

‘Combines classic country house murder mystery with an ensemble comedy caper in a glorious debut’

Sunday Express

‘Nicely done, with some entertaining asides about the nature of detective fiction: recommended reading for a long winter night’

Guardian

‘An ingenious plot, witty asides and lively characterisations...
If Carlsberg did whodunnits they would probably be something like this’

Saga

‘A witty repurposing of the Golden Age country house whodunnit for the modern age’

Financial Times

‘An entertaining whodunnit in the classic Christie style’

Mail on Sunday

‘Jensen has taken themes from dozens of Golden Age novels and made something new – and funny – out of them... An excellent cosy crime novel’

Literary Review

‘A spine-chilling, Agatha Christie-esque whodunnit’

i newspaper

‘A locked-room mystery that gleefully winks to its form...
Full of sharp turns, the plot is equally engaging, reminiscent of the *Knives Out* films, and drawing from the many
mysteries it name-checks’

Irish Times

‘A heart-warming blend of a classic whodunnit with a
modern spin’

Belfast Telegraph

‘A glorious feat that intrigues, surprises and delights from
page one. This gem is a solid gold revival of the Golden
Age whodunnit, with a delicious Danish twist’

Janice Hallett, author of *The Appeal*

‘A love letter to the classic country house murder mystery... If Agatha Christie had written *The Big Chill* it
would have been very much like this’

J.M. Hall, author of *A Spoonful of Murder*

‘A brilliant update on the traditional country house
murder. Oskar Jensen has a wonderfully descriptive style,
pin-point accurate and loaded with atmosphere. If this is
the start of Scandi-Cosy, I’m all for it’

Ian Moore, author of *Death and Croissants*

‘Oskar Jensen is a sparkling new voice in crime fiction.
Loved it’

S.J. Bennett, author of *The Windsor Knot*

‘A wonderful mix of Golden Age tributes, Scandi not-so-noir, puzzling mystery, and a study of the sort of friendships that linger across the years... A belter of a book, and

I’m already anxiously awaiting the sequel’

Katy Watson, author of ***The Three Dahlias***

‘A glittering jewel in the crown of modern country house mysteries. We must have more of Torben Helle!

Truly excellent’

Marion Todd, author of ***Old Bones Lie***

‘Beautifully written and teeming with intrigue... Had me hooked from the first page and guessing until the last’

Joanna Wallace, author of ***You’d Look Better as a Ghost***

‘Cunningly clever. I defy you to guess whodunnit’

Tina Baker, author of ***Call Me Mummy***

‘A clever, funny, sparklingly fresh twist on classic country house murder’

Kate Griffin, author of ***Fyneshade***

‘A clever and funny country house murder’

J.B. Mylet, author of ***The Homes***

‘A charmingly quirky protagonist, a bleakly vivid setting, and a cleverly plotted country house murder make for a brilliant read... A beautifully written tribute to the

Golden Age classics’

Guy Morpuss, author of ***Five Minds***

Also by Oskar Jensen and available from Viper

Helle's Hound (2025)

