

The characters in the story

Milly

Hannah, her mother

Ed and Lizzie Halford, of Caves House

THE GUESTS:

Adrian Bennett

Susan Bennett

Clive

Penny

Brett

Anne

Damian

Charles

Two other guests

THE ACTORS:

Caroline, who plays Lady Dunsany

Andy, who plays Lord Dunsany

Polly, who plays Miss O'Halloran

Bernie, who plays Mr Rochester

Michael, who plays the waiter

Rod, who plays Detective Blakey

Caves House

The first drop of rain hit the car window. It ran down the glass and disappeared. Milly looked out at the black sky ahead.

‘It doesn’t look good, Mum,’ she said.

‘No.’ Hannah took one hand off the wheel and pulled a map out of the pocket in the door beside her. She kept her eyes on the road and passed the map to Milly. ‘See if there’s a village soon. I’d better get some petrol before the storm hits.’

Milly opened the map.

‘Wakefield should be about four or five miles away. Then it’s seventeen miles to Romney.’

‘Oh, good. We turn off at Romney.’

Big drops of rain were falling now and the sky was even darker.

Milly looked at the map again. ‘When do you think we’ll get to Caves House?’

‘About four o’clock, I hope.’ Hannah glanced up at the sky. ‘That’s unless the storm slows us down. I remember the house is in a valley at the bottom of some hills. The road going into the valley’s very steep and narrow.’

Milly looked at her mother. ‘How old were you when you came here?’

‘About nine or ten, I think.’

‘And the caves were open then?’

‘Yes. A lot of people used to go there.’

‘But now they’re shut?’

‘Mmm.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Those other big caves at Farnley were discovered about thirty years ago. Maybe everyone goes there now. I didn’t even know Caves House was still open.’

Lightning lit the sky in front of them.

'Ah! Here's Wakefield.'

Milly looked out of the window at the shops and houses along the side of the road. The village was empty in the rain. 'There,' she said suddenly and pointed at a sign. 'Petrol.' Then she noticed another sign outside a small café. 'Oh, they've got hot chocolate, Mum. Can I have one?'

Lightning lit the sky again. Hannah turned the car into the petrol station. 'Okay. I'll have one too,' she said. She stopped the car and gave Milly some money. 'I'll get the petrol. You get the drinks.'

Milly got out of the car, pulled her coat around her and ran through the rain to the café. She heard thunder in the distance.

'Two hot chocolates to take away, please,' she said to the woman behind the counter.

There was only one other person in the café – an old man sitting at a table by the window with a cup of tea. Milly smiled at him. He nodded back at her.

'Storm coming,' he said.

'Yes. It looks nasty.'

The man lifted the cup to his mouth. 'Going far?'

'Caves House.'

The man put the cup down. 'Caves House?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'There's a murder weekend –'

'A what?'

'You know – a murder weekend. A group of people stay somewhere for a few days, there's a murder and they have to try to find out –'

'A murder?'

Milly laughed at the look on the man's face. 'Oh, not a real one. It's a game.'

The man nodded. There was thunder again, closer now.

‘So, you’re going to Caves House to play this game?’

‘Well, no, I have to work. I’m helping my mum. She’s making all the food for the guests for the whole weekend. She’s a caterer. She’s just started her own catering business.’

‘Two hot chocolates,’ said the woman behind the counter, and Milly turned to pay.

‘Thanks,’ she said. She took the drinks and started to leave.

The old man nodded at her. ‘Be careful in the rain.’

Milly ran back to the car. Hannah was waiting for her, and they set off again.

Ten minutes later they were in the middle of the storm. The sky was black all around them and the distant hills were lost in the heavy rain.

‘Well,’ said Hannah, ‘it’s the right kind of weather for a murder weekend.’

‘Mum, who gets murdered? Is it one of the guests?’

‘No, I don’t think so. I’m not sure. There’s a group of actors coming too. There’s something about it in the email they sent me with the catering details. Look in my bag.’

Hannah’s open bag was on the floor at Milly’s feet. Milly reached down and pulled out some pages.

‘Look, here’s Romney,’ said Hannah. ‘We have to turn off here. There should be a sign to Hill End on our left. Watch out for it. I don’t want to miss it in the rain.’

Milly saw it first. ‘There! *Hill End 14*,’ she read. Under it was another smaller sign. The letters on it were almost completely faded but she could just read them through the rain. *Caves House 17*. They were nearly there.

Milly sat back and opened the pages of the email. At the top of the first page it said ADRIAN BENNETT’S 40th BIRTHDAY and then there were a lot of details about the food Hannah would serve and the meal times. There would be ten guests and six actors to feed.

The last page was about the murder weekend:

Are you in... The Company of Murder?

You and your friends are enjoying a wonderful evening in a grand country house. Suddenly there's the sound of a gunshot, and then a scream. You go to see what has happened - and your blood runs cold. That charming person who sat next to you at dinner has been shot dead!



But the weekend has only just begun.

The police arrive to question everyone. Who has done this terrible thing? Can you discover the murderer? There are lots of clues to help you during this exciting weekend, as well as lots of fun and laughter.

Join us in... The Company of Murder.

Milly looked at the picture of a woman lying across a big bed. Dark blood covered the top of the woman's dress.

Milly closed the pages and put them back in the bag. 'It looks like fun,' she said.

