

# DEATH AT THE FIRESIDE INN

## by Kitty Kildare

### EXCERPT

“At last!” Hetty reappeared at the door, and Peregrine growled at her. “You caught the nuisance. His brother and him were such pests whenever I worked. They were always getting in the way or nipping at my ankles.”

“There’s another pug in residence?” I asked. “I was only told about one in need of collection.”

Hetty waved a hand in the air. “It’s not here! I put together a box of the animal’s things. If you don’t take them, I’ll only throw them out.”

“I’ll take the toys. Peregrine will welcome his familiar things since his world has been so grievously upturned.”

“It’s by the front door.” Hetty shook her head as she regarded the pug with a shrewish look. “Florence treated those creatures like they were babies, not animals.”

“It’s a point of fact that we are all animals,” I said.

Hetty sniffed again. “Not by my reckoning. Time for you to go. You got what you came for.”

I stopped by a photograph hanging from a picture rail on the wall. “Your former employer must have been someone of note. These pictures are of famous people.”

Hetty looked at me as if I’d said something ridiculous. “Of course she was. Everyone knew Flo. And they all loved her. Mind you, they wouldn’t have been so fond of her if they had to clean up after her. She was almost as messy as her dogs, God rest her soul.”

“Florence was in the theatre business?”

“She was. You really must leave. I have so much to do.” Hetty marched to the door, lifted a box, and held it out to me.

I followed her to the door. “What about the other dog? I may as well collect them both. Where will I find him?”

Hetty tilted her head. “You don’t know what happened to Flo?”

“All I was told was there was an animal that needed rescuing because his owner died. I knew the woman’s name was Florence, and I was given this address. Is there something else I should know?”

Hetty pulled herself upright. "I should have said earlier. They found the other dog with Flo's body. It'll most likely be in the pound or have run off if the coppers didn't grab it. That one was always escaping out the door if you didn't watch for it."

This news didn't thrill me. The police dog pound was a notoriously unpleasant place, all cold floors and metal, and whenever I could, I got the dogs out and arranged for them to be fostered, or moved them to the much more appealing dogs' home on the other side of the river.

"Where did Florence die?" I asked.

Hetty looked smug at having more information than I did, but I tried not to let it bristle.

"I don't like to gossip," she finally said.

"I'm sure you'll make an exception on this occasion. Once I know everything, I'll take this pug, and you'll never see either of us again."

"Florence took the dogs with her when she worked," Hetty said. "But that one you're holding wasn't feeling well, so she left it behind. She was supposed to be home that night, but she never showed."

"Did that not concern you?"

"I don't live in. I have lodgings across town, so I didn't know she hadn't come home. Flo has several London homes, or she'd stay at a nearby hotel when she was working."

"She died in a hotel?"

"I can't tell you where she died. When the police came here, they said she'd passed last night after her performance. She was found when her other dog, Quillon, alerted to a problem. It kept barking." Hetty's expression grew sharp and shrivelled, as if she smelled something unpleasant. "The coppers wouldn't tell me anything else, despite having worked for Flo for thirty years. If you need to know more, go to the Winter Garden Theatre. That was her second home, and where she held her last performance. The staff there should know more."

I drew in a sharp breath. My gaze went to the sitting room with its photographs of dazzling bygone era theatre stars. "Flo. Florence. Are you talking about the theatre star, Florence Sterling?"

"And now the penny drops. The very same. And you're standing in her home, holding one of her pugs," Hetty said. "Aren't you the lucky one?"