

"IF AGATHA CHRISTIE WERE TO GO ON *MASTERCHEF*, THIS NOVEL WOULD BE THE RESULT. A DELICIOUSLY FUN MURDER MYSTERY." -CLARE POOLEY

KNIFE



SKILLS



FOR

BEGINNERS



ORLANDO

MURRIN



**KNIFE  
SKILLS  
FOR  
BEGINNERS**



**ORLANDO  
MURRIN**



## Epigraph

'They were all victims. Whatever happened inside that house none of them deserves to be punished for it. None of them.'

*The Family Remains*, Lisa Jewell

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## AMUSE-GUEULE

*Sunday 29/6/2003.*

*Chef made me promise to keep a recipe diary. Essential for anyone with ambitions to open his own place or write a cookbook. As if.*

*He's had me working on a cheese biscuit to serve as an 'amuse', so here we go. There's this new guy at work called Paul (posh boy, far too full of himself) who had the idea of rolling the dough into a tube and coating it in seeds. Then you slice and bake so the biscuits are decorated round the edge. It took a lot of work but in the end I cracked it. Brilliant, though I say so myself.*

*So here it is: Christian's Cookbook, recipe #1.*

### PARMESAN BITES

*Process together into a dough 170g plain flour, 150g each of grated parmesan and chilled, cubed butter, 1 teaspoon black pepper (freshly ground, as ALWAYS), ½ teaspoon flaky salt and a big pinch of cayenne.*

*Roll into two neat cylinders about an inch in diameter and chill until firm. Brush with beaten egg and roll in a mixture of sesame, nigella and poppy seeds (about 2 tablespoons of each) and chill again. Slice into thick coins and bake off at 160°C fan for 16–18 minutes until darkly golden.*

*Makes 50–60. They keep well in a plastic box and go great with sherry. The key is not to add water to the dough. We left one batch in too long and discovered they taste better if you overbake them. Happy accident.*

# Prologue

## Sunday

I'm looking at my watch for the tenth time, when in he strides.

'Ouch,' I say, 'you look terrible. What on earth happened?'

'Looks worse than it is,' he replies, upbeat as ever. 'Disagreement with an escalator.'

We're in one of those high-pitched bar-restaurants on Sloane Square with too many mirrors, too many people checking their hair in them and Taittinger by the glass. Christian's right arm is in a plaster cast with just the fingers sticking out, the left one bandaged at the wrist. Not ideal for a chef.

He orders a vodka Negroni, asking for it to be served in a highball glass so it's easier for him to hold, and shoots a look at a pair of young women perched near by, which despite the bruises on his face has its usual effect. Warm eyes, winning smile – he's never had to try very hard.

It being a Sunday, I go for a Bloody Mary.

'Been too long, mate,' he says, and holds out his glass for me to clink. 'I'm sorry about Marcus – how are you doing?'

'Sorry I didn't return your calls. It's been a difficult time. But I'm getting there, slowly.'

'How long is it now?'

'Almost ten months.' Three hundred and one days, to be precise.

‘Oh,’ he says, then in an attempt to brighten the mood: ‘Still living in the lap of luxury, though?’ It comes out a bit tactlessly, and he knows it. ‘That little gem of a house round the corner you two used to share,’ he quickly adds.

‘Jubilee Cottage,’ I reply. ‘One or two problems, but I’m hanging on in there.’ Maybe it’s all the months of moping around, but I seem to have lost the art of small talk.

‘I was thinking back to that gig we did in Cannes a few years back,’ he continues. ‘Wild times! Remember the langoustine that came to life in the *fruits de mer* and bit Kate Beckinsale? I’ll never cook on a yacht again as long as I live.’

I smile and stir my drink with its oversize stick of celery. A dish of grilled Padrón peppers arrives, and I sprinkle them with salt flakes. Spain is a land of bright colours – go bold with the seasoning.

‘Anyway . . . Hoping you may be able to save the day, help out an old friend. Does Chester Square Cookery School mean anything to you?’

I must have walked past the place a thousand times on my way to Victoria – typical Belgravia mansion with decorative white stucco, like icing on a wedding cake. Somewhat grander than your average cookery school, and news to me that Christian works there.

‘It was after my business went into liquidation – the owner’s an old friend of mine. She took pity on me, I guess. The job comes with a nice little flat at the back, and I don’t mind having to charm the punters while I cook. Which brings me to my point.’

It seems Christian has a problem. During September, the school runs short residential courses for amateur cooks wishing to take their culinary skills ‘to the next level’. There’s one starting tomorrow, but he can hardly teach it one-handed.

