

I SMELL CHOCOLATE

“I smell chocolate,” Grant mumbled, half asleep in the back of the SUV Papa had rented at the airport. Just an hour earlier, they had landed in Papa’s little red and white airplane, the *Mystery Girl*, at the airport in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

“No, you don’t, Grant,” his sister, Christina, grumbled. “It’s just your imagination, silly.”

It was almost midnight and everyone—including their grandparents, Mimi and Papa—were sleepy. It had been a long day and a long flight; fog had caused delays. Usually when the foursome embarked on one of their travel adventures, they all were noisy and rowdy and teasing and laughing; that was part of the fun of traveling with their grandparents, who acted more like fourth-graders than old fogeys.

But tonight was different. They’d missed dinner. “I want to get to the hotel,” Papa insisted. “We can eat then.” But the foggy roads had caused them to creep along for the last hour.

Mimi snored softly in the front seat. Papa sang “Good Night, Irene” over and over under his breath. Christina figured he was trying to stay awake. It had been a workday for him and Mimi, who was a children’s mystery book writer. Papa was her “wrangler, travel agent, cowboy, pilot, trail boss, and chief factotum,” as he always put it. This always made Mimi giggle and her blue eyes beam.

“I really, really do smell chocolate,” Grant insisted yet again.

Christina tugged on the blanket she and her brother were unsuccessfully trying to share in the backseat. It was February and it was cold; real cold. The back windows were blurred with frost.

“You really, really don’t smell chocolate,” Christina said. She was 10 and Grant was only 7, so she usually got the last word in most things—but not this time.

For suddenly, Mimi roared to life in the front seat. First, her curly blond hair popped up over the seat, then the arms of her red suit began to flail as she wiped at her window with a tissue.

“I SMELL CHOCOLATE!” Mimi hollered. Mimi was an admitted “chocoholic.” She loved all things chocolate.

Just as Christina prepared to argue with her grandmother, she suddenly had the strangest sensation. “Ohmigosh!” she said. “I smell chocolate, too!”

“Told ya!” said Grant, with a yawn. He rolled over, pulling the blanket entirely off his sister.

“EXCUSE ME!” cried Papa. “EXCUSE ME! Do any of you even remember where we’re going on this trip? I know we started out what seems like ages ago, but actually it was only this afternoon after school and work. But we were headed somewhere—remember?”

At the same time, Christina and Grant tugged two corners of the blanket and wiped swirly circles on their windows.

“Wow! Look at that!” said Grant, in a dreamy voice. “Streetlights...streetlights that look exactly like Hershey Kisses.”

His sister laughed. “They *are* Hershey Kisses, Grant. Now, I remember, Papa. We’re going to Hershey, Pennsylvania, the Sweetest Place on Earth!”

“Uh, we’re not going there,” said Papa. “We’re actually here!”

The creepy fog cleared just enough for them to see that they had stopped in front of the Hotel Hershey.

“Thank goodness,” said Mimi, quickly combing her hair and fixing her lipstick. A bellman headed out of the fog to help them with their luggage. Mimi always had a lot of luggage. She didn’t go anywhere without her red suits, high heels, laptop computer, research books, camera, a fancy ball gown, and Papa’s tuxedo (which he called his “penguin suit”). Mimi always said you just never knew when you might be invited to a black-tie ball. She and Papa loved to dance.

“This place looks mysterious in the fog,” Christina told her grandmother. Mimi was here to do research for a mystery she planned to set in the world-famous town of chocolate: Hershey, Pennsylvania.

“Oh, I doubt there’s anything mysterious about a town devoted to candy and kids and fun,” said Mimi.

“Don’t be so sure,” said Papa, getting out of the car with a yawn and a stretch. He wore his usual outfit of dress jeans, black leather vest, bolo, cowboy boots, and Stetson hat. He pushed the button to unlock the back gate for the bellman. “Mystery seems to follow you around, woman!” Mimi laughed.

“Oh, maybe I’ll just write a little cozy this time,” she said.

“What’s that?” asked Christina, gathering her backpack and jacket.

Mimi slipped on her coat as Papa opened the door for her. “It’s just a quiet, little old-lady kind of mystery where people sit around and drink tea.”

