MURDER AT HOTEL MARVELO



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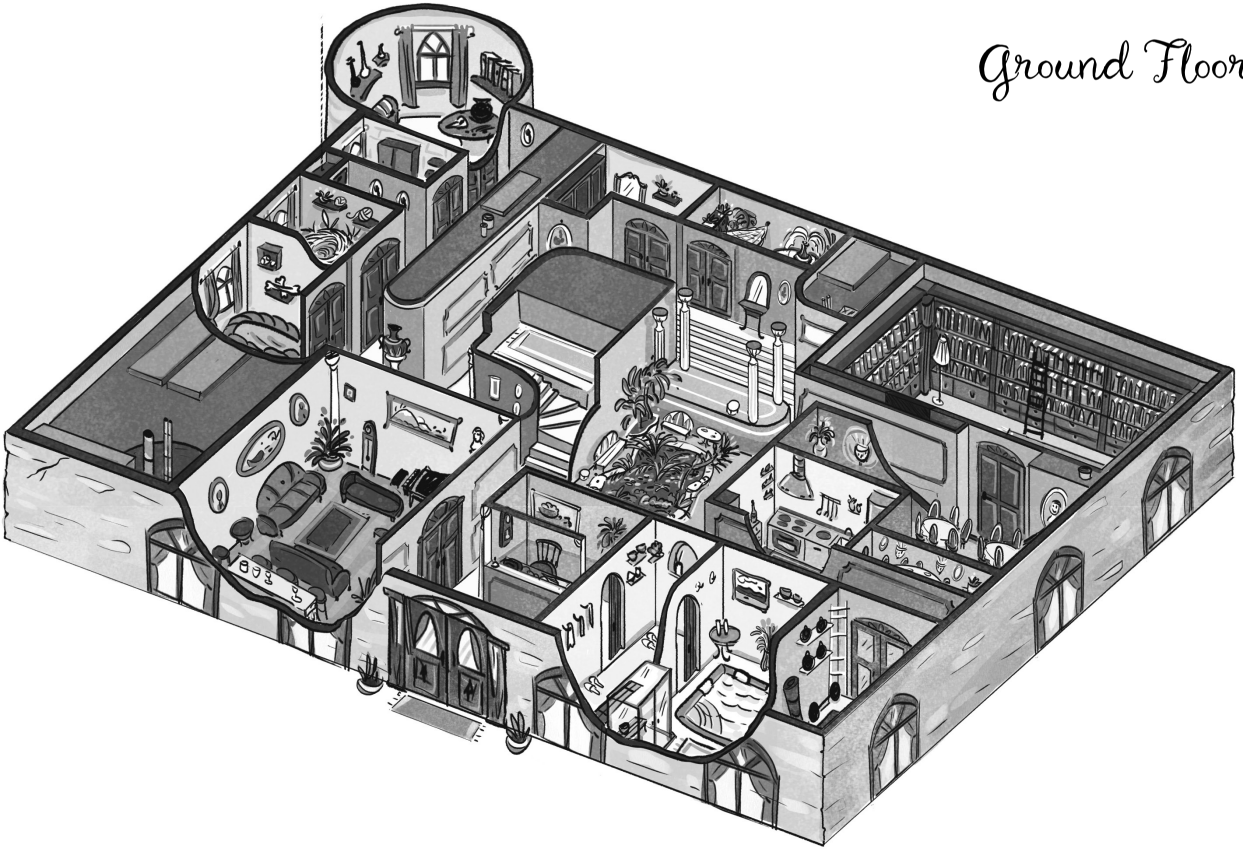
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For Ned
Happy Birthday!

