

MURDER AT TWILIGHT

By Fleur Hitchcock

EXTRACT

I wander over to the little window next to the front door and peer out through the slatted blind into the courtyard. I don't think anyone can see me, so I watch for a few minutes, trying to make sense of everything. The people in white are very busy sticking things into bags, and one of them is crawling across the tarmac on their hands and knees with their nose about an inch above the ground.

If it wasn't really disturbing it would be funny.

As I stare out, the front door at the top of the steps to the main house opens, and framed in a rectangle of orange light is Sharon, Chris the waterkeeper's girlfriend. She's looking down at her phone, so I can't really see her expression because she's got this long blonde hair that hangs down in a sheet on either side of her head. Behind her comes Dave McAndrew, the man from the sawmill, and Connor Evans, the gamekeeper, both looking worried. They're followed by Lord Belcombe and Chris himself. They all bundle into the Land Rover and sweep out of the courtyard.

Then Lady Belcombe, Noah's mum, appears at the top of the steps, watches the white-suited people for a moment, checks her phone, and goes back inside, without closing the door properly.]

"What shall I do, Tai?" I ask, stepping back from the window.

In answer, Tai lies down, crosses his paws and rests his head on my foot.

"I need to do something, I can't just stand here waiting." I don't usually go in to the main house, but I really want to find out what's happened – and if anyone asks, I'll say I'm searching for Mum, which I kind of am.

A little bit terrified, I run down our steps, cross the courtyard and walk up the grand marble steps that lead to the house. I know Lord B's out, I saw him go, but Lady B's not easy. Mum's very good with her but she can be scary, mostly because she's used to people following her orders. She ran a newspaper or something before becoming a Belcombe. She doesn't fit here in the middle of the countryside, I don't think I've ever seen her outside unless the sun's shining.

She's too towny and she probably knows it. Maybe that's why she's so prickly. Perhaps country people make her feel uncomfortable.

Or am I kidding myself?

The heavy oak door swings open as I touch it and I stick my head around. It gives straight on to the hallway – which is really a giant open barn thingy, as big as most people's whole houses, with a fireplace, sofas and a table. Portraits of ancient Belcombes line the walls and the corners of the room disappear in polished wood murk.

Lady Belcombe is standing in front of the fireplace, her face streaked with tears. When she sees it's me she rushes forward to grab my arm. "Vivienne, darling – I'm so glad you're back – have you heard anything from little Noah? Have you seen him? He hasn't come home, he wasn't there when Marion went to pick him up, and..." She shakes her head as if there's something more she's not going to tell me. "I'm so worried about him."

"What?" I say. "Mum went to pick him up from school and he wasn't *there*?" I try to keep the excitement out of my voice. This is thrilling on many levels.

"He's vanished," she says, sniffing. "Has he contacted you?"

I reach for my phone. "No," I'm saying already. "No – not as far as I know, nothing." I hold it up. Apart from this morning's *I'll get you later*, the last message from Noah was six months ago, when he'd sent me the charming words, *Suck it up, loser*.

That probably marked the absolutely final end of our not very beautiful friendship.

"Vanished – like, disappeared?" I say. She's not listening to me though.

A policewoman comes out of the sitting room and takes Lady B by the elbow. "Shall I make you another cup of tea?" she asks.

"I've had enough of tea – you stupid woman—" Lady B snaps, and then, as if remembering that she's talking to a police officer, she says, "No, no thank you very much," sniffs and sinks into one of the monumental leather sofas, trembling and blowing her nose. "Vivienne, sit down and help this woman find my son." She points at the other vast sofa, one that must have seen the death of several cows.

Ignoring everyone, Tigger, the Belcombes' cat struts over and wipes his head on my shin then sits and licks his chest. I bury my hand in the thick fur behind his head and try to feel

normal. Because she's told me to, I sit down, but it feels surreal sitting here with Lady B and the cat.

“Ah – Vivienne? Vivienne Lin.” Not at all bothered by Lady B, the policewoman checks a notebook. “You live here, don't you?” she says. “We need to talk to you.”

“What's happened to Noah?” I ask. “Where's my mum?”