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bestselling author of *The Treasure Hunters Club*

SEVEN REASONS TO MURDER YOUR DINNER GUESTS

A Novel

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THE DINNER PARTY

NOVEMBER 2015

Vivienne

STEPPING OUT OF THE TAXI, VIVIENNE SQUINTS AT the dark street for any sign of the restaurant.

“I can’t seem to find it...” she says, but her voice is lost in the roar of the engine as the taxi speeds off.

“Idiot,” Vivienne mutters. She glances at the loose change in her gloved palm and drops it into her handbag. She has never agreed with tipping taxi drivers, anyhow, especially those who talk incessantly about their kids.

Light rain is falling, the sort that soaks you before you even feel it, and Vivienne’s dry hair is prone to frizzing at the mere mention of moisture. Searching her bag for an umbrella, she groans when she realizes she’s left it in the taxi. Then her hand lands on the invitation. She doesn’t need to read the gold words again.

Serendipity's, thirteen Salvation Road...

This isn't quite what she pictured. The street reeks of disappointment, every building a failed enterprise someone invested their hopes in. A trendy cupcake café, a retro clothing boutique, a themed bar...all with weather-beaten For Sale signs attached. A young woman pushing a buggy bows her head against the rain and marches by, nearly knocking into Vivienne. An elderly man moves slowly on the other side of the road, leaning heavily on his cane, scowling at the pavement. Vivienne thinks better of asking either of them for directions and searches for numbers on the worn-out storefronts. Building 7, 9, 11...but then the road ends.

A waste of time. She pulls her mobile from her bag to ring another taxi. A few more minutes in this rain, and her makeup will landslide down her face, sending her hair into a panic and fleeing in the other direction. If she hurries, she can still make the 6:28 p.m. train home, and her feet could be happily nestled in her sheepskin slippers with *Poirot* on the telly.

"Looking for Serendipity's?" A soft voice seems to slide straight into her ear, making her jump, her Clarks heels echoing on the wet pavement.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," the man says as Vivienne spins toward him. *Perhaps boy is closer to the truth*, she thinks as she takes him in. His eyes are magnified as he peers through rain-streaked glasses, giving the impression of a baby owl. His long hair is sodden and hangs in ropes down to the collar of his denim jacket. In fact, his whole body seems to have been dragged down with the rain. A drowned baby owl.

Then she catches sight of her own reflection in the boy's glasses. Crepey skin, frizz-ball hair, a down-turned mouth. This boy might be unappealing, but at least he still has youth on his side. As she marches well past middle age, Vivienne feels herself becoming more invisible. She wouldn't be surprised to look in a mirror one day soon and find no reflection at all. Anger flares, fighting her rising hopelessness.

"Yes," Vivienne snaps. "Why?"

"I-I'm looking for it too," he says, his voice barely more than a whisper; then she notices he's clutching a familiar envelope. The thick black card and expensive lettering... It had looked so different from any other mail she'd received, yet a week earlier, she'd chucked it straight into the bin.

"Some naff PR event," she'd muttered to her colleague Cat, rolling her eyes. "Cheap wine, beige canapés, and a presentation about a new air freshener."

But Cat had already retrieved the invitation from the bin and was scrutinizing the lettering.

"Looks like it could be a posh dinner party," she'd said, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow. "If you don't want it, do you mind if I go? Bit short on cash this month..."

"It's addressed to the deputy editor, *not* the junior writer," Vivienne had snapped, snatching back the invitation.

Cat had turned away, blinking at her screen. Vivienne knows what the girls in the office see her as—a nasty old spinster with no life—but she has more talent in her little finger than most of them have in their whole fake-tanned, gym-sculpted bodies. Some days she could happily strangle the lot of them.

When Vivienne had started out at the magazine as a wide-eyed twenty-three-year-old, she'd been one of only two women in the place. Through sheer hard work, she'd eventually made it to deputy editor, but then she'd gotten stuck. Vivienne became part of the furniture while the house around her had been renovated. Suddenly, the work-experience girls were lecturing her on Facebook and Instagram. One of them—with skin so flawless Vivienne could hardly bear to look at her—had even offered to read through her copy to give it a “younger vibe.” Let's just say, *she* didn't last long.

During her time in the deputy role, the publisher had introduced five different (always male and always younger) editors to do the top job.

Last week, the latest incarnation, a thirty-eight-year-old former teen magazine editor named Damian with a bald spot that shone through his spiky hair and a very loose grip on the basic rules of grammar, had asked for “a quick conflagration” in his office. Vivienne had been shaken to hear that magazine sales had dropped further in the last six months and there was real risk of closure. The editor himself had seemed unfazed as he panted on his most sympathetic expression while glancing at his watch. Perhaps he was already in receipt of another job offer. Vivienne could only imagine having the kind of bulletproof confidence that requires no evidentiary talent to sustain it.

Back at her desk, she'd picked up the envelope again, turning the thick card over in her hands. Her name was spelled out in the intricate gold writing, but it didn't say who was holding the dinner,

and there wasn't even an email address to RSVP. For the next two days, it stayed propped up behind her keyboard, and her eyes regularly drifted toward the ornate lettering.

That morning, as she pulled on her reliable black shift dress from M&S, she saw those letters again in her mind's eye. Dragging a hairbrush through her graying hair, she frowned at her aging reflection, lifted her chin to see two loose folds of skin starting to form underneath. *Jowls*. What an utterly depressing word. She mouthed it at the mirror, and the folds wobbled as if in acknowledgment. *Aging is a privilege denied to many*, she told herself, then turned away from her reflection. Picking up her handbag, she wondered about the other dinner party guests. Perhaps she could make some new contacts who might come in handy if the magazine did close, or maybe there would be a mature male journalist on the lookout for an intelligent, like-minded partner. Over a nice glass of wine, she'd astonish him with the news that today was, in fact, her sixtieth birthday. "You don't look a day over forty-five!" he'd gush. Well, fifty-five, maybe...

Now, watching this man-boy wipe his nose with his grubby denim jacket sleeve, Vivienne wonders if she's made a mistake in coming tonight. She assumed it was a PR event for senior journalists, but he didn't look the part at all. Vivienne wonders what would have prompted the dinner party host to invite them both along. She looks down the street, considers making her excuses.

"I'm Tristan, freelance computer programmer," he says, offering a weightless excuse for a handshake.

"Vivienne, magazine editor," she snaps back, no need to

mention the *deputy* bit. “I’m off for home now; looks like the place doesn’t even exist...”

“You’re a magazine editor? Wow, that’s a cool job.” He beams at her.

“Well, it has its moments,” she says, a smile of her own pulling at the corners of her mouth. She looks down at Tristan’s trainers, which have Velcro straps (surely he’s learned to tie his shoelaces by now?) and are a dishwater gray thanks to the rain. His socks must be soaked through too.

“Look, you really must get out of this rain...”

“Hang on, I didn’t notice this door before,” Tristan says, his attention on an alleyway set back from the road.

Vivienne looks up and sees a black doorway. She blinks, and two gold numbers glisten in the rain.

“Thirteen! This must be it,” Tristan cries, a childish triumph to his voice. Despite herself, Vivienne feels a spark of excitement in her chest. She has always loved a good mystery, finds comfort in revisiting her favorites, *Prime Suspect* and *Poirot*, and reading anything by Agatha Christie. They step down the alleyway, and Tristan pushes the door open to let Vivienne through.

The door snaps shut behind them, cutting off the sound of the city’s early-evening traffic. Vivienne can hear only her footsteps on the tiled floor and Tristan’s breath behind her.

“I can’t see a thing,” she whispers, taking tiny steps forward.

“Look, there’s a sign,” Tristan murmurs.

As Vivienne’s eyes adjust to the darkness, a large gold plaque appears on the wall ahead of them. The word SERENDIPITY’s is

printed in stern capitals, just above a staircase leading down. Vivienne's heart gallops, but she doesn't want to come across as a scared older woman, so she takes a deep breath and walks forward. She reaches out for the smooth wooden banister as her toes tentatively feel for each step.

"Here we go." She tries to give her voice a singsong quality, as if attending creepy dinner parties in hidden underground restaurants is something she does every day.

