An Unfortunate Christmas Murder

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CANELOCRIME

Penguin Random House

First published in the United Kingdom in 2022 by

Canelo, an imprint of
Canelo Digital Publishing Limited,
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA
United Kingdom

A Penguin Random House Company
The authorised representative in the EEA is Dorling Kindersley Verlag GmbH.
Arnulfstr. 124, 80636 Munich, Germany

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978 1 80032 651 4
Ebook ISBN 978 1 80032 650 7

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Cover design by Ami Smithson

Cover images © Istock

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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For Cosy, who was a very good cat. I hope you are somewhere very sunny being fed the cake we wouldn't let you eat during your time on Earth.

Chapter One

It was another crisp winter's day in the small town of Dewstow and Margery could not help but smile to herself as she exited the car. She loved this kind of weather, when the air was fresh and burned your lungs slightly if you breathed in too deeply. The leaves on the trees surrounding the school had all fallen off and were just mush on the tarmac; everyone rushing past in their hurry to get into the building was bundled up in big coats. The sky was as grey and bland as it had been for weeks now and the wind whipping through the car park was chilling, but none of it could dampen Margery's spirits.

'Are you excited, Margery?' Clementine asked as they walked together towards the school. 'First year you're in charge of the Christmas menu and everything?'

Margery grinned back at her cheerily. Clementine looked hilarious today, all wrapped up in the ginormous scarf, the matching bobble hat Margery had knitted her years ago covering her grey hair. 'I am actually, Clem! I think this one will be the best yet. Well, it can't be any worse than the year we forgot to defrost the turkeys anyway, can it?'

Margery could not wait to get into the kitchen and start planning; she had been thinking about it since September. Half because she was nervous about it and half because Clementine had been pondering since August how early

it was socially acceptable to get the Christmas decorations out of the attic.

Much to Margery's disapproval, Clementine had decided that the beginning of November was fine; they had barely put the Halloween decor away before she was already trying to smother their living room with lights and tinsel. Though it seemed that Clementine was in good company. The cleaning team had already dragged the Christmas decorations out and thrown them up all over the school. The hallways were full of wonky-looking artificial Christmas trees and frayed paper chains and the teaching staff had already started begrudgingly sending around Christmas cards.

The whole kitchen team had come a long way since Margery had taken on the kitchen manager's post the summer before, and she had somehow managed to turn their ragtag team into something resembling a well-oiled machine. It had not been an easy task by any means, especially since the former kitchen manager had been in place for such a long time. Margery knew that no one enjoyed change and she was proud of their little crew; feeding 1200 school pupils and all the teachers and business support staff every day was no mean feat. Officially titled Education Centre Nourishment Consultants, they all preferred to be called dinner ladies, except for Clementine who enjoyed being difficult.

Margery and Clementine entered the school, buzzing themselves in using the new security pass system. It had been set up by the headmaster and the security team after the nastiness earlier in the year involving the death of a colleague. Margery had been glad that they had finally decided to do something more to keep the staff and students safe than just give Gary Matthews on Security

even more hours to work. Although it did mean that twice a week fellow dinner lady Seren would lose her pass and be late to start her shift.

Margery smiled to herself in anticipation as they strode up the flight of stairs to the first floor and into the canteen. The shutters were still closed, and she could not wait to open them for another fantastic day. Clementine swung the kitchen door open. Margery was not prepared for what they found inside.

The entire room was covered in a horrific mess of baked beans. They were everywhere. Smeared up the walls and all over the usually spotless stainless-steel work surfaces that they spent so much time sanitising and polishing every day. There was even a layer of beans slowly dripping off the ceiling one at a time, landing on Sharon who was sitting on the floor wailing as Karen fruitlessly dabbed at the mess with a roll of kitchen towel.

'What…?' Margery stared in horror. 'What happened?'

Sharon wailed from her place on the floor, wiping beans from her kitchen tabard. Karen gently patted her shoulder. 'It's okay, Sharon, we'll have it all cleaned up in no time. Anyway, at least it's something to post about on our Mums' Facebook group. You can say your husband spilt them, get a lot of likes and that.'

Margery's second in command, Gloria, appeared from the long corridor that led to the walk-in fridge and freezer and dry store. She was pushing the mop bucket, a very sour expression on her face, her black hair spilling out from her hairnet in disarray. 'I tried to stop him, Margery, but he insisted he could carry it all.' She gestured to the huge gastro tray that usually housed all the decanted beans for lunchtime's jacket potatoes, now upside down on the

floor and obviously the cause of all the chaos. 'He slipped carrying the tub, I told him to use the trolley.'

