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Murder at the Laurels

Lesley Cookman

Chapter 1

'HOW MANY MORE DO you want, then?' Libby Sarjeant pushed a wisp of damp, rusty coloured hair off her brow. 'I can't turn them out like sausages.'

Guy Wolfe grinned at her from behind his neat goatee beard. 'You can't turn them out at all unless you haven't got anything else to do,' he said. 'You're one of the most unreliable suppliers I've got.'

'Thanks.' Libby tried to look outraged and failed. 'Suppliers, is that what we are? I thought we were artists.'

'To me you're suppliers. Now, I'm an artist.' He turned to look smugly at the rows of greetings cards behind him.

Libby snorted. 'That's prostituting your art,' she said.

'No it isn't. It's being practical. Think of all the Laughing Cavalier and Stag at Bay cards that are sold each year.'

'I didn't know you were that famous.' Libby picked up her basket and slung it over her shoulder.

'Only among a certain well-informed set,' said Guy, and laughed as her mouth dropped open. 'I'm teasing, Lib.'

'Oh.' Libby turned towards the door and then remembered. 'You never said how many more you wanted. And if you do, do you want them all the same?'

'I'll take whatever you can produce, and as long as it's pretty, it doesn't matter what the view is. You sell quite well, you know.'

Libby smiled, her turn to be smug. 'I know. Especially –'

'Since you turned detective?'

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'No, I was going to say especially that one –'

'The view through the window?'

'With the yellow roses, yes.'

'The punters loved that. Was it from imagination?'

'No, I visited the cottage once.' Libby sighed. 'It was beautiful. I wanted it.'

'Was this when you were house hunting? What was it Peter and Harry called it?'

'The search for Bide-a-Wee. Yes, it was then.'

'But Nethergate's miles from Steeple Martin.' Guy perched on the edge of the old oak table that did duty as a counter.

'When I was house hunting I wasn't looking particularly in Steeple Martin. Just something small and somewhere else.' Libby turned her head and looked out of the window. 'Nethergate was somewhere else, as well as Steeple Martin. Just too expensive.'

'Seaside location, you see.' Guy narrowed his eyes and put his head on one side. 'Wish you'd moved here instead, now?'

Libby sighed again. 'In a way. It's all been very difficult.'

'Murder usually is,' said Guy.

Libby nodded mournfully.

'Look, why don't I take you to lunch? You need cheering up, and Sophie can mind the shop.'

Guy's daughter looked up from her magazine and nodded vaguely. 'No customers, anyway,' she said.

Guy made an exasperated sound and slid off the table. 'Come on,' he said, taking Libby's arm. 'Let's leave her to it.'

'She's right, though, there aren't any customers,' said Libby, as they walked along Harbour Street towards Guy's favourite pub. 'Don't be too hard on her.'

Guy grinned. 'I'm not really. Sophie works for me and lives with her mother. A remarkably well adjusted child. Just very modern.'

'Hardly a child, and of course she's modern. Did you expect a Renaissance maiden?'

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'I'd have preferred it. Look what happens to modern misses. That Paula, for instance,' said Guy, referring to the murder case Libby had been involved with in the spring.

Libby shuddered. 'I'd rather not even think about her, thank you.'

'Well, ignore her, then, but I want to know the inside story. People do ask, you know.'

'What people?' said Libby, surprised, as they went into the cool interior of The Swan.

'Those customers there aren't any of,' said Guy. 'When they see your name, if they're local, they always say, "Oh, she was involved in that murder, wasn't she?" and I waffle and mumble.'

'Carry on waffling and mumbling then,' said Libby sitting at a table. 'How on earth do they know, anyway?'

'Local papers, local radio. It was hardly low profile, was it?'

Libby accepted her half of lager. 'No, but it's still not something I want to talk about.'

'Ah, but it got you together with the lovely Ben, didn't it?' said Guy, slyly.

'Sort of,' said Libby, frowning.

'Only sort of?' Guy looked at her down-turned face and decided not to pursue the subject, despite his normal elephant child curiosity. 'So,' he said, casting round for a new subject. 'How are the kids?'

The telephone rang as soon as Libby opened the door of number 17 Allhallows Lane later on that afternoon. She fell down the step and answered it, breathing hard.

'Libby, it's Fran. How are you?'

Libby sat down on the stairs with a bump.

