is thin with blonde hair and has an anxious look about her all the time. She is the oldest of five brothers and sisters and I think she spends most of her spare time helping her Mum look after them".

"What she did to you was very wrong. She should have guessed they were up to no good".

I nodded, mollified. Perhaps, after all, Annabelle wouldn't try to persuade me to make up with Jill. "Susan and I are very puzzled why a smashing girl like you has no friends at school. Why is that?"

I started to explain that until I had met Annabelle I didn't think I needed any friends. Annabelle continued,

"But now you have so many friends in Dorset, wouldn't it be nice for you to have at least one friend at school?"

Annabelle asked me this very earnestly, giving me her full eye treatment but I knew what she was up to. She is always willing to forgive anybody, whatever they have done, if they say they are sorry and she really hoped I would forgive

Jill.

"Oh all right you win! I'll tell her I forgive her and we can be friends but you'd better help me with my letter to her or it won't get done" I replied very ungraciously.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of Susan smirking because she knows that neither of us can resist Annabelle. I didn't know then how important a decision I had made! Annabelle always gets things like this right but I don't know how.

"Isn't Miss Blackman the teacher who doesn't like you?" asked Susan, referring to the P.S. to Jill's letter.

"Yes" I replied miserably. "Once Miss Blackman spelt the word 'acommodation' on a white board. I knew she had spelt it wrongly because there is a sign on the house opposite to our house "accommodation to let" and I told Miss Blackman but she wouldn't accept she was wrong. Just then the deputy head slipped into the back of the classroom and heard us arguing and Miss Blackman got into trouble for not listening to a child. She has hated me ever since and now she's the acting head. Oh well I'll just have to try to keep out of her way". (Famous last words!)

Then I remembered Annabelle's parcel, grabbed it and unwrapped sheet after sheet of paper. I must have looked bewildered because they giggled at me, beastly girls! In the middle was a large black clumsy key. They shrieked with laughter at my mystified expression, Sherlock Holmes, me, flummoxed by a key!

"Come on Annabelle" said Susan. "My Mum's coming for us at 11 o'clock so we'll see you then, Sherlock".

They clattered off. They were deliberately baiting me by calling me Sherlock, in effect they were saying to me, "see whether you can solve the riddle of the key but we don't think you will succeed!" Slowly I picked up the wrapping paper and smoothed it out so it could be used again the way Nanna had taught me and tore off the stamps to be recycled. Then I gloated in turn over each of my gorgeous presents.

Suddenly I heard the roar of a motorcycle. To my surprise it stopped in the road outside the Rectory and I could hear the sound of feet running hard from the road, through the shrubbery and up to the front door. I also ran down the stairs in time to see a black glove come through the letterbox and drop a card on the mat. I ran to the front door but when I opened it I could hear the motorbike roaring away and I didn't even glimpse the person wearing the black glove. I wondered why that person had been in such a hurry, unless he or she was up to no good?

It seemed sinister to me so I picked up the card wearing gloves in case there were any "dabs" on it.

Sarah has taught me police jargon, much to Nanna's annoyance, so I knew all about "dabs". On the card was written

P 11 12? A 10 11 S 11 12.

I guessed it was nasty and that meant it was from Jim Purchase. However it wasn't until later that day I realised some of its horrible meaning and it was a great shame that, even then, I didn't guess all its meaning. I chucked the card

in my bedroom drawer, dressed and went downstairs taking the big key with me. If the card was from Jim Purchase I wasn't going to let a young crook like him spoil my birthday!

I could see the key was too large for any room inside the Rectory so I went up to Annabelle's study bedroom to nose round for a clue. I looked round her room in the way a real detective does, taking in one thing at a time but not missing anything. I have X-ray eyes! I noticed her music stand with some music on it, 'Amazing Grace', with which Annabelle would be leading the choir on Sunday, and some Irish ballads. I wondered when she would sing them. Seated in a chair at the table was Bruno, Annabelle's one-eyed teddy, with a glass of milk near him on the table and a ginger biscuit by his right paw. On his nose he wore a pair of blue spectacles and he was reading a gardening book. I borrowed the book from Bruno and looked at it wondering whether it could be a clue? The big key was definitely an outside key. I sat in the armchair flicking my way through the book and thinking that the Martins always had fresh vegetables for meals, but they weren't brought from the supermarket, at least when I went shopping with them. Could they grow them at the Rectory? Could Annabelle have a SECRET GARDEN?