HELLE & DEATH

OSKAR JENSEN



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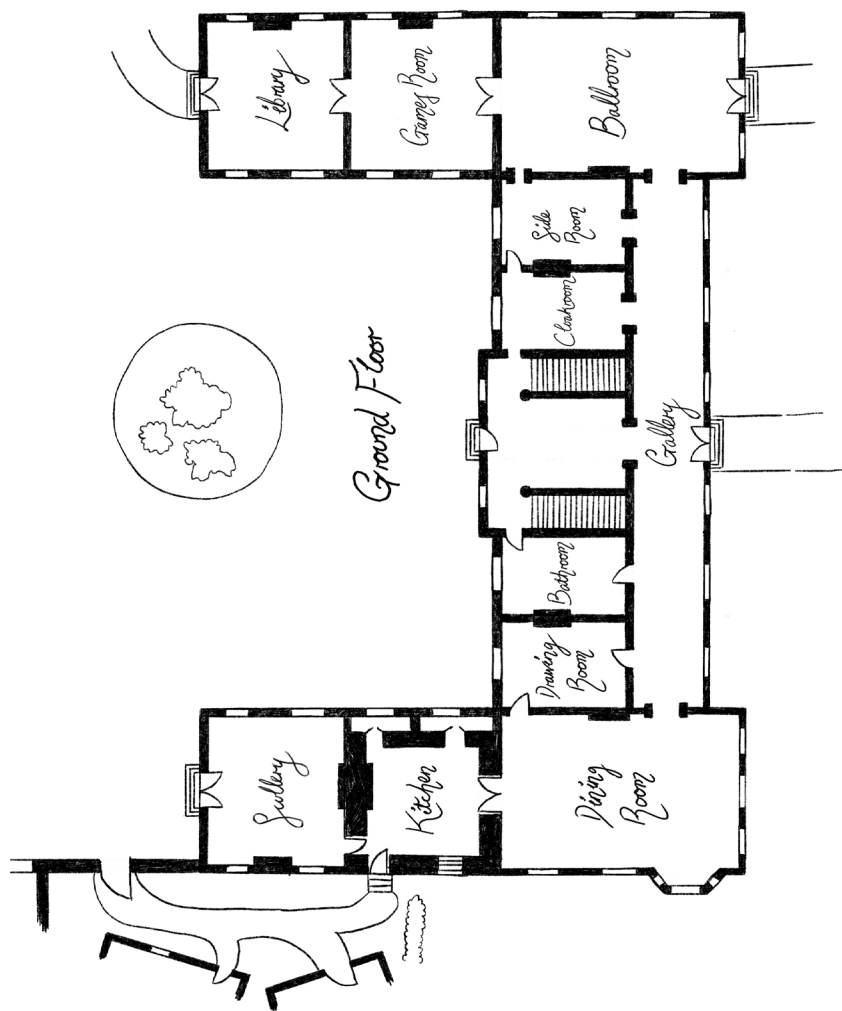
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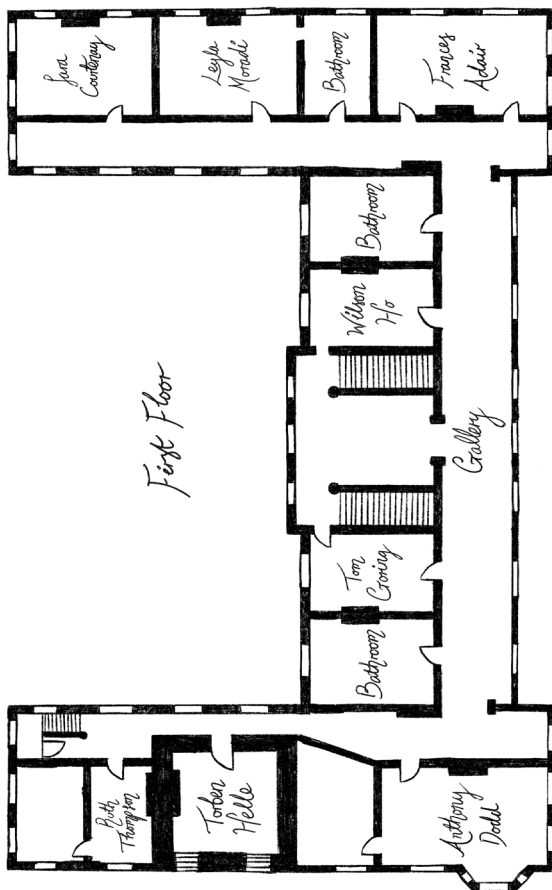
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For my friends





DANISH GLOSSARY

<i>Det blæser en halv pelikan</i>	It's blowing half a pelican (cf. 'It's raining cats and dogs')
<i>Det ved jeg sgu ikke</i>	Roughly, Damned if I know
<i>Dit svin</i>	You swine ('you bastard')
<i>Er du sindssyg?</i>	Are you serious? (John McEnroe, 'You cannot be serious!')
<i>For fanden!</i>	For the devil! (expletive)
<i>For helvede!</i>	For hell! (expletive)
<i>For Satan!</i>	For the devil! (expletive. It's good to have options)
<i>Frisk som en fisk</i>	Fresh as a fish ('fit as a fiddle')
<i>Fuck dig</i>	Fuck you
<i>Gå som katten om den varme grød</i>	Walk like the cat around hot porridge ('pussyfooting around the subject')
<i>Gerningsmand</i>	Perpetrator
<i>God nat</i>	Good night

<i>Hyggelig</i>	Cosy (sort of. Oh come on, we all know this one by now)
<i>Hold kæft!</i>	Shut up! (Often used to express incredulity or awe, cf. 'Wow!')
<i>Hold op</i>	Hold up, wait up
<i>Ingen ko på isen</i>	The cow is not on the ice (‘everything’s OK’)
<i>Jeg elsker dig</i>	I love you
<i>Klap lige hesten</i>	Pat the horse (‘hold your horses’)
<i>Lort!</i>	Damn, bugger, oh shit!
<i>Morgen</i>	Morning
<i>Offer</i>	Victim
<i>På god fod</i>	On good foot (on good terms)
<i>Så er den ged barberet</i>	So the goat is shaved (a difficult task completed)
<i>Sluge en kamel</i>	To swallow a camel (to put up with something, cf. ‘no use crying over spilt milk’)

SATURDAY, NOON

It was easy to overlook the bullet wound. The dead man lay back on the narrow bed as if asleep, large left hand across his chest, his right arm dangling. The gun had fallen to the floor, just out of reach, looking for all the world as innocent as the cast-off slipper lying beneath a bare right foot. The corpse was dressed in a pristine white nightshirt. Were it not for the gaping entry wound in the right temple, itself almost lost in shadow, the rumpled bedclothes and sprawled limbs might suggest nothing more than a restless night.

