

A PROPER FAMILY CHRISTMAS

by

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## PROLOGUE

Haseley House is pretty ghastly really - one of those mansions where the architect seems to have been terrified of omitting any style of any period, and so bunged it all in somewhere. Coming upon it suddenly, as one does, after the discreet little cottages of Haseley village, it represents a major onslaught on the sensibilities.

And yet, it's a house to stir the imagination. One can picture archers crouching behind the battlements, knights errant scaling the rusticated walls to rescue fair ladies from that ridiculous turret at the corner. And who knows what Agatha Christie murders have been committed behind those stained-glass windows, or Wodehousian romances played out to the sound of nightingales on the ivy-draped terrace?

The place has remained largely undiscovered by those who take an interest in such things. You won't find Haseley written up in the chronicles of the Victorian Society, or see glossy pictures of its beautiful and charismatic owners in *Cotswold Life*. William Shirburn, the present owner, is neither beautiful nor charismatic. He lives alone with his cat, a plump tabby as self-centred as himself, and neither of them is the least interested in inviting a load of journalists to tramp through their house.

William has rather let the place go since his children grew up and left home. Not that he couldn't afford repairs. Due to an inherent laziness about spending money, his family has accumulated considerable wealth over the years. If William bothered to investigate his various bank accounts or sell some of his numerous shares, he could probably afford to convert Haseley into a luxury mansion, complete with a swimming-pool where the overgrown tennis court now stands and a sauna in the cellar. The pantry would make a good gym.

But William isn't a swimming-pool-and-sauna sort of person. His daughter Julia never liked the house anyway, and his son Stephen is busy with a demanding wife and young child. The tourists by-pass Haseley with a shudder on their way to Bourton-on-the-Water, and it will probably end up as flatlets or a home for the elderly.

## CHAPTER 1

'Are you sure you've got everything?' Hilary Watlington looked doubtfully at the tiny rucksack her son was in the process of slinging on his back.

'Of course I'm not sure, Mum! Now if I knew what I'd forgotten, that would be good. Then I could go and pack it now, instead of finding I needed it half-way up a mountain.'

'Knickers, socks, hankies,' persisted Hilary.

'They are *pants*, Mum, that men wear! How often do I have to tell you?' The fact that Daniel had risen to her standing tease showed that she wasn't the only one feeling tense.

He glared at her, hating her for being left behind, just as she was hating him for going.

She fought the querulousness that welled up inside her. Rational, liberal-minded parenthood battled with her demon, the over-protective widowed mother - and lost.

'I still don't see why you want to drive up in the dark.'

'I did explain,' said Daniel, setting the rucksack down again on the hall floor with exaggerated patience. 'If we can get to Glencoe tonight, we'll be able to start climbing first thing tomorrow morning.'

'But there are so many drunks about in the evening at Christmas - ' 'Rolling out of the numerous pubs on the M1? I don't think many firms choose Leicester Forest East for the office party!' He knit his thick eyebrows together in heavy sarcasm, reminding her of a ruffled owl. Ben had looked just the same when he was cross. It was funny to think that Daniel was approaching the age Ben had been when she'd first met him - almost as if she could replay her life. Oh, how could he do this to her? Subject her to the terrible possibility of it happening to her again?

'I suppose your friends will be sensible,' she heard herself saying. 'They won't play amusing medical student-type pranks like pushing each other off mountains, will they?'

'We might push Ellison off. He's become seriously boring since he met that nurse in ENT. She's religious, so it's not as if he's even getting a shag out of it. She tried to stop him coming with us, you know.'

'Perhaps,' ventured Hilary ruefully, 'she was worried about someone she cared for climbing mountains in the middle of winter.'

'Bollocks! She's just afraid we'll knock his brains back into his head.' He relented suddenly. 'Are you really going to be okay? I hate leaving you all alone in London for Christmas!'

'Who says I'll be alone?' Hilary made a face at him. 'I might have planned to have men in, for all you know.'

'Men?' Daniel raised one of the bushy eyebrows in a gesture of intense scepticism.

'There's that nice gang of builders over the road. I'm sure they wouldn't like me to be lonely.'

'They'll be at home with their wives and girlfriends - and kids,' said Daniel cuttingly.

'Well I'm looking forward to having the house to myself, as a matter of fact. I'm going to play *my* music, and watch girls' programmes on TV, and live on Chinese takeaways and tiramisu.'

'They say old people should eat chocolate,' said Daniel, dodging out of her reach.

'Keeps up the iron intake.'

