

FLEUR HITCHCOCK
**MURDER AT
CHRISTMAS**

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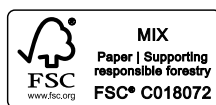
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*For Louise and Bini and the children
whose parents are so far away.*



Chapter I

Day I, 17th December

“Darling! Darling!”

We stop right opposite the sign that says Bath Spa and I bundle out of the train door. I can hear her, but I can’t see her and then...

“Muuuummmmm!” I drop my suitcase and dodge the streams of people pouring on to the platform. “Muum! Billy!”

“Grace!”

It’s a struggle, but I elbow my way through and cling to them, smelling, feeling everything that’s been missing the last ten weeks. Mum pulls my

face up to hers and kisses my cheeks.

“Oh, sweetie, how are you? Your train was so late, I thought you’d never get here.”

I can’t speak; the longing that’s been a part of my heart ever since September bursts up my throat and I know I’m crying there, in front of everyone, but it doesn’t matter.

“Yay, Gracie.” Billy, my younger brother, grabs me round the waist and almost pulls me to the ground. “Missed you!”

“Bil-ly,” says Mum. “Give her a chance.”

As the flood of passengers recedes from the platform, Mum grabs my suitcase and, laughing at how stupid we were not to use the lift, we lump it down the steps to the long passageway that leads under the train lines.

“This way,” says Billy, running back and forth between the ticket barriers and me and Mum. He’s as excited as I am, and the tears start again just watching him.

It’s all so much, I want to sit down and just hold them both. They’ve been in sunny Australia and I’ve been here in England at Tetherton Hall, trying to make friends with a bunch of girls – a few lovely,

most of them indifferent, some of them foul. And I've missed my family so much.

Mum's talking. "So the hotel's very nice, isn't it, Billy?"

"Yeah! They've got Christmas trees everywhere, and gingerbread snowmen in the room, and a glass jar of chocolates, and cute little teddies on the bed, and we've got our own bathroom with a load of little bottles of stuff."

"Stuff?"

"Stuff," says Billy. "You'll love it – you know, hair stuff, skin stuff. Lo-tions..." He grimaces and waggles his fingers at me.

"It's a lovely room. I'm quite impressed," says Mum. "Views of the park; Mollie's done well to own such a place. And we're lucky to stay there. She's given us a sort of suite, which is very kind."

"Is Mollie there?"

"No, not yet, she's at some hotel conference in Edinburgh. Supposed to be back tomorrow, but they've forecast snow. This way..."

We filter through the ticket barriers and are thrust out into the icy street. Mum wheels the suitcase, easily skimming it over the crossing,

and soon we're walking away from the station, Billy chattering, Mum humming and me smiling. I know I'm grinning like an idiot, but this is the best feeling and I want to hang on to it. It's only a couple of weeks, and I'll be back at school again, but to be with Mum and Billy right now is so... A shiver goes down my back. It's too good, I can't think of a word.

Masses of people head towards us and we weave our way through them until we reach a wide pavement with a low wall on the right.

"The weir," shouts Mum, pointing through the balustrades at roaring water below. "That's Pulteney Bridge. Really famous, remember?"

I do, from the time before when we visited Bath and saw Mollie and Granny, but before I can say anything she's off again, gliding the suitcase round the corner and along a narrow pavement.

"Hotel's down there," says Billy, pointing off to the left.

Quite suddenly, Mum's wheeling my suitcase past a smartly dressed man with slicked-back hair and the smoothest of smooth chins, into a beautiful Georgian townhouse.

He opens an inner door for us and we're inside.

I stop for a second to take in the most enormous Christmas tree that reaches all the way up to the fancy plasterwork ceiling. "Wow!"

"Thank you, Alastair," says Mum, stuffing the suitcase into a lift and stripping off her coat.

"Hello, Jodie," the doorman calls back from the doorway. "Anything you need?"

"All good," she says, pressing the lift buttons.

I race in behind and Billy crams in just as the doors shut.

"And breathe," says Mum, grasping me for another hug.

Ping!

"Here it is," says Billy. "Well, up there." He points up a short flight of stairs.

Between the three of us, we lug the suitcase up on to a small, silent landing.

Mum unlocks the door with a card and Billy pushes it open. "Ta-da!" he shouts, dragging me up the last step. "Welcome to our just-over-a-week-until-Christmas home."

And we step inside.



Chapter 2

The room, or rooms, are dead pretty. Up under the eaves at the top of the hotel, with square windows looking front and back over the park behind and the street in front. There's a cute little sitting room with a massive TV and some delicate pieces of vintage furniture, although right now our mass of luggage is filling most of the floor space. To the left, a door opens into a big room with two big single beds and a swish bathroom. To the right, a cosier double bedroom with another dazzling bathroom, which will be for Mum and Dad – when

he gets back from his electronic-detox-learning-to-paint-like-Cézanne week in northern Spain.

There's another Christmas tree, waist height and hung with tiny crackers. But it's a real fir.

And in the corner of the room is a tent. An actual tent, for one person, with sheepskin rugs and fairy lights.

"You didn't tell me about this!" I say to Billy.

"Oh – yeah, it's really cool. I think you're supposed to read books in there or something."