Torben Helle's eyes roved quickly round the room, taking in the scene. The cheap chairs with their rush seats. A skull tucked away upon a shelf of books and jars, and the mundane explanation for its macabre presence – an artist's palette. A painter must study anatomy. The morning light from the single window was poor, revealing only that too-pure nightshirt and a rent in the mattress, its spilled

stuffing somehow more violent than the fatal injury itself. So dark was the room, that Torben first took the scrap of white upon the floor for a nightcap, before realising what it really was: the suicide's final note. He straightened up, lifting his eyes from the page. What was Decamps saying in this image?

Torben had been asked to review the first English-language monograph on Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, a Parisian artist more famous for his oriental scenes, and the book's author was clearly struggling to make sense of this painting. Her argument was that it was a forgotten milestone in French depictions of suicide, halfway between the grand heroic scenes of David's *Death of Socrates* – the noble martyr surrounded by mourners – and the nihilism of Manet's *Le Suicidé*. The Decamps painting dated from the 1830s, and the author saw it as a move towards Manet's vision of the pointless death, in an image literally stripped of meaning by the removal of all the 'clues' that an artist would generally include for the viewer. To Torben, that spilled stuffing in the mattress was clue enough. And if this author was going to reference David, why had she not thought to bring in his *Death of Marat* – the famous body in the bathtub – and, though not a suicide, visually a far more obvious—

Torben looked up. A change in the train's motion had brought him to his senses just in time: they were pulling in to Newcastle, and passengers were stirring all around him. He took the handwritten invitation that he had been using as a bookmark, tucked it in at the page of Decamps'

Suicide, and crammed the book back into his battered leather holdall.

As the train juddered to a halt he glanced at his watch. Nine minutes to twelve, two behind schedule. That gave him precisely four minutes to cross the double bridge to platform seven, where the eleven fifty-five would take him on to Bastlehaugh. He was encumbered by the holdall in his left hand, and the umbrella in his right. And by his hat, which might cause problems, given the strong wind. Oh, and there was the small matter of about three hundred other passengers, all bent upon the spot where stairs, bridge and barrier met. Maybe it was the malignant influence of the suicide paintings, but something about all those milling bodies unnerved Torben. Coupled with the grey and the grime they had something about them of an old war film, of going over the top. His umbrella was a solid stick, its handle of bark ash, and unconsciously he adjusted his grip, holding it like a sword. Time to go.

The wind was high upon the bridge, licking at the tails of his coat, tearing holes in the mist. Torben danced between the oncoming fools who were heedless of the signs to 'Keep Left', and slalomed down the ramp to the platform. He had a minute, maybe less. But there was the train ahead of him, its carriage doors still open. On the edge of his vision he glimpsed a man in uniform with a whistle between his lips. But Torben had almost made it, just behind a small, huddled figure who was struggling with something, blocking the way.

Lort! Without a thought, Torben stooped, taking up the

old woman's surprisingly light luggage with what he hoped was a friendly smile. He was about to heave it on to the train when he became conscious of an unpleasant sensation, and looked down to see the woman battering him with her fists. 'Get off me bags! He's got me bags!' Her screams rose to mingle with the whistle and the screeching of unknown machinery. In the absence of any better plan, Torben threw their cases in, then, losing his head completely, he picked up his assailant and lifted her bodily aboard the train, jumping in after her an instant before the doors closed upon him. Grimacing, he wrenched his hand from their grip.

'Sorry,' he panted. 'Thought you— you needed help, or we might both have missed the train.'

The woman glared up at him, her face incredulous. 'Missed the train? *Missed it?* I've only just bleedin' well got *off* it!'

Torben blinked. 'Off it?'

'I was goin' into town for me shopping, wasn't I?'

'Oh. I thought—'

'You thought! I should have the law on you.' And she fetched him another blow with her handbag.

Eventually, the combination of a full carriage, the train's motion, and the realisation that the train carried on to the Gateshead Metrocentre, all served to pacify his abductee, who turned her back on him with a final '*gnarh*'.

Torben took stock. Had he literally just *picked up* an old woman? It appeared that he had. Apparently emergencies turned him into some sort of ... molestatory stevedore? Still, he had caught his train. One finger was bleeding;

his bag had a new scuff to add to its war record. And his umbrella, presumably, lay where he must have dropped it when he had embarked upon his act of unsolicited chivalry. ‘*For helvede*,’ he swore.

