



*A Very Special Christmas*

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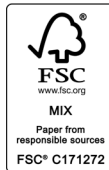
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## *Chapter One*

Abigail Beadle walked into the church and paused to stare round. Only a few of the pews were occupied but still, that was more than she'd expected, given her stepmother's genius for upsetting people. She shivered. November could be a cold month and Christmas still seemed a long time away.

A lady was already sitting in the front pew: her stepmother's cousin, Cynthia. She was draped in very old-fashioned garments. It was what you did at a funeral, dress in black. Today Abigail would have preferred to wear red – bright red – if she'd owned any red clothes, that was. It occurred to her suddenly how outraged Edwina would have been if she'd even said that, let alone done it, and she had to turn a giggle into a hiccup.

Freedom from her stepmother's bullying had gone to her head, was bubbling out of every pore, but she had to hold it in till this was over.

As she took her seat at the front, Cousin Cynthia held out a lace-edged handkerchief, no doubt thinking she'd been stifling a sob.

Abigail shook her head, wasn't going to pretend to weep. She'd done her duty and recently kept an eye on Edwina as she grew frailer. She'd looked after her father for a few years but he had been far easier, in spite of his deteriorating health from Parkinson's. After his death, it had been even harder to deal with her stepmother, so they'd mostly avoided one another. It was a big house, after all.

From now on, however, she would do what she wanted and expected to enjoy the rest of her life now that her stepmother didn't hold the purse strings. She'd promised herself all sorts of small treats last night as she lay sprawled on a couch (*like a slut*), watching her own choice of TV programme (*fit only for idiots*) and drinking a glass of white wine (*real ladies only drink wine at table*).

It took her by surprise when the funeral service ended and Cynthia had to poke her in the side to remind her to stand up. She led the way outside, relishing the fresh air on her face as she followed the coffin into the churchyard. She had a sudden desire to tear off the unflattering black hat and sling it as far away as she could. It was such a horrible lump of a thing. Today, after everyone had gone home, she was going to walk down to the ash grove at the rear of the grounds and toss the hat into the highest tree. What fun it would be to see birds perching on it and, she hoped, pecking it to pieces!

In the coming weeks she'd buy some flattering clothes and get a new hairstyle. She hoped – oh, she did so hope! – that she'd make some proper friends now that she could invite them home or go out without recriminations being heaped upon her for days afterwards.

Another jab from that bony elbow made Abigail realise she was daydreaming again. That was her besetting sin, to quote one of her favourite fictional characters.

Cynthia glared at her. 'I don't know what's got into you today. Throw some earth on the coffin, for goodness' sake, and let's get this part of the funeral finished!'

Abigail did the necessary, then stood back and watched everyone follow suit. It seemed to take for ever. She didn't understand why Cynthia kept glancing at her with ill-concealed triumph. Once the funeral was over, she was never going to invite the woman to visit Ashgrove House. She wasn't a Beadle, after all, and she'd followed her cousin Edwina's example and become increasingly unpleasant to deal with as the years passed.

The mourners followed her back to the house, so Abigail still had to remain calm and solemn. There weren't many in the drawing room: the vicar, a few elderly acquaintances of the family, Cousin Cynthia and Mr Liddlestone, the family lawyer, whom she'd known since she was a child.

She hoped they wouldn't stay long. They didn't.

After they'd nibbled a biscuit or two and grimaced at the horribly sweet, cheap sherry her stepmother had favoured, which she had specified was to be the only alcoholic drink to be offered at her funeral gathering, the visitors murmured the usual platitudes and left.

Abigail had only pretended to drink. She hadn't made up her mind yet whether to pour the rest of the sherry down the sink or keep it for unwanted guests, like Cousin Cynthia. She sipped a cup of tea offered by Dot, who came

in twice a week to do the cleaning and had been doing so for most of Abigail's life. Dot winked at her as she moved on. She was doing overtime today with one of her many friends helping out.

Dot did wonders with the cleaning and never counted the extra minutes she gave so cheerfully. Why she had continued to work for such a bad-tempered woman was a mystery to everyone in the village. Abigail didn't know what she'd have done without Dot, who had been more like an aunt, comforting her after first her mother when she was a teenager and a few years later her father died.