'Yes. Well, just remember that we're there to work. I'll need your help making the food and you'll serve the guests at every meal. And you mustn't get in their way. Don't speak to them unless they speak to you. This weekend is really important for me, Milly. These people have plenty of money. If all goes well, they may give me more work. So you need to be –'

'– a good little servant girl,' finished Milly with a cheeky smile.

'Hmm,' said Hannah and glanced at Milly out of the corner of her eye. 'You just need to be charming, not cheeky. And do the job well. Okay?'

'Okay.'

Milly looked out of the window.

There was no farmland here. Trees and bushes grew close to the road. They shone with wetness in the grey light.

'The storm's passing.'

Hill End appeared. It was a small village – a few houses, a small shop, an old post office. A moment later it was gone.

'Nearly there,' said Hannah.

They passed a sign saying *Road open*.

Then, among the wet grey shapes of the trees, craggy rocks began to appear. Soon the road narrowed and the land on one side dropped steeply away. They were going down the side of a hill and Milly could see the tops of trees below. On the other side of the road little rivers of rain ran down the craggy rocks. Hannah drove more slowly and they wound their way carefully down towards the valley floor.

Milly looked at the edge of the road where it dropped away. It would be easy to have an accident here – to go over the edge and roll down and down into the thick, wet forest below.

'I hope we don't meet someone coming the other way,' she said.

Hannah was sitting forward in her seat, her eyes on the road. 'I wish the light wasn't so bad.'

'At least the rain's stopped.'

Suddenly Milly saw part of a roof below.

'Is that Caves House?' She tried to see more through the trees. 'Oh, it's gone.'

But before long they reached the valley floor. The road became wider and they crossed an old stone bridge. They passed a small cottage and moments later there was Caves House in front of them.

Hannah parked the car and Milly jumped out.

'Oh, it's freezing cold!' she cried and jumped back in again. Hannah laughed.

Milly grabbed her scarf and hat from the back seat and pulled gloves out of her pocket. She put them on and looked up at the big brick and stone house in front of her. It was like something from a children's book. It had a steep grey roof with windows in it. And it wasn't square. Rooms jutted out here and there, each with its own little roof. It was wonderful.

Suddenly the front door opened and a woman came out.

Hannah and Milly quickly jumped out of the car and walked towards her.

'Hello,' the woman called. 'Welcome to Caves House.'

A man joined her at the door. They were about the same age, Milly thought – both in their sixties – but he was very thin.

'Hello,' said Hannah. 'I'm Hannah Foster and this is my daughter, Milly. We're cooking for the guests this weekend.'

'Come in. Come in,' said the man. 'It's freezing out here. I'll take you to the kitchen and show you to your room. I'm Ed Halford and this is my wife, Lizzie.'

Milly thought his skin was an odd grey colour.

They all went inside and Ed shut the door.

Milly looked around her. They were in a large hall. From floor to ceiling the walls were covered with wood panelling and a grand curved staircase led up to the floor above. The dark wood was beautiful, but after a moment Milly could see that the carpet on the stairs and the floor was faded and worn. She could also smell the dust in the curtains at the window beside her.

Ed pointed at a door on the right. 'Now, that's the dining room.' He pointed at two large glass doors on the left. 'And through there is the sitting room.'

Then he led them past the glass doors and down a corridor towards the back of the house. They passed another door on their left.

'That's the games room and library,' said Ed.

Milly looked in through the open door. There were hundreds of old books along the walls and comfortable velvet chairs to sit in. She could see that it had been a grand room once, but now the colours were faded and the velvet was worn.

The Halfords led them down a few steps to a lower part of the house and stopped. The corridor continued.

'There are three bedrooms off this corridor and the bathroom's at the end,' explained Ed. 'And there are three bedrooms off the other side of the kitchen.'

'The actors aren't here yet,' added his wife, 'so you can choose any of the rooms in this part of the house. They each have two beds.' She pointed down the corridor. 'These three rooms are a bit nicer than the others because years ago they were used by guests. The ones on the other side of the kitchen were for the staff.'

'Of course,' said Ed, 'all the guests this weekend will sleep upstairs in the larger rooms.'

'Do many people come to stay here these days?' asked Hannah.

‘Not many,’ he replied. ‘Lizzie usually cooks for the few who do come. There’s no other staff here these days. Just us.’

‘Anyway,’ said Lizzie, ‘this is the kitchen. It’s old but everything works. You should find everything you need.’

They followed her through the kitchen door.

Milly glanced at Hannah. The kitchen wasn’t just old. It was ancient! It was like something from the 1930s.

‘Um...thank you,’ said Hannah and smiled weakly.

‘Okay. Well, um...’ Ed started to move towards the back door. ‘If there’s anything you need, you can find us in the little caretaker’s cottage up the road.’

‘Well, I –’ began Hannah.

But the Halfords were already outside. ‘We’ll be back to welcome the guests at six thirty,’ Lizzie called. And they disappeared.

Hannah and Milly looked at each other.

Hannah began to undo the buttons on her coat. ‘Well, there may be two murders this weekend.’ She looked at the ancient kitchen around her. ‘Because if that stove doesn’t work, I may kill someone!’ She threw the car keys to Milly. ‘Unload the boxes of food – and hurry!’