The second carriage was a little emptier, and Torben threw himself into a seat in time to see the Tyne roll below him. The great river was battleship grey, mists curling across its surface. Normally he was comforted by large bodies of water. Today, this one looked like it was lying in wait. He felt the tug of melancholy, of the grey river beneath him. His mind went back to the painting. Had Decamps been right to suggest there was something heroic in the act of suicide? It was the way Torben would want to go, given the choice; there was something comforting about death at one’s own hand. How much better that would be than to fall, trapped in metal, into the grey waters below. And again he felt that leaden tug.

Then someone snatched his hat.

‘Torben!’ He turned. ‘I knew it was you! Didn’t I say so, Frances?’

He began to get up, one hand instinctively ruffling his hair out of its hat-bound flatness. Two faces close to his: one pale, high cheek-boned, framed by long black hair; the other green-eyed and grinning, alive with inner light.

‘Sara! Frances!’ he beamed.

Next instant, he was enveloped in a whirl of copper-coloured hair as Frances caught him in a three-kiss hug.

As he struggled free, Torben felt the envious eyes of two men across the aisle – before they switched back to appreciating Frances’ slender form, wriggling in beside him. Naturally, he told himself, he deplored their objectifying gaze. But he couldn’t pretend the seat next to him hadn’t been significantly improved by the presence of its new occupant.

Across the little plastic table, Sara slipped in quietly, her knees skimming his. ‘Let’s have a look at you then,’ she said. ‘Frankly, Frances, I don’t think he’s changed a bit.’

Frances offloaded a bag on Torben’s feet, leaving her gloved hands free to cup his face. The gloves were made of butter-soft leather, moss green, and supple as skin against his jaw. ‘It’s this beard,’ Frances said. ‘He’s all braw and bonnie now.’

Torben caught Sara’s eye, mid-roll. Frances had always played up to her Scottishness. He smiled. ‘It’s been a criminally long time, I’m sorry. And I must say, to see you both still looking so outrageously gorgeous is—’

‘Surprising?’ said Sara.

‘Colossally unfair,’ he finished. ‘How was your journey?’

‘Grand,’ said Frances. ‘Bit of an early start, but we’ve been self-medicating so it’s all been rather ... you know, like a holiday,’ she finished up, with a belated attempt at schoolgirl innocence. Well, that explained the exaggerated accent. And the slight whiff of whisky.

‘You came up together?’

Frances paused, looking, for once, at a loss for an answer. For perhaps the space of two seconds, no one spoke.

‘We happened to have booked the same carriage,’ said

Sara, her voice smooth. 'First class, if you can believe that. It was practically cheaper once you factor breakfast in.'

'I wasn't sure who else was coming,' said Torben, 'except Ruth, who said she was travelling last night. And Wilson's been in touch.'

'Tom Goring will be there, I suppose,' said Sara. 'Anthony will have tried for the usual boy-girl matchy-matchy thing – you know how anal he always was about planning things – so if Leyla's made it too, that's more or less the whole set.' She grinned. 'Classic setup for a country house party. The tycoon, the lawyer, the actor, the – well, whatever you are, Torben. Not a professor yet, I trust? Of course, we women aren't keeping our end up as femmes fatales but we can boast me as impecunious literary scholar, Fran here as *enfant terrible* of the art world—'

'As the struggling sculptor of Shoreditch, more like,' said Frances.

'And Ruth and Leyla as more agents of law and order,' Sara finished up, ignoring Frances' interjection. 'I make that all eight of us, the original first-year line-up, the cream of Staircase Two!'

'I wonder,' said Torben, 'why we've all been brought back together.'

Frances beamed at the two of them. 'I wonder,' she said, 'why we never thought of doing it before.'

The train ploughed on up the Tyne Valley. At every little station, damp ferns sagged over the brick banks, lurid in

colour, somehow Jurassic. Beside the sulky band of river at their right, the town was giving way to sodden fields and clumps of marshland, stretched beneath a February sky. Rooks stalked the barren pastures; a few sheep hunkered down. With great deliberation, a heron lowered its head to murder a frog. To the left of the track, the hills rose high, and bare spindled trees thinned into pasture, itself soon replaced by a parapet of jagged fir trees. It was, thought Torben, an uninviting landscape, for all its brutal grandeur. He couldn't see why his forefathers had made the effort to conquer it, a thousand years ago.