I walked through the house to the back door and looked out into the garden. There's a great big wall to the left of the garden and I had always assumed it backed on to the cemetery but could I be wrong? At the bottom of the lawn was a potting shed attached to the wall so I decided to go and look in it properly and I ran down the lawn and went in it. At the far end of the shed was a door into the wall so I tried the big clumsy key in its lock and it worked!! Just then I heard Annabelle and Susan talking beyond the door and I listened to one of the most bizarre conversations I've ever heard.

"Come on you dear little lupin, you're not trying" encouraged Annabelle.

"It's no use you talking to your mingy flowers. Mine are much better and bigger than yours! Well done red rose, you're much bigger than Annabelle's pink rose".

Then there was silence for a few minutes. "It's very nice of you, Annabelle, to rock my hammock".

A moment later, "Don't rock so hard!"

She suddenly shrieked and there was a crash!

"Right, Annabelle Martin, you're dead meat!!".

"You'll have to catch me first" giggled Annabelle.

I went quietly into the garden but they were so busy chasing each other round the flowerbeds that they didn't see me coming. I grabbed a hose, which was lying on the ground watering tomatoes, and gave them both a good soaking. It served them right for hiding the secret garden from me.

"However did you find us?" panted Susan shaking the water off herself.

"Elementary my dear Watson" I replied, smirking, while taking off Sherlock Holmes.

(Sherlock Holmes always said this to his friend Dr. Watson when Watson said he was baffled by him.)

"I suppose dear Bruno told you" said Annabelle smiling at me.

"Yes, he helped me, but why on earth were you talking to the flowers, Annabelle?"

"We have a new teacher, Mr. Donald, who has started a gardening club at our school and he helps us to grow plants and flowers for sale to the parents. As an experiment he told half the children to talk to the flowers that they were growing and half of them not to talk to them. He thinks the ones that are talked to should do much better than the others. I think he's right, look at my roses!"

"Of course they'll do better, Annabelle dear" I replied with heavy sarcasm.

It was very hot in the garden, which was completely surrounded by high stone walls. Annabelle showed me two vegetable patches divided into neat rows and marked out potatoes, leeks, cabbages, lettuce and onions and also patches of ground full of flowers marked 'Mr. Martin', 'Mrs. Martin', 'Annabelle', 'Susan', 'Peter' and one bare patch.

"Who's that bare patch for?" I asked.

"It's for you "Patricia" if you would like it". Annabelle looked fondly at me when she said this.

I felt very happy knowing that I was regarded as part of the Martin family! I had always left gardening to Nanna at our home in London but perhaps it would be fun to have my own patch to grow flowers in? Annabelle then showed me a wilderness bed.

"That's where wild grasses grow. My Mum was born deep in the Dorset countryside and she is teaching me all about them, their names and how they grow, I think she knows them all".

Just then Peter came in to the garden and wished me a happy birthday. I thanked him for the chess book but didn't say anything about his deliberately provocative card, which had made me even more determined to beat him at chess, which would 'learn' him! We all went back to the large lawn, where croquet hoops were set up, and practised hitting the croquet balls through the hoops and knocking each others' balls off the lawn.

Then Susan and I lay on adjoining hammocks while the other two played a game of croquet.

"I do wish you lived in our village and came to our school" Susan suddenly said to me.

I was very touched and I felt my jealousy of Susan's friendship with Annabelle seeping away. I know how strong that friendship is because I'd heard Lady Mary talking to Mr. Thomas at a cricket match the previous Saturday. It's not that, like my hero Hercule Poirot the famous Belgian detective, we detectives deliberately eaves-drop, but we just happen, by the sheerest chance, to overhear interesting conversations!! I was sitting right against a big cricket roller and Lady Mary and Mr. Thomas came up and started talking on the other side of it.

"Have you ever considered, Mr. Thomas, sending Susan to Millfield School? They have sports scholarships and excellent tennis coaches and I know they would really welcome an outstanding tennis and table tennis prospect like Susan" Lady Mary asked him.

Mr. Thomas took time to reply and I was surprised how passionately he spoke.