'Goodness, Fran, how are you? Haven't heard from you for ages.' She fended off the advances of Sidney, the silver tabby, who was determined to convince her he was starving to death.

'No, sorry. I kept meaning to ring you, but somehow…I don't know.' Libby did. Fran felt uncomfortable about the circumstances of their friendship.

'Well, the thing is,' Fran went on, 'I've had a call from my cousin Charles to say it's my Aunt Eleanor's birthday today. Apparently, the rest of the family are all going to see her this afternoon.'

'Yes?' said Libby, puzzled.

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'Well, Aunt Eleanor's in The Laurels, just outside Nethergate.'

Should have known, thought Libby. Coincidence upon coincidence.

'So you're coming down, then?"

'Not today, I can't,' said Fran, 'but tomorrow. I just wondered if we could meet up for a drink.'

'Funnily enough, I've just come back from Nethergate. A little gallery there sells my paintings. There's a nice pub there called The Swan.'

'That'd be great. The only thing is, I'm car-less at the moment –'

'Would you like me to pick you up at the station? I could take you to your Auntie's.'

'No, no,' said Fran hastily, 'that wasn't what I meant. I thought, when I've seen Auntie, perhaps I could ring you and we can both make our way there. Or I could catch a bus to you.'

'You'll be lucky, there aren't any,' said Libby, amused. 'No, you ring me when you're ready and I'll meet you at The Swan. And why don't you come back with me and stay the night? We could have dinner at the caff.'

'Are you sure?' Fran sounded wary. 'I wouldn't have thought anyone would want to see me.'

'Don't be daft. You practically saved my life, didn't you? Everyone will be delighted to see you.'

There was a pause. 'What about Ben?' asked Fran. 'Won't he mind me being there?'

'What's it got to do with Ben?' said Libby, pulling a face.

'Won't he be around?'

'Maybe. We don't live in each other's pockets, Fran.'

'Oh. I thought…'

'Yes, well, it didn't quite pan out.'

'But what happened? It all seemed…'

Libby sighed. 'I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. Now, have you still got my mobile number? And come to think of it, have I got yours?'

Fran switched off her mobile and stared reflectively at what she thought of as her Betjeman kitchen. When she was a child, she lived in a world epitomised by John

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Betjeman's business women and their bathrooms stuck precariously on the back of tall grimy buildings, issuing steam into grey morning air glimpsed through a yellowing train window. Of course, she didn't know Betjeman then, but as soon as she heard his overstuffed cushiony voice reading that poem on the radio, she knew she had found a soulmate. She didn't feel quite so at home with his statuesque tennis and rowing girls, their lives bore little relation to hers, but his affection for Metroland and Cornish churches, and dates in tawdry dance halls, was as if her own thoughts had taken form and set themselves to paper.

It all boiled down to nostalgia, of course. As a child, Fran could summon up nostalgia for things that she had never even experienced, for places she had never been. She lived in an ever-changing world of her own, now flying up to those grimy bathrooms in Camden Town, then conveyed in a bumpy carriage through a concealed tunnel in rock to a hidden valley in the West Country, next climbing a small green hill above a sea of cow parsley in the Suffolk countryside. Every book she read was measured for its ability to transport her to the place between its covers and her favourites were, and remained, those that did. There were others, borrowed from the library, that she never owned and therefore never read again, but their atmosphere lingered round the edges of her memory like coloured smoke.

She supposed that was part of the reason that she became an actress. She wanted to write, but the words eluded her. She could never transport herself to one of those magical places, so she became other people, able to live in their lives, in their penthouse apartments, seedy bed-sitting rooms, country vicarages, nuclear shelters. She had children of all ages, many husbands and lovers and several different parents. Along the way, she acquired a real life husband and three children, but she was never really comfortable with them. They were too real. Her real husband got fed up with her constant search for the magical place and left her. The children stayed and helped her attain a sort of reality, partly because then she had to stop moving. Until the money ran out and she finally ended up in Betjeman land with a stuck-on bathroom three floors up looking out over the criss-cross railway lines of central London. Somehow, the Betjeman flat wasn't as romantic as she had thought it might be. The blue and white lino in the kitchen was cracked and the window sealed up with blistering grey paint, while a plastic ventilator whirred dustily in the top right hand corner of the glass. The geyser probably pre-dated Betjeman and dribbled occasional hot water from a reluctant rusting arm, and Fran clung on to her dreams.