But then, hadn't he felt something of the same pull himself? That was the reason he had given his family when, uncomprehending, they had challenged his decision to burden himself with the debt of a foreign education, to estrange himself in an institution that was, in the words of his parents – school-teachers who had grown up in the heady days of '68 and, unlike so many, stuck to their principles – 'nothing more than an archaic bastion of establishment privilege'. Torben had entrenched, argued for its beauty – its exacting standards – even its convenient bus connection to Heathrow airport. If there had been a subtext, he had allowed it to be the appeal of a world-famous university set against his own upbringing: a small farmhouse outside a small town, a humble life in what, even for Denmark, was a backwater. But what had really won the day, he thought, was his parents' guilt. Both taught at the same *Gymnasium* where Torben had done his A levels, and after three years of that, they had

to concede that he'd earned the right to get as far away as he liked.

He remembered the excitement of getting into Oxford, an early Christmas present in a family where no one had ever been educated further afield than Århus. And when he finally made the move, he had welcomed the unknown. Eighteen years old and brimming with newness, revelling in a language, a culture, that had fascinated him from afar. But he had not accounted for the loneliness. It would have been better, surely, to make the adventure surrounded by fellow warriors, than to leave as he had done, alone?

That was also why he had accepted Anthony Dodd's invitation to this little reunion. As a student, he had swiftly overcome that initial isolation. He had flourished, made himself anew – not without missteps, granted, but by the end of his first degree, he was happy with the person he had become. Now, nearly a decade on, living alone in Oxford and London ... well, he was not so sure. But that was the beauty of seeing old friends: they assumed they knew who you were. To them, Torben was still a lovable fool, and the role suited him perfectly. That was who he wanted to be, for a weekend at least.

Ruth had noticed, though, the last time they had met. She had seen the hardness that was in him. What had she said? 'No man is an island.' Torben had laughed it off, as usual. 'Clearly John Donne never visited the Isle of Man.' He loved that about the English language, its capacity for playfulness. He had once discovered, delightedly, the irony that in English you could be described as both gauche

and maladroit – an observation that had sent Anthony, no scholar of French, scurrying for his *Oxford Dictionary of Etymology*—

‘Oo, this is us,’ said Sara, scrambling up. ‘Torben, could you manage—’ she flapped a hand at their cases. Frances winked at him. The train shuddered to a halt, and ‘Bastlehaugh!’ was called.

‘Funny,’ said Sara, as they alighted. ‘*How* – like Aslan’s How, I suppose. I assumed it was pronounced “whore”. Ah well. Oh, and I never thought about taxis ...’

‘I’ve ordered one,’ said Torben, from behind a stack of luggage.

‘Excellent,’ said Sara. ‘Thanks, Torben, that’ll save us a fare.’ She always had been ruthless when it came to money.

Frances smiled, making the corners of her face do that crinkling thing he remembered so well. The part of Torben that was still emerging from his melancholy liked to think he was above being placated by a Glaswegian lass with auburn curls and a retroussé nose. But he had to admit he was not.

As she very well knew.

The window of a cab wound down. ‘Taxi for a Doctor Hell?’

Torben sighed. ‘*Helle*,’ he said, ‘it has two syllables.’ But he said it only in his head, as he stacked their cases in the boot of the cab before clambering in beside the driver. The girls – forty minutes of their company had transformed them ineluctably in his mind from women to girls – took the back.

‘Bastle House, is it, sir?’

‘That’s right, thank you.’ Shameful, of course, but he sort of enjoyed those rare occasions when people called him ‘sir’. It seemed so ridiculously English.

The driver started his engine. ‘And picking up on Tuesday morning?’

‘Yes, it’s sort of a long weekend.’

The driver shook his head. ‘Well, I will try. But it is a bad road at any time, and snow is forecast.’ He sighed, putting the car into gear. ‘But I will do my best.’

Torben had encountered this before, the fuss the English made over a few flakes of snow. They had no conception of a real winter. Of the great drifts that remade the world, the long nights and the bone-cold, the thoughts that came unbidden through the cracks ... He shook himself. This *was* England, where snow was picturesque. *A holiday*, he reminded himself. *A jolly holiday*.

Bastlehaugh was a tiny place, crooked in the elbow of the hills. A straggle of slab-stoned houses, a pub and a post office, all on the point of capitulation to assault by ivy and the damp, pervading mist. The little taxi growled as the road grew steep.

‘So, is it far?’ said Torben, conscious of his social duty. It was too loud for general conversation, and the other two already had their heads together.

‘Not as the crow flies, no. But it takes time – with these roads, and the hills. The fee is fixed, sir.’

‘Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean ...’ Torben trailed off.

‘Now, Doctor Hell,’ said the driver, ‘is it a party you are going to?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Torben. ‘There’s a group of us – we were something of a set at university, though all that was years ago. Then at Christmas I received – well, we each received, I imagine, a letter from Anthony, inviting us for this weekend. Anthony Dodd,’ he added with emphasis, glancing at the driver.

‘Yes?’