It was ridiculous that Edwina had refused point-blank to pay for more help, given the size of the house. She'd held the purse strings in a tight grip until a few weeks ago, when she'd had a severe heart attack. She'd lingered for two more weeks in hospital but hadn't recovered consciousness.

Abigail sometimes wondered whether Edwina had been mean because they were short of money or because it gave her pleasure to make everyone except herself scrimp and manage without luxuries. Knowing her, she'd probably enjoyed it.

Oh dear! Someone was speaking to her. 'Sorry. I was lost in thought. Could you say that again, please?'

Mr Liddlestone gave her one of his gentle smiles. 'I have to go now. I have an appointment with a client in half an hour. Could you come and see me at my rooms tomorrow? We need to deal with the will. Your stepmother didn't want it read in front of everyone.'

'Yes, of course. Oh, Mr L, I'm so looking forward to having my own money and looking after this house properly.'

‘Yes, I . . . suppose you are. Shall we say tomorrow at three?’

She watched him go, worried about how old and pale he’d been looking recently. Today he seemed unhappy about something, but it couldn’t be because of her stepmother dying because he hadn’t liked Edwina either. It was her father who had been his friend.

Perhaps there was less money than expected. Well, if so, Abigail was good at managing. She’d cope, would do anything necessary to stay at Ashgrove House. Her ancestors had started building it just after King George I came to the throne in the early eighteenth century, and had added to it over the years. It wasn’t a large stately home, just a small manor house. Abigail loved every brick of it.

The trouble was, you had to pay an inheritance tax to keep a house like Ashgrove and she wasn’t sure there would be enough money to cover that. What would she do if she had to sell her family home and find somewhere else to live? It didn’t bear thinking of. She had never lived anywhere else and was a Beadle to the core.

Gerard Liddlestone drove slowly back to the village from Ashgrove House after the funeral, feeling depressed about the mess he would have to start unravelling the following day. He rubbed his aching forehead. He’d been feeling seedy for a while and his wife was pressing him to retire.

You ought not to speak ill of the dead, but Edwina Beadle had been a horrible woman, who’d trapped a grieving widower and ‘married up’, as some people called it. At first she had been reasonably pleasant – never the sort you got on with easily, unlike her husband, though.

She'd persuaded her husband to write a will leaving everything to her, but fortunately Stephen Beadle had had the wit to make a condition about that inheritance. She'd tried to get round that in her final will, which had left everything to her Cousin Cynthia. He was sure the latter would bring in lawyers to back up that will.

He was getting too old for these struggles over inheritance, hated to see families torn apart. After her husband died, Edwina had taken control of the estate finances and turned into a spiteful miser, treating her stepdaughter like a slave. He'd been a coward when dealing with her, he admitted, should have reminded her when she fiddled around with her will about that addendum to her late husband's will – an addendum which she had signed and which stipulated that everything should be passed on to Abigail.

The trouble was, he'd felt that her anger would have made her stepdaughter's life even more unpleasant if he reminded her, and since the house would eventually come to Abigail, it made no real difference.

He still felt guilty about letting that situation continue, though. He didn't really have another client waiting for him, but his headache was getting worse and he couldn't seem to think straight. He nodded to his secretary and told her she could go home because it was past her usual time of leaving.

He got the box of Beadle family papers out of the storeroom, set it on his desk and took the lid off. Edwina's latest will, which was on top of the pile of documents, was going to cause a lot of trouble. He ought to be working out how best to deal with it tomorrow, but instead sat scowling at it, rubbing his forehead tiredly.



Edwina had grown rather erratic in the last year of her life, changing the details of her will several times. On what turned out to be her final visit to his rooms, she'd done it again. He'd tried to persuade her not to do this, of course he had, but she'd been adamant, threatening to go to another lawyer if he refused. He'd had to bring in two people from a nearby office to act as witnesses because they were the only others left in the building by that time. She'd signed it triumphantly, believing she was carrying out the threat she'd been making for years to disinherit her stepdaughter completely.

This time it was because of some imagined fault that was supposed to prove that Abigail could not be trusted with the family money or the preservation of historic Ashgrove House. Ha! Abigail had been the one looking after the house for years.

He was deeply sorry now that he'd been a coward, unable to face Edwina's fury. He should have reminded her about the addendum, but had thought she'd once again change her will again in a week or two.