In a world that owes its existence to dreams, those that don't conform to the stuff of those dreams are soon edged out to the perimeter. There were women with slimmer figures than Fran's, prettier faces and fewer years than hers, and they were there for every audition, every part. Eventually she admitted defeat, and that was when she'd met Ben.

And through Ben she'd met Libby and got peripherally involved in the murder investigation that had devastated the village, and particularly Ben's family.

The phone on the landing began to ring. Fran had given up thinking it might be for her months ago and made no move to answer it, knowing that her downstairs neighbour would be there before her anyway. Sure enough, she heard Dahlia's broad

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voice, as distinctive as her broad hips, in cheerful conversation with the unseen caller.

'Miz Castle. Phone, Miz Castle.'

Surprised, she pushed herself away from the table. Most people used her mobile, except, she remembered, as she went downstairs, cousin Charles.

'Charles?' she said, as she lifted the grubby receiver.

'How did you know it was me?' He sounded surprised.

'You're the only one who calls me on this number,' said Fran. 'Where are you? I thought you were going to see Aunt Eleanor today?'

There was a short silence.

A muffling blackness descended on Fran and she dug her nails into her palm hard to force her mind to clear.

'She's dead, isn't she?' she said.

'Fran, you're scaring me,' said Charles. 'First, you knew it was me, second, you knew she was dead. What's going on? Were you down there today?'

Fran took a deep breath. 'No, of course not. I told you, you're the only person who rings me on this number, and I doubt if you'd have rung to tell me how she was as I'm going myself tomorrow.'

'You won't go now, surely?'

'No? Oh, I suppose not.' Fran frowned. 'But I've already made arrangements to stay with an old friend. I might as well go down.'

'Why don't you go and stay on the night of the funeral instead? I assume you'll go to the funeral?'

'When is it?'

'Not sure yet. I'll give you a lift if you like.'

'Thank you, I'd appreciate that.'

'I'll ring you nearer the time, then, shall I?' said Charles, sounding more normal.

'Yes, great, Charles, but you haven't told me what happened. When did she die? What was it? Heart?'

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'I suppose so, but no one seems to know. Barbara got there first today and was actually sitting with her without realising she was dead.'

'Who's Barbara?'

'Remember I told you? My sort-of cousin? Barbara Denver.'

'Oh, right. Yes. Well, Eleanor was quite old, wasn't she?'

'Over 90. She –'

'Don't say it,' Fran jumped in quickly. 'Please don't say she had a good innings.'

'No clichés allowed, eh?' said Charles, sounding amused.

'Sorry. It's so belittling. But how awful for you all. Especially Barbara.'

'Well, yes. She wasn't too happy. Anyway, I thought I ought to let you know.'

'Very kind of you, Charles. Thank you. And I'll give you a ring later in the week, shall I?'

'Fine. At least you've saved yourself a trip tomorrow,' said Charles.

Bloody prat. What a thing to say. Fran climbed back up to the Betjeman flat, absolutely certain that, tomorrow, she was going to The Laurels.

Chapter Two

THE RHYTHM OF THE train began to take effect, and Fran's mind began to drift into that peculiar half sleeping, half waking mode where external sounds can still be heard, yet a whole new scenario begins to unfold to accompany them. Faces slid in and out of Fran's consciousness, places revealed themselves and Fran herself was once more a guest at Uncle Frank and Aunt Eleanor's wedding. It was funny how she had forgotten Frank. Yet there he was, looking over Eleanor's shoulder, an Eleanor shrunken with age, her pretty bright hair and pale prettiness faded and wrinkled, her blue eyes opaque and bewildered. But it wasn't Frank after all, and she was looking up at the face now, while the blackness descended, muffling her nose and mouth…she couldn't breathe…

Fran opened her eyes and found herself looking into the concerned face of a middle-aged woman sitting opposite.

'Are you all right, dear?' asked the woman. 'I thought you were choking.'

'I'm sorry.' Fran struggled into an upright position. 'I was having a bad dream. How embarrassing.'

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The woman smiled. 'Oh, don't worry about it. I think we should have reclining seats, like they do on aircraft, for these long journeys.'