‘I thought – if I do the meet-and-greets, who better than my old friend Paul to cover me in the classroom? I meant to bring the schedule along, but it’s basic stuff really – knife skills, roasting, chocolate. Mainly ladies who lunch, enjoying a break from their husbands. The sort of stuff an expert like

you can teach with one arm tied behind your back.’ He wiggles his fingers and laughs.

Poor old Christian; he sure has come down in the world since the glory days of *Pass the Gravy!* and two Michelin stars. His latest failure – he seems to be the master of bad timing – was a chain of brasseries, which I gather cost a lot of people a lot of money.

I weigh up his offer. Chester Square is less than a ten-minute walk from home, so I can hardly complain about the commute. On the other hand, am I ready to throw myself into a classroom, in front of new faces, strangers? I’m out of practice – I’d rather stay at home.

‘Embarrassing question,’ I say. ‘How much will they pay?’

He sits up a little straighter, tension visibly easing.

‘We’ll sort that out, no worries there. But great that you’ll do it – weight off my mind.’

‘I’m not saying yes for definite – I need to check my diary,’ I protest. What am I letting myself in for? ‘Look, I’ll phone you.’

This he chooses to ignore. ‘So see you tomorrow – I’ll introduce you to the team, give you the tour, before the students arrive.’

He lays his left hand lightly on my arm, the bandage somewhat grubby. ‘I’m sorry about Marcus, and I mean that.’

Then he stands up, teases the girls with another of his steel-grey glances, and bounds out of the bar. Leaving me to pay the bill.

\* \* \*

I hate to go on about money, but since Marcus died I’ve discovered how totally clueless I am. He knew how to manage finances, handle any sort of tricky situation, whereas I always seem to be out of my depth and chasing my tail. I can’t believe how much it costs to run a house – even one as tiny as mine. Thank God for my freelance work for *Escape*, which covers the basics; an eight-pager every month – recipes *and* food styling. And thank God for Julie, who happens to be the magazine’s food editor and commissions me.

Back at Jubilee Cottage, I phone her to tell her about Christian. Early evening on a Sunday, she may even pick up. Party Girl is out carousing with some noisy media friends in a bar in Covent Garden – a Montmartre vibe, apparently. ‘I’ll call you back on FaceTime,’ she screams. She thinks modern technology is marvellous, whereas I can take it or leave it.

A few seconds later my phone vibrates and her smiling face appears. Tonight she’s gone for a Latin look, with hair swept up and dramatic eyeliner. ‘That’s better,’ she says, to the background bleat and swell of accordions. ‘It’s crazy here – you should come and join us!’ My barfly days with Julie are over but it’s kind of her to ask.

‘Funnily enough, I’ve been out to drinks myself,’ I say, with a hint of pride. For weeks she’s been trying to persuade me to stir my stumps and go out. ‘But you’ll never guess who with.’

‘Lady Gaga? Elton John? Dolly Parton?’

‘Better than that – *Christian!*’

She’s amazed – hasn’t seen him since the brasserie launch. ‘That’s great! But I thought he’d crashed and burned. Is he still as gorgeous as ever?’

‘Some wear and tear,’ I say, ungenerously.

‘Remember that time he got mixed up with the oligarch’s daughter and we were convinced he’d been sent to Siberia?’

Or the time he was fan-mobbed in Tokyo, or cooked at the White House: no shortage of material for a future biographer.

I tell her about Christian’s accident, and that he wants me to step in and save the day. As expected, Julie turns protective. ‘Are they paying you properly?’ I confess this hasn’t been finalized. ‘Pin them down, Paul, and insist on half upfront. Otherwise – if you want my opinion – it’s a brilliant idea.’

‘The only thing is, I was promising myself a few days off after last week,’ I say lamely.

‘But you’re a fantastic teacher – it’ll be fun. Get you out of the house, and you can treat yourself to a holiday on the proceeds. A proper holiday, like you deserve.’

It's true: I could do with a week on a beach. Early September means Christmas to magazine people, and we've just completed a nerve-shredding two-day photoshoot for *Escape's* festive number. The theme was *The Nutcracker*. As well as the inevitable groaning turkey and trimmings, our editor insisted on a twelve-foot Christmas tree (fully festooned in blue and silver), three small kids (ditto) and a French bulldog (blue and white bandana). Everywhere you looked, bewhiskered toy soldiers, plus – I can feel sweat breaking out at the memory – a crackling log fire, on the hottest day of the year.

'I just hope she's OK with the pictures,' I say. 'She' is our editor, Dena, a tyrant who stubs out careers as casually as the Dunhills she still smokes in the office because no one has the nerve to object.

