

THE MAID AND THE MANSION-BOOK 1

FIORA GRACE



THE MAID
AND THE
MANSION:

A MYSTERIOUS MURDER

THE MAID AND THE MANSION:

A MYSTERIOUS MURDER

(The Maid and the Mansion Cozy Mystery—Book
One)

FIONA GRACE

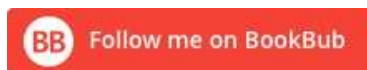
Fiona Grace

Fiona Grace is author of the LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books; of the TUSCAN VINEYARD COZY MYSTERY series, comprising seven books; of the DUBIOUS WITCH COZY MYSTERY series, comprising three books; of the BEACHFRONT BAKERY COZY MYSTERY series, comprising six books; of the CATS AND DOGS COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books; of the

ELIZA MONTAGU COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the ENDLESS HARBOR ROMANTIC COMEDY series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the INN AT DUNE ISLAND ROMANTIC COMEDY series, comprising five books (and counting); of the INN BY THE SEA ROMANTIC COMEDY series, comprising five books (and counting); and of the MAID AND THE MANSION COZY MYSTERY series, comprising five books (and counting).

[MURDER IN THE MANOR](#) (A Lacey Doyle Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [AGED FOR MURDER](#) (A Tuscan Vineyard Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [SKEPTIC IN SALEM: AN EPISODE OF MURDER](#) (A Dubious Witch Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [BEACHFRONT BAKERY: A KILLER CUPCAKE](#) (A Beachfront Bakery Cozy Mystery—Book 1), and [VILLA IN SICILY: OLIVE OIL AND MURDER](#) (A Cats and Dogs Cozy Mystery—Book 1) are each available as a free download on Kobo!

Fiona would love to hear from you, so please visit www.fionagraceauthor.com to receive free ebooks, hear the latest news, and stay in touch.



Copyright © 2022 by Fiona Grace. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally.

BOOKS BY FIONA GRACE

THE MAID AND THE MANSION COZY MYSTERY

A MYSTERIOUS MURDER (Book #1)

A SCANDALOUS DEATH (Book #2)

A MISSING GUEST (Book #3)

AN UNSOLVABLE CRIME (Book #4)

AN IMPOSSIBLE HEIST (Book #5)

INN BY THE SEA ROMANTIC COMEDY

A NEW LOVE (Book #1)

A NEW CHANCE (Book #2)

A NEW HOME (Book #3)

A NEW LIFE (Book #4)

A NEW ME (Book #5)

THE INN AT DUNE ISLAND ROMANTIC COMEDY

A CHANCE LOVE (Book #1)

A CHANCE FALL (Book #2)

A CHANCE ROMANCE (Book #3)

A CHANCE CHRISTMAS (Book #4)

A CHANCE ENGAGEMENT (Book #5)

ENDLESS HARBOR ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALWAYS, WITH YOU (Book #1)

ALWAYS, FOREVER (Book #2)

ALWAYS, PLUS ONE (Book #3)

ALWAYS, TOGETHER (Book #4)

ALWAYS, LIKE THIS (Book #5) ALWAYS,

FATED (Book #6)

ALWAYS, FOR LOVE (Book #7)

ALWAYS, JUST US (Book #8)

ALWAYS, IN LOVE (Book #9)

ELIZA MONTAGU COZY MYSTERY

MURDER AT THE HEDGEROW (Book #1)

A DALLOP OF DEATH (Book #2)

CALAMITY AT THE BALL (Book #3)

A SPEAKEASY DEMISE (Book #4)

A FLAPPER FATALITY (Book #5)

BUMPED BY A DAME (Book #6)

A DOLL'S DEBACLE (Book #7)

A FELLA'S RUIN (Book #8)

A GAL'S OFFING (Book #9)

LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY

MURDER IN THE MANOR (Book#1)
DEATH AND A DOG (Book #2)
CRIME IN THE CAFE (Book #3)
VEXED ON A VISIT (Book #4)
KILLED WITH A KISS (Book #5)
PERISHED BY A PAINTING (Book #6)
SILENCED BY A SPELL (Book #7)
FRAMED BY A FORGERY (Book #8)
CATASTROPHE IN A CLOISTER (Book #9)

TUSCAN VINEYARD COZY MYSTERY

AGED FOR MURDER (Book #1)
AGED FOR DEATH (Book #2)
AGED FOR MAYHEM (Book #3)
AGED FOR SEDUCTION (Book #4)
AGED FOR VENGEANCE (Book #5)
AGED FOR ACRIMONY (Book #6)
AGED FOR MALICE (Book #7)

DUBIOUS WITCH COZY MYSTERY

SKEPTIC IN SALEM: AN EPISODE OF MURDER (Book #1)
SKEPTIC IN SALEM: AN EPISODE OF CRIME (Book #2)
SKEPTIC IN SALEM: AN EPISODE OF DEATH (Book #3)

BEACHFRONT BAKERY COZY MYSTERY

BEACHFRONT BAKERY: A KILLER CUPCAKE (Book #1)
BEACHFRONT BAKERY: A MURDEROUS MACARON
(Book #2)

BEACHFRONT BAKERY: A PERILOUS CAKE POP (Book #3)

BEACHFRONT BAKERY: A DEADLY DANISH (Book #4)

BEACHFRONT BAKERY: A TREACHEROUS TART (Book #5)

BEACHFRONT BAKERY: A CALAMITOUS COOKIE (Book #6)

CATS AND DOGS COZY MYSTERY

A VILLA IN SICILY: OLIVE OIL AND MURDER (Book #1)

A VILLA IN SICILY: FIGS AND A CADAVER (Book #2)

A VILLA IN SICILY: VINO AND DEATH (Book #3)

A VILLA IN SICILY: CAPERS AND CALAMITY (Book #4)

A VILLA IN SICILY: ORANGE GROVES AND VENGEANCE (Book
#5)

A VILLA IN SICILY: CANNOLI AND A CASUALTY (Book #6)

CONTENTS

Contents

CHAPTER ONE.....	11
CHAPTER TWO.....	16
CHAPTER THREE.....	23
CHAPTER FOUR.....	32
CHAPTER FIVE.....	38
CHAPTER SIX.....	45
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	53
CHAPTER EIGHT.....	61
CHAPTER NINE.....	69
CHAPTER TEN.....	74
CHAPTER ELEVEN.....	78
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	85
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	90
CHAPTER FOURTEEN.....	98
CHAPTER FIFTEEN.....	104
CHAPTER SIXTEEN.....	112
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.....	116
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.....	121
CHAPTER NINETEEN.....	129
CHAPTER TWENTY.....	135
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE.....	141
CHAPTER TWENTY TWO.....	147
CHAPTER TWENTY THREE.....	154

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR	159
CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE	167
CHAPTER TWENTY SIX.....	175
CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN	177
CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT	181
CHAPTER TWENTY NINE	189
CHAPTER THIRTY	193
CHAPTER THIRTY ONE	197
EPILOGUE.....	200

CHAPTER ONE

Mary Adams waited, poised for action as the large engine on the conveyor belt lurched closer. Three... two... one. She imagined an invisible timer counting down the seconds until it wobbled to a stop at the point on the factory floor where she was standing. Every time this happened, it felt like a test she had to pass – or else.

As soon as it stopped, she sprang forward.

Reaching the steel engine block, she took a heavy piece of steel piping from the wire basket by the belt. With forceful wriggling and some shoving, she shoved the pipe into the slot, its shape fitting snugly. Grabbing her wrench, she set about tightening the bolts. After three years of doing this, her palms were tough and her arms strong, even though they still ached at the end of each long working day.

The smell of oil and metal hung heavy in the factory's stale air. Clangs and shouts resounded around her as she wrestled with the final bolt, jerking on the wrench with all her might, to make sure it was as secure as it could be, in as fast a time as she could manage it.