"My wife, Rose, is a County swimmer, I'm a good club tennis player and Susan is our only child. When she won her first tennis tournament, at the age of only six, we realised she could become a champion so we helped her practise and practise. Then the media started to take notice of her and we were scared that all the attention they paid to her would spoil her".

"I can't imagine your Susan as a spoilt brat. She is so calm and kind and she thinks about other people" responded Lady Mary in surprise.

"She isn't spoilt but that is largely due to her friendship with Annabelle, they are inseparable. I have seen Annabelle watching Susan play a big tennis match. When it was finished Susan went straight over to Annabelle, they linked arms and went off together to visit old Mrs. Tompkins in the village and to take her some flowers. Susan told me Mrs. Tompkins said their visit cheered her up and Susan was as pleased about that as she was about winning her match. Some newspapers build up a promising young sports person and praise them to the heights, while they are winning, but then turn on them like jackals when they lose. Sooner or later Susan will lose an important match and some papers will write her off as yet another British failure. Then Annabelle will be at hand to pick up the pieces and to remind Susan there are other things in life than sport, great though sport is. Susan has taken up other interests already. She's playing the drums because Annabelle is a singer".

That was all I heard because they moved away, but it was enough to make me realise how close they are, but now I knew that Susan valued me for myself and didn't just accept me because of my friendship with Annabelle. What did I think about Susan's idea of my leaving London and living in Dorset? A Cockney friend of Nanna's said that what she couldn't stand about the country was "The 'orrible 'ush". All my life I have been used to the constant noise and bustle of London so I wondered whether I could live less hectically? Could I get as excited as are Annabelle, Susan and Peter about flowers and birds? Dorset was so much more friendly than London. When I walk through the village, people call out to me "Hello Patricia" and Sam, the large black alsatian, leans over his gate looking out for me. Then I remembered how horrible next term at school was likely to be and I knew I wanted to be with Annabelle, Susan and Peter forever, even though life in Dorset would be much quieter than in London.

"Yes, I wish I could but I don't know whether my Nanna would ever leave London".

Mrs. Martin brought out home-made lemonade and cookies and Susan and I lay in our hammocks and sipped and nibbled in companionable silence.

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Chapter Two An Accident?

Peter and Annabelle finished their game of croquet and lay down in hammocks near Susan and me. Peter then turned and smiled at Annabelle. He has been devoted to her for as long as I have known her, and much longer than that according to Susan. I didn't really know Peter very well at this stage but he struck me as quite shy and dreamy. However, when he plays sport he's as intensely competitive as Susan and I am. I helped him by tricking the bully, who was bullying him at school, and he's always been grateful to me for that.

We knew we had only twenty minutes before Mrs. Rose Thomas, Susan's Mother, was due to take us swimming and we were making the most of the sunshine. For a few precious moments, the garden was absolutely still and even the bumble bees were holding their breath!

"Wake up at once you lazy toads. We're going swimming" Mrs. Thomas shouted, disturbing us thoroughly.

Grudgingly we got up and moved out to her waiting car. Annabelle, in typical form, asked if we could stop at The Lodge for Gemma, who is a four year old girl in Annabelle's Sunday Club. She lives with her Dad and Mum in The Lodge, the house by the front gate leading into Wylie Park. Her Dad, Robert, was in the S.A.S. and he's the butler at Wylie Court and is also in charge of security there.

I noticed Mrs. Thomas and Susan exchange resigned looks at Annabelle's request. Susan had told me Mrs. Thomas particularly wanted to work on improving Annabelle's diving and here she was, once again, putting others in front of herself.

Mrs. Thomas stopped outside "The Lodge" and beeped her horn. The front door flew open, there was a blur of red and a very excited small girl hurled herself up the path and into the car where she snuggled up next to Annabelle.

While Mrs. Thomas drove us to the swimming baths, which are part of the sports complex where Susan practises tennis and table tennis, she told me that the plan was to have a picnic lunch in Wylie Park after we'd finished swimming. Then we would track Robert through the woods and he would track us before we had tea on the terrace at Wylie Court. I was very excited at the prospect of such a cool time on my birthday as I had never gone tracking before.