‘Oh, I just thought you might have heard of him; big name, small place ... in fact it’s all rather mysterious. He made a fortune almost straight after leaving university through, well, an invention I suppose you’d call it; the papers were full of it at the time. Big business. Then only last year, just when he was all set to become a Captain of Industry’ – Torben pronounced it so the capitals were audible – ‘he chucked the whole thing in and retired before hitting thirty. We all wondered why. I rather hoped there’d be some local gossip about him.’

‘I live in Hexham.’

‘Of course; sorry—’

‘He’s a total recluse,’ said Frances, leaning in between them. ‘Turned his back on the world. Why, he isn’t even on Twitter!’

‘Nearly there, Doctor Hell,’ said the driver. Five times they had surmounted what Torben took to be the final crest, only to find another summit before them, pressed about

by fir trees. The road rose, dipped, writhed, and Sara had reported that she was feeling sick.

‘Look, call me Torben,’ he said. ‘And thank you, Mr—?’

‘Mr Hasan Roy,’ said the driver. ‘And please, do not thank me yet: I cannot take you past the gatehouse; the road surface is poor and I should not risk my car.’ He pulled over to the side of the road, where a gap in the woods was barred by a pair of wrought-iron gates, flanked by buff stone pedestals. Ferns and fallen pine needles mingled with brown bracken. A square stone cottage, its windows blank, was just visible beyond.

Hasan helped Torben with the luggage. ‘I will carry these for you to the house,’ he said, holding up two of the bags. ‘It’s included in the fare.’

‘Oh, I’m sure that isn’t—’ began Torben. But then Frances pushed the gates open, and he saw the rutted track winding up into the trees. ‘Actually, that would be a great help, thank you, Mr Roy.’

‘We’ll take these two,’ said Frances, grabbing their handbags, and she and Sara set off up the path, bags swinging, arm in arm and giggling.

As they trudged along behind for what seemed like forever, Torben found himself telling Hasan about the old woman on the platform. Hasan’s laughter did him good – more good, certainly, than the climbing, scrambling, bag-juggling assault course that was this potholed and interminable driveway.

‘The moral, I suppose,’ said Torben, growing hot from exertion despite the winter cold, ‘is not to overread simple situations.’

‘I am, of course, a mere taxi driver,’ said Hasan. ‘But it would seem to me the moral is not to pick up old women at train stations.’ He paused. ‘Which is what I seem to spend half my life doing!’ His chuckle rang through the wood. Then he stopped again. ‘By which I do not mean—’

‘We’re here!’ called Sara, from somewhere ahead of them. The trees had opened out into wide, rather scrubby parkland, where the two women were gazing, still uphill. ‘Christ, Anthony really did make a mint, didn’t he? It looks like Castle bloody Howard. Halloo!’ And, waving at a score of empty windows, she set off again towards the mansion towering ahead of them, grey against a greyer sky.

Torben took in the high rows of windows, the austere geometry, the sharp-edged pediments that hinted at two further wings, tucked out of sight. Bastle House was showing them its best face, a serene impression, with all such concessions to reality as entrances, outbuildings, space to park, hidden round the back, the way the path was leading them over this last shoulder of hillside. It looked – oh *for fanden*, it looked *perfect*.

‘Thank you so much, Mr Roy,’ said Frances. ‘We can carry these from here.’ Taking hold of a case with one hand and Torben with the other, she tugged him on up the drive almost before he could say goodbye. The sight of the place had her all but jumping with excitement. ‘Yaldi! I think we’re going to have fun, what do you reckon? Panelling? Suits of armour? Oddly cruentating floorboards? Now tell me, *Doctor Hell*, in your professional opinion, when d’you think the house was built?’

Torben gave in, adopting a persona to match her own. ‘Well, Ms Adair, if pushed, I would say that the façade betrays a strong John Nash influence without any of that neo-Gothic affectation that crept in afterwards, so no later than the 1830s, but of course the name “Bastle House” hints at a far older origin ...’

Beside him, Frances was small and warm. The air smelt of pine, sheep dung and the coming snow. They were abandoned on a hill in the middle of nowhere at the whim of a millionaire hermit whom he had not seen in years.

Yaldi indeed!

SATURDAY, ONE-THIRTY P.M.

Ruth caught the flash of movement, doubly distorted by the crown glass of the windowpane and the tears in her eyes. Wiping away the latter, she crossed the frankly vast guest bedroom that Anthony had assigned her and peered out. Surely that was Sara, just cresting the ridge? That walk – quick, birdlike, always giving you the sense there was someone she'd rather not let catch up somewhere behind her – was unique. So. The others were arriving.