Mr. Watson's words, spoken to her before her very first shift, replayed themselves in her mind.

“We’re doing this for our country, girls! Remember that every time you tighten one of these ‘ere bolts. These engines are something we in England’s Midlands can be proud of producing! In days to come, people will remember Watson Machinery, manufacturing in this unfortunately war-torn time, as a shining example of British workmanship!”

A stray strand of her shoulder-length, buttery blond hair had come loose from its cap – which all young ladies on the factory floor had to wear for safety so their hair didn’t get caught up in the machinery. The strand was tickling her nose. Fixing the next pipe into place, she pursed her lips and puffed it away as she bore down on the wrench again.

There. Tightened. Even though she knew she wasn’t as powerful as the men who’d worked there previously, she was pleased that she’d done a thorough job, with the help of her tools.

High on the wall, the clock’s dusty face told her that they had reached the final hour of the day shift. Stretching her right arm tiredly, as she waited for the line to rattle forward again, and the next engine to arrive at her workstation.

“Last hour,” she mouthed to them, exchanging a grin.

But the line didn’t move. Instead, with a wheezing noise, the conveyor belt shut down.

A mechanical problem? Looking at the other women on the line inquiringly, taking in their frowns and shrugs, Mary saw they were as much in the dark about this as she was.

And then, from behind her, came the familiar throat-clearing that signaled the boss was on site.

Mary spun around. “Afternoon, Mr. Watson,” she said hurriedly, rubbing her oil-streaked palm on her overall. “Are we standing down while something gets fixed?”

Mr. Watson stared at her and the others from under his tweed cap's narrow brim. There was an unfamiliar expression on her boss's florid face.

To her surprise, Mary realized it was an apologetic look.

Mr. Watson *never* paused the belt unless there was a pressing need. Even though she had no idea what this was about, she felt a flicker of unease on seeing that expression.

“Well, girls.” The gold rings on her boss's fingers gleamed in the dull light as he raised a hand to twist the end of his stubby mustache. “Our time together has come to an end.”

The words sent a shockwave through her.

“You've all been troopers,” he said. “You've done your bit for your country in these ‘hard times – epitomizing the spirit of Britain through your tireless work at Watson Machinery – but now, I'm happy to tell you, we have enough lads who are back in town after the war, to be able to restart our operation the way it was previously.”

He paused, surveying the group.

“We're ending an hour early today, although you'll get your full daily wage, and that's my reward to you for standing in for our brave lads while they were on the frontlines. You can collect your wage packets from the main gate when you leave.”

A brief smile warmed his face as a muttered chorus of thank yous came from the assembled workers.

Not from Mary, though. While everyone else seemed to be somewhere between mildly disappointed and rather relieved, she felt horrified. Surely an hour's paid notice wasn't enough for such a life-altering decision? A week would have been fairer! Why were people grateful when they'd been so abruptly cut off from their employment?

“Thank *you*, girls,” he concluded his speech, turning away and marching swiftly toward the exit, rubbing his hands.

Should she put up with this without a fight?

Intimidating as it was to argue a decision at such a time, the alternative would be even worse. She had no option but to plead her case.

Nobody else was even glancing at the boss. All of the other women were heading toward the change rooms, to clean up after the long, dirty day.

Taking a deep breath, Mary ran after him.

“Mr. Watson!” she called out. “Mr. Watson. May I speak with you?”

He turned, now frowning.

“If you’re quick, yes,” he said, but his tone didn’t sound accommodating. She’d better collect her thoughts, and present a good argument, if she had any hope of succeeding. Clasping her hands, she took a deep breath.

“I was wondering – when the men come back – is there any chance I could keep on working here? Or even move to another position somewhere else on the floor? I mean, I know the ropes, and it’s a job, right?” she asked, her cheeks flushing as she acknowledged her circumstances.