He stared out of his office window, then looked back at Edwina's final will. What if . . . ? No, no, he couldn't destroy it. He just . . . couldn't. He was a lawyer. This will must be *proved* legally invalid. He was tempted, though, and who would know if he did destroy it? It wouldn't really change anything, just prevent a lot of nastiness and expense because he was sure that Cynthia Polson would try to overturn the original conditions of inheritance.

Actually, he hadn't even asked his secretary to type this new will up, because the previous will was on the computer

and it had only been a question of changing the names and a couple of sentences. Even he could manage that. He switched on the computer and opened the file, once again tempted to destroy that new will. Just one keystroke would do it.

No, no! He mustn't, even though it would be the easiest way to deal with this situation. He closed the file quickly and stared in horror as his fingers seemed to take on a life of their own and deleted it, then deleted the backup file too.

He jerked his hands away from the keyboard, looking at the screen, aghast. What had he done? There was a way to retrieve deleted files, he knew, because he'd had digital mishaps before. But his head was throbbing. He'd ask his secretary's help in sorting it all out tomorrow.

He shut down the computer, stuffed the paper copy of the final will back into the box, having to push down the pile of papers to get the lid closed. It was time to start a new box for the Beadle family. Only would there be any more Beadles? Abigail was thirty-eight, after all, and unmarried.

He began to pack his briefcase, stopping now and then to sigh and worry about her. She had looked happier than usual today, though she'd tried to hide it and stay solemn. But he'd known her all her life and was well aware that when her eyes crinkled slightly at the corners she was hiding a smile.

She had lovely eyes, of an unusual turquoise-blue, rimmed by long dark lashes, and honey-coloured hair like all true Beadles. She was as honest as the day was long and stubborn when she believed something was right. My goodness, how the years had flown past! Could the little

Beadle baby whose christening he'd attended really be almost forty?

He was seriously considering how best to move into retirement now. Neither of his children had wanted to study law so he'd recently taken on a younger partner as the first step in disengaging. Philip Danvers was a pleasant chap, well qualified, and was settling in nicely.

Gerard began to pace up and down then stopped to stare blindly out of the window. If he gave in to temptation, destroyed the paper copy and let the final will stay deleted on the computer, he'd be breaking the law, going against all he believed in.

It occurred to him yet again, however, that what he was thinking of doing would be justice in the very best and truest sense of the word. But it was still against the law.

No, he just couldn't do it.

When all the guests had left, Abigail let out her breath in a long exhalation of relief. She switched on the radio and smiled as she heard one of her favourite tunes.

She couldn't help it. She began to waltz round the drawing room, then twirled out into the hall. From there she moved into the library and completed the circuit via the dining room at the front of the house, which was across the hall from the drawing room. She and her father had often danced round the house together. He'd loved ballroom dancing but her stepmother had not been at all musical.

As she spun round, she nearly fell for lack of a partner and laughed aloud. She was free! Free at last.

The music continued to play, so she went on dancing. On her second circuit of the main rooms, she pulled back

the curtains, swaying to and fro, then starting off again, waltzing merrily till the tune changed into a tango. Oh, she loved a tango. It had been her father's favourite dance. She began moving to the new rhythm with smooth, controlled steps and impeccable turns.

Dot went into the drawing room to clear away the cups and glasses, but ducked back behind the door, smiling when she saw Abigail solemnly waltzing across the room and out into the hall. She continued to smile as the dancing took Abigail round the main rooms for a second time.

When she heard the curtains being drawn back to let in the afternoon sunlight, she nearly cheered aloud. The old witch would have thrown a fit. Edwina had always insisted on keeping the curtains drawn at the times of day sunlight fell on the windows, to prevent fading of carpets and upholstery. They were only drawn back at those times if the room was going to be used by her.

Dot had refused point-blank to keep the blinds half drawn in her kitchen, a place lazy Edwina rarely visited, and had threatened to give notice if anyone tried to make her work in such dim light.

As the music changed to a tango, Dot began to sway. She went to a ballroom dancing club for oldies in the village and loved Latin American dances most of all. When Abigail came round again, she couldn't resist it. She stepped forward and bowed. 'May I have this dance, my lady?'

Abigail swept her a curtsy. 'Delighted, my lord.'