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'Go on, if you're going, go!' Hilary picked up his rucksack and thrust it into his hands. 'You'll be late picking up the others.'

But he hesitated, a confession to make. 'Er... I've told Gran you'll be on your own.'

'Oh no, Daniel! She'll involve me in something - you know what Margery's like.'

'Well actually she said something about going down to Haseley. She's got this architect friend she thinks ought to look at the house.'

'But I thought William always went over to Stephen and Ratso's.'

'Poor old sod! I suppose they think Christmas dinner once a year will persuade him to leave all his money to that awful child.' Daniel grimaced. 'Well, Gran's quite capable of inviting someone to stay with her brother without telling him. You'd better go too - make it a house-party.'

Haseley, in the middle of winter? No thanks!' Hilary shuddered. 'I shall be perfectly all right here - I like to have all my *things* round me. Quite honestly, at my age one prefers the comfort of one's own home.'

'At your age? Honestly, Mum! What are you - forty-five?' Daniel scowled. 'Perhaps I'd better book you on a Saga trip to Eastbourne!'

'That would be nice! Come on,' she opened the door, 'let's see if that old rust-bucket of yours will start.'

'Melanie is a Classic Car! The man at the garage couldn't believe I still had one of these old Rileys on the road.'

'Just so long as it stays there!' She watched him stow his bag in the boot, suppressing the feeling that surely this child of hers wasn't old enough to drive, never mind own a car. And then suddenly, in the shadow of the boot-lid cast by the street-light, it was Ben leaning over their old Morris.

He shut the lid, Daniel again - yet now she saw the twenty-year-old man, not the boy.

He turned to hug her. 'Take care, Mum. I'm only going for a week. I'll be back before you know it.'

'Take care yourself.' She squeezed him crossly. 'I don't suppose they teach you any first aid at medical school?'

'Of course not! But if any of us develops a rare genetic disorder, we'll be well away! I'm going. Don't stand out here in the cold.'

'I'm not,' said Hilary, and went back into the house and turned all the lights on.

Scratch the cat was a little bored. He had been asleep all day in an excellent new place he'd found, on an old coat of William's that had long ago dropped from its peg into a dark corner near the back stairs. The hot water pipes from the kitchen boiler emerged to dispose most of their heat here, before beginning their long and largely fruitless journey to the upper regions of Haseley House. It was the sort of hidden place a cat could suddenly leap out from, just as people like Mrs Arncott, William's daily help, were walking down the passage with a heavy tray. Scratch had done that this morning with gratifying results, and he was waiting till she had forgotten about it before taking the opportunity to try it again.

The dark December evening didn't tempt Scratch to take more than a sniff through his cat-flap in the back door. He was past the age of seeking entertainment down in the village, and anyway, since a rather undignified operation insisted on by Mrs Arncott soon after he had chosen to come and live at Haseley, he didn't really feel the urge. He wandered into the drawing-room to see what William was doing. Scratch didn't hold to the theory of the cat who

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walked by himself. He liked company - human company - and as they lived alone in this huge house, William was the one to provide it.

William, however, had not yet woken from his own nap. He sat there with head slumped and mouth open, assaulting sensitive ears with unpleasantly penetrating snores. Scratch was not immune from snoring himself on occasion, but there is something very irritating about a person being blatantly dead to the world when you are awake and ready for action. He sat on his haunches and wondered how to remedy the situation. Direct measures seemed the best. Scratch drew back, and sprang into his master's lap.

'Bugger you!' William shot into the air. Scratch tried and failed to cling on, wounding William in the process, and ending up paws akimbo on the floor. The two of them glowered at one another, mutually aggrieved.

William had been having a pleasant dream. He couldn't remember much about it, but it certainly hadn't been Christmas there, and he resented being so painfully jolted back to grim reality.

'What the hell's wrong with you, you flea-ridden mangey old monster?' he said to the cat, who was attempting to recover his dignity by pretending to wash. 'If you think I'm going to feed you, now that you've shredded my bloody leg to pieces...'

On the whole William was pretty content with life. He and his house suited each other - both a little creaky in the joints, more than a little eccentric, with the air of self-assurance that goes with having been around a long time and intending to be around a good bit longer. He didn't in the least mind living alone. Mrs Arcott came in every morning, making sure he hadn't fallen down dead, and keeping him supplied with anchovy paste and tinned stew and gossip from the village. They had a satisfactory relationship based on mutual nagging, which kept their minds lively and added interest and amusement to the day.