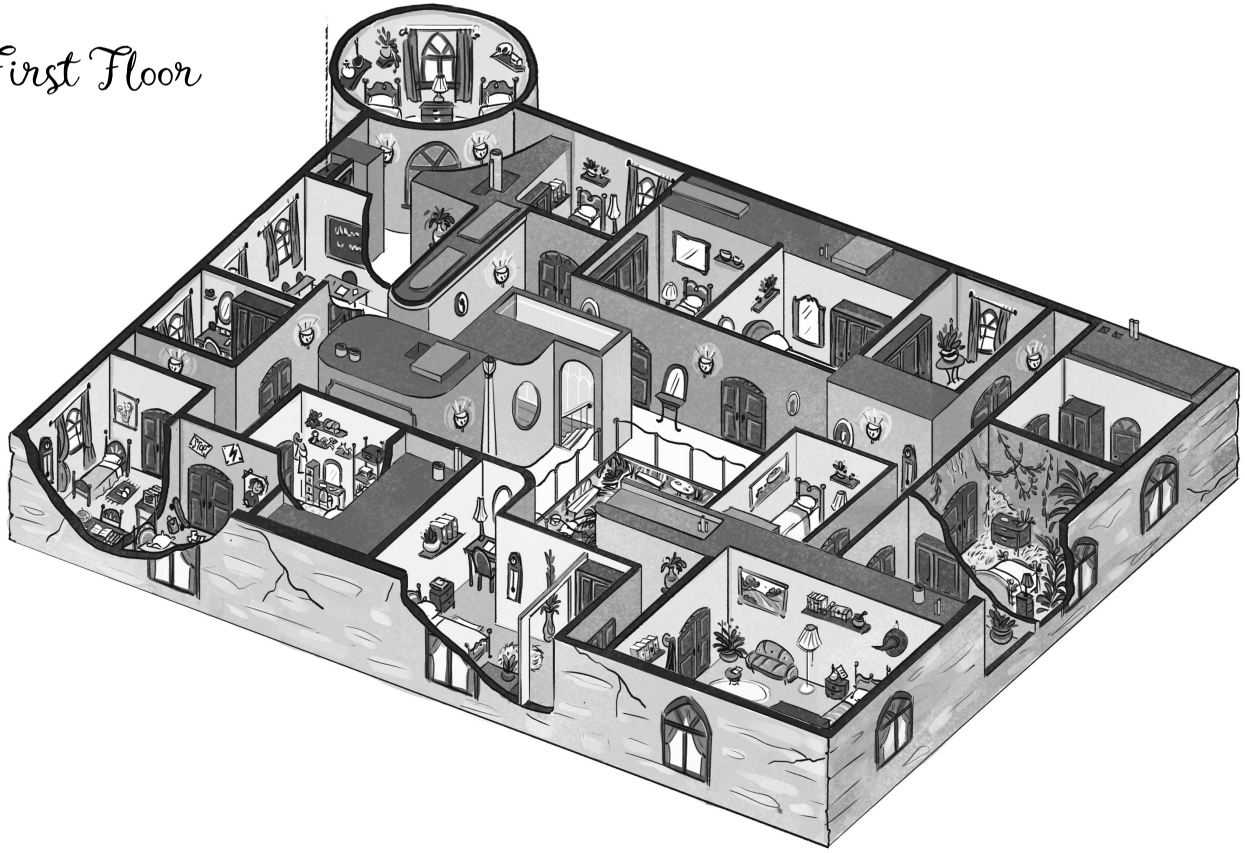

The Grounds of Hotel Marvelo
The Lake
The Hotel


The Forest
HOTEL MARVELO
N
W
E
S
To Town

Ground Floor



First Floor



Who's Who at Hotel Marvelo



Juniper



Finnian



Ida



Caspian



Teddy



Mortimus



Artemis



Finnian Marvelo was reading a book as he crossed the marble floor of the hotel reception. The hotel belonged to his parents. The book had belonged to his great-great-grandmother. The day, however, was all his. And he intended to spend it reading.

But as he reached the entrance to the drawing room, the ancient brass bell outside rang. He glanced up from the page to the check-in desk, but the concierge, Mortimus, wasn't there. Nor were his parents. Finnian tilted his head in surprise.

The bell gave an impatient trill, then gave several more rings in quick succession. Finnian hastily tucked his book (*The Compleat Guide to Subduing an Angrey Sprite*) under one arm and hurried over. No self-respecting Marvelo would leave a guest waiting.

He tugged the iron handle and the arched door glided open. The runes around the great door frame – warding symbols that prevented the use of magic in the hotel – flickered a burnished gold. The griffin standing on the wide stone step outside barged past him and lumbered towards

the check-in desk. The runes faded away as Finnian closed the door again. All was safe – no magic detected. Not that he expected otherwise. Hotel Marvelo guests knew the rules.

'Could I obtain a room for the evening?' The voice was deep and imperious and faintly impatient. Typical griffin. Finnian looked towards the drawing room and then across to the spa. Mortimus was still absent.

'Of course,' he said, hurrying to the desk. He hadn't yet been trained to use the booking-in system on the computer. But would Mortimus really want a new guest to be kept waiting? And what about his parents?