'Oh, I'd never wake up in time to get off, then,' said Fran. She smiled and pushed her glasses back up her nose, picking up the magazine which had fallen closed on the table. She looked out of the window, and then at her watch, before settling back in her seat to gaze out of the window, determined not to let herself drop off again. Dreams could be very unsettling, but not usually embarrassing, although occasionally she had mistaken a dream for reality and shocked her nearest and dearest into the middle of next week by telling them things they would rather keep to themselves. Mostly, her 'moments', as the family called them, took the form of a scene unfolding in her head, which she frequently put down to imagination, always being very dubious when they turned out to be right. 'Just think,' she would say, 'how many times I've seen pictures and they're wrong.' Dreams were more like the odd facts that she found herself thinking about that turned out to be true, of which, on further investigation, she could have had no knowledge. The whole business was very disturbing, and she dwelt on it as little as possible, especially when it was as unpleasant as the recent dream.

But it had led to a new career working for an upmarket estate agent, who sent her to ferret out nasties in the woodsheds of some of their top properties. And then she had met Ben, the architect, who, in turn, had introduced her to Libby, with whom she'd tried to solve a murder. The police, naturally enough, managed it without them, but in a funny way, Fran had enjoyed herself. There was something about the village community that appealed to her, although she did wonder how welcome she'd be when she turned up again, as she might provide an unwelcome reminder to some of those more closely involved.

The view outside the window was increasingly beautiful. Summer had clothed the country in a matching set of greens, with brown and cream accents. She loved the country. As a young actress she had adored touring seaside towns in summer, with their slightly raffish air of faded grandeur and tacky amenities, and large, industrial towns in winter, with comforting and fattening food specialities; all of it had charmed her. But the best part had been the tours to small market towns with Shaw and Ibsen and Rattigan revivals, surrounded everyday with beauty, both man-made and natural. Market towns had changed a lot since Fran's young days. Now they had an outer shell of new building, and Fran often thought you could age a town by its rings, much like a tree. The outer ring would comprise low rise industry and thoughtfully designed new housing in village-style developments, the next the little boxes of the sixties, with huge plate glass windows and unimaginative plastic extrusions, then the smart red brick Thirties villas, a smattering of ornate Edwardian edifices, rather more Victorian monstrosities – large and small – and finally the red, black, white and gold of the local stone and brick that looked as though it had been planned and set there from the beginning of time.

For a change, the sun was beating down with an intensity suitable for August as they drew in. A venerable Ford masquerading as a taxi waited near the ticket office and proved willing and able to transport her to The Laurels, the imaginatively named nursing home where Aunt Eleanor had breathed her last, and which had, in fact, not

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a laurel in sight. It stood, mellow and welcoming, at the end of a slightly sloping, curved drive. Fran peered out of the taxi window at the well kept grounds, noting the absence of shrubbery or dense vegetation of any description. In case the inmates tried to hide, she decided, trying to imagine little old ladies in long winceyette nightdresses flying across the lawns in a futile game of hide and seek.

The wide and curving stone steps were divided down the middle by a smooth ramp. Fran walked up beside it and pushed open the swing doors. Odd that they weren't locked, or was there an inner door to prevent the prisoners escaping?

'May I help you?' A woman looked up from behind a high counter.

'Er – yes.' She suddenly realised she had given no thought whatsoever to what she was going to say when she arrived at The Laurels. She swallowed hard and returned the interrogative gaze of the woman behind the desk. Was she imagining it, or was it a suspicious gaze?

'Eleanor Bridges. I'm her niece.'

The woman's immaculately made-up eyes widened and she stood up.

'But Mrs Bridges –'

'Died. I know.' Fran finished for her. 'I just –' she paused. 'Well, I just wanted to –'

'Her immediate relatives were here, you know.' The woman's tone was frosty.

'I know. That would be Mr Charles Wade, wouldn't it? He's my cousin by marriage. My name is Fran Castle.' Fran tried a winning smile and was gratified to detect a slight thaw in the woman's expression.

'Marion Headlam.' The woman held out her hand. 'I'm the owner of The Laurels.'

'Not the Matron? You don't look like my idea of a matron.' Fran shook the proffered hand and relaxed.

'No. I have qualified nursing staff here, obviously, but I look after the business side of things.'

And very lucrative it must be, thought Fran, looking round the well appointed hall.

'So.' Marion Headlam came round the desk. 'You wanted to see where Mrs Bridges died?'

Fran was taken aback. 'Well, yes, actually.'

'Relatives often do. Particularly,' added Marion Headlam, with a minatory look, 'when they haven't been in the habit of visiting regularly.'

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'I didn't even know she was in here,' mumbled Fran in apology. 'We'd – er – lost touch, rather. There was a – well, a family disagreement.'