At the bottom of the stairs, they're greeted by a heavy dark wood door with a huge gold handle in the center. Muffled voices, then a screeching laugh, emanate from the other side. Vivienne's racing heart slows a smidgen at the sound of other people. Even though her conscious mind is telling her that she's in Central London, with thousands of people just meters away, she started to feel like she and Tristan had entered a different world. She pushes the door open and gasps. It is the most splendid dining room she's ever seen, with a roaring fire framed by an elaborate marble fireplace, dark wood panels, and enormous oil paintings hanging from the walls. Vivienne always dreamed of living in a grand house with rooms like these; she'd been glued to *Downton Abbey*, imagining herself right at home alongside the well-bred ladies. Vivienne puts her hand on the smooth marble fireplace and looks up at the image above. Unlike the other paintings, which depict generic landscapes and plump, dreamy women, this is a black-and-white-inked drawing. A devilish face pokes through the center of the circular image, which features a series of animals dressed as humans. At the top is a peacock wearing a top hat and tails, then an eagle holding up

weighing scales, two brawling dogs in white shirts, a pig in a suit digging into a roast chicken, a bow-tied lizard peering at a scroll, a pipe-smoking cat, and a top-hatted sheep gazing at a well-dressed ewe. Could this be a clue to tonight's event? If so, then Vivienne is impressed. This is a cut above the usual lackluster marketing tricks. Stepping closer, she gazes into the eyes of the devil, who seems to be looking right at her. She leans forward and notices that the image is slightly pulling away at the corner. She reaches for it.

"Look at that table," Tristan says, standing a little too close behind her, like a nervous toddler.

She reluctantly turns from the picture and takes in the circular table with a white tablecloth in the center of the room. Above it hangs a crystal chandelier, with white tapered candles burning brightly. Long green vines hang down from the chandelier to the table and wind around a series of gold candelabras, like an octopus's tentacles. Seven places are set, with sparkling silver cutlery and crystal wineglasses. Once again, she's reminded of a period drama. Vivienne wonders if she's meant to be the old dowager countess of the group.

"Well, hello there," a booming male voice calls from across the table. "Come and sit down."

Vivienne squints at the dark silhouette behind a candelabra. Walking toward the table, she spots two empty spaces, both with small black cards between the cutlery. As she gets closer, she finds the one with her name, written in the same style as the invitation. Peering at the card, she sees the eagle with weighing scales once again. To her right sits a lean man wearing a fitted gray suit and an

arrogant expression; he nods at her. To her left is Tristan's setting. They both sit down.

Matthew

LEANING BACK IN HIS CHAIR, MATTHEW WATCHES the old lady and drippy (literally, the floor around him is soaked) bloke make their way to the table, taking the last two seats. Well, now he really is confused. The woman is the same genre of dried-up spinster you find in every office across London. A couple of cats at home and a freezer full of ready-made meals, no doubt. As for the drip: too-long hair, smudged glasses, a fan of outdated rock music (judging by his T-shirt). Adding all this together, Matthew would surmise that he works a badly paid job involving computers. Already seated is the Botoxed lingerie boss with huge knockers, the old Welsh police officer who clearly loves a drink or ten, the too-skinny YouTuber frowning at her phone, and the dull TV doctor desperately waiting to be recognized. Glancing around the table, Matthew flicks his glossy hair and wonders who has brought this random wedge of humanity together—and why.

“Welcome to London’s most mysterious dinner party.” The old copper jumps up, offering his spade-like hand to the two new arrivals. Matthew’s own knuckles still ache a little from his bone-crushing greeting.

“I’m Melvin. No sign of our host yet,” he adds.

“My name’s Vivienne. It took us a while to find the

restaurant...” the older woman babbles, trying to smooth down her hair as she takes Melvin’s hand.

“Tristan,” the geek mutters, shaking the proffered hand but staying in his seat. He removes his glasses and wipes them with a napkin. Without the specs, he looks more vulnerable. He has the spots of a teenager, an unexpected boomerang-shaped scar running along his cheekbone, as well as a receding hairline. He’s a good ten years older than Matthew, he reckons, probably late thirties.

“Good to meet you both. I’m Matthew.” He nods from the other side of Melvin, flashing his most winning smile at them and feeling relieved that he’s too far away to shake Tristan’s hand. As the two new arrivals take off their coats and Melvin introduces the other guests, Matthew notices with satisfaction that they’re both squinting a little. He has dazzled them, just as he does with everyone he meets. He takes a languid sip of his wine and doesn’t need to look up to know that six pairs of eyes are on him. It’s the same wherever he goes. Women, men—everyone can’t help but stare.

“Well, the wine’s certainly good,” he says, raising an eyebrow at the lingerie boss to his left, who’d introduced herself as Janet.

“Delicious,” she responds, beaming and flashing her catlike amber eyes.

It’s clear to Matthew that Janet was stunning in her twenties, but now, in her early forties—at a guess—she’s past her prime. Sure, the wonders of Botox have ironed out her forehead, but the lines around her eyes and mouth cruelly betray her. And Matthew would bet that she’s put on a few pounds in the last five years. Great boobs, but she’s “paying the ass tax,” as his colleagues at the

investment bank would say. Noticing Matthew's appraising eye, a blotchy pink rash spreads unattractively across Janet's mighty cleavage, which bounces heavily as she lifts her wineglass and takes three large gulps.

"Malbec—Argentinian, I'd say," Janet grins at him, her lips already turning inky thanks to the tannins.

"Ah, a woman who knows her wine," Matthew purrs, casually hooking his left arm over the back of her chair.

And just like that, the daft cow is all his. Despite the multiple rings on her wedding finger, despite the obvious disparity in their ages, despite the fact that she's been in his company for all of ten minutes, he knows without doubt that he could take her home right now. He doesn't want her, of course (he's already decided that the young YouTuber Stella will be the lucky lady), but it's always fun to practice.

As if reading his thoughts, Matthew's mobile buzzes to life in his jacket pocket, right next to his heart. Probably Robyn, or maybe Charmaine. God, it could be any one of five or six pretty yet vulnerable women he'd plucked from various dating websites. Occasionally, he slums it and heads to one of those cheesy night-clubs at around 1:00 a.m., when he can guarantee some easy targets. Bowled over by Matthew's expensive looks and cheap charm, they happily oblige his darker fantasies, stay at home waiting for his calls, and cancel plans with their friends (who eventually give up inviting them) until they become totally reliant on him. At that point, he could do anything—*anything*—to them and they'd accept it. That's when he performs his signature U-turn and just

stops calling. Some take it worse than others, like this one girl, Eleanor, who wouldn't accept it was over. You'd think she'd be grateful for the few weeks of the high life he'd shown her, but she messaged and called him incessantly. Matthew had worried he'd have to take matters into his own hands and find a way to silence her for good, but thankfully she got the message in the end.

Shaking his head to shoo the thought away, Matthew's mind returns to the dinner party. When the black invitation appeared in the mailbox at his flat on Brompton Road, he presumed it was some sort of elite singles mixer. Ever since he'd agreed to that mortifying article in the free paper, "London's Hottest Bachelors" or whatever, he's been overrun with invitations. Most had ended up in either the digital or literal trash. But there was something about this one—the luxurious paper, the hint of mystery—that piqued his interest. He hoped it might bring him some fresh meat, some new challenges. It was all getting a bit easy.

"You can keep your fancy wine," Melvin addresses the group now. "Beer's my tippie, always has been."

And your body isn't thanking you for it, Matthew muses, taking in Melvin's bulging stomach pushing against the table. Matthew's personal trainer, Felicity, keeps his body in perfect shape. She's worth every penny—and never charges for those delightful extras.

"Is that a Welsh accent I detect?" dull Dr. Gordon pipes up. "There can't be many like you in the Valleys."

And the table goes quiet. Janet rolls her eyes at Matthew, Vivienne clears her throat, and Stella glares at the doctor. But Melvin just lets out a laugh straight from his sizable middle.

“No, Gordon, there aren’t many Black people in Wales, but that makes us all the more special,” he chuckles. And just like that, the tension is defused. Matthew imagines that Melvin is a good police officer, equally capable of taming flying fists and providing comfort when needed. It’s not the sort of life that would appeal to Matthew, though. His more subtle skills are better suited among the traders. In fact, when he thinks about it, he approaches his work life in much the same way as his personal life: He befriends new, inexperienced traders so that they confide in him when it all inevitably goes wrong. He offers to help and then swoops their clients away before the poor kids know what’s happening. The turnover is so high in his company that no one seems to notice Matthew’s predatory approach, except perhaps his boss, who simply gives him a look of admiration when he turns in impressive monthly figures.