'I'll text you tomorrow morning the moment she's seen them. And *please* say yes to Christian.' As we talk I catch sight of myself in the mirror. It's hard to look at your own reflection objectively, but the last couple of years haven't been kind: Marcus's dreadful illness, followed by the inevitable. For forty-two, I guess I'm in reasonable shape – not that I take any exercise apart from racing around for work. But there's sadness in my eyes, a sort of wariness that wasn't there before. Hair's getting greyer, too – which on Marcus was distinguished, but makes me look somehow faded. Worn down by grief, if you want to know the truth. I try smiling, and it's a big improvement.

Maybe Julie's right, and this Chester Square gig will take me out of myself, stop me rattling around in an empty house missing Marcus. Maybe I'll get a glimpse of the Christian I used to know and love before the ex-girlfriends and Inland Revenue knocked the stuffing out of him.

'OK, I'll think about it,' I say. 'Speak tomorrow.'

# Chapter 1

Monday

The front door of number forty-one is not in Chester Square at all but to one side of the property, in Eccleston Street. This particular house has always intrigued me because at some point the owners built a square extension at the back, with clerestory windows running around the top – a gallery, or perhaps a library?

By Belgravia standards, the place looks shabby. The Grosvenor Estate, which owns everything around here, has draconian rules on exterior maintenance, so it's not a case of peeling paint or cracked windows, but there's something unloved about it. Cinerarias in the window boxes look as if they'd benefit from a feed and water, and the steps could do with a sweep.

Beside the door – regulation black gloss, somewhat scuffed – is a touchpad with numbers, and a round button marked Visitors. I press this and there's a jangling of bells, followed by the clash of electric locks leaping back. The door half opens, and a pale, slender young woman in a high-necked white chef's tunic looks me up and down. It's as if she's gone out of her way to be unmemorable: no make-up or jewellery, wishy-washy hair.

'I'm Suzie,' she says. 'Suzie Wheeler.'

Not the enthusiastic welcome one might have hoped for . . . *Thank you for coming to the rescue at short notice, Paul! Or: You must be Paul*



*Delamare – our knight in shining armour!*

‘I’ll show you up. Christian isn’t here yet.’ She’s a rhotic speaker – burrs her *rs* as they do in the West Country; my mother was too. As the door closes behind us I notice she bites her nails.

‘Is there a code so I can get in and out by myself?’ I ask.

‘1904,’ she replies.

I’ve set the questions for a few food quizzes in my time, so I parry this with, ‘Invention of the tea bag.’

‘Also the boss’s birthday.’ She smiles, cautiously. ‘Not the year, obviously – the nineteenth of April.’

My first impression on stepping inside is the smell. I have an especially keen sense of smell – it’s something chefs develop. This is that instantly recognizable ‘institutional’ pall, of dinners and disinfectant. Otherwise no surprises: a thick but well-worn carpet in burnt gold, console tables with magazines and tired vases of chrysanthemums, dingy Victorian landscapes hanging from picture rails.

I follow Suzie up a broad flight of stairs – ‘The Grand Staircase,’ she says with a sniff – and along a landing. If downstairs is like a waiting room, this has more of an auction house vibe, crowded with lumber and glass display cases. I’ll take a proper look later, but we seem to have a collector in our midst – of antique cooking equipment.

We pick our way to a door bearing a hand-painted plaque: SHELLEY ROOM. Suzie taps on it, calls out, ‘Your visitor, Mrs Hoyt,’ then melts away. I step into the oak-panelled lair of the cookery school’s proprietor-cum-principal.

She’s standing at tall French windows, facing away from me. Her silhouette is trim – braid-edged tweed suit, ash-blonde hair swept back under a wide headband – against the green backdrop of the planes in the square’s central garden. In the middle of the room stands a large antique desk of the bank manager sort, topped with green leather, framed photographs and a laptop. A few tidy piles of paper are kept in check by

antique brass weights, the bell-shaped type with a handle at the top. Running along the walls are further display cabinets and an ornate cast-iron strongbox, with a coat of arms traced in gilt. Hanging on the panelling: prints of herbs, fruits and spices; framed advertisements for Victorian bakeware and gadgetry; one of those School of Arcimboldo oil paintings in which the subject's face is modelled from vegetables.

I'm busy taking all this in when the woman wheels round. She's not that much older than I am – late forties, perhaps – elegantly made-up and presented, but holds her face to one side, as if hiding something.

'Rose Hoyt,' she says, extending a hand for me to shake. With the other, she dabs her eye with a handkerchief. 'You must excuse my appearance. I presume from your surprised expression that Christian didn't mention it.'