When we arrived at the town swimming baths I changed into the new red swimming costume Nanna had given me. Susan was wearing a Speedo swim-suit, Peter had green trunks and Annabelle was in her favourite swim-suit, silver with a frill. Mrs. Thomas had hired two lanes and two diving boards for our party. She demonstrated the crawl, sidestroke and breast stroke to us. She is normally quite clumsy but in water she is transformed, cleaving it with grace and power. Susan's eyes gleamed, she is ever so proud of her Mum!

We tried swimming like Mrs. Thomas but not very successfully and then it was time for our diving lessons. Annabelle trotted off holding Gemma's hand and soon, in the distance, I could hear the shrieks of mixed delight and terror from the little ones as the waves rose higher and higher.

My first dive from the lower of the two boards was a painful belly-flop, then I did start slowly to improve. However, I didn't dare go to the higher board although Susan and Peter did. There was an enormous splash and great waves were thrown up whenever Susan dived but Peter was more graceful as he had already learnt some diving at his school.

After a time I went off to relieve Annabelle.

"Mrs. Thomas wants you. I'll look after Gemma".

Annabelle trotted off.

"Don't want you, want Annabelle" declared Gemma mutinously.

I was furious with her. "You're a selfish little pig. Don't you realise Mrs. Thomas particularly wants to teach Annabelle how to dive but she insisted on taking you with us".

Gemma looked astonished, her lip fell and I thought she was about to cry but then her face cleared and she nodded vigorously.

"All right then, I agree, I am being selfish. Only Annabelle is so good to me! You know I quite like you, Patricia".

We had a lot of fun together until Gemma's Mum arrived to take her off and I went back to watch the divers. Peter had disappeared to get a drink but Susan was still crashing into the water. Under Mrs. Thomas's really expert tuition Annabelle was diving very neatly from the top board. She only made a small splash each time she hit the water. Two boys were throwing a ball over our two lanes very close to Susan and Annabelle when they dived and I could see Mrs. Thomas was getting quite irritated with them as she was frowning.

Just then Susan announced she was going off to get some crisps so I turned to ask her if she could get me some. As I turned and called out to her a girl with blonde hair of about Susan's age ran up and deliberately pushed her into the pool.

"Serve you right you stuck up rich girl. You and your friends have no right to hog the pool".

Susan clambered out of the pool rubbing her leg as she had scraped it on the side when she fell in. She looked absolutely furious and she thundered after her attacker. She caught up with her and I saw them wrestling together. The blonde girl was screaming at the top of her voice and swearing at Susan and everybody turned to watch them fighting. I saw an attendant run over but Mrs. Thomas ran even quicker and she was just about to break up the fight when Susan succeeded in pushing the girl into the pool.

I was watching the fight when I heard a very heavy splash behind me. I suppose, in my mind, I had expected the usual quiet noise when Annabelle dives in because, hearing the splash, I turned round in considerable surprise. I looked but couldn't see Annabelle at all. Then I looked harder and there lying motionless on the bottom of the 12 foot deep pool I could just make out a

silver costume. I was terrified.

"Mrs. Thomas come over here at once. Annabelle's drowning" I yelled, pointing her out.

Mrs. Thomas rushed past me, dived in and yanked Annabelle by the hair up to the surface of the pool. I was shaking all over. It couldn't be, Annabelle couldn't be dead!!

Mrs. Thomas pulled her unresisting body from the pool and gave her the kiss of life. After what seemed an eternity, Annabelle was violently sick. Peter and Susan must have heard the commotion because they rushed over. I was trembling so hard I had to sit down and I saw an old chap in an attendant's cap and uniform come over with two blankets and Mrs. Thomas wrapping them both tightly round Annabelle. When at last she sat up we all demanded of her

"What happened?"

"I felt something heavy hit me" she muttered incoherently.

I looked over to the pool and saw a ball bobbing in the water so I picked it up. It certainly wasn't heavy enough to make Annabelle lose consciousness or cause the huge black bruise spreading rapidly over her temple. "I'm taking Annabelle straight home. Are you lot coming?" called out Mrs. Thomas.

At that moment Robert came up to us grinning all over his face.

"Are you looking forward to the hunt this afternoon?" he asked.

Then he saw how white and trembly Annabelle was and asked

"What's wrong?"

Susan explained and apologised because they would have to put the hunt off.