“So who do you think the mystery host is?” Janet asks, directing her question straight at Matthew.

He decides to indulge her with his attention once again.

“Simon Cowell, Ryan Gosling, Prince Charles?” He grins, giving her a wink.

“Sounds more like that game, Snog, Marry, Kill,” guffaws Janet, not letting her gaze stray from Matthew’s. He notes with satisfaction that the other guests have fallen quiet as they listen in.

“Go on, then,” he dares, slowly passing the tip of his tongue across his upper lip.

Janet leans back in her chair, clearly loving the spotlight. Matthew’s eyes travel from her face to her neck. Her jugular vein is gently pulsating, sending lascivious blood from her brain to her heart.

“Marry Cowell: I’d never have to work again,” she squeals. “Kill Ryan: Nice guy, but not much fun. And snog Prince Charles: He might appear like Mr. Sensible with his gray suits and cuff links, but I bet he knows how to please a lady.”

“What would your husband say?” Melvin comments with a laugh, but Matthew hears an undercurrent of disapproval. He’s probably the type who doesn’t approve of women talking about sex, Matthew imagines.

“Who cares?” she snorts, turning back to Matthew. “Your go: Beyoncé, Hillary Clinton, and Nicole Kidman.”

He puts his finger to his lips as if considering her question carefully. He lets a few seconds pass, and the table falls silent waiting for his answer.

“Could I kill them all?” he asks, sending Janet into hysterics.

A door on the opposite side of the entrance swings open, and a clutch of bow-tied waiters file in, each holding a small gold tray bearing fresh jugs of red wine.

“Water for me, please,” Gordon pipes up, and Janet rolls her eyes at Matthew, who winks in response.

“Do you know if the host is on his way?” Melvin asks one of the waiters, receiving a small shrug in response before they all disappear back through the door—presumably leading to the kitchen.

“Looks like we’ll have to make our own entertainment,” Matthew says, glancing around the table. It’s time to sprinkle some of his magic around...

“What about you—Vivienne, was it?” He draws the old

woman in, deliberately excluding Stella the YouTuber. “Does Prince Charles do it for you?”

“Oh God, no. Benedict Cumberbatch is more my type...” says Vivienne. She takes a sip of her wine, briefly closing her eyes as the rich taste hits her.

“Ew, he’s ancient,” Stella suddenly chimes in, her voice much more refined than Matthew had anticipated.

“Is Justin Bieber more your bag, then?” he asks, finally looking at her, dipping his chin and flashing a stern look.

“Hardly. I like Michael B. Jordan—great actor, and so stylish,” Stella says, and Matthew turns away as if she hadn’t spoken.

“I wonder if they’re bringing my water. It’s getting a little warm in here,” Dr. Gordon cuts in, dabbing at his forehead with a napkin.

“Who needs water when the wine tastes so good?” Matthew says, reaching for the carafe and turning back to Janet. As he does so, his place setting catches his eye. Underneath his name is a drawing of a sheep wearing a top hat and monocle, looking down at a ewe. Shrugging, he pushes it to one side and proffers the carafe to Janet.

“Don’t mind if I do.” She beams, and Matthew carefully pours the dark-red liquid into her glass.

Red wine has always reminded him of blood. Now, in the brooding light of Serendipity’s, even more so.

Stella

STELLA LOOKS FROM GORGEOUS MATTHEW TO PAST-her-prime Janet and back again. *WT-actual-F* Why is he bothering

with her? Sure, she's got huge boobs, but she's big all over and old enough to be his mother—probably. Her eyes glide over Matthew's sculpted cheekbones, his long eyelashes, and she realizes she's seen him somewhere before. Then it comes to her: He was featured in an article she recently read—"London's most eligible hotties" or something equally lame. But one bachelor, with impossibly dark eyes, stood out. The writer had clearly been taken with Matthew, too, describing him as "devastatingly dishy" (*please!*). The article featured the net worth of each "hottie," and Matthew's was nowhere near her father's, from what she can recall, but he was definitely going in the right direction. She takes in his Savile Row suit, the gold signet glinting on his pinkie finger. She'd sworn off dating for a while, but perhaps she can make an exception for this Matthew. After all, her father was threatening to cut her off again, and she could really use a backup. He had definite potential. And yet, he hadn't looked her way since she'd walked in...

Sighing, Stella wonders if she made a mistake coming along today. The invitation looked expensive; she anticipated some luxury freebies, a few glasses of champers, and perhaps some exclusive content for her channel. When all she was getting was a dreary dinner party with gross red wine and a load of weirdos. Not to mention a racist thrown in. She's still fuming over what that doctor said to Melvin about being Black and Welsh. With a mum from Ghana and a white dad, she'd heard it all before she was twelve. Melvin should have torn a strip off that weedy man, but he just laughed. Infuriating!

She picks her mobile back up and logs on to her YouTube

page. Just before heading out tonight, she uploaded a new video all about where and when to wear cowboy boots and how to find the perfect pair without paying hundreds of pounds. Already she had dozens of comments from her teen followers thanking her for her insight. Her subscribers are escalating at a faster rate than her rival Highstreet Heroine's, and she's had two recent sponsorship offers, which is what actually matters to her, not finding affordable fashion for broke teenagers. God knows what makes them think the high street can compare to designer, but they lap up any old nonsense she spouts, and who is she to tell them otherwise? Looking down at her own Versace cowboy boots—a treat from her dad for her twenty-second birthday—she thanks her lucky stars she doesn't have to bother with cheap knockoffs.

You could say she fell into fashion vlogging. After being kicked out of school (as *if* she'd steal from those stuck-up bitches!), her dad lined up work experience for her at various places, but she'd hated every tea-making, photocopying second, and they weren't even paying her. Then one day, a few years ago, Stella started her YouTube page. What had begun as a bit of a hobby quickly escalated to a phenomenon (to quote the *Daily Mirror*) as her views and subscription numbers soared. Within months, she was being invited to showbiz parties and blogger events, often asked to give presentations about her incredible success. She received all kinds of freebies thanks to the offer of association with her YouTube page: clothes, accessories, beauty products, first-rate meals in Michelin-starred restaurants, bottles of champers, and so on. Of course, Stella could easily have paid for it all, but that isn't the point.

Her thumb moving quickly, Stella logs out of her StellaStylez account and into the other one. She smiles to herself when she sees the comments she's clocked up on there—the shouty capital letters, the exclamation marks. She pictures the tears, the hurt, even the fear that her words have caused, and instantly, she's exhilarated, as if she can feel the blood racing around her body. She feels so... alive.

“So you're in fashion?” the old lady suddenly asks Stella, talking across Dr. Gordon.

“Yeah,” Stella murmurs, reluctantly putting her phone face down on the table. “I've got a YouTube channel with nearly half a million subscribers.”

Stella glances around the table and sees that the other guests are impressed, apart from geeky Tristan, who appears to be choking on his wine.

“Oh, excellent. Yes, I think my daughter, Louisa, watches those sorts of things. She's fourteen,” Gordon cuts in.

Please don't talk to me about your boring teenage daughter...

“And you're a doctor?” Stella says, trying to sound like she gives a flying F. Boarding school had drilled the importance of small talk into her, along with other useful skills like using the correct cutlery and how to fox-trot.

“You might recognize me.” He clears his throat and touches his powder-blue tie. “I regularly appear on *The Morning Show...*”

“Oh, right. Well, I'm not much of an early riser.” Stella shrugs, reaching for her phone again. Why had no one told this man that skinny ties are only acceptable at fancy dress parties?

“Not to worry.” He shrinks back into his chair. “I’m a doctor of nutrition and appear quite regularly on television to discuss the latest fad diets, that sort of thing.”

“Oh, darling, now I know where I’ve seen you,” Janet cries from Stella’s other side. “You were on the other day labeling some poor celeb as bonkers for her maple syrup diet. And there I was, just about to stock up.”

“Well, I’m not sure I called her ‘bonkers’ . . .” Dr. Gordon splutters, picking up his fork and wiping it with his napkin.

“Perhaps it’ll help slim down her thighs,” Stella mutters but finds herself royally ignored, as Janet is now gazing at the doctor, who’s sitting a little straighter in his chair. No doubt she’s hoping to get a few tips on how to lose a bit of weight herself. The dress is definitely designer, but she’s spilling out of it. Nice rings, though, Stella has to admit; the woman’s engagement rock looks to be three karats, maybe even four.