'Ah, yes.' This seemed to explain everything to Marion Headlam. 'Guilt. You'd be surprised at how much guilt a death generates. Now –' she reached over the high counter and picked up a telephone. 'I'll just get – oh, Nurse Redding? Could you come to reception, please? Thank you.' She replaced the receiver. 'Nurse Redding was one of the staff who looked after your aunt. You'd probably like to talk to her.'

'Thank you, yes.' Fran was grateful that things had been taken out of her hands.

'I'll show you into the visitor's room and send her in to you.' Marion Headlam opened a door on her right and held it open for Fran. 'Would you like some tea? Or coffee?'

'Tea would be lovely, thank you,' said Fran, feeling suitably humble. After the door had closed, she looked round the room.

It was quite a small room, decorated in a rich yellowy cream with blue and cream curtains at the long window, which looked out over the drive. A selection of up-market glossy magazines lay on a well polished table and a strictly arranged vase of flowers and seasonal vegetation stood on another. No roses in here, thought Fran. They might be badly behaved enough to drop their petals.

She moved to the window and stared out at the manicured grounds. It wasn't surprising that Marion Headlam had wondered why she was here. She wasn't sure herself. Just… the strange feelings that had assailed her from the minute cousin Charles had telephoned her with the news. And then the train journey. She still hadn't recovered from that.

A brief tap on the door heralded the entrance of a dark-haired woman in the royal blue of a nursing sister's uniform. She was much the same age as Marion Headlam, but there the resemblance ended. This woman wore no elaborate eye make-up and wouldn't even when she was off duty, if her unplucked eyebrows and aggressive moustache were anything to go by.

'You wanted to see me?' She stood just inside the room, hands held rigid at her sides.

Fran tried another winning smile. This time it wasn't so successful.

'Nurse Redding? Or should it be Sister Redding?'

'Not here. When I worked in a hospital, I was.' Her tone was flat and unemotional, as though it didn't matter either way.

'Right.' Fran's smile was becoming determined and a little manic. 'Shall we sit down?'

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Nurse Redding almost shrugged, but not quite, and sat on an upright chair by the wall. Fran took one of the high-backed, wooden-armed chairs grouped around the magazine table.

'I believe you were with my aunt when she died?'

'No, I wasn't.' Her expression didn't alter one jot.

'Oh. I thought Mrs – is it Mrs? – Headlam said you were.'

'I was one of the team looking after Mrs Bridges. That's what Mrs Headlam would have said.'

'Right.' Fran nodded immoderately. 'And how was she?'

Nurse Redding looked surprised. 'I don't know what you mean,' she said, peering under her beetling brows.

Fran felt herself break out in a gentle sweat. This was more difficult than she had thought. 'I mean, was she happy? You know, contented?'

This time, Nurse Redding did shrug. 'None of them are happy. They're all here waiting to die. Most of them try and pretend they're not, if they've still got some of their marbles. The others don't know what's going on anyway.'

'And which was Aunt Eleanor?'

'I thought you'd know. Mrs Headlam said you were a niece.' There was definite suspicion in the voice now.

'I am, but I hadn't seen her for years. I didn't know she was in here. Charles Wade only told me yesterday.' Fran hoped that the introduction of Charles'ss name would allay the suspicion.

'She was confused. Wanted to go home.'

'But not ill?'

'You can never tell. Didn't seem ill. But she had a bit of heart trouble. No surprise that she died.'

Fran thought about this. 'But Charles did seem surprised when she died. He wasn't expecting it.'

'Nobody expects it. It's always a shock.'

Fran was beginning to feel as though she was swimming through treacle.

'Did she have many visitors?' she asked in desperation.

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'Mr Wade, Mrs Denver. And Mr Denver.'

Fran caught the imperceptible change in the flat voice. 'Mr & Mrs Denver? I don't think I –'

'Mrs Denver. Mr Wade's cousin. Paul Denver's her son. Thought you'd know.'

'Oh, yes, well,' Fran, remembering just in time, felt the hot flush spreading again. 'Barbara Denver. I'm Mrs Bridge's niece by marriage.'

Nurse Redding said nothing.

'Um, I know this might sound a bit peculiar, but do you think I could see her room?'

Fran was aware of the first slight hesitation. 'I don't know… I'd have to ask.' Nurse Redding stood up.