I fumble an apology and turn away. Her face appears to have fallen at one side, perhaps because of a stroke or palsy. Something similar happened to a matron at school during the school holidays – we were terrified it might be catching.

'Anyway,' says Rose, fidgeting with her hands, 'I did ask him to try and be punctual.' As well as engagement and wedding rings I see a big fat cushion-cut emerald in a diamond surround, probably Art Deco, worth more than I earn in a year.

'While we're waiting, let me tell you a little about the school and what we do here. This house has been in my family – the Strangs – since 1900, and I have lived here all my life. As you can see, it's on the large side. After my husband died – Hoyt is my married name – our daughter took a course at Leith's. It struck me we might be able to set up something along similar lines here.

'We teach what I call "classic cookery". A lot of the cookery schools seem only interested in jumping on the latest bandwagon – "Macaroon Masterclass", "Vegan in a Hurry", you know the sort of thing. But if you study here, you learn real cooking – how to make a proper béchamel, French-trim lamb cutlets or poach a salmon. Proper culinary practice, in other words.

‘You will be teaching a class of eight. It’s a residential arrangement. I think part of our appeal is that students get to stay in Belgravia, which would normally cost them a king’s ransom. From our point of view, if we have all these spare bedrooms, we may as well fill them.’

She checks her watch again. According to mine, it’s four minutes fast, but maybe she likes it that way. ‘Did Christian take you through the syllabus?’

‘No,’ I reply, and she hands me a printed sheet. I’m about to raise the question of my fee, but she’s already stood up and crossed to the fireplace, beside which an ornate gilt handle is set in a decorative plaster border. She gives it a crank, and noticing my look of interest, comments, ‘You’ll find that in many ways we’re rather old-tech here. This is one of the original servants’ bells from the nineteenth century, although of course Papa had them electrified.’

I look down the list of lessons. *Yikes!* This is also like stepping back in time – to a 1970s catering college. *Mastering the Art of Pastry. Well-tempered Chocolate. Syrups, Spun Sugar and Sugarcraft.* What has Christian landed me with?

‘Erm, is there any flexibility with this?’ I ask.

‘I think you’ll find it well structured – it covers the basic techniques and gives a satisfactory balance across the days. I know some schools design their courses so the students effectively cook their own meals, but I find that a little, well, cheap. Besides, that’s what Suzie is here for,’ she adds, as the young woman enters.

‘You rang, Mrs Hoyt.’ Very *Downton Abbey*.

‘No sign of him, I suppose?’ asks Rose.

‘I think he was late back last night,’ replies Suzie.

Rose fiddles with an earring. ‘In that case, please show Mr Delamare around and make sure he knows where everything is.’

I follow Suzie out and, as soon as the door is shut, say to her, ‘“Mr Delamare” makes me feel about a hundred. Please call me Paul.’

She nods and we file back past the museum exhibits.

‘I do feel a bit let down by Christian,’ I continue, hoping she’ll tell me what’s happening. ‘He promised to be here.’ She shrugs – barely perceptibly – then leads me downstairs to a stately door with an enormous brass gong to one side. The nameplate is inscribed PINK ROOM.

‘This is where we eat,’ she says, swinging it open. There’s something about pink dining rooms that makes me feel bilious, though I have to admit the space itself is gracious enough, facing out over Chester Square and gleaming with mahogany. On one wall, discreetly let into the beeswaxed panelling, I notice a dumb waiter, and ask Suzie if it’s still in operation.

I’m a sucker for old-fashioned mod-cons. When I was a child, my mother used to take me to a china shop in South Audley Street that had a magic doormat: when you stepped on it, your weight triggered a mechanism that set the doors juddering open. My first suit came from a men’s outfitters that used pneumatic tubes to whizz cash and change between the shop floor and the accounts department upstairs.

‘Right to the top,’ she replies. Useful no doubt in olden days, for servants ferrying breakfast in bed to their indolent masters and mistresses. ‘But Mrs Hoyt doesn’t like the disturbance while people are eating, so I still do a lot of traipsing up and down.’ Suzie indicates a door covered in green baize – the real thing, which you rarely see nowadays except on gaming and billiard tables.

Leaving the Pink Room behind us, she leads me back into the hall, past the funeral flowers to the rear of the building. I knew these properties were big, but this one seems to go on for ever. We step out into a dark little courtyard, towered over by brickwork, with a huge black steel door at the back which Suzie says opens into Eaton Mews. A narrow cast-iron stairway – like an old-fashioned fire escape – leads up to a glazed door. Christian told me he had a flat above the old coach house, and this is it.

Suzie climbs up the stairway and taps at the door, waits for a minute then descends.

‘Any idea where he might have got to?’ I ask.