“I don’t think kids will like that,” argued Grant. He wadded the blanket up under his arm and inhaled deeply, as if he could make the scent of chocolate rush down to his growling tummy.

“Why not?” said Mimi.

“Whatever the mystery is, I think kids will want the characters to drink hot chocolate, not tea,” answered Grant.

“I agree!” said Christina.

Papa laughed as he hustled them toward the foggy-windowed hotel. It was spitting snow. “You know, you kids are characters in Mimi’s books,” he reminded them.

Christina and Grant just looked at one another and shook their heads. “That’s what we mean, Papa!” said Christina. “We want to drink some hot chocolate!”

“And sooooooon,” groaned Grant, rubbing his tummy. “And maybe eat some chocolate candy bars and chocolate pie and...”

Just then the bellman opened the doors to the hotel’s Fountain Lobby and the kids staggered inside. For a moment, they were speechless. Mimi and Papa just smiled.

“Well, if we want chocolate,” Christina finally squeaked... “I think we’ve come to the RIGHT PLACE!”

2 THE RIGHT PLACE

The **opulent** lobby mesmerized Christina and Grant. They plopped their backpacks and jackets on the beautiful mosaic tile floor and craned their necks to stare up at the sky blue ceiling with clouds painted on it. A large fountain spurted in the center of the room. Palm trees scattered around the lobby added to the exotic, even sort of spooky, feeling.

“Wow!” said Christina. “I didn’t know we were going to stay in a palace, Mimi.”

Even though she was exhausted, Mimi laughed. “More like an Italian villa,” she said. “The Hershey is an historic hotel, you know. It dates back to the 1930s.”

Just then, Papa called for Mimi to join him at the registration desk. He looked aggravated.

Grant, who had wandered off to look around, dashed back to Christina, scooting along on the marble floor on his Heelies. “Hey, Christina,” he whispered loudly.

“I can hear you!” his sister said. “Everyone can hear you.”

Grant looked all around. He shrugged his shoulders. “But there’s no one here...except us chickens, as Papa always says.”

His sister groaned. “They why are you whispering?” She knew they were all so tired and hungry that they were getting cranky. She could hear Papa’s voice getting louder at the registration desk; there must be a problem, she thought.

Her brother had scooted off toward a group of palm trees near the fountain. “Pssst!” he hissed back toward Christina. When she ignored him, he repeated “PSSSSSSST!” so loudly that even the bellman looked up. But not, Christina noted, the two security guards huddled in conversation behind the palms.

Quickly, Christina sidled up to her brother. “What gives?”

“I don’t know,” Grant whispered, very quietly this time. “I’m eavesdropping. These two guys are talking about a big deal theft—right here in Hershey, just earlier tonight, as nearly as I can tell.”

“Whoa,” said Christina. “Trouble in Paradise...I like it!” She was fond of mysteries, puzzles, riddles, intrigue, spies, spying, and anything like that. Mimi always said she had inherited her mystery genes and maybe she would grow up to be a writer one day. Christina hoped so.

“It’s silver dollars!” Grant said. “I wish they’d talk louder.”

Suddenly, the security guards looked over at the two children. They gave them a fake smile, then quietly moved to the other side of the fountain where they continued their conversation out of earshot of the nosy kids.

“Over here!” Papa called. He was smiling now.

As the kids approached the registration desk, Mimi said, “There was some confusion about our reservation, but now we’re all squared away. We’re going to have lovely adjoining suites.”

Christina giggled. Mimi always loved it when they got upgraded to a swankier room. She knew Papa was a good finagler when it came to arranging such things. And she and her brother loved separate rooms—it was so much easier to sneak out and explore, when necessary. And for she and Grant, it was *always* necessary!

The beaming desk clerk handed Papa the keys. In a bright, chirpy voice she said “WELCOME TO THE SWEETEST PLACE ON EARTH!”

Grant grinned and whispered to Christina. “If we’re lucky, maybe not as sweet as they think?”

Christina grinned back. “Fog, chocolate, and mystery afoot—what more could we want?”

Her brother groaned and rubbed his tummy. “Something to eat,” he begged. “Pleeeeeeaaasse? And make mine chocolate!”