“There’s no solid scientific evidence to support it,” Gordon says to Janet, putting the now sparkling fork down and warming to his topic. “In fact, it could cause problems with blood sugar and insulin levels. And the short-term weight loss will only be reversed when the person returns to solid foods—”

Janet chuckles, cutting Dr. Gordon short just as he’s getting going. “Oh, I don’t know who I was kidding, anyway. As if I could live without red meat.”

Stella rolls her eyes, zoning out of this lame chat. With no bubbles in sight, she decides she might as well give the red wine a go. She leans forward to push her place setting (weirdly picturing

a lizard reading a scroll) aside and picks up her glass. The black curranty wine tastes bitter on her tongue but then slips easily down her throat, sending a pleasurable warmth through her.

“Not your usual tippie?” Matthew asks, his dark eyes on her from across the table. Surely they’re dark brown, though they appear black in this light.

She shakes her head. “I prefer champagne.”

“Do you know how to tell if it’s a good wine?” he asks, his voice almost a whisper beneath Dr. Gordon’s and Janet’s rising crescendo (“And what about the baby-food diet?”).

She swallows and shakes her head again, pushing her poker-straight hair behind her ear and frowning at her deep-red fingernails.

Matthew picks up his wineglass by its stem and slowly swills it around and around, the scarlet fluid spinning, then climbing up the sides in tiny tidal waves.

“See, it’s got legs,” he murmurs, keeping his eyes on the glass. She sees how the waves slowly ebb down, giving the appearance of long legs.

“Oh, yes, I see them.” She beams at him. He mirrors her smile for a second, flashing pointy white incisors; then it’s gone, and he’s turned to his right to top up the policeman’s glass. She has been dismissed and finds herself still grinning stupidly at the side of Matthew’s face.

Feeling foolish, Stella turns back to her own glass and attempts to emulate the wine-swilling, but it splashes over the rim and leaves red spots on her white napkin.

Sighing, she finishes off her wine, then pours herself a second glass, takes a large sip. This one is going down much easier.

Already the edges of the room have a hazy quality, like the old photos in her mum's picture albums from the '80s. It's quite a pleasant feeling, and Stella leans back in her chair, suddenly finding Janet's flirting amusing rather than irritating.

"So are you single, Matthew?" Janet is asking. "Or is there a lucky lady at home?"

"Still searching," he tells her. "If you know anyone?"

As Janet guffaws, throwing back her blond blow-dry, Matthew catches Stella's eye and gives her a split-second wink. A frisson of excitement sparks through her. Maybe tonight will bring some distraction after all.

Tristan

STARING DOWN AT HIS GNAWED FINGERNAILS, Tristan listens carefully to the conversation going on around him. Chatter weaves in and out, certain words hanging in the air like cartoon speech bubbles. *Mysterious... Serendipity's... Celebrity...* The truth is, Tristan can't remember the last time he was at a dinner party. Perhaps it was back when he was a student, sharing pizza with like-minded computer science undergrads. As he counts on his fingers, it dawns on him that he hasn't even spoken to anyone face-to-face for five days. The number of people in this room, their loud voices, their different personalities, their range of opinions—it's all hurting Tristan's head. All he wants to do is run out of this

place, jump on the tube, and get home, return to the safety of his little flat in Manor House.

“God no, they ruin your body and spoil all your fun,” Janet bellows across the table after Matthew asks if she has children. Her red-painted lips are stretched wide, her strange yellow-green eyes bright with humor. It all seems so forced, and Tristan wonders if this is true. He glances at the journalist, Vivienne, sitting on his right, her sharp profile pointing toward Janet with a look of open disgust. She is a person whose thoughts are projected straight onto her face, and right now her face is showing that she’s not impressed with Janet—or any of the other dinner party guests, it seems.

When he bumped into her in the street, he watched her take in his unappealing appearance, soaking-wet hair, and old denim jacket. She instantly wrote him off as insignificant; she probably even considered pretending she knew nothing about the dinner party. But the invitation was clearly in her hand, so she had no choice but to admit she was looking for the restaurant too. When he pointed out the door, she swept past him and marched down the stairs as if she owned the place and he was merely a doorman. As they entered the dining room, she immediately distanced herself from him, her eyes scanning the room for anyone more interesting, more dynamic, more altogether *palatable* than Tristan.

His hand instinctively reaches up to touch the scar on his cheekbone; the tip of his forefinger fits perfectly into the hollow left by that thug’s boot. The wound has healed, but the dent will always be there to remind him of that night. He looks down at his old Metallica T-shirt and thinks he probably should have made

more of an effort. Janet appears to be wearing a ball gown of some sort; Matthew and Gordon are in suits; Stella is wearing a tight black dress and cowboy boots, diamonds sparkling in her ears. Tristan rarely thinks about his appearance these days, but today, before he got dressed to come out, he stood naked in front of his bathroom mirror and wondered where this almost-forty-year-old had come from. It felt like mere months ago he was a nowhere-near-twenty-year-old with an exciting and possibly lucrative future at his outstretched fingertips. Lately he's grown his hair longer, brushing it across his forehead so it just about hides the worst of his widow's peak. It doesn't seem fair that his hair is disappearing, yet he still suffers from acne... Then his eyes fell to the sad-sack belly, which has surprisingly inherited the hair he's lost from his head. Lately, he finds himself patting it protectively, like you see pregnant women doing.

Just as he was about to leave, his landline rang. It could have only been one person, and he hesitated before deciding it was easier to get it out of the way.

"Why did you take so long to answer? You scared me half to death!" his mother shrieked.

"I was just on my way out."

"Oh, are you seeing Ellie?"

"No, Mum, it's over. Remember?" he sighed.

"It's such a shame. You never did tell me what you did to chase her away—"

"Mum, I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow," Tristan said, hopping from one foot to the other.

“OK, you go. Have you been taking those vitamins I sent? Muriel next door said they helped her son’s acne. He’s eighteen now and just started a medical degree at Edinburgh.”

“Yes, Mum, I’ve been taking them,” he muttered, teeth gritted together. *Please go.*

“And don’t forget, your father is driving over tomorrow to look at your boiler...”

As he made his way to the restaurant, Tristan reflected on the months he’d spent living back at home over the summer. His mother had insisted, keen to “look after” him following the breakup. It hadn’t been so bad at first; she’d filled him up with all his childhood favorites: shepherd’s pie, lasagna, homemade chips, and pale sausages. He’d spent whole days in his old bedroom, his laptop on his knees as he sat up in bed, wrapped up in his single duvet, like a large receding Baby Jesus. But one Sunday morning, when his parents were at church, boredom had led him to poke around in their bedroom. Tucked under their bed, he found a box. Why hadn’t he just left it where it was? Why had he chosen to release those secrets?

Now, sitting at the table among these loud and rude people, he thinks wistfully of his quiet flat, even his parents’ cozy semi. Still, he forces himself to tune into the chatter. They’re all trying to work out who has planned the dinner party, but Tristan can’t think about that now; his mind is already overloaded. He hasn’t spoken a word since he sat down. He should say *something*.

“It reminds me of a Murder Mystery night,” he mumbles. He’d gone to one with Ellie, hated every second. His teeth push together, his jaw clenches at the memory. Tristan’s words drift across the table

and disperse like cigarette smoke as the other guests watch Matthew and Janet resume their excruciating flirting. Looking at Matthew, Tristan notices how the candlelight creates a halo effect around his thick chestnut hair, his eyes as dark as a well. Vivienne at least acknowledged Tristan before dismissing him, whereas Matthew's gaze hopped over him, stopping only briefly on Vivienne to flash his luminescent teeth. The older chap, Melvin, greeted them both enthusiastically and introduced Janet, who hasn't taken her eyes off Matthew. Stella briefly glanced up from her phone to give him a reluctant wave. As for Dr. Gordon, Tristan earned a curt nod of the head.

As Matthew laughs and Janet grins back at him, Tristan lets out a controlled sigh and turns away. His eyes fix on the name card in front of him, which pictures a bulldog in a white shirt, its arm raised, paw balled into a fist. He focuses on the humanlike fingers of the fist and counts. *Two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen...*

"Oh goody, I'm *starving*," Janet squeals as the smartly dressed waiters file back into the room and stand, elegantly poised, behind each seat. In one synchronized movement, they place seven plates in front of the guests.