Often in the holidays he was treated to the additional enlivening company of her two boys, Grime and Brine, since Kath, as she never failed to point out, was a Single Parent. The exploits of Mr Arcott, who had flown the coop as soon as he realised his sons were turning out in his own image, were relayed in daily episodes of ever-increasing luridness. Only that morning William had been entertained to full details of his latest bimbo, a babe of the first order, or a bottle-blonde slut with a skirt up to her knickers, according to whether you listened to the boys or their mother.

There was only one cloud on William's horizon - the awful prospect of the Festive Season. William really wasn't into Christmas. All that jingly tinsly presenty stuff that his daughter Julia was so good at made him feel queasy. He had no interest in watching the bright eyes of little children as they opened their gifts from Santa. In William's experience, if children were enjoying themselves it meant that he wasn't.

Not that, left to himself, he couldn't have had a good time. He would have drunk a bit, and shared turkey with the cat, watched *Diehard* and James Bond, and fried up plum pudding for breakfast. But unfortunately for William someone, probably in Brussels, has decreed that elderly people are not allowed to rest in peace at Yuletide, but have to be dragged from their own homes and forced to pretend to enjoy themselves in somebody else's. Poor William was condemned to his son and daughter-in-law's uncomfortable house in Oxford.

Stephen was a Classics Fellow, who'd lived for years a bachelor, donnish life in his College, bothering no one at Christmas, since he preferred to work through the holiday. But then the College Librarian turned thirty and decided it was time she acquired a husband and child before it was too late. To his family's horror, her eye fell on Stephen, and before anyone knew it, she was walking up the aisle in cement-coloured satin with a bunch of wilting lilies

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and a smug smile. She then set her mind to conception, and the baby followed within a year.

None of this would have mattered to William, who would have ignored his son married as happily as he had done single, but Lesley had chosen to take on the role of Dutiful Daughter-in-law. She could not seem to be persuaded of William's total lack of interest in his grandson, and inflicted them on each other at all too frequent intervals. Christmas was compulsory. Three horrendous days loomed before him, to be spent in the company of Stephen and Ratsö and the unspeakable Tobias, before he was to be allowed to return to Haseley House.

However, they weren't coming to collect him till Saturday, and sufficient unto Saturday was the evil thereof. Today was only Thursday, and William settled down to make the most of his last days of freedom.

He flicked on the telly. It was the easiest way of finding out what time it was, since no one remembered to wind the clock on the mantelpiece. Somewhere about *Countdown*, he estimated. He enjoyed that, though he was secretly even more enthralled by the wonderful programme that followed, in which the lower orders of America aired their personal problems with such a spellbinding lack of inhibition.

He waited patiently through an advert break, only to recoil in horror. What was this? Carol singing? Some pop-singer and a bunch of tone-deaf primary school children dressed in Santa Claus outfits, instead of his proper programmes!

'Pah!' said William, who thought Scrooge had been much maligned. 'Bloody Christmas!'

'I am *not* going to mind being alone!' said Hilary to the mirror on the hall-stand. She said it out loud, and her voice echoed in a strange way, as if Daniel's absence had caused an unusual space in the house. 'It's only for a week. Lots of people spend Christmas on their own.' It was the first sign, wasn't it - talking to oneself? She was beginning to get eccentric already, and Daniel had only been out of the house five minutes.

Never mind, no one could hear her. There was no one to care what she did. She could sing, or take all her clothes off and dance on the table if she wanted to, or break down. She never had broken down when Ben died. It had always seemed best to postpone the moment until a more convenient time: after the funeral, or when she hadn't to discuss mortgage arrears with the building society manager, or look sane and capable enough to be given a job. Somehow she had never got round to giving way, and after three years it seemed a bit late.

The woman in the mirror looked perfectly capable of spending Christmas alone. She stared resolutely back at Hilary, calm, efficient, neat dark curls just hinting at grey. She had the air of a prep-school mistress perhaps, kindly but detached.

'Christ! When did I become matronly?' Hilary glared at the figure, who frowned as if about to give her a hundred lines.

She went down into the kitchen, craving the comforting warmth of the Rayburn. Ben's cousin Julia had been horrified when they first showed her this room, shortly after they had moved in. 'Oh dear, a basement kitchen! Never mind, you'll just have to make everything as light as possible. White paint everywhere, with perhaps a hint of blue in the curtains, and you should get away with it...' Instead Hilary had installed dark wooden furniture, with thick plum-coloured curtains and cushions and deep William Morris wallpaper. It was a room to shut the world out of, an underground burrow. Ben had teased her about its womb-like atmosphere, saying she must be compensating for having lost her mother at an early age.