'I'll come with you,' said Fran brightly, following suit. That Nurse Redding was displeased was very apparent, but she had no choice but to leave the room with Fran behind her.

Marion Headlam didn't seem in the least surprised that Fran should want to see the room where her aunt had died.

'Of course. You'll see that it's a very pleasant room with every facility.' She handed Nurse Redding a key. 'We keep it locked, of course, until a new client takes it over.'

Client? thought Fran. Not patient? She came to a halt behind Nurse Redding, who had stopped at a door towards the back of the building. A small metal holder held a card, which, on peering closer, Fran read: E. Bridges. Nurse Redding unlocked the door.

Almost immediately, Fran was overwhelmed by black suffocation. From a distance, she heard a voice saying 'Are you all right?' and felt a hand on her arm. Panic gripped her, and she tried to push the hand away, but she was overborne, and thrust gently into a sitting position, her head forced forwards towards her knees.

'Poor thing,' she heard a voice saying. 'It takes people the strangest ways, doesn't it? Must have been fond of her old Auntie after all. I'll see if that tea's ready.'

Fran's head began to clear and she sat up slowly. She was in a large, bright room that seemed to be a cross between a hospital ward, with its high metal bed, and a well furnished hotel room. Nurse Redding stood in front of her, a frown on her heavy face.

'Sorry,' said Fran, weakly. 'I don't know what came over me.'

Nurse Redding managed her almost shrug again. 'Shock,' she said succinctly. 'Mrs Headlam's gone to see about tea.'

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'Thank you,' said Fran, wondering if she dared ask to be left alone. Nurse Redding settled the question by moving to the chair the other side of the bed and sitting down, feet neatly crossed at the ankles. Fran sighed and looked round the room.

'This was her furniture, wasn't it?' she said.

'No. Mrs Denver kept it all in storage.'

'Television? Was that hers?'

'No. She did have one, but ours had a bigger screen.'

There was a video recorder, as well, and something that Fran thought was a decoder for cable television. On the bed table lay a formidable array of electronic gadgetry: three remote controls and a white item with red buttons.

'What are those?' Fran stood up shakily and picked up the white object.

'The call button. Different buttons for different things. This one –' Nurse Redding pointed, 'for calling domestic staff, and this one for Nursing staff. This light flashed if there was a message for Mrs Bridges, and a buzzer sounded.'

'What sort of message?' Fran looked round for a telephone. There wasn't one.

'A visitor, or a phone message. She would buzz back if she wanted to take the message, and someone would either bring the mobile phone in, or come and tell her who the visitor was.'

'So no one could come and see her unless she wanted to see them?'

'Oh, no. The reception desk is manned at all times when the front door is unlocked.' Nurse Redding turned her gaze to the french windows.

'And when is that?'

The other woman looked back at Fran with a frown, and Fran wondered if her questions had gone too far.

'The door's unlocked between 10.30 and 12.30 in the morning and 2.30 and 5.30 in the afternoon. That's when we encourage visiting.'

'Like hospitals.' Fran smiled, hoping to defuse the palpable hostility emanating from Nurse Redding. She failed.

There was a knock on the door, followed by the entrance of a small blonde in a blue and white striped uniform with an old-fashioned starched nurse's cap. She carried a large tea tray set with a delicate bone china cup and a plate of biscuits. She smiled nervously.

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'Mrs Headlam sent some tea,' she said.

'Thank you,' smiled Fran going forward to take the tray, but Nurse Redding was too quick for her.

'That'll do, thank you, Nurse Warner.' The tray was set firmly on the bed table and Nurse Redding picked up the sugar basin. 'Sugar?' she asked.

'No, thanks,' said Fran, watching Nurse Warner slide uncomfortably out of the room. There was something there, she thought. Something had come in to her head while that girl was in the room. Fear. Not as strong as the suffocating feeling, but quite tangible.

A high-pitched sound intruded in to the silence and Fran looked at the white device on the table in front of her. However, Nurse Redding felt under her cardigan and Fran saw that she wore a pager attached to her belt.

'Excuse me. I'm wanted,' she said, and without any further ado, left the room, leaving the door open behind her.

Fran stood still for a moment, wondering if anyone else was likely to come in and chaperone, but it seemed that she was to be trusted, for there was only silence in the passage outside. Carefully, her heart beating like thundering hoof beats, she moved to the door and pushed it closed. The click as it latched sounded deafening, but there was no answering commotion from outside and Fran let out her breath and began to snoop.