'I've had a very trying week at work, and I desperately need to switch off,' said the griffin.

Finnian glanced at the arc of lettering above the doorway to the drawing room. The familiar motto read: *Leave your spell book at home and relax at Hotel Marvelo*.

He nodded sympathetically. 'Worrying about keeping up with the latest trends in hexes or the newest charm to sweep social media can be exhausting.' He'd heard his mother say this to a sorcerer who had visited the previous week. He also knew that using magic could be dangerous, and therefore stressful – especially to the untrained. But he knew better than to mention that and risk offending a griffin.

The griffin eyed him dubiously. 'The room?'

'Keep your hair on.' Finnian's sister, Juniper, sailed round the desk and tried to elbow Finnian out of the way. He fended her off expertly.

The griffin looked down at itself with a disgruntled frown – a startling expression to see on a griffin's face under any

circumstances. It regarded the feathers on its chest, ruffled its huge wings (the draught from this blew Juniper's dark curls back), then turned to briefly observe the golden fur on its hindquarters and tail.

'I don't have any hair,' it said.

Griffins were notoriously literal. Which Juniper would know if she had read *The Culture, Customs and Character of the Modern Griffin*, as Finnian had. Twice.

'No, of course not,' said Finnian. He frowned at his sister.

Juniper shrugged and, abandoning her efforts to gain access to the computer, hopped up onto the desk, swinging her legs carelessly. It was all extremely unprofessional.

The griffin gave a lengthy, forceful sigh. Finnian hastily tapped the computer to life and scanned the system for an empty room. There were sixteen suites at the hotel, seven of them currently occupied. Two were reserved for aquatic guests, and the rest were spread among the different sections of the hotel.

'Something in the Castle Wing?' he asked the griffin.

The ancient clock in reception began to strike ten o'clock. The griffin made an ominous rumbling sound that could have been a 'yes' or could just have been an indication that it was beginning to feel hungry.

'Can I take your name, please?' Finnian found that he was sweating slightly.

The griffin produced a card with a name and email address on it.

Finnian tapped at the computer for an embarrassingly long time. Juniper was grinning.

He fumbled with a key card and pushed it across the desk. 'Room Fourteen.'

The griffin lifted one large foot and speared the card with a huge, curved claw.

'Would you like me to show you the way, sir?' Finnian asked, a little more faintly than he would have liked.

'That won't be necessary,' said the griffin. The long-haired tuft on the end of its tail flicked as it galumphed away towards the dark hallway leading to the Castle Wing. 'And it's *madam*,' it called back coldly, without turning round.

Finnian, who had been feeling relieved and triumphant in equal measure, closed his eyes briefly – which stopped him from having to see the delight on Juniper's face, but not from hearing her gleeful laughter.

She slipped down from her seat on top of the desk and clapped him on the back. 'Never mind. At least you checked your first guest in.'

There was no spite in Juniper, only a refusal to think about anything for more than half a second before she said or did it. Finnian knew that her congratulations were just as sincere as her laughter.

He tapped the computer to close the screen and allowed himself a small smile. He *had* done it. And for a griffin, no less. Now his mother and Juniper's father would have no choice but to accept that he was ready.

Juniper had never taken the family business as seriously as he did. She and her father, Caspian, had joined it when he married Finnian's mother, Ida, nearly ten years ago. She *had* once muttered something about training to be a sorcerer,

but that might just have been because she and Finnian were having an argument at the time and she had briefly wished she could turn him into a slug. Finnian himself, though, felt nothing but pride knowing that he would be next in the long line of Marvelos to run the hotel.

One of the bells on the back wall of the reception area rang. The spidery writing on the ancient label next to it said *Service Entrance*. This usually meant a delivery, which was always exciting.

Juniper immediately assumed an air of disinterest, stepping casually past him, her hands behind her back. Finnian wasn't fooled by this act one bit. Undignified though it was, he pushed his sister out of the way and dashed for the service door.

Juniper, who had been expecting the push and the subsequent rush to get there first, had her elbows ready (she was much fonder of using them than she should have been) and made good use of them, first jabbing Finnian in the ribs then keeping him at bay until they reached the door at the same time. Finnian grabbed wildly for the knob and wrenched the door open.

It was a much smaller and far less imposing door than the grand entrance, but the warding was just as strong. Guests frequently ordered parcels to be delivered to the hotel. Of course, the parcels never contained anything magical, but sometimes they smelled strange, or made suspicious mewing or croaking sounds, and one (to Juniper's delight) had even dripped.