"Foie gras—my favorite." Matthew beams over at Janet, who grins back.

"Could you confirm there are no sesame seeds in this? I'm allergic," Dr. Gordon tells his waiter and gets a brief nod in response.

"Anyone going to tell us what this is all in aid of?" Vivienne queries, but the waiters are already marching out of the room.

"And they say there's no such thing as a free lunch." Janet chuckles and picks up her cutlery.

Tristan gazes down at the sticky-looking beige square in front of him, the wafer-thin crackers. He hasn't eaten since breakfast, but the sight of this food isn't exactly making his taste buds tingle. He watches Janet expertly smear the gooey substance onto a cracker and land it on her pink tongue. She closes her eyes in apparent ecstasy. He tentatively picks up his own knife and scoops up some foie gras. But as soon as his knife touches the cracker, it instantly crumbles into an unappetizing heap on his plate.

"Bit tricky, that?" Melvin asks, smiling at Tristan.

"I've never eaten anything like this before. Not used to fancy restaurants," Tristan replies.

"Me neither, so let's make the most of it," Melvin says, picking up a dessert spoon and scooping up some foie gras and broken crackers from his own plate.

"Good idea," Tristan chuckles, copying him. He looks up to see Janet staring at them in disgust before turning her ravenous eyes back to Matthew to grill him about his dating experiences.

Despite its unappealing appearance—and dubious ethics—the foie gras is utterly delicious, and Tristan's plate is cleared in no time. His taste buds celebrate; poor things are more familiar with beans on toast.

"I'd have thought a young man like you would be out on the town every night," Melvin says after taking a large gulp of red wine.

"I prefer takeaway at home with friends," Tristan replies, which is only a half lie. He has takeaway most Friday and Saturday nights, but never with friends.

"My wife and I used to go out lots when we first married, but

not so much these days... She's recovering from chemo..." For the first time, Melvin's voice is low, almost a whisper, a strange expression on his face.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. My dad had prostate cancer a few years ago. He's doing great now—" says Tristan.

"That's good," Melvin cuts in. "I'm sure she'll be fine. She's a very strong lady, my Mary. More wine?"

Tristan nods and watches Melvin wave over the waiter to request another bottle. He's smiling again, filled with bonhomie. Clearly, he doesn't want to talk about his wife's illness, but his expression hadn't been one of sadness—more like guilt. Odd.

Gordon

GORDON FINDS HE CANNOT TEAR HIS EYES AWAY

from Janet as she hungrily smears thick, sticky foie gras onto the cracker. She doesn't seem to notice that she has also coated her thumb; her focus is totally taken with the food carefully balanced on the tips of her fingers. As if in slow motion, she raises the cracker, her bloodred lips parting—Gordon can see her expensive dental work—and it is devoured. Then she finally spots the blob of beige on her thumbnail, and that also disappears into the red cavern. He tries to ignore the twitch in his groin.

Looking down at his own plate, Gordon scrapes a modest amount of the foie gras onto his knife and carefully spreads it around a cracker. Made up of mostly duck fat, foie gras is certainly calorific, but, in fact, the monounsaturated and polyunsaturated

fats can be a beneficial part of a healthy diet in small quantities. He picks up his wineglass and takes a small sip of the red wine, allows the liquid to swill around his mouth one, two, three times and then swallows. With its links to lowering heart disease, Gordon allows his wife, Elizabeth, to pour them each a glass of red wine once or twice a week. Elizabeth inevitably tries to persuade Gordon into a second glass, but then he reminds her the health benefits most likely stop after just one. As he's always telling his wife, it's all about moderation, a word this Janet woman clearly doesn't live by.

As he watches her repeat the process with a second cracker, it takes everything Gordon has to maintain an impassive expression on his face. Inside, he is screaming at this woman: *You are disgusting!* He thinks back to medical school and the autopsies they all had to partake in. About half of his class rushed off to vomit; a couple fainted right there and then. But Gordon, he loved every second. He relished the feel of the scalpel pushing through the skin, the beauty of the organs fitting together just so. His tutor was amazed by Gordon's focus at such a young age. The thought still makes him smile. Looking up at Janet now, he pictures the layer of fat he'd find if he cut through her skin with his scalpel. Yellow and bulbous. Perhaps if she saw that, she'd change her ways.

Slowly chewing his modest portion of foie gras (exactly thirty-two times, to aid the digestion process), he briefly closes his eyes with pleasure. It is truly delicious. A small voice inside his head is saying, *Go on Gordon, eat it all up. Worry about it later.* He looks down at his plate and picks up a second cracker, smears another thumbnail of foie gras on top. Again, he slowly chews and swallows

before pushing the plate away from him, away from temptation. He leaves the last three crackers and barely touched foie gras. As he does, he notices his place setting. Pleasingly, it reads *Dr. Gordon MacMillan*, and underneath there's a tiny drawing of a peacock in a top hat. He peers more closely at it; the peacock looks rather distinguished. Perhaps it is the emblem for some sort of high-profile guest speaker society. Gordon allows himself a moment of excitement.

"Pass that over if you don't want it," Janet calls, her fingers wriggling as she reaches across the table for Gordon's plate.

"Oh, I might have more later," he responds, a little quicker than he intended, pulling the plate back out of her reach. Gordon suppresses a smile as Janet visibly huffs and turns back to gazing at Matthew. She's got no idea what a fool she's making of herself. As if that young, athletic chap would want an overweight middle-aged woman!

"Get it down you, Gordo," Melvin bellows across the table as if he's shouting at a rugby referee. "You could do with a bit more meat on those bones."

"Thank you, Melvin. Perhaps I will have a bit more," Gordon says and gingerly picks up his knife once again. He takes a side-long glance at Melvin, who is now leaning back in his chair, his unsightly stomach shaking as he laughs at something Matthew has said. It's really no wonder that the police force is in such a state, with men like Melvin in their camp.

"You look like you'd make a good winger; there's no sport better than rugby," Melvin says to Matthew.

Gordon inwardly rolls his eyes. His dad had loved rugby, too, a die-hard Edinburgh Rugby fan, couldn't understand Gordon's preference for his bedroom and books over the muddy sports field. Another niggle of his: how the world is obsessed with sports "heroes" over scientists, who save lives and really do make a difference.

"So sorry to hear about your wife," Gordon says now, fed up with this mindless sports chat.

Melvin's smile quickly disappears, and he nods solemnly at Gordon.

"Did you know that a healthy diet can reduce your risk of cancer. In fact, obesity is a cause of thirteen different types of cancer," he says.

"Well, Mary certainly isn't obese," Melvin snaps, putting his cutlery down rather abruptly, causing a loud clatter and silencing the table.

"Oh, no, that's not what I was implying." Gordon gives the police officer a reassuring smile. "It's all about eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and proteins. Avoiding red meat, alcohol, and sugary foods."

"So tonight isn't helping our chances of living long lives, then," Vivienne cuts in from Gordon's left. He looks up to see her cool blue eyes staring hard into his. It's a look that Elizabeth sometimes throws him when she feels he's "going on a bit."

"Well, everything in moderation, I always say," he splutters, quickly looking toward Janet.

Elizabeth has warned him before about his overzealous

“lecturing” on healthy eating. But what did she expect? Conversation at dinner parties naturally turns to food and drink, and he can’t miss the opportunity to educate others.

Gordon goes back to his plate as conversation around the table turns to the recent christening of the royal baby, Princess Something or Other. He sighs into his starter at the inexplicable interest people have in these entitled little children who just happened to be born into the right family.

God, this foie gras is delicious. He can’t deny it. At home, he made sure that he, Elizabeth, and Louisa followed a strict and balanced diet.

“It’s like a diet camp,” Louisa would sulk, and he’d started to wonder if she was supplementing her meals with high-sugar snacks when she wasn’t at home. He could see her body filling out, her *derriere* rounding off, her upper arms starting to wobble.