The room contained nothing. The efficient Mrs Denver had obviously cleared everything of interest and only a few forlorn garments were left. Fran picked up her tea and sat down in the chair Nurse Redding had vacated at the side of the bed.

'Mrs Castle?' The voice came from outside the door, and Fran realised that she had shut it and no one without a key could get in.

'I'm sorry,' she said, smiling into the worried little face of Nurse Warner. 'The breeze must have caught it.'

'I came to see if you'd finished with the tea things.' The young nurse scurried over to the table and picked up the tray, casting a nervous glance around the room as she went.

'Did you look after my aunt?' Fran asked, as she prepared to follow the girl out of the room. Nurse Warner stopped suddenly, and the cup rattled in the saucer.

'Er – sometimes,' she said.

'And did you think she was happy?'

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'Happy?' The big blue eyes turned on Fran in sheer astonishment. 'Why should she be happy?'

It was Fran's turn to be astonished. 'Good heavens, what a peculiar answer.'

Nurse Warner blushed. 'I'm sorry. It's just – well, how can they be happy? They've no life left.'

'They have every comfort, though, don't they?'

'Oh, yes.' Nurse Warner nodded vigorously. 'And the food's very good. And the doctor comes round every day.'

'Does he?' mused Fran. 'So did he think it was only to be expected that Aunt Eleanor died?'

'I don't know.' Nurse Warner looked down at the tray and shuffled her feet. Waves of something – was it fear? – were coming off her, and Fran couldn't think how to get to the reason for it.

'Sorry to leave you.' Nurse Redding appeared from round a corner and Nurse Warner, with an air of relief, shot off in the other direction.

'That's all right.' Fran began to walk beside the other woman back to the reception area. 'At least I know where Aunt Eleanor spent her last days.' To her own ears this statement sounded like the worst sort of maudlin falseness, but Nurse Redding seemed to accept it.

Marion Headlam was waiting for them in the reception hall.

'Feeling better, now?' She smiled brightly at Fran. 'It's the shock, you know. Mrs Denver fainted right away. Didn't she, Nurse Redding?'

'I'll get back now,' said Nurse Redding, without answering the question. She nodded briefly to Fran and disappeared back the way she had come. Fran thought she heard Mrs Headlam give a little sigh.

'Do you know if there's a bus service that I can get back to Nethergate?' she asked.

'Well, there is, but it's a bit of a walk down the lane to the left.' Mrs Headlam looked doubtful.

'How far, would you say?'

'Ooh, a good twenty minutes walk, I should think. I could call you a taxi?'

Fran put her shoulders back. 'No, I think the walk would do me good. And it's so pretty round here, isn't it?'

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'Yes, we've got lovely surroundings.' Marion Headlam looked round complacently, although Fran thought she probably thought more of her interior surroundings than the exterior. 'Well, see you at the funeral, I expect.'

'Oh?' said Fran.

'We always attend clients' funerals.' Marion Headlam smiled and held open the door. 'Goodbye, Mrs Castle.'

Fran, a relieved surge of adrenaline washing over her, walked as briskly as she could down the steps and set off down the drive. By halfway down, she wished she'd left her jacket at home, by the time she reached the lane, she wished she'd worn flat shoes instead of her favourite courts and by the time she was in sight of the bus stop, half hidden by a mass of vegetation, she wished she'd taken a taxi or, when she'd called Libby earlier to arrange their meeting at the Swan, agreed that Libby could come and pick her up. Her mobile had no signal, so she couldn't even call her now. The sun beat down remorselessly on her unprotected head and her forehead and the back of her neck were dripping. It occurred to her that she hadn't bothered to find out how frequently the buses arrived, and, of course, there was no timetable attached to the bus stop. There were no houses nearby, either, which argued that this was possibly one of the one-a-day variety, which, after a quarter of an hour, Fran was convinced was true. Although, she argued with herself, if that was the case, surely Marion Headlam would have told her? She didn't, she realised, even know whether she was waiting on the right side of the road, although she had taken an educated guess judging from the direction the taxi had come. She couldn't see a corresponding stop on the other side of the road, and was beginning to feel quite desolate when the welcome sound of a diesel engine rose above the buzz of insects and call of birds, and round a bend in the road lumbered a double-decker bus. Greeting the surprised driver with a heartfelt smile, she climbed on thankfully.

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