She thrust the mop at young Benjamin, the newest Education Centre Nourishment Consultant. He hung his head in shame and joined Karen in dabbing at the beans. Margery shook her head at them all.

'I can't even come into work twenty minutes later than normal without something terrible happening!' she said, waving her hands at them. 'Gloria, get the cleaning team down here to help. Clem, grab some more kitchen roll! And where's Seren?'

'She's gone to get changed,' Gloria said, glaring at Benjamin. 'She had beans in her shoes.'

'Sorry!' Benjamin piped up from where he was scraping the mess off one of the work surfaces with a spoon.

'We'd better not tell you any secrets, Ben,' Clementine said. 'You might spill the beans!' Gloria turned to glare at her as she laughed uproariously at her own joke.

The kitchen door slammed open with a crash, stunning them into silence. They all whipped their heads around to look at who it was. Deputy head and drama teacher, Rose Smith, appeared in the room. She was as glamorous as ever in her smartly tailored trouser suit. Her silver bob was pristine with not a hair out of place, tucked back neatly behind her ears to show off a rather expensive-looking pair of earrings. She clacked into the middle of the kitchen on her high heels and the kitchen team parted like the waves of the Red Sea.

Tiny music teacher Mrs Large shuffled behind in her shadow, clutching her recorder bag. Assistant drama teacher Edward Daniels closed the door with a soft click, though how he managed it Margery did not know, as his

arms were full of papers. This bizarre procession stopped just short of the pool of liquid spreading outwards on the floor. Rose stared at it in disgust for a moment before throwing her arms in the air theatrically.

'Ladies, ladies, ladies!' Rose said, triumphantly.

'And very young man!' piped up Mrs Large, nodding in Benjamin's direction. She looked even more mousey than usual today in her beige cardigan and matching skirt.

Rose glowered at her before continuing. 'Now I'm sure you all remember that auditions for my… I mean… *our* Christmas concert are going to take place at three thirty today, and I expect you all to be there.'

'Or be square.' Mrs Large smiled at them toothily. Rose gave her a look that could have curdled milk. Mr Daniels smirked at them both, but quickly covered his expression with a cough.

'What if we don't want to be in your stupid Christmas play?' Clementine asked. 'What if we're busy with more important matters?'

Mrs Smith took a deliberate look around the messy kitchen, her eyebrows raised. 'Yes, it certainly looks like you're all terribly busy. Regardless, if you don't audition then you won't get a good part.'

'I don't want a part,' Clementine said, shrugging. 'None of us can sing for toffee.' All the dinner ladies in attendance nodded in agreement.

'And it's only the end of November,' Gloria said, handing Karen another roll of kitchen paper. 'You've got ages to chuck a play together.'

'Listen you…' Rose began, in a harsh tone and then seemed to remember her audience, lowering the finger she had been pointing at Gloria, baring her teeth into a grin, and starting again, slower this time. 'I need this,

all right? Every year Ittonvale school put on a play so spectacular that they get the front cover headline in the *Dewstow Press*. How ridiculous is that? The school that's actually in Dewstow doesn't get a single mention. It's disgusting.'

They all nodded again at that; even Clementine murmured in agreement. Margery and Clementine had never got over their fierce rivalry with the neighbouring town of Ittonvale, not since the Ittonvale School Education Centre Nourishment Consultants had stolen all Summerview Secondary's clean tea towels while they were distracted at a summer fete. They had neither forgiven, nor forgotten.

'So, you can see how much is at stake here,' Mrs Smith said gravely. 'If we want to win this thing we have to start now. I wanted to start in September, really, to make a good go of it, but James wouldn't let me. He said it was crazy.'

She folded her arms, her face pulled into a sulky pout. Margery suddenly found herself pitying the headmaster. If Mrs Smith acted like this in public, then she must have been terrifying behind closed office doors. It was no wonder that their clandestine relationship had ended so suddenly. Margery sighed, she had so much work to do and not enough time for one of Mrs Smith's tantrums. Still, it would not do to fall out with the deputy head. Especially now in her role as the kitchen manager, the deputy head could make her life very difficult indeed.

'We'll be there,' she said. 'Just tell us when and where.'

Mrs Smith beamed at her and snatched one of the pieces of paper Mr Daniels was holding. She thrust it into Margery's waiting hands. Clementine took it from her and stared at it, her brow furrowed.

'This doesn't even say what it's for,' Clementine scoffed. 'It just says extravaganza of the year in all capitals and 3 p.m. in glitter glue.'