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Tonight it suddenly seemed oppressive. She was aware of the weight of the whole house heavy on top of her - layers and layers of empty rooms above her head. She hurried back upstairs, needing at least one floor beneath her to regain some control of the house.

But up here she felt too exposed. She and Ben had deliberately made the living-room as large and light as possible by knocking the two ground-floor rooms into one, with big windows at each end. Now the space looked ridiculously vast, and the dark panels of uncovered glass dangerously expansive.

People had tried to persuade her to move after Ben died. There had been an awful family meeting, when Ben's cousins had decided to 'rally round' and arrived *en masse* one morning, bearing alcohol and good-will. Still in the coma of bereavement, she had let them in, hoping for some sort of comfort. Instead they rearranged her life as if she had no part in it.

'Darling, you simply must get out of this house!' Julia had looked about her with a shudder. 'Every single thing must remind you... Oh, it's ghastly! Tony'll find you somewhere cheap near us in Wimbledon. Not that I mean...' catching her husband's eye, 'but what a pity about the Life Assurance! If only you'd come to us, Tony would have got you a really good deal.'

Tony winked at Hilary, whether in confirmation or reparation for Julia's tactlessness, she wasn't sure.

'Mind you, I suppose there *isn't* anything cheap in Wimbledon - not our end, anyway,' Julia abandoned her scheme regretfully. 'What you must do, Hilary, is sell up here - this would fetch a bit, wouldn't it Tony? You are just about in Fulham, after all. You can pay off the loan on the printing business, and buy a lovely little house in the country! It would be wonderful for Daniel. You could grow things, and make your own wine, and we'd all come and visit you.'

'A lot of this stuff could go,' said Lesley, then new to the family and revelling in this opportunity to validate her position. 'Stephen and I will help you clear things out if it's too painful.'

If Hilary had had any idea of ridding herself of her last memories of Ben, the thought of Lesley going through their things would have put it to flight for ever. Daniel, with all the outraged fire of seventeen, threatened to rush down to Oxford, when he heard, and turn out Lesley's cupboards. Hilary had laughed in spite of herself, and in a way the incident had given her the jolt she needed. Certainly she had no intention of losing her home as well as her husband. So much of Ben was in this house - not only the things they had bought together, which would have moved with her, but their positions in each room - little corners of familiarity. She was surprised to realise how much they mattered to her.

She drew the curtains quickly, turned on the stereo and poured herself a drink, then wondered if she should be keeping a clear head. She alone was responsible for dealing with anything that might happen now. Would she be capable of seeing off Jehovah's Witnesses, or mending a fuse, or saving the neighbours from a fire, if her faculties were numbed by alcohol? And with music on, one couldn't be sure what other sounds it was disguising. A host of burglars might be tramping through those supposedly empty rooms above her.

She really had meant it when she'd told Daniel that she didn't mind spending Christmas alone, that evening, weeks ago it seemed, when he'd first mentioned the climbing scheme. Since Ben's death they had always gone to friends or a small hotel, making a rather over-conscious effort not to let the season get them down, but she still found Christmas one of her worst times. The idea of ignoring it altogether had seemed infinitely appealing.

'You'll have to go to someone's for Christmas Day,' Daniel had warned her. 'It's all very

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well saying it's sentimental rubbish, but when there's sod all on telly and you see everyone else in the street playing happy families round the Christmas tree... well, you'll miss Dad like buggery, for a start.'

'As if I didn't already!' Hilary had made a face.

'Phone Julia and Tony. They'd *adore* to have you!' He imitated Julia at her most gushing. 'It'll be the real thing - you know how Julia loves all that Christmas crap. You can see it through in an alcoholic haze. Good pressies, too, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Oh yes, and have Tony taking me into corners and asking me how I *am* all the time, and Julia telling poor little Posy not to bother Auntie Hilary, as if I was an uncertain-tempered cat, and everyone avoiding the subject of husbands and feeling guilty if they laugh by mistake.'

'Okay, okay!' Daniel had grinned. 'Trash the Wimbledon idea. But I still think you'll want to go somewhere, when it comes to it.'

'Nonsense. I shall just put my head down and let the whole thing pass me by. It'll be heaven.'

Well, here she was, just as she had wanted it - alone for Christmas.

'Sod it!' she admitted out loud. 'I'm lonely already.'