“She’s a teenage girl going through puberty; don’t say a word,” Elizabeth warned when he’d mentioned his concerns to her. But really, what would it look like for a respected *high-profile* doctor of nutrition and dietetics to have an overweight daughter? Hypocrisy, that’s what. When Elizabeth was out of the room, he’d occasionally mention the impact of fatty foods on the body, causing cellulite and acne. He was proud that he could talk in a language teenagers would understand. He’d learned that through his television work. And goodness, he loves every second of it. When that camera is on him, he feels like a superhero, like a world leader, like royalty. Finally, his chance to educate the common man! Unfortunately, he’s only asked to appear every few weeks, so when the invitation

for tonight's dinner party had appeared on his desk, he hoped to meet some media types to whom he could slip his new business card. The peacock on his place setting made him wonder about a speakers' gathering. But the more he hears from his fellow dinner guests, the less likely this seems.

Then he looks down at his plate and realizes with horror that it has been scraped clean. Did he really eat that huge portion himself? It didn't seem possible, yet everyone else was either chatting or finishing off their own starters, so it had to be him. Suddenly, the heat from the open fire is unbearable, his suit jacket nipping under his arms.

"Excuse me, I won't be a moment," he mumbles, turning to Stella on his right and then Vivienne on his left, but neither responds, nor even show they've heard.

Gordon skirts the table and pushes open the heavy door they walked through just an hour before. Opposite him are the stairs heading up and, to his right, another wooden door marked *WC*. He pushes it open and finds a rather elegant restroom inside, complete with chaise longue, an enormous mirror with an ornate silver frame, huge porcelain sinks, and a neat pile of individual towels. He walks straight to the single cubicle and locks himself inside. Spinning around to face the toilet, he leans against the door and allows his body to slide down onto his haunches. The toilet bowl is perfectly clean, not a mark or spot of dust to be seen. Just how he likes it. He takes a deep breath and leans forward on his knees, the trousers of his slim-fitting suit pulling a little on his thighs.

Then he hears something—a creak of a door, a footstep.

Someone is coming. They can't hear this, they can't smell it, they just can't. If it got out, his burgeoning television career would be over. Quickly, he gets to his feet and flushes the toilet. Stepping back into the restroom, he glances at himself in the mirror. Sweat glimmers off his forehead, his cheeks are faintly pink. He grabs a towel and mops his brow, then throws it in the bin and pushes through the door. Glancing left and right, he sees the corridor is empty. He lets out a long sigh and walks back into the dining room.

Janet

GAZING AT THE GORGEOUS YOUNG BANKER TO HER right, Janet feels alive for the first time in months. When her PA had handed her a pile of post last week, she was drawn to the thick black envelope right away. As the managing director of Sophia's Whisper lingerie company, she receives all manner of invitations every day, but when she opened the envelope, read over the words, she found herself pulled in by the air of mystery, as well as the promise of a proper sit-down dinner rather than those fiddly canapés. God knows, she needs some intrigue in her life right now. This morning, she'd spent yet another breakfast in silence. Her husband, Bill, flicked through the *Financial Times* with his left hand while shoveling bacon, fried eggs, and buttered toast into his mouth with his right. Cheerful yellow egg yolk dripped down his chin, but he didn't notice, just carried on flicking and chewing, flicking and chewing.

“There’s a bit of egg on your tie, dear,” Janet said, but even that didn’t make him look up or acknowledge his wife’s low-cut dress, which she’d picked up especially for the dinner party.

“Oh, crumbs, it’s my best one,” he muttered, grabbing a napkin. Watching Bill’s vain attempts to wipe the yolk away, Janet tried to remember a time when they’d talked late into the night, a time when they’d danced with their hips pushed together in a crowded club. But those memories escaped her, like darting fish. Had they ever been like that?

“I’ll be home late tonight,” she told him. “Work party. Don’t wait up.”

“OK, dear,” he mumbled, his focus now returned to his paper and half-eaten—but never forgotten—English breakfast.

As she’d walked away from the table, Janet briefly wondered if Bill had his own plans, a secret passion he kept hidden from her—gambling, drugs, women? Glancing back to see him merrily munching away, with yolk still smeared all over his chin, not unlike a weaning baby, she found the latter option hard to believe.

“Did you get a chance to ring Caroline yet?” Bill suddenly asked, finally looking at her. “She wants to speak to you about the christening.”

“Erm...not yet. I’ll see if I have time this afternoon,” she responded, caught off guard.

“You can’t ignore that baby forever,” Bill said. “She’s absolutely gorgeous, and our only niece.”

“I’m not ignoring her, Bill,” Janet snapped back. “I’ve just been busy.”

After grabbing her favorite Chanel tote, Janet glared at her reflection in the hallway mirror. Trust Bill to bring the baby up just when she'd been in such a good mood. Janet supposed it was bad form not to meet your sister's baby—and she'd be, what, eight weeks old now? Bill had never understood. It didn't matter how many years passed, the aching sadness still reared its head at the sight of a baby, especially a newborn.

"New dress?" Bill commented, stepping toward her, his chin cleaned of egg yolk.

"Yes, what do you think?"

"A little on the tight side." He frowned, appraising her. "Perhaps it's time to size up. Or think about utilizing that extortionate gym membership."

Janet fumed silently as she watched him *waddle* off. How dare he comment about her size? She closed her eyes and brought up the image that had comforted her lately: Bill, cold and dead in bed next to her. She'd be sad for a while, of course, but she'd gotten over worse. Yes, she could picture herself as a sexy young widow. She took a deep breath, slicked on some of her favorite chili-red lipstick, and crossed her fingers for an adventure tonight.

With hungry eyes on Matthew, she wonders now if her adventure will come in the form of a younger man. She is sure there's lots she could teach him about the world, about women. It wouldn't be the first time she'd sought passion elsewhere. Or the second, or third...

"My God, that foie gras was amazing," Matthew sighs. "Even better than at the Magnolia Room."

Janet beams. Matthew recognizes her as a woman of class who knows her haute cuisine.

“Agreed.” She nods, trying to ignore the single drip of sweat snaking down between her shoulder blades.

“Still no sign of our host,” Vivienne pipes up. “At first, I thought this was an elaborate PR promotion, but surely they’d have got to the point by now.”

“Not sure why an old copper like me would be invited to a fancy PR event,” Melvin responds. “Maybe we’re taking part in a new reality TV show. Mary used to watch that one, *Married at First Sight*. Not my sort of thing, but you do get sucked in.”

“Oh God, do you think they’re filming right now?” Vivienne asks, glancing around the dark corners of the room. Janet notes that her eyes stop and linger on Matthew a little too long. She’s old enough to be his mother—or even grandmother—for goodness’ sake.

“Well, I doubt tonight’s events would make for compulsive viewing,” Janet guffaws while inwardly congratulating herself on wearing her new red dress. If they are being filmed, she’s sure it would look great on camera. “Could be some form of performance art?”

As Janet speaks, she leans over and holds her glass out toward Matthew.

He obliges, fills it to the top. She notes, with pleasure, that his eyes gaze admiringly at her chest. So what if she’s put a few extra pounds on her bottom and tummy over the last five or so years? Her greatest assets are as magnificent as ever.

“Chateaubriand,” Janet’s waiter says, gently placing a plate in front of her. She hadn’t even noticed the starter plates being cleared away, and now the stealthy waiters are back, serving up their latest delectable offering.

“Thank you, my dear,” Janet replies, taking in the finest steak, which is beautifully sliced and showing its obscenely pink inside. Nestled next to the meat are delicately roasted potatoes, bright-green asparagus, and a small jug of yellow béarnaise sauce. She wonders how anyone could even consider vegetarianism. Why deny yourself life’s greatest pleasures?

Everyone else has been distracted by the food, but that pesky journalist, Vivienne, is digging her (low, sensible) heels in.

“Excuse me,” she barks at her waiter. “Do you think we could speak to your boss? We’re due some sort of explanation...”

“Let it go, Vivienne, love,” Melvin says. “They’ll get to it soon enough. Let’s just enjoy this marvelous food.”