'Yes exactly, extravaganza!' Mrs Smith beamed at her. 'School hall, three thirty!' she said, triumphantly, gesturing for Mrs Large and Mr Daniels to follow her. 'Come along, you two.'

'But it says three!' Clementine said. Mrs Smith ignored her.

Mrs Smith exited the kitchen finally; Mr Daniels scuttled along behind her with the posters. Margery breathed a sigh of relief as she walked over to the notice board and pinned the poster up. It was unmistakably the work of former dinner lady Ceri-Ann. She had obviously spent a very long time drawing and colouring in the picture of the snowman on the unnecessarily large and mysterious poster. Ceri-Ann had left the school to do Health and Beauty Therapy at Ittonvale College but had recently decided to also branch out into graphic design, much to everyone's dismay. It was bad enough being continuously bombarded with offers of makeovers and head massages; it was even worse now that there were constant barrages of posters and leaflets to accompany them. Margery had tried to pluck up the courage to ask her to stop but she had never had the heart to, and so the paper recycling bin was almost always full.

'Do you have any fruit today?' Mrs Large asked softly. Margery almost jumped with fright; she had not realised Elizabeth Large was still behind her.

'Of course,' Margery said, pointing to the display fridge where she kept the least bruised apples and bananas from her fruit and veg order. 'What are you after?'

Mrs Large beamed at her. 'Ooh, I'd love a few satsumas if you have any? My husband usually packs my lunch, but I forgot to get it out of the fridge this morning!'

'Oh, well I can do you a sandwich too, if you want?' Margery asked, walking over to the fridge and grabbing out two squished satsumas. 'Just pop up to the canteen again at lunchtime.'

'Don't worry, I've got a Cup a Soup in my desk.' Mrs Large smiled again. Margery always thought of her as being as old as she and Clementine were but was reminded that Elizabeth could only be in her thirties when she smiled. Possibly because it gave her more personality than Mrs Smith's tyrannical regime over the music and drama department usually allowed. She took the fruit from Margery gratefully and put them in her recorder bag. 'How much do I owe you?'

'Gosh, don't worry about it, I haven't even got the till out yet.' Margery gestured to where Karen and Sharon were taking it in turns to sweep up beans into the kitchen's small dustpan and brush. 'I haven't had a chance with all this mess.'

'Well, good luck to you all,' Mrs Large said. 'And Margery? Don't worry about the concert too much, Rose's bite isn't as bad as her bark, it'll be a laugh. You'll see.'

Margery waved her off as she left the kitchen, closing the door gently behind her.

'Did you not charge her for those?' Gloria asked, appearing at Margery's side.

'No,' Margery said. 'It's only a few satsumas.'

Gloria did not agree, her brow furrowed, and she marched off, muttering something about not hitting this week's gross profit target under her breath.

'Come on now, ladies,' Margery said with a sigh, watching Gloria's back as she went to help Benjamin. 'Let's get this kitchen spotless and ready for lunchtime.'

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The school hall looked a lot bigger than it usually did as they all trooped in through the double doors. Margery suspected that this was because they only usually gathered there for Mr Barrow's assemblies. It seemed very strange for all the uncomfortable plastic chairs to be stacked up at the back of the room. The only sign that the chairs were ever used at all were the scuff marks on the hideous vinyl flooring. She noticed that the stage had been brought out of storage in preparation and unfolded and slotted together in what she hoped was not as haphazard a way as it looked. It took up most of the back wall, especially with its large overhead light fixtures that were fitted to a particularly wobbly-looking metal frame overhanging the stage.

It had taken a great deal of coaxing to stop the kitchen team from putting their coats on and going straight home after work, but Margery knew she would never, ever hear the end of it if they did. Karen and Sharon were openly sulking. Gloria was still wearing her trademark cheery grin, but it was looking very forced. Benjamin just looked a bit surprised to be invited; his blond eyebrows were raised high on his forehead as though they had become stuck there. The only person who did not seem to mind too much was Seren. She was good friends with Mrs Smith, and Margery would often see them driving into work together, as though Seren was Rose's strange surrogate child.

Mrs Smith was holding court at the front of the hall. At some point in the day she had changed out of the

smartly pressed suit she usually wore and was now wearing what Margery could only describe as 'drama teacher chic'. A look which consisted of hoop earrings and colourful scarves over a long, flowing green dress. She looked more like a Christmas tree than the actual tree, which was wilting sadly in the back corner of the hall, leaning against the stage. It was the only real tree in the building and probably the cheapest the headmaster could find on the school's budget. If they'd found out that the headmaster had gone to the nearby woods and cut it down himself, no one would have been very surprised.