Finnian frowned and peered out of the open door. There

was no one there. Juniper elbowed him out of the way and saw the letter before he did. It lay on the ground – small, brown and unassuming. It was addressed to a Henry Gravelaxe.

She grabbed it, sniffed it, then tried to peer through the seal in the paper, all while fending off Finnian (elbows again).

'Juniper, that's private!' and 'Juniper, there are *rules*!' had no effect. Finally, Finnian said, 'Juniper, I will tell –' and instantly regretted it. The scornful look she gave him spoke volumes, but he was stopped mid-sentence in any case.

An earth-shattering scream came from the direction of the spa.

Juniper frowned, the letter forgotten. 'Was that the banshee?' she asked uncertainly.

The children were used to the banshee, who had been there for some time, and to the mournful howls of Orthrus, the two-headed dog. They were used to the creaks and groans of the hotel, the strange chanting that came from behind closed doors (all practice, of course – no live magic). They were used to unusual demands from high-maintenance guests and to taking delivery of strange parcels.

They were not used to screams.

'That was not the banshee,' said Finnian, meeting his sister's frown with one of his own. 'That was Mortimus.'

Juniper's dark eyebrows shot up. Mortimus? Their curiously absent concierge? This was a man who had once listened to a witch demand twenty-seven live tarantulas and said 'Very good, madam' without so much as widening his eyes.

He was not a man prone to screaming.

Finnian looked at Juniper and Juniper looked at Finnian. She flung the letter at the shelf under the desk.

They both went running.





The children reached the entrance at the same time, Juniper leaving a smudged handprint on the serene blue of the wall as she skidded into the spa.

At the sight of their parents, they both stopped dead. Ida Marvelo, current proprietor of the hotel and Finnian's mother, spun round to them, her hands outstretched in a stop sign. Her face was pale and startled beyond anything Finnian had ever seen. She cast a wide-eyed glance at her husband, Caspian, Juniper's father, whose dark brown face was equally as shocked.

The spa smelled of its familiar eucalyptus. The lights had their usual soft and calming lavender hue. But something was very, very wrong. At his sides, Finnian's hands scrunched into worried fists.

'What is it?' asked Juniper. She stepped forward like a cautious fawn, which just went to show how unusual this all was.

'Stay back,' said Ida, pushing a greying streak of fair hair from her forehead.

'Is Mortimus all right?' asked Finnian, worry rising like

water in a bathtub.

'I'm fine.' Mortimus appeared from around the corner. 'I was just . . . replacing the towels.' He was wearing his customary grey suit, gloves and wire-rimmed spectacles, his hair an immaculate backwards swoop. Finnian couldn't even begin to guess at his age – he had been at the hotel during Grandpa Marvelo's reign – but he and Juniper had settled on the idea that he was at least two hundred and thirty-two. Mortimus had neither confirmed nor denied this when Juniper had asked him directly.

'What's happened?' demanded Juniper, more forcefully.

Ida and Caspian looked at each other.

'We're going to have to tell them,' said Ida.

'They'll find out anyway,' said Caspian.

'Find out *what*?' said Finnian.

Juniper gave him an approving glance over her shoulder.

'Wait a minute, where's Teddy?' he asked, sudden panic about his little sister propelling him into the spa.

'Teddy's fine!' said his mother. She stepped forward to meet him.

Juniper had darted forward too. Caspian tried to block her, but it was a doomed attempt from the start, as Caspian well knew. Stopping Juniper from doing anything she wanted to do only ended in failure.

And so it was that Finnian and Juniper came face to face with the incident. (The detective, when she turned up, would refer to it this way, but 'incident' seemed much too small a word to Finnian's mind, especially considering what happened later.)

Lying on the gleaming white floor of the spa, under the bench, below a row of fluffy white robes, was a wizard. A wizard wearing a T-shirt with a sports logo on it underneath a ceremonial brocade robe. The robe was tied with a leather belt that had loops to hold at least three daggers. There weren't any daggers, though. As well as the hotel's rule about no magic, it had a rule that banned more mundane weapons. The mundane and the arcane could both be equally dangerous to life and limb.

Nonetheless, there was a wizard, lying on the floor, disarraying the collection of fluffy slippers designed to accommodate hooves, claws, paws and feet of all sizes.

A *dead* wizard.

Finnian realised it right away, his hand flying to his mouth.