Thankfully, Vivienne seems to accept Melvin’s advice, and the waiter scuttles off. *Marvelous is certainly the right word for this steak*, thinks Janet. She picks up her cutlery and feels her knife slip through the beef without resistance, it’s so tender. She balances a piece of potato on her fork with the steak and closes her eyes as the flavors explode in her mouth. Was there really anything better in life than a plate of exquisite food? *Except an afternoon in bed with a young man, perhaps*, she thinks, drinking in Matthew’s endless dark lashes, his long fingers tapping away at his phone. As she reaches for her glass, her eyes fall on her place setting. Under her name is an intricate drawing of a pig eating a roast dinner. Janet holds back

a gasp, quickly glances over at Matthew, relieved that he hasn't seen it, then pushes the card into her tote. Looking around the table, she notices that Melvin the copper is tucking his white linen napkin into his shirt collar, the IT boy is fiddling nervously with his cutlery, and skinny Stella is poking at her steak and frowning. A motley crew, if ever there was one. What on earth does Janet have in common with that miserable old journalist or the rugby-loving police officer? And don't even get her started on the sanctimonious TV doctor trying to spoil all her fun. Thank goodness their mysterious host had thought to invite Matthew. He is obviously interested. Taking another bite of her steak, Janet decides to stop concerning herself with why she's here and just enjoy the evening.

"I think we've met before," Vivienne abruptly says, her sharp voice cutting through Janet's thoughts.

Janet looks up at the older woman and raises an eyebrow. She said she's a journalist, but it's unlikely she works at a fashion publication, going by her shapeless black dress and frumpy shoes. And Janet would be shocked if Vivienne was wearing underwear from her high-end brand. She looks more like an M&S white-cotton-granny-knickers sort.

"I don't think so..."

"Yes, I interviewed you a few years ago; it was a profile piece for our *Women in Business* page."

Janet narrows her eyes. Actually, that did ring a bell... It was about three months after she'd sold her company and had only recently started at Sophia's Whisper. She'd been busy coming to grips with the new job, but this woman kept emailing and phoning

her office until Janet finally agreed to spend a miserable hour with her at a coffee shop near work. Vivienne had started off quite pleasant, complimenting her on the highly lucrative sale of her clothing app and her new heels, but then she ambushed her, asking about the “loyal staff” she’d fired. God knows why the woman was so bothered about them: a couple of barely literate graduates whom she’d gotten to write the press releases, a faceless computer chap who’d dealt with the technical side of things, a few savvy girls whom she’d sent out to scour charity shops for designer clothes and jewelry she could sell as “vintage.” I mean, she *had* told a tiny lie when she encouraged them to invest in the company, but you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, and this had been one hell of an omelet (it had paid for their summer house in Greece, a new place down in Cornwall, and new cars for her and Bill). Besides, those freelancers would surely have benefited from just having the company’s name on their CVs.

When the article had come out, this journalist woman referenced the “ruthless” sale of the company, but the worst bit for Janet had been the rather cutting comments about their latest catwalk show. Her boss thought the article was great publicity, but Janet seethed at the journalist’s implications that she was letting the side down—“a female boss reinforcing the male gaze,” as she’d put it. Janet even rang the magazine editor to give him a piece of her mind.

“Oh yes, I remember now,” she mutters. “You said our models stomped all over the feminist dream or something.”

“I’m so pleased you read it.” Vivienne smiles tightly.

“Of course I did. You know, we have plus-size models now,” she says.

“And by ‘plus-size,’ I’m guessing you mean size 10, maybe 12 at a push?” Vivienne parries.

Janet isn’t in the mood for this tonight. She’s spent hours in boardrooms having the same argument with her—mostly male—shareholders. Just this afternoon, she patiently explained to the CEO why every model doesn’t need to be “at least a C cup,” but she’s not about to tell Vivienne that. She’s come to Serendipity’s to have fun, not be grilled by a withered old harpy.

“Let’s be honest, Vivienne: Who wants to look at big girls in their bras?” Janet chuckles. “Am I right, Matthew?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve always had a soft spot for curvy girls.” Matthew looks up from his phone and raises his eyebrows suggestively at Janet.

Silence falls across the table. Vivienne purses her lips, and Stella nearly chokes on her steak. Janet instinctively beams back at Matthew, but then a cold realization hits her: He’s talking about her. Janet knows she’s no ’90s supermodel, but she’s surely not a “curvy girl,” either, despite Bill’s hints.

Six pairs of eyes are on Janet, waiting for her reaction.

Melvin

MELVIN NEARLY SPITS OUT HIS WINE AS MATTHEW’S “curvy girl” comment reverberates around the room. He can see from the pink blush climbing up Janet’s neck that she has never

thought of herself in this way. The woman's a stunner, no denying it. She's one of those girls who carries her looks around like a queen wearing her mantle; she swept into the restaurant surveying her property and her subjects. Those yellow-green eyes had flashed around all the chaps, landing first on Matthew, then Gordon, and then Melvin, weighing up their worth. Young Tristan, with his smudged glasses and old T-shirt, didn't get a look-in, poor kid. But her low-cut dress, her unladylike comments about sex, her flippant attitude toward her own marriage just aren't to Melvin's taste. He thinks of Mary. Despite everything she's been through—all the needles, the pain, the hair loss—she's retained her dignity. Mary is a lady, unlike Juicy Janet. Still, the last thing he wants is for her to get upset; she'd been having such a good night. He holds his breath as he waits to see how she'll handle this unwitting insult. Should he say something?

“Well, the whole world *is* talking about Kim Kardashian's bottom,” she eventually splutters, the thumb of her left hand absentmindedly spinning her eternity ring around and around on her finger, sending flashes of light across the table.

Fair play, good save. Melvin shoots her an encouraging smile. But really, at her age, she should know better than chasing after a young man like that. It's clear that she's a good twenty years too old for this Matthew. As he watches Janet wave at a passing waiter, demanding more wine, Melvin wonders about her husband: Where is he tonight? Does he have any idea she's spending the evening flirting so obviously with another man? Then he thinks of a 999 call he answered a month or so before. There had been a

reported domestic disturbance on a nice road in Belgravia. He'd been sent to have a quiet word and had pictured a tipsy well-to-do couple falling out over which Farrow & Ball shade to paint the drawing room. But when he'd rung the bell, a man came straight to the door, tears of blood streaming down his face.

"I did it. I'm sorry," he confessed as Melvin pushed past to get into the house. The poor woman was lying in a bloody heap on the kitchen floor, a spatula still clutched in her hand. Melvin touched her neck; she was already cold.

"I just couldn't take it anymore," the husband said to Melvin as he was guided to the patrol car. On the way to the station, he talked incessantly about day-to-day pettiness, passive-aggressive battles over trash day, and forgotten anniversaries. The man's words were doused in sorrow but also in relief. Worse, Melvin understood. He understood how a marriage, even a good marriage, could become suffocating, and how close one side—or both—could come to snapping.

He'd usually tell Mary the details of his day, and surely she would have been horrified by that tale, but he couldn't do it. He was filled with shame at the sympathy he felt for the man who had murdered his wife.

Melvin looks from Janet to Matthew. It strikes him just how different young men are these days. When Melvin himself was in his twenties, living in a small village just outside Cardiff, you were deemed "well groomed" if you had regular haircuts and wore clean shoes for a date. These days, young men have *manicures*, wax their chests, spend hours honing their muscles at the gym. He's even

heard that some wear makeup! Mind you, Matthew looks pretty good on it. His dark-brown eyes and high cheekbones remind Melvin of Christian, his new colleague at the station, and then he's wondering what Christian is up to right now...

Stop it!

In his fifty-eight years, Melvin has often found himself wondering about certain men who crossed his path. It was to be expected, he's told himself. He spent his teen years on a rugby pitch—and in the communal baths afterward—then joined the police force, working predominantly with men and spending weekends watching rugby or football and drinking in the pub with his male friends. But the appearance of Christian ramped this up. Now Melvin's "wonderings" last for hours, epic daydreams while he sits next to Mary watching *Antiques Roadshow*, torturous nightmares that leave him drenched in sweat and shaking all over with an all-consuming ache for this man. Christian's earnest brown eyes are the backdrop to his every waking moment.

"Oh, yummy," Janet's voice cuts through his daydream.

Melvin looks up to see the waiters reappear, presenting plates of something chocolaty, sending Janet into apparent ecstasy.

"Not sure my belly can take much more," Melvin says, but picks up his spoon anyway. As he digs into the sponge, dark, shiny chocolate sauce comes oozing out, mixing with the vanilla ice cream, reminding him of the yin-yang sign. Years ago, Mary taught him what it meant—a little bit of good in every bad person and a bit of bad in every good person. Right now, Melvin feels all bad because his daydreams about Christian are teetering on the edge of

reality. Yes, unbelievably, Melvin has started to think that Christian might have feelings for him too. The way he holds his gaze for a second too long, the casual touch to his knee as they sit side by side in their patrol car, the charged air between them.