But Mr. Watson shook his head, causing Mary’s hands to clench together even tighter.

“You’ve always done your best, er, Ethel,” he said, and Mary bit her lip. Three years working here, and he didn’t even call her by the right name? “But the problem is, helpful as you’ve been, it caused my operations to slow down when that entire assembly line was managed by girls, instead of lads. I ended up going at three-quarter speed since then, and it’s cost me.” He tugged again at one of his golden rings, thoughtfully.

“But I’ve always finished ahead of the others,” she pleaded. “I’m strong. I can easily keep up with the men.”

Regretfully, Mr. Watson shook his head.

"We've filled all the positions," he said. "They've all been taken. And think about it – it's fair, innit? The lads deserve a chance at a good job, back home after such brave fighting, and with families to support. You want your fella to be able to buy you some treats and luxuries, don't you?" he added, in a hearty tone. "And now, you'll have some time with your family."

“But I – I don’t have a family,” Mary said, thinking sadly of her mum. Or a fella. At the age of twenty-three, the factory shifts had become her life. She’d grown to love the camaraderie with the other women on her line, the jokes they’d exchanged during work, the stories they’d shared on their occasional nights out.

Mary’s goal was to save a nest egg, so that she would be able to study further, and look after herself in an emergency. But the nest egg so far was little more than a few pounds and a handful of shillings, thanks to the expense of simply living in the tough wartime environment.

Mr. Watson shifted from foot to foot, impatient with the conversation.

“There are jobs out there,” he reassured her. “Plenty of them. Just not right here at this factory. My advice is to go looking for a new one.”

Mary drew in a breath, and let it out again.

There was no room for argument. No jobs remained at Watson Machinery. But what he’d said was true. There must be other jobs elsewhere.

There was a whole row of factories on this grimy street, many of them manufacturing similar equipment to this. And they’d been allowed to leave an hour before closing time. There was no point in wasting any more time arguing.

If she moved fast, Mary hoped she might find a new job on this very road, before the hour was up.

CHAPTER TWO

A sharp gust of wind blew cold, autumnal raindrops into Mary's face. Slipping on the sidewalk, under the glow of the overhead streetlamp, her legs felt leaden as she approached the very last factory in the row.

It was after six, past closing time, but its lights were on, and there were still people inside. Maybe the manager was still inside, finishing up for the day?

Approaching the gate, Mary tried to summon up the same optimism and determination with which she'd started her mission. But it was difficult, when at factory after factory, boss after boss had given her the same short answer.

"Sorry. No jobs for ladies. The men are back in town, and we're full!"

Maybe this humble little metalworking factory, which was a much smaller setup than Watson Machinery, would have a position open?

Tiredly, she walked up to the gate.

"Is the manager here, please?" she asked the man who was approaching her, a bag over his shoulder and an oil smear on his stubby nose. His jacket hood was pulled over his head, and under it, his gaze was fixed on the bus stop.

Now, he stopped and stared at her.

“I’m the manager. But we’re all closed up for the day now. What is it, miss?”

Through practice, Mary had managed, over the past hour and a bit, to condense her request into one fast, persuasive sentence.

“Watson Machinery let all their woman workers go today, and since I’m experienced on a machinery assembly line, I’m looking for a new job in manufacturing.”

He made a face. “Sorry, miss. It’s the owner’s decision here to bring the men back again and work a bit faster. We filled the last job yesterday, and have a waiting list of two more ex-soldiers who want to start with us.”

“Oh, this is really disappointing,” Mary admitted in disconsolate tones.

“Times are tough, I know,” the factory manager replied. She had heard the words a few times before in the last hour, and she felt sure that she would be hearing them many times in the future.

It had been so easy to get the factory job three years ago. They'd literally been begging for workers to keep production going as more and more young men had enlisted.

Now, the pendulum had swung all the way back again.