Juniper stared, her head tilted. 'What's he . . . ? Why is he . . . ?' She looked at her parents, then her brother. Then finally at Mortimus, who was blinking rather more than seemed necessary.

Finnian saw the moment she realised too. His sister's brown eyes went wide. She took a step forward, then a step back. She looked behind herself at the spa entrance.

'He's not – I mean, he can't really be – but he *is*, isn't he? He's dead,' she said finally.

'Shh!' said Ida.

'Juniper!' said Caspian.

'Well, he *is*!' said Juniper, recovered enough to be indignant.

'There must have been an . . . an accident,' said Finnian.



'There must have been an . . . an accident,' said Finnian.

‘What kind of accident?’ asked Ida, her face strangely wishful, as though she was hoping the children might be able to think of some explanation that she couldn’t.

‘There’s nothing here but fluffy robes and clean towels,’ said Mortimus heavily. ‘And wizards don’t have accidents.’

‘Well then, he must have dropped dead of – what do you call it? – natural causes,’ said Juniper. And then, uncertainly, ‘*Do* wizards die of natural causes?’

‘No,’ said Finnian, who had read *So You Want to Be a Wizard?* and had followed it up with *A Complete Account of Wizarding in the Twenty-First Century* (which had been rather dry, although he hadn’t admitted that, even to himself).

‘No, they do not.’ Finnian shook his head. It wasn’t possible.

This had *never* happened. Not in all the long history of the hotel. Not to any Marvelo before.

‘Well, he must have died of *something*,’ said Juniper, crossing her arms. She was nothing if not logical. ‘He can’t just be dead for no reason.’

‘We have to call the police,’ said Finnian. He took a deep breath. This was troubling, to be sure, but he’d hit on the correct protocol to follow and suddenly felt a lot better.

‘Finnian, we *can’t* –’ Ida suddenly made a noise that sounded a bit like a mewling kitten. She was looking over Finnian’s shoulder.

He spun round to see Miss Romunculus, the alchemist from Room Seven, wearing floral pyjamas. For someone whose profession was largely based on minding your own

business and keeping secrets, she currently looked very interested. But then again, only this week she had been called chatty (by Juniper), loquacious (by Mortimus) and noisy (by the disgruntled sorcerer in the room next to hers, who had lodged a formal complaint).

'Is he . . . ?' she asked, inching her pink slippers forward to see better.

'Indisposed,' said Mortimus.

'Dead as a doornail,' said Juniper at the same time.

All three of the adults had moved to block the alchemist's view. As Mortimus was a substantial man, this was working pretty well.

'Dead!' she said in a loud voice.

Ida winced. 'Caspian, would you be a dear and take Miss Romunculus to the cocktail lounge? I'm sure she'd like something to settle her nerves. No charge, of course.'

Miss Romunculus opened her mouth. The look on her face told Finnian that she had no intention of going anywhere at all and every intention of meddling, questioning and generally making a nuisance of herself until every guest in the hotel was aware of the terrible event.

'Allow me, madam,' said Mortimus, who had returned to his usual unflappable self. He glided forward exceptionally quickly for a man who normally creaked when he moved, and towed the alchemist away.

'Would you like me to contact the police?' she called out hopefully, craning her neck to keep viewing the scene for as long as possible.

'That won't be necessary,' said Finnian's mother, in what

Finnian knew was her forcibly cheerful tone. 'I'll do it myself.'

'Perhaps we should close the spa?' Caspian ventured. 'And fetch something to cover the . . . uh . . . ah . . . um . . . guest?'

'Good idea,' said Juniper, when no one else spoke. 'Why don't you make a sign to put up?'

Caspian brightened at the prospect of having something practical to do and hastened away, leaving Ida, Finnian and Juniper in the formerly serene and immaculate spa.

Finnian looked at his mother, who hadn't moved.

'We are going to call the police, aren't we?' he said. It was the right thing to do. The *only* thing to do. The police had the resources and knowledge to get to the bottom of this situation. They had procedures and . . . and manuals, he was sure of it.

His mother's tight smile was not particularly reassuring. 'Why don't you go and find Teddy?'

Finnian looked at Juniper. Juniper shrugged.

He tried again. 'They'll know what to do.'

Finally his mother said, 'Yes, there's nothing else for it.' She looked off in the direction that Mortimus and the alchemist had gone. 'We'll have to contact the police. I'll – I'll do it now.'