"I'm sure Sir John and Lady Mary will arrange it all for tomorrow. They did so want you to have a scrumptious birthday treat, Patricia, but one more day won't harm".

He went off to telephone Wylie Court.

We all got changed but while the others chatted I slipped into detective mode. I thought the whole incident was very odd, from the blonde girl attacking Susan to Annabelle being hit by something hard enough to knock her out. I couldn't get out of mind the nagging thought that Jim Purchase might be involved. That horrible birthday card came back to me.

"P 11 12? S 11 12 A 10 11"

Annabelle could have drowned. Was the card meant to be a death threat? Did it mean Susan and Annabelle wouldn't live to see their next birthdays? I didn't then wonder why S & A each had TWO crossings out or why there was a question mark about me! Was I simply being over-suspicious? One thing was certain, I had to investigate much more deeply.

"I'd like to stay longer. I'll take a bus back" I told the others.

After they went off I took a walk round the leisure centre. It was quite large with several pools, a bar, a cafe and a gym into which I then walked.

"Hey you! What are you doing in here?" called out the old attendant rather aggressively. His manner took me aback.

"I'm just looking around."

"One of our medicine balls is missing. Have you or your mates taken it?"

"No we haven't taken it but perhaps I could help you try to find it?"

"Oh, that is kind of you. Sorry I spoke to you a bit roughish, miss, but I'm having a hell of an afternoon. The lad who is meant to be helping me has vanished. I can't find him anywhere. I last saw him only an hour ago but now he's vamoosed leaving me single-handed apart from one other person who has to look after the swimmers and I can't be supervising them and clearing everything up at the same time. I suppose you wouldn't like to earn three pounds helping for the next two hours? If you do agree, you'll have to wear a uniform and cap as my bosses insist on that for all helpers".

"Five pound" I said firmly.

"All right, you drive a hard bargain. Done".

Perfect I thought. I could look round without appearing suspicious to anybody as well as earning some money. I felt more confident about my suspicions. Lots of strange things were going on:-

1. The missing ball;
2. The missing boy.

I just had to work out what and how they fitted in with Annabelle's accident.

"I had better know what your boy helper looks like in case he comes back and accuses me of pinching his job".

"He's about 15 and calls himself John Sale. He's a big lad with brown hair and always wears dark glasses. He looks sullen and never smiles but mind you, I'll say this for him, he isn't gabby. He never says a thing about himself. He worked very well last week and that's why I can't understand him disappearing without saying anything or even collecting his money".

The word 'sullen' convinced me it must be Jim Purchase. The dark glasses would be a disguise as the police were looking for him in connection with the arson attack on Wylie Court. Another piece of the jigsaw then clicked into place. Sgt. Douglas Johnson had been talking to me about a young man, who he had stopped, and who had told him his name was Steve Old. Sgt. Johnson checked and the young man's real name was Simon Young. He laughed when he told me that people lack any imagination when they give false names and often give names which have some connection with their real names. That young man had given his right initial and had simply said 'Old' instead of 'Young'. Sale was a word connected with the word Purchase and 'J' stood for Jim, not John. The first couple of times I saw Jim Purchase he looked sullen and this, plus the coincidence about the name, convinced me it was him.

"Please collect your uniform and cap from the room upstairs marked 'Private - Attendants use only'" Mr. Brown told me.

When I went into the attendants' room I noticed the window was swinging loose. I looked out and saw it was on the same level as the high diving board. When you stood at the window you were square on to the diver and only a few feet away. Jim Purchase would have had a perfect aim at Annabelle from where I was standing. I got my detective notebook out to make notes and looked carefully and slowly round, Sarah had drilled into me that was what detectives do, but what I couldn't fathom was how he knew we were going to be at the swimming pool? I was sure the attack must have been worked out some days before. I saw a notice board in the room with two lists on it. One was of bookings, schools, toddlers, over 50's and beginners at various times

during the week and also private parties. There was only one entry for today, "Mrs. Thomas and party 11.30 to 1. Rope off two lanes and reserve two diving boards" and it gave her telephone number, including the village extension.