So Dot took over. She always played the man when she and her sister went to the senior citizens' dances in the

village hall, because there was a shortage of older men her age and she was quite tall. She swept Abigail swept round in a masterful manner, swaying and swooping, holding her arms just so, and tilting her partner back a couple of times, just like they'd shown her at the club.

When the music stopped, she let go and bowed. 'That was a real pleasure.'

Abigail laughed and clapped. 'You are such a good dancer, Dot.'

'Not as good as your dad.'

'Wasn't he marvellous? He started teaching me when I was quite little, before you began working for us. But after he remarried, we only danced when Edwina was out. When he developed Parky's and gradually lost control of his limbs, he was so brave about it, never complained. We both missed the dancing dreadfully.'

'My Hilton was a good dancer, too. I miss him for that, though not for much else. He was a lazy devil round the house.'

Abigail didn't comment. Everyone in the village had known that Hilton Eakins was a drunkard and a slob, of course they had, but they'd never dared say that to Dot's face, even after he died. She changed the subject. 'I shouldn't be dancing on the day of my stepmother's funeral, should I? Please don't tell anyone.'

'If I were in your place, I'd be tap dancing on the rooftop for the whole world to see, I'd be so happy. She was a nasty person and treated you badly.'

Dot held up one hand to stop Abigail protesting that remark. 'I didn't say anything before about how things

were. It wasn't my place and I couldn't do anything about it, could I? But you don't have to pretend with me, love. I know what *she* was like better than anyone. You can dance, sing, shout, do anything you feel like from now on. You've earned it.'

To her surprise, Abigail gave her a big hug and said, 'The first thing I want to do is thank you, Dot, for everything you've done over the years, especially since Dad died. You've been a great comfort to me.'

'I wish I'd been able to do more to help you.'

'No one could. It was just a question of enduring. But the way you winked at me sometimes or made jokes about her helped. I knew I wasn't alone in the world, even after Dad had gone, not with you around. That meant so much.'

'What are you going to do now, if you don't mind me asking?'

'I don't mind you asking, but I don't actually know till I find out how matters stand financially. All I can do is start sorting out the house because I'm not living in my stepmother's clutter. I hate how she changed things around. Her ornaments will be the first things to go. Cheap, horrible tat, they are. But even before that, I'm going to bring my own books up from the cellar, then take all those mouldy, boring old tomes off the shelves in the library and put *them* in the cellar. I'll fill the shelves with my novels. *Romances*, even.'

'You daring devil!' Dot chuckled. Ma Beadle had been particularly down on romances. Abigail, on the other hand, would read any sort of novel but loved romances best, said she felt safe knowing there would always be a happy ending

to the story. Reading romances had been her secret vice, that and the occasional bar of chocolate or bottle of wine. Not much of a life, poor lass.

As Dot walked back to the kitchen, she shook her head sadly. Only a gentle soul like Abigail would consider it to be an act of rebellion to put her books out on public display. They wouldn't look as nice as the old books, though, because the romances were all second hand. Over the years Abigail had bought them from charity shops or market stalls, and had smuggled them into the house with the shopping. Hundreds of them, there must be now.

The smile faded. Dot wasn't sure her job would be safe from now on and that was worrying her. Why had Mr L been looking so unhappy today at the funeral if everything was all right? There was some problem looming, she was sure of it. She knew she wouldn't be sacked unless matters were desperate, but her job would depend on how much money had been left and whether Abigail would be able to stay here. There would no doubt be massive death duties to pay. No, they called it inheritance tax these days, didn't they? Well, it didn't matter what they called it, she considered it unfair for the government to take so much of what people had left to their families. Double dipping, she called it. People had already paid tax on their money when they earned it, after all.

Surely the old house wouldn't have to be sold? It'd break Abigail's heart to do that. It'd break any Beadle's heart! It'd upset Dot, too. And let alone she would find it hard to manage on the old age pension without the extra money she earned working here, she too loved the big old house

and its interesting contents. No, there must be enough to cover the inheritance tax because the old witch had been an absolute miser with money. Abigail would be all right, surely she would?

Dot stood still to think about it. She had a good mind to ask Mr L about the will when she went into his suite of offices to clean up tonight. If she hurried with her jobs here, she might be able to catch him before he left work for the day. He wouldn't tell her any details of the will, that wouldn't be right, but she'd know from his expression whether the news was going to be good or bad for her girl.