Really, she could have done with more time to herself. Coming on top of everything else, her recent chat with Anthony had left her reeling. Thankfully Leyla, who had swept in almost immediately afterwards, had gone straight to her room to freshen up; probably Sara would do likewise. She hadn't been prepared for this, mentally or emotionally; of all the crises she was currently compartmentalising, this was suddenly the most unlikely and the most insistent. It turned a weekend away into a mission, against the clock,

and she just wasn't sure she had the strength for it. If she could only clear her head, then maybe with a moment's reflection – a little prayer – the right course of action might present itself.

But now more figures were appearing. She could spot Frances' hair from here, the brightest thing in this drear northern landscape – and there, unmistakably, was Torben. No, she would have to go down. This would all need managing, which meant she had to be there from the start. Carefully, calmly, Ruth gathered up the crumpled tissues, and placed them in the fireplace where, later, they might even do some good. Her troubles, too, could be tided away. For now.

Sara was waiting for the others at the top of the drive, breathing hard. Torben sympathised: despite the freezing temperatures, he could feel the perspiration on his own brow, colder still in the biting wind. What had happened to his hat? Oh. Still in the footwell of the taxi. Of course.

'Tor's been – been telling me about the house,' said Frances, too tired to remember to say 'about' or 'hoose'. 'Well, making it up, anyroad. How'd he do?'

Sara fished in her bag for her phone. 'Um ... name "Bastle House" derived from the original building, sixteenth century, of a type characteristic of Northumberland – tum tee tum – thick walls, fortified against the Scots – that's you, wee Frances – lands granted to one of Charles II's yes men in the Restoration, much extended, distinctive

long gallery et cetera, before it forcibly changed hands again after Culloden ... remodelled soon after Waterloo with a lot of money from spinning jennies and things, so classic blood-of-the-workers stuff, plus probably ill-gotten gains from the slave trade in there somewhere ... anyway, east wing added and the whole thing made symmetrical ... architect a pupil of John Nash. Original family lived in it till the sixties, at which point – oh, at which point my phone has failed to download the final drop-down section – still, hurrah for Wikipedia.'

'Full marks!' said Frances. 'Well done, Tor.'

'You've got signal up here?' said Torben.

Sara shook her head. 'Looked it up on the train and left the tab open. Hence the cliff-hanger ending. Anyway, I'll have to turn it off now. In his invite, Anthony specifically requested—'

'No phones,' said Torben. 'I'm not sure if that's ironic, given his career, or exactly what you'd expect of a repentant geek who sells up. No tech, back to nature – maybe it's a hipster thing?'

'Mystery: check!' said Frances. 'C'mon, let's find out. Perhaps he's got himself an Amish wife.' She led them across the gravelled drive, skirting a trio of elegant, bare-limbed trees at its centre.

Torben was about to point out the flaws in her last suggestion, when a blur of motion to his right distracted him. Two figures, indistinct and silhouetted, stood at one of a run of four achingly beautiful sash windows on the ground floor and, as he turned, one of the figures vanished with startling

rapidity, followed – more slowly – by the other. The first person had seemed, from what he could tell, quite astonishingly tall; they had taken up much of the high Georgian window space, which now gaped, vacant, unreadable.

He paused, but mostly to drink in the crumbled pointing on the narrow grey bricks, by which time the others were up the front steps, Sara plying the lion's-head knocker with gusto, Frances hanging back, her body language suddenly reluctant.

He could hardly blame her for being intimidated. From here, at the foot of cracked stone steps, they stood between the house's paws. On either side the wings stretched out, their height exaggerated by the double rows of windows. He could forgive the English a lot for the sake of these old sash windows, their glass panes rippling like cool water, their proportions so elegant – and, yes, their insulation so meagre. But in Denmark, it seemed like every old house had decided at the same instant – some time in his childhood? – to shed its lovely windows, which grew again as soulless, double-glazed excrescences that, he had to admit, saved a ton on heating bills. Those of Bastle House, by contrast, were capped by pale stone lintels, set in the sort of mellow brickwork that, if encountered in the right mood, literally made him go weak at the knees. One day, he feared, he would go down before one of these houses like – like Kevin Costner kissing the sand in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. Needless to say, this was not something he was about to admit to Frances and Sara. But it all reinforced the growing impression that Anthony Dodd, the

digital-startup success story, had turned his back on the twenty-first century.

At last the door opened, and Torben braced himself to meet his host – but the face behind it was that of Ruth Thompson, immediately engulfed by Sara and Frances, who dropped their bags and pounced upon her in delight. Torben, just managing to achieve eye contact before Ruth disappeared, shot her a wonky grin.

Ruth had been his best friend in first year. They saw far less of each other these days – especially, he had to admit, since her marriage, far too young, to Jon, who numbered a controlling jealousy among his many enlivening character traits. Even so, the sight of Ruth made the whole thing – strange house, strange summons – less intimidating. Finally dropping the luggage inside the door, he joined the general scrimmage.