'Ooh, aren't the decs lovely?' Karen said in a hushed whisper, as they walked through the room. Clementine turned to stare at her in disgust at the abbreviation.

Mrs Smith had evidently already dragged out the poor cleaners and a few of the more gullible business support staff she could blackmail, as well as most of the teachers. They all sat in a semi-circle on the ugly chairs in front of the stage, as she gesticulated grandly at her script. Tiny Mrs Large sat at the piano behind Mrs Smith, nervously worrying her lip with her teeth. She looked quite demure in her plain beige cardigan, clutching her recorder and sheet music. Her mousey brown fringe concealed the top half of her face, as she seemed to cower behind it.

Mrs Smith looked up as the kitchen team arrived and scowled at them all. 'Nice of you to finally join us, Margery and etcetera.' She waved her hand at them dismissively. 'We've all been here hours, haven't we, ladies? You've missed all the fabulous ice breaker games.'

'We have names you know!' Clementine said, pointing to Benjamin. 'His name's…' She turned to him suddenly puzzled, swishing her own hands around in confusion. 'Erm… you know… the young one.'

Mrs Smith rolled her eyes and tutted. 'Don't even know your own co-workers' names Mrs Butcher-Baker, and you expect me to give you a good part if you can't remember your lines, really!'

'I don't want a part!' Clementine hissed.

Margery shushed her. 'Come on, Clem, let's just get this over with.'

They all took a plastic chair from the back of the room, carried them over and sat down heavily. Margery smiled at the other poor souls that had been half invited, half forced to attend. The brand-new cleaning team must have had to start work early and they both looked thoroughly miserable about it.

Mrs Smith put on her false smile again. 'Now that we are all here, I can finally reveal the theme of this year's Christmas concert!' She clapped her hands together in glee. 'The theme is…' She paused for a long moment and then raised herself slowly up out of her chair.

There was a long silence. Margery looked at Clementine who shook her head and scoffed at the spectacle of it. Seren clapped once and Gloria shushed her. Margery was sure she could hear Mrs Large muttering under her breath.

Mrs Smith drew in a deep breath, raising her arms dramatically above her head, flicking her silver bob behind her ears as she did so. 'Really? No one can guess?' She gestured at the Christmas tree in a dramatic swooshing motion. 'The theme is… Christmas!'

They all groaned.

'For God's sake, woman, the whole thing is Christmas themed!' Clementine yelled from her seat. 'Look at this place, it's disgusting, look how many terrible ornaments are on that sad tree!'

'Yes…' Mrs Smith said, as if Clementine were the stupidest person she had ever met. 'But it will be an entirely new Christmas concert, with all new songs written by me!' There was a cough from behind her. '…and Mrs Large.' There was another cough, Mrs Smith rolled her eyes. '…and Mr Daniels.'

'So, let's be clear. What are the students going to be doing while we're doing this show?' asked Miss Macdonald, the newest and youngest of all the English teachers sitting with the rest of the English department. 'Will they be doing it with us?' She was sitting next to Mr Daniels, who threw back his head and rolled his eyes at the suggestion.

Mrs Smith stared at her, dumbfounded. 'No, of course not! They'll have their own special assembly. Well…' She paused as if considering how to say it. 'I mean it'll be a bit shorter than the adult one.'

'You've cut the students' concert time again to fit this teacher one in, haven't you?' Clementine yelled, stabbing her finger at Mrs Smith violently. 'How long is it this year, fifteen? Twenty minutes?'

For a moment Mrs Smith looked like she might come back with a retort but then she just shook her head in exasperation. 'Well, we all know the student concert is just a formality before we get to the good concert! And it's ten minutes long this year, they're doing *A Christmas Carol* again.'

'*A Christmas Carol?* How can you do *A Christmas Carol* in only ten minutes! Even the Muppet one is an hour and a half!' Clementine roared. The hall erupted into arguing about the length a children's school concert should be, until Mrs Smith stepped forward into the circle, threateningly.

'Quiet!' she cried in her best teaching voice, and they all fell silent again. 'It's not ideal, having to do a children's play at all, but they don't care anyway! There is not a single Nicole Kidman in the student body. I should know…' She sneered nastily. '…I teach them.' Mrs Large nodded in agreement behind her.

'Now, let's get on with it,' Mrs Smith said, snatching the pile of sheet music from Mrs Large's lap and shoving it all into Margery's. 'Take one and pass it on now, chop chop!'