I grab a gingerbread snowman from a glass dish by the TV, stuff it in my mouth and crawl into the tent. "Have you heard from Dad?" I lie on my stomach and call out through the doorway.

Mum shakes her head as she drags her suitcase through to her bedroom. "Nope, he's completely off-grid. No contact – their phones are locked in a safe apparently."

Billy makes a face. "Why would you do that?" he asks, and then goes straight on. "So, Grace, what would you like to eat for supper? Pizza? Noodles? Curry?"

"All of them," I say, thinking back to last night's tragic supper at school. "Because nearly everyone

had gone home, we had to eat in Miss Thompson's flat yesterday. There were only three of us. It was cauliflower cheese – it was mushy and tasted of ovens."

"Yuk!" says Billy.

Mum laughs. "Bet you're starving."

"I am, but just let me go to the loo."

I scurry out of the tent and run through the twin room to the bathroom. The loo paper has been folded over and the seat has a plastic tag over it. I wash my hands using one of the bottles of soap and then squirt a dollop of "Crème de floret" on my hands.

Coming back out, I hold out my hand for Mum to sniff.

"Delicious," she says. "Mollie always did have expensive taste!"

"Is it all Mollie?"

"I would think so. You haven't met Damien the manager. He's very nice, but I don't think he's got the same understanding of toilettries. Come on, let's eat."

There are two staircases in the building, a big grand one and a much narrower one. Billy and I race each other down the grand one. He wins, and

I skid to a halt in the hall, where some guests are checking in.

“Damien,” murmurs Mum, pointing at the man behind the counter. He’s middle-aged, gangly and has a rat moustache, but a kind enough face. Mum’s right; he doesn’t look like the sort of person who would spend hours testing shampoo. In fact, he looks like he could benefit from trying some.

He sends the new arrivals into the lift and beams when he sees Mum. “Hello Jodie, are you on your way out?”

“We are, Damien.” Mum pulls me forward. “Just wanted to introduce you to my daughter, Grace.”

“Delighted,” he says with a half-bow. He puts out his hand to shake mine, and I fumble the whole thing. I think it’s the first time I’ve ever shaken hands. Do people still shake hands?

“Can I run up my own separate bill for food?” says Mum. “I don’t want Mollie to pay for it – we might have room service.”

While they chat, I watch Alastair the doorman. He’s in the outer lobby, having a bad-tempered conversation with a man wearing a fur hat. Alastair glances over his shoulder towards Damien and

bundles the man out on to the street. The man stops on the other side of the road and takes a photo, but Alastair looks as if he's won the encounter, and greets another guest swinging into the hotel with a smile.

"All sorted," says Mum, linking arms with me and Billy. "Now, food."

"Are we going somewhere challenging?" asks Billy doubtfully.

"No, we'll have noodles," says Mum. "Because you're fussy and I want you to eat a proper meal."

Ten minutes later we're ordering food from a menu to die for.

We all talk at once until the food comes. Billy has so much to tell me about his new friends in Australia, and how cool living in a proper house is – and about our cat, Jericho, who was tiny when I left but is "an absolute murderer" according to Mum, scrunching up her face. And I want to tell them all about Tetherton. I'm careful though. I don't want to say it's awful. I don't want to land that on Mum. But it *is* awful. I hate it and I miss my family so badly.

"This year I'm sharing a room with Katya."

“We know that,” says Billy. “But what’s she like?”

“She snores,” I say. “And farts.” Billy laughs.

“Oh, darling, does she really?” Mum says.

“And she has really annoying habits, like putting on her headphones and then humming out of tune.”

“Oh, that is irritating.”

“She does it after lights out, when I’m trying to get to sleep.”

“You poor love!”

“And when she drinks tea...” I pick up my smoothie and slurp it, making as much of a sucking sound as I can. Billy laughs so hard he nearly falls off his bench.

“Oh, Grace!” says Mum, but she’s laughing too.

“But it’s true. And the way she eats toast,” I pick up a gyoza and bite into it, crunching it with my mouth open. “And she never washes her clothes.”

“Sweetie, that can’t be true, surely. Oooh, food!”

My ramen arrives and I spend a moment wafting the delicious steam up to my face and admiring the perfect arrangement of pea shoot and grilled chicken. Billy dives in, burning his mouth and grabbing for my smoothie to soothe it.

“Take your time,” Mum chides.

We slurp our noodles in satisfied silence, while the clatter of the restaurant reaches peak pitch. Masses of people stream in after work, laughing and chattering, and it’s almost impossible to hear what anyone is saying.

The end of our table disappears to two men and a woman, but there’s enough room and, honestly, we don’t need to speak.

I am in heaven.

As soon as the last noodle disappears between Billy’s lips, Mum’s already asked for the bill, and moments later we’re out of the babble and on the street, where the air is cold and clear, and the lights are twinkling overhead.

Linking arms, we wander slowly down the main street, past the shops. The last remaining staff are locking up now. The windows are bursting with golden light and stuffed with shining things that people are going to give each other for Christmas. Full of noodles, we stroll through them, looking at the shops and chatting, but all I feel is deeply happy to be arm in arm with my mum and my brother.