3 MYSTERY AFOOT?

As Mimi steered them toward the elevator, Grant balked. “Really, I’m serious. Aren’t we going to eat? My bellybutton’s kissing my backbone.” He moaned and doubled over.

The bellman laughed as he lurched the luggage cart onto the elevator. “Don’t worry, young man,” he said. “I’m sorry all our restaurants are closed, but I think you’ll find an acceptable midnight snack in your rooms.”

“Is it midnight?” Christina asked. She loved to stay up past midnight, especially on New Year’s Eve to hear the church bells ringing and fireworks popping in the distance.

Papa looked at his watch. “Oh, yes,” he said. “It’s past midnight—the witching hour.”

“Ohh,” said Grant. “What does that mean?”

His grandfather yawned. “It means that I’m sure witching I could go to bed right now!”

As soon as they entered their suite, and began to “ooh” and “aah” at the luxurious rooms, Papa said,

“Goodnight, Irenes!” and headed into one of the bedrooms and closed the door.

The bellman deposited their luggage. Mimi tipped him, and he left with a short bow and a doff of his cap.

By that time, Christina and Grant had gone through the connecting doorway to their room. When Mimi joined them, she found her two grandchildren standing there with their mouths hanging open. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

Together, the two kids pointed at the basket sitting on the dresser. It was enormous, and was filled with heaping piles of fruit and chocolate—Hershey Bars, Kit Kat Bars, York Peppermint Patties, and Hershey’s Kisses galore—so many they even spilled out of the basket and all around the top of the dresser.

Mimi laughed. “Dig in!” she ordered. “And while you snack, get your pajamas on. I’m going to take a quick shower.”

Before their grandmother could leave the room, the two hungry kids dashed for the basket. Together they hauled it over to one of the twin beds and dumped it out onto the bedspread.

“Wow!” said Grant. “Look at all this stuff! This is better than Halloween. Better than trick-or-treat, better than...mrgfhgrr pfgsghrlw!”

His sister could no longer understand her brother because his mouth was now filled with a big wad of chocolate. She chose a banana and Grant looked at her like she was crazy. Christina shrugged. “I’m just too tired,” she confessed.

“Grant!” Mimi called from the bathroom. “Would you go down the hall and get some ice, please. Papa would like some water.”

“Surembghret, Mimi!” Grant called back. He swallowed hard and grinned. “That’s better,” he said, wiping a GOT CHOCOLATE rim from his lips. “Ahhhhh.” He hopped off the bed and scampered to the door.

Christina finished her banana and put on her pajamas. She unpacked her backpack, and then to help her brother, she unpacked his backpack and put his pajamas on his bed. When he didn’t come back, she began to get worried. She went into the living room that connected the adjoining bedrooms. From there she could hear Papa snoring softly. She could hear the water running in the shower in the bathroom. So, she opened the door to the hall and peeked outside.

She looked up and down the hallway. It was quiet as a tomb. She was a little worried; what could be taking her brother so long, she wondered. Suddenly, she spotted something far down the hall, just a shadow she thought. But when she squinted hard, she could see it was Grant. He was squatting down in front of a room, and it looked like he was peeking in a keyhole!

“Grant!” she called in as quiet a loud whisper as she could muster. When he did not look her way, she repeated a little more loudly, “GRANT!”

From back inside their room, she heard her grandmother call, “Grant, are you back yet?”

On an impulse, Christina stepped out into the hall. “Grant,” she hissed one last time. “You’d better come on, now, can you hear me? Mimi’s calling!”

Grant still didn’t look up. Exasperated, Christina took another step further down the hall and put her hands on her hips. When she did, she heard an awful sound: the sound of the door closing behind her. And she and Grant had no key. In a huff, she tugged her pajama bottoms up a little and marched down the hall.

As she got closer to Grant and was just about to start to fuss at him, her brother looked up at her with big, scared eyes. Slowly, but insistently, he shook his head back and forth. “NO!” he mouthed silently. Then, with the tip of his finger, he beckoned her to come closer.

With goose bumps prickling her arms, Christina tiptoed down the hall toward the dark corner where her brother seemed frozen in place.