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An hour later and they were all standing on the stage in a row while Mrs Smith marched in front of them, shaking the sheet music threateningly at them as they sang. Mrs Large sat to the side of the stage at the piano, wringing her hands together in terror whenever Mrs Smith was not bellowing at her to play the music. The choreography had been bad enough when Mrs Smith had demonstrated it, without it being performed by a group of people who barely had a dash of rhythm between them, Margery thought. They must look absolutely hilarious all swaying about. Margery could hear Clementine wailing tunelessly next to her the entire time and she kept having to pretend to cough to cover her smile.

'No, no, no!' Mrs Smith screeched, and they all came to a sudden halt, jostling each other. 'It's step one, two, three, pivot. Not whatever you're all doing!'

Margery found her mind wandering; there were so many better things they could be doing right now. She would much rather be at home eating Quality Street, sitting in front of the imitation gas fire.

She looked over at the large floor-to-ceiling hall windows. They were a lot creepier at night than during the day, and the air outside was thick with fog. It was hard to tell through the clouded windows, the condensation running down the frames, but she could have sworn she could see someone out there in the cold. She stared as hard as she could, feeling her brow furrow under the strain. There was a tall figure out there in the playground, she was sure of it. Margery watched them put their hand against the glass and peer inside the hall, though she could not make out any clear facial features through the haze. Maybe it was a teacher arriving to the practice session late, she thought. She hoped.

'Again!' Mrs Smith cried, Margery looked at her with a start and then back at the window. The person had gone. She stared for a moment till she was snapped back into the argument between Mrs Smith and the rest of the staff.

'You can't keep us here forever!' screeched Karen from the row behind. Margery turned around just in time to see Sharon break down in tears for the fiftieth time that day.

Mrs Smith glared at her from her place in front of the stage. 'I have the hall booked till half past eight, so actually…' She grinned widely, showing off a needless number of teeth, but there was no humour behind it. '…I think you'll find I can.'

'Phft!' Clementine scoffed loudly. 'Then we'll go home and forget all about this nonsense. I can't even remember what happened ten minutes ago most of the time, let alone this stupid dance.'

'It's easy,' Mrs Smith hissed at her. 'Even Mrs Large can do it.'

Mrs Large looked up from the piano, startled. Margery was sure she saw her brow furrow in concern for a moment, but the expression was gone as quickly as it came.

'Go on, Elizabeth… up you go.'

'Me?' Mrs Large squeaked. She lifted the sleeve of her cardigan and looked at her watch uneasily.

'Yes, come on,' Mrs Smith said impatiently. 'The sooner we all learn this the sooner we can get out of here. Come on.'

Mrs Large stood up awkwardly. Clementine's mother would have described her as being too short for her weight; Margery pushed the nasty thought away. Mrs Large's legs were shaky as she stepped forward.

'Gosh, I'm not really good at these things,' she squeaked out, gesturing to where Mrs Smith was standing in front of the stage. 'I'll go where you are, shall I?'

'Yes, all right.' Mrs Smith nodded, moving out of her way as she walked forward. 'That's a good idea, then they can all see you.'

Mrs Large looked at her watch again, but then seemed to realise that as it was only half past four, there was no way out of it. Resigned to her fate she stepped forward to where Mrs Smith had been. Mrs Smith went and sat down on the piano stool, she put her hands together and cracked her fingers before playing the first chord of the song.

'I'm not a very good dancer really, sorry all,' Mrs Large said, wringing her hands together as she peered at the waiting staff on stage. 'Maybe I'll just run through it once and then Mrs Smith can show you again?'

Mrs Smith waved a hand dismissively. 'Nonsense, you're fine. Now, let's get on with it.'

'Okay, I'll just do it quickly then,' Mrs Large said apprehensively, stepping from foot to foot. 'All right ladies, erm…'

'I'll count you in!' Mrs Smith grinned at her and sat back down at the piano. 'A one, a two, a one, two, three, four!'

It all happened so quickly that Margery's brain could not process it fast enough to comprehend what was happening. There was a loud and terrible screech and a big metal object seemed to fall from nowhere out of the sky.

One minute, Mrs Large had been standing in front of them beginning the awful dance sequence and the next she had disappeared under a mangled mess of metal and wires. All Margery could hear was the screams of those around her, as they watched Mrs Large disappear under the lighting rig as it fell from the top of the stage. Even Mrs Smith was wide-eyed, mouth gaping open, her fingertips still resting on the keys of the piano. Mr Daniels rushed forward from his seat to the pile of metal. Margery turned to look at Clementine, who was usually so proud of her unflappable first aid training, but even she was frozen, staring in horror at the spot where Mrs Large had stood.

Margery found her voice somehow, though it sounded small and feeble to her own ears. 'Quick, somebody call an ambulance!'