Jim would have known Mrs. Thomas when he lived in the caravan site at the village. He would also have known that the extension number was the one of the village. He could easily have dialled to check if it was Susan's Mum and then slammed the phone down when she answered and it wouldn't be difficult for him to guess that Susan, Annabelle and me would be in the party. Of course he couldn't have known which of us he would have the chance to attack but an opportunity had been thrown into his lap which he wouldn't resist. The other list showed Mr. Brown, a Mr. James and John Sale sharing duties. Their duties were either general cleaning or supervising and John Sale was on duty to supervise swimmers all that morning as was Mr. James.

I put on the uniform and the cap and walked round, picking up chairs, hoovering up litter and taking cups and saucers back to the tea counter and I also took a whole load of newspapers to a big litter bin next to the lanes where we had been diving. At the bottom of the bin I saw a lump with papers over it. That wasn't good enough a disguise to pass my beady eyes! I removed the papers and found the missing medicine ball, which was sopping wet. When I saw it I realised I'd found Jim Purchase's weapon and I imagined him hurling it at Annabelle and seeing her drop like a stone into the pool. I wondered how long it would have taken him to recover the ball, wrap newspapers round it, throw it in the bin and then ride off on the motorbike? I timed it all, imagining the time I would have taken to throw the ball, and it only took forty seconds to complete before he could run into the exit marked 'staff only'. I walked through the exit and saw, at the end of the passage, an exit door to the public car park, where I guessed his motorbike had been waiting.

Hadn't he taken a terrible risk of being seen in the crowded baths? I had to check that out. Then I had a brain-wave. Suppose he had a helper whose part in the plot was to grab the ball out of the pool, wrap it in paper and hide it. Just before Susan left to get some crisps I remembered seeing a man in a bathing hat and wearing goggles swimming underwater at the end of the pool in which Annabelle was diving. If he was the accomplice he could have grabbed the ball. Two people often ride a motorbike and I knew somebody must be sheltering Jim so it was likely his helper could be involved. It would mean that if nobody saw Jim throw the ball he wouldn't appear suspicious. The ball would fall in a different part of the pool from Annabelle and it would appear only natural to fish a ball out of a swimming pool. I decided to start my further investigations in the cafe adjacent to the pool so I went in there and checked the windows and I couldn't see the diving board from them. Huddled in a corner were the blonde girl, who had attacked Susan, and two boys who looked very like the two who had been playing ball near the diving board. I pulled my cap over my eyes, took a dustpan and brush and started to work as near the table where they were sitting as I could without arousing their suspicions. I remember reading in a Father Brown detective story that people seem to think if you wear official uniform, you're deaf and blind and they don't

notice you. I could just hear the blonde girl whispering "He said he would meet us up here. He said he hated rich people and he'd give us £20 if you threw your ball near them and upset them and then I pushed the girl in the pool. Why didn't you stop her pushing me in the pool? You were meant to come to help me."

"We ran over to help you but her Mum got there before we did. When's he coming with the money?"

I assumed they meant Jim Purchase and I thought 'you will have a long time to wait for your money'. It served them right. If there was one thing I hated, it was the thought of people making money out of their crimes. It all fitted together, the screaming and the fight had been planned to take everybody's attention off the attack on Annabelle, even the girl and the two boys didn't realise Annabelle was to be attacked and hadn't seen the attack. It had been a wickedly clever plan even though it was risky. Everybody including me had turned round as soon as the screaming started as Jim guessed they would. You don't often see a fight at a swimming pool! Jim would have thrown the ball from inside the upstairs room and nobody was likely to have seen him, except Annabelle. She had only to turn her head but why should she? You don't turn your head when you're going to dive from a high board because if you do you could easily slip off and hurt yourself.

I went back to the attendant's room and changed into my clothes and collected my £5. I told him I had found the medicine ball and he was very pleased. I then went back to the village on the bus, which stopped at lots of stops before it got to our village giving me plenty of time to think as it chugged along. Why had Jim's card said P 11 12? and S 11 12 as well as Annabelle 10 11? Then I realised that Jim had not known in advance whether he would be able to attack Susan or Annabelle or even me! It would have been none of us if, when he looked out of the window, he had seen anybody looking in his direction. It could have been Susan or me lying unconscious at the bottom of the pool, for ever!! I wouldn't have taken any notice of a large splash if Susan had been diving and nobody would have seen me at the bottom of the pool if Annabelle had been looking at the fight. I shivered! He would have watched from the attendant's window for his chance. If we had stuck together he would have called it off and left quickly in case one of us recognised him in spite of his dark glasses. He wouldn't have cared whether the blonde girl attacked Susan or not as he wasn't intending to pay the boys or her. When I got off the bus, I had solved some of the meaning of the card but, unfortunately, not all of it. P11, 12? meant I could have been drowned and S 11 12 meant Susan could have been his victim or so I then thought.

