

THE
MULBERRY HALL
MURDERS

MURDER ON A MIDSUMMER NIGHT

LUCY
STRANGE

illustrated by
HANNAH PECK

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FPO (fsc placeholder)

For Leah Garton



CHARACTERS



ELIZA ROSE



BRAM ROSE



KRISH SWAN



MR ROSE THE CHEF



MRS ROSE THE DRIVER



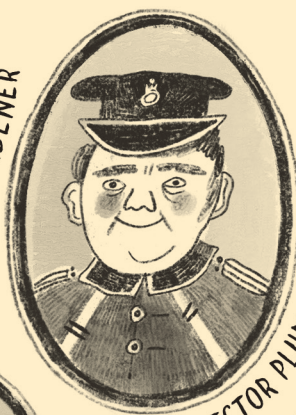
SIR PERCY SWAN



MAGNUS COOPER



MR WILLOW THE GARDENER



INSPECTOR PLUM



GRAVES THE BUTLER



MARIA GLASS



DOCTOR WU



It was the night of Sir Percy's summer party. A warm breeze danced across the gardens of Mulberry Hall, and birdsong filled the evening air.

The party guests were arriving, dressed in their wonderful costumes. There were fairies and goblins, king and queens, and all sorts of woodland animals. Sir Percy met his friends on the terrace. There were happy cries of, "Haven't seen you in ages!", "Don't you look well!" and "What a splendid weasel costume!"

The guests helped themselves to drinks from silver trays. Then they strolled over the neatly trimmed lawn to admire Sir Percy's splendid garden.

A large bush stood at the very bottom of the garden, between a maze and a duck pond. The bush rustled ... and it swished. It shook! And then a boy in a badger costume climbed out of its lower branches.

“What did you push me into that bush for, Eliza?” the boy grumbled to a girl dressed as a brown rabbit. He picked some prickly twigs from his costume.

Eliza wasn't usually the sort of child to go around pushing people into bushes, but her big brother Bram was being annoying this evening. Even more annoying than normal.

“Because you're talking rubbish, Bram Rose,” Eliza huffed. “You're just trying to scare me.”

“I am not talking rubbish!” insisted Bram, brushing a dead leaf from his badger bottom.

Eliza ignored him. She lit a candle and placed it in a lantern. She looked around. There were

twinkling lights in all the flower beds, bushes and pathways now – a hundred of them at least. The grounds of Mulberry Hall had become an enchanted fairy garden.

“Oh, it looks magical, doesn’t it?” Eliza said.

But Bram wasn’t listening. He wasn’t always very good at listening.

“When darkness falls, the Crow King will come!” Bram said in a low, spooky voice. It was the third time he’d said it that evening.

Eliza rolled her eyes at him and stomped off.

“It’s true!” Bram called after her. He followed his sister across the middle of Sir Percy’s nature garden, and his badger leg got caught in a bramble.

“The Crow King will appear at the ancient stone in the middle of the maze,” Bram recited. He untangled himself from the bramble as

Eliza strode on. “Mr Willow says so. Every midsummer night, the Crow King comes!”

“Why? *Why* would he come?” Eliza demanded.

“I dunno – maybe the Crow King captures humans and drags them back to the Underworld! Or maybe he just ...” Bram considered it. “Maybe he just pops up to see what’s going on.” He caught up with his sister again. “Don’t you want to see him, Eliza? An actual demon! All we need to do is go into the maze and wait until dark ...”

Eliza felt a wave of fear wash over her, but she didn’t want Bram to see he had scared her again. She pulled up the hood of her rabbit costume, pretending it was the breeze that had made her shiver. “Old Mr Willow is full of nonsense,” Eliza said firmly. “Ghost stories and legends and stuff. None of it’s true.”

Mr Willow was the gardener at Mulberry Hall. He always said he had worked there for a hundred years, and Eliza almost believed him. Mr Willow's bent back and wrinkled face made him look like a twisted old tree. He had grown up on Dark Moor, which was a windswept wilderness that surrounded Mulberry Hall.

"Now come along, Bram," Eliza said in a voice that was a lot like their mother's. "Lighting the lanterns was supposed to be *our* job, not just mine. It would be nice if you actually helped." She lit another lantern and placed it by the entrance to the maze.

Eliza tried not to look down the pathway that squeezed between the maze's tall, prickly hedges. The maze made her feel shivery even in daylight. There was *no* chance she'd go in there after dark ...

"After we've done the lanterns, we need to get back to the kitchen to help Dad with the food," Eliza said. She passed her brother the

box of matches. “I’ve done about a million of them, and all you’ve done is follow me around going on about this silly old legend.”

Bram struck a match and lit the candle Eliza was holding out. “The Crow King is not a silly old legend,” Bram said. He loomed over the candle so its light made his face look hollow and strange. “The Crow King is REAL!” he hissed.

Eliza glared at her brother. “And what if he drags you back to the Underworld with him?”

“Oh, I won’t let *him* see *me*,” Bram said, as if he already had a clever answer to this. “I’ll be hiding. I’m very good at hiding.” Bram leapt behind a small cherry tree to show off his very good hiding skills.

Eliza put her hands on her hips and shook her head at him. “You want to spend the night hiding? In the dark? In there?” She jerked her head at the spooky entrance to the maze and raised an eyebrow at her brother.



Bram looked into the maze. Eliza did too – she couldn't help it.

The light was fading now. The tall hedges created deep shadows that meant you could

only see a few yards of narrow pathway, then it got swallowed up by a terrible darkness.

Eliza shivered again.