And so, every nice thing that Mary does for him is now infused with guilt, his home is no longer the refuge it was. Melvin pictures himself balancing on the edge of a cliff, filled with paralyzing fear. In order to avoid both his guilt and his temptation, he's been hiding out at the Dog & Partridge every day after work. Five pints at the pub, getting home after Mary has gone to bed, then wrestling a hangover to be up at 6:00 a.m. and in the office by 7:00 a.m.

Last week, when the black envelope had appeared on his desk, he tossed it on top of the ever-growing pile of paperwork that he'd never gotten around to looking at. It was only that afternoon, as he sat at his desk fighting his heavy eyelids, that he actually opened the envelope and decided to go along. Leaning back in his comfy office chair, Melvin pictured Christian, excitedly pointing out restaurants as they'd patrolled the streets together, asking Melvin about the sorts of food he liked. As daydream gave way to real life, Melvin smiled to himself. He wondered if Christian had planned an intimate date for them disguised as a dinner party.

Now he sees how ludicrous that thought was and reflects that he might have been better off in the pub after all. At least he'd just have himself to put up with. This is a mixed bunch, that's for sure. As well as handsome Matthew and sex-obsessed Janet, Vivienne is a lady of around his age and seems to have elected herself the headmistress of the group, looking offended at every turn. Melvin

finds there's always someone who makes a daft comment about his color, and that award has gone to uptight Dr. Gordon. If looks could kill, the Scottish doctor would have dropped dead thanks to young Stella, but Melvin just laughs these things off. He'd heard it all on the rugby pitches around Cardiff and found humor was the best reaction. The younger generation don't see it this way; you just needed to look at Stella's face to know that.

Now that Melvin thinks of it, he realizes he's met Stella before. Over the summer, he'd been called to a nice flat in Kensington to a report of burglary. He got there and found a very well-dressed, well-spoken chap in a three-piece suit, who introduced himself as a barrister (putting Melvin firmly in his place) and announced that some "extraordinarily expensive jewelry" had been stolen from his daughter's flat. When Melvin started to take down the details, it became clear that Stella was too inebriated to give a statement, telling her father to "just buy me another one." Melvin then had to act as a referee as father and daughter yelled at each other about the diamond-encrusted necklace. Watching them, Melvin felt an almost overwhelming urge to put his hands around both their necks and squeeze the life out of them. He'd had enough of privileged people wasting police time. At least Stella is more composed tonight. Not only that, she appears to be wearing a diamond necklace just like the one they'd described. Good thing he never got around to filing that police report.

After polishing off his dessert, Melvin picks up his glass and downs the lot. Then he forces himself to tune back in to the

conversational tennis match flying over the table. The guests, now a little worse for wear, are sending balls in all directions.

“Oh, come on, you can’t beat snogging a stranger on a sweaty dance floor!” Janet screeches.

“It’s just not an efficient method,” Matthew replies, his tie now slightly askew. Melvin can also detect a bluntness to his vowels that weren’t there earlier. Surely perfectly polished Matthew couldn’t be northern?

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you had a harem on the go, with all their attributes written up on a spreadsheet,” Vivienne says.

Melvin notices that Matthew starts at the mention of *harem*. Has tipsy Vivienne stumbled across a truth?

“As if I’d be so disrespectful, Vivienne! I’m a gentleman,” he cries.

“I have to agree with the ladies,” Melvin cuts in. “I met my wife, Mary, at a wedding, and our first kiss was to “Dancing Queen” at midnight. We’ve been married for more than thirty years.”

Janet and Vivienne grin, and Matthew shrugs his shoulders in defeat. Then a lull falls over the table. Vivienne turns to Tristan to ask about his IT work, and Matthew talks to young Stella over Janet’s head.

“What’s this?” Janet suddenly cries, clutching a tiny black envelope, a mini version of the one that contained the dinner party invitations. Melvin glances around the table and sees they all have identical envelopes by their wineglasses. Where on earth had *they* come from?

Conversation at the table grinds to a halt as the other guests

watch Janet open the envelope. Clearly enjoying the attention, she slowly peels it open, pulls out a small black card using the tips of her red nails, and looks at it. Then her smile freezes.

“Is this some sort of joke?” she splutters, the card in her hand shaking.

“What is it?” Vivienne snaps, her recent comradery with Janet now apparently forgotten.

“Is someone filming us?” Janet cries, looking frantically around the room.

“What are you talking about?” asks Gordon. “What does it say?”

“Get it away from me!” she yelps, throwing it toward the center of the table.

“Take it easy, Janet, love,” Melvin says.

Vivienne reaches across and picks up the card. She pulls her glasses from her handbag and squints as she reads the letters in the dim light.

“It says: *You will die aged forty-four.*” She gasps and drops the card as if it’s on fire. The guests all look at each other. In an instant, the atmosphere in the room turns from warm and pleasantly tipsy to suffocating and disorientating.

“Take no notice. It’s probably just a silly PR stunt,” Matthew says, putting his hand on Janet’s.

“It’s not silly—it’s downright cruel,” cries Vivienne, standing up. “I’m going to speak to someone about this.”

“Hold up, Vivienne,” Melvin calls, but before he can do anything, Vivienne has marched toward the door through which the

waiters disappeared. They all watch as she abruptly stops, her hands pushing in vain against the solid wood.

“It’s locked,” she says. She bangs her flat palms against the door, but there’s no answer.

Vivienne goes back to her chair. The only sound is Janet sobbing quietly.

“First thing tomorrow, I’ll find out which PR company planned this dinner party...” Vivienne mutters, though her voice has lost some of its power.

“Let’s see,” Gordon says, quickly ripping open his own envelope. “Mine says fifty-three. That’s three years from now.”

“You shouldn’t have opened it,” Vivienne scolds. “I’m certainly not opening mine.”

“Me neither,” Tristan mutters, pushing his envelope away.

“I feel sick,” Janet sobs, and Melvin notices her skin has paled. “I knew there was something strange about this dinner party.”

“Calm down, everyone,” says Melvin, picking up Janet’s card from the table. “I tell you what: I’ll take this to the station tomorrow and see if I can find anything out.”

“No wonder the host didn’t make an appearance, if they were planning to pull this stunt,” Vivienne says.

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” Matthew says, taking a glug of his wine.

“It would be interesting if the numbers were correct, though, wouldn’t it?” Gordon mutters, turning over his card as if hunting for clues.

“Interesting’?” Janet snaps. “I’m already forty-four; it’s my birthday in July! That card is a death sentence!”

A chuckle bursts from Stella. They all look over as she starts to cough.

“Something funny?” Janet snarls.

“Sorry—wine went down the wrong way,” she splutters. Matthew takes his hand off Janet’s and reaches across the table to give Stella his napkin.

“We’ve all had a bit too much to drink,” he says. “We’ll be laughing about this in the morning.”

“I doubt that,” Janet cries, dabbing at her eyes with her own napkin and looking forlornly up at Matthew.

“It’s time we all call it a night,” Melvin says. “Give me your contact details, everyone. I’ll look into this and let you know what I find out.”

They each pass him a business card, with Stella scrawling her email address on a napkin. Melvin notices that Vivienne pushes her black envelope into her bag before wishing them all a brusque goodbye and marching unsteadily out of the room. Minutes later, Tristan follows her out, tucking his envelope into his back pocket. Matthew and Stella move across to the fireplace for a whispered conversation. Gordon stays sitting at the table, frowning at his mobile phone.

Melvin looks over at Janet, whose smeared makeup reminds him of a tired clown. She glances gloomily at Matthew and Stella as she pulls on her coat. Melvin pushes the business cards and napkin into his pocket. He notices that two unopened envelopes

are still on the table, but leaves them be. He isn't sure how his name ended up on the guest list for this odd dinner party—maybe it's one of his colleagues winding him up. Truthfully, he doesn't care. He has no real interest in unmasking the dinner party host. But as a police officer, he should be seen to make an effort, to take control of upsetting situations. He'll make a few calls tomorrow, hopefully settle the ladies' concerns. Glancing at his watch, he sees it's just before 11:00 p.m. Bit early to head home; Mary might still be up. He just wants to get as drunk as possible and try to forget about his problems for a few more hours.

“One for the road, to calm your nerves?” he asks Janet, and she nods.