Mr. and Mrs. Martin both came to the Rectory door when I rang the bell.

"We can never thank you enough, Patricia, for alerting Mrs. Thomas to Annabelle's accident. We shudder when we think what would have happened if you hadn't seen her in time" cried Mr. Martin emotionally.

When we went into the lounge Annabelle was curled up in a deep armchair wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown with Monty purring his extra strong purr on her lap. She'd obviously heard what her Dad said to me.

"Oh do stop going on about my stupid accident! I've heard nothing else from

you all afternoon. I'm not saying that I'm not very glad you came with us to the swimming pool and saved my life, Patricia". She smiled at me and squeezed my arm. Umm, I thought. No accident!

"All right, Annabelle, I won't talk about it anymore" said Mr. Martin to pacify her.

He chuckled. "Rose Thomas was in such a taking that Huw and I had to take her to 'The Cow and Coffin' to revive her. When we got to the pub we wanted to go in the side door but there was a sign outside it saying "Only guide dogs". Rose point blank refused to go in. She must have thought it was reserved for dogs and we would see a row of St. Bernards sitting on stools holding pints in their paws and that humans weren't allowed in."

"Oh Dad, that's so funny" laughed Annabelle.

There was a rattling outside the door and in came Mrs. Martin carrying a tray of drinks. A large cup of coffee fell off it and spilt on the floor.

"I'm so sorry but I can't help it. We could have lost you forever, Annabelle, but for Patricia here".

She gave me a fierce hug.

That evening Susan and Peter came round for supper and afterwards we played a word game. We each had to write down the word "Martin" and make words out of its various letters. Peter won a Mars bar for getting ten words right, such as 'tin' and 'rat'. Then Mr. Martin showed us more words including the word 'mar', which I'd never heard of. He explained that the correct way to deal with this puzzle is to write down each letter and then work out how many words start with that letter. When you had completed one letter you went on to the next one until you had gone through all the letters in the word.

Mrs. Martin then showed us a book of beautifully coloured birds and we had to guess the names, which she covered up, of each of them. Peter got them all right, Susan was second but I only guessed the blackbird and the martin, because Annabelle had once, naturally, shown me a martin. Peter won a second bar of chocolate and he looked proudly at Annabelle but she had fallen fast asleep curled up in the deep armchair.

That night I had a terrible nightmare. I was standing outside the village church and the church bell was being tolled slowly and very solemnly. It was what Mr. Martin called "The Passing Bell" to announce that a person had passed from life to death. A small coffin was brought out of the church and taken to the open waiting grave. I saw the gravestone lying on the ground beside it and on it was carved "Annabelle Martin, aged 10".

"No. No." I screamed in terror.

I heard a soft knocking on my door.

"Whatever's the matter, Patricia? I heard you screaming".

"Oh Annabelle. I dreamt you were dead".

"Well, I'm not" replied Annabelle grumpily. "Don't you get like my Mum and Dad. They haven't stopped since Mrs. Thomas brought me home and told them what happened. I fancy a hot chocolate, how about you?"

We padded downstairs, she in her monkey slippers and me in my alligator slippers and sat in the warm dark kitchen. Monty was curled up in his basket and every so often his little nose twitched.

"I expect he's chasing mice in his sleep" commented Annabelle. "Do you often have nightmares?"

"Ever since my Mum and Dad died I have had one nightmare which keeps on recurring. I'm standing outside a house. Through the window I can see a Mum and Dad playing with several happy children and I tap incessantly on the window because I want to go into their house but nobody lets me in. They don't seem to hear me".

"Well I'm very sorry my stupid accident upset you so much, Patricia, and gave you nightmares".

We went back to bed but it was some time before I could get to sleep. I went over and over in my mind what had happened. It had been on the tip of my tongue when the Martins kept on talking of an accident to say that it wasn't. If I was right, it wasn't an accident. It was

'ATTEMPTED MURDER'.

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