Mary’s heart sunk to her shoes, as she accepted that there were no jobs. Not in this entire row of factories, and she guessed it would be the same in the whole county. All over Stoke-on-Trent, throughout the West Midlands, and even England. She wasn’t normally one to be discouraged, but right now, she had to admit, she’d hit a low point.

Then the manager’s face brightened.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I heard today about something you could apply for.”

“Oh, what’s that?” This meeting might have been the stroke of good luck she needed.

“The owner of our place was talking to the line manager this morning, and he said a friend of his is short of help at home. His wife put an advertisement in the local paper.”

“At home?” Mary asked.

“Yes. Their housemaid quit last week, I believe, to care for her sick mother, and from what I’ve heard, they’ve not filled the position yet. I have a copy of the paper here. I was taking it home to do the crossword, but you can have the rest of it.”

“Oh, thank you.” What a kind man he was. Perhaps this day had averted disaster after all.

He scrabbled in his satchel and, after unfolding it and extricating the crossword section, handed her the rest of the newspaper. Then, as headlights cut the gloom and wheels hissed through water, he ran to catch his bus.

Mary looked down at the newspaper, which was already getting soggy in the rain.

“Five Bedroomed Family Home, near Stoke-on-Trent, requires House Maid to take up Duties alongside two other Maids, a Nanny, and a Cook General. Good Wage. Modern house and convenient access to Buses and Trains.”

After taking a look at the wages offered, her mouth dropped open.

This was less than half what she’d been earning at the factory! Less than half!

She’d not even be able to pay for her rented room on this salary, never mind transportation, food, clothing, and of course her all-important nest

egg that she dreamed of saving, so that she could study and better herself one day.

There was no way she could afford to take this job. Snorting in bemusement at the irony of this fact, Mary folded the newspaper and shoved it in her purse before it disintegrated completely. A housemaid's job was clearly out of the question. But in this newspaper, there might be other jobs.

This helpful manager could have handed her the answer to her problem. All she needed to do now was to get somewhere dry and take a look.

The small coal fire in her rented room glowed warmly as Mary, in her dressing gown and slippers, sat down on the faded but comfortable brown armchair, feeling expectant. Now, at last, she could scour this still-damp newspaper for employment opportunities.

She opened the paper, being careful not to get any of it in the bowl of beef soup she'd set on the table for her dinner, or to knock over the bottle of beer she always allowed herself on a Friday.

"Employment, employment, what is there?" she muttered, glancing up at the bookshelf on the wall, which contained a row of well-thumbed, dogeared novels. Mysteries, adventures, travel and detective books were her favorite, unlike most of the other girls at the factory, who adored romances.

"You want to be able to afford more books, you'd better find work," she reminded herself.

The advertisements for jobs were surprisingly sparse, a reflection of the fact that times were hard. There weren't many factory jobs advertised at all, and uneasily, she realized that was because they didn't need to advertise them. There was no reason to, with all the men who were back from the war knocking at their doors.

So, what else was there?

Wishing she'd had the chance to study further and to qualify as a teacher like her mum had been, Mary paged through the advertisements.

Housemaids, parlor maids, kitchen maids, and cook generals, as they were called. Mary guessed that those must be cooks who were asked to do a few other tasks during their working day.

Those were the main opportunities, it seemed. Cook generals got paid a little more than maids.

Mary glanced dubiously at her bowl of beef soup. That represented the pinnacle of her culinary achievement, truth be told. She could make a good sandwich – tasty, and packed with ingredients, and she never held back on the mustard, but that probably wouldn't count for much in a big house where a three course menu was required for every meal.

But surely there was something else?

Barmen, mechanics, hospital staff – all requiring a man for the job, or else expertise that she didn't have. The position of a stable hand at a country house briefly caught her eye. You needed to be hard-working, capable, with a good attitude. The job included cleaning stables, cleaning saddlery, grooming horses, and helping with general duties.

Would they consider a woman? Probably not, she acknowledged, and she didn't know anything about horses. But she had seen that this position included board and lodging, and because of that, the salary seemed like it would go further.