‘Hello, Torben,’ said Ruth. She was as tall as he was, and he got in a large wet kiss on each cheek before she let him go, nose wrinkling in embarrassment. But there was something else in her face – a tiredness, a lack of focus.

‘You got in OK last night then?’ he said.

‘Evidently,’ she said. Her smile was warm as ever and, unlike his own, perfectly even – it just took a fraction longer than usual to arrive. There was no sign of their host. Not that anyone else seemed to notice.

‘How *are* you?’ said Sara. ‘Still at the Met? You were heading up that anti-harassment campaign, last I heard.’

‘I got moved,’ said Ruth. ‘Apparently I’m naturally better suited to knife crime prevention.’

‘Seriously? Let me guess, it’s because you’re Black?’

‘Yup. They asked if I knew anything about drill music. Sure, I thought, my dad brought me up on that stuff, trooping the colour and everything – so I said yes. Turns out drill music doesn’t mean “The British Grenadiers”.’

Torben half suppressed a snort, and Ruth gave a shame-faced laugh. ‘Yeah. Still, I think I’m doing some good. It’s East End, mostly, so close to home. But it’s – it’s hard, you know? Some of these boys are so young.’

Sara put a hand on her shoulder.

Ruth grimaced. ‘Sorry. Look, we’re weekendening at a country house; shall we just forget about the existence of things like real life – work and the rest of it – for a bit?’

‘Er, quite right,’ said Torben. ‘*Ingen ko på isen* and all that.’ He had been on the point of asking after her husband – purely out of a sense of duty; he couldn’t stand the man who was, he suspected, the chief reason he’d seen so little of his good friend over the past few years – but pivoted swiftly on Ruth’s cue. Clearly Jon came under the heading of ‘the rest of it’. Glancing around for inspiration, he improvised. ‘Work, pah! Strictly speaking, for something like this we should all have private incomes we’re far too civilised to mention.’

‘Along with honorifics that we dispense with among ourselves because it’s all a bit *infra dig*,’ said Sara, catching the mood.

Frances was looking round the hallway, awestruck. A Persian rug into which whole worlds seemed to be woven ran away from them over herringbone parquet. To either side, a flight of limewashed wooden stairs rose to a

mezzanine landing, honeyed banister rails gleaming with polish. Against bare walls, chest-high Doric pillars were topped with tastefully naked statuary. 'I should take off my boots,' Frances said, to no one in particular.

A woman appeared in the archway opposite, absently wiping her hands on an apron. 'Would you?' she said to Frances. 'That'd be a great help, thanks.'

'Oh, this is Kirsty,' said Ruth. 'Housekeeper, cook—'

'General dogsbody, aye,' said Kirsty. Her accent was the sort of thick Geordie that somehow reminded Torben of Danish, and he began to like her at once.

'I'll just pop your things in the cloakroom for now,' said Kirsty, making for their luggage, and they all dived in to help. 'Your rooms will have to wait till later – lunch is about ready. It's a mercy you weren't held up longer, what with the weather we've got coming. Mr Dodd's been following the forecast all week; he's been dead worried about it. Had me cancel this tree-surgeon he had coming round yesterday for fear of him getting stuck in the snow – at least that looks like holding off till you're all here ... um, anyroad, where was I? Oo yes, lunch! It's this way.'

As the others followed Kirsty down a long, airy gallery – 'panelling; check!' muttered Frances – Ruth held Torben back in the entrance hall.

'Ruth,' he said at once, 'are you all right? I thought you looked—'

'Not now,' she whispered. 'That can wait; it's you I'm worried about.' She glanced round. 'Leyla's upstairs. She arrived a bit before you; she'll be down in a minute.'

Torben raised an eyebrow – or tried to; it was harder than it looked.

Ruth held his gaze. ‘I just wanted to check you were ready. You still haven’t seen her, have you, not since—?’

He shook his head. ‘It’ll be fine,’ he said. ‘That was nearly a decade ago; we’re proper adults now. She’s probably got a partner and—’

‘No,’ said Ruth. ‘No, she hasn’t. Oh, Torben.’ She sighed.

He had never been able to hide his emotions from Ruth. At her ‘no’, something had happened inside him, a sudden vacuum, a glorious disembowelment – the reawakening of a pain, a quickening, that had lain dormant for years. He had not noticed its absence, until now.

‘Well, maybe she’s got fat,’ he said, trying to recover.

‘Maybe who’s got fat?’ came a voice from above their heads.

And Leyla Moradi descended the stairs.

Kirsty led the two women along the passageway, fielding their questions as best she could. It was the sort of bright chatter that flew past you like little birds; she’d never got the hang of it. With their talk and their wide eyes, they seemed much younger than her – or rather, they made her feel old – but they couldn’t be really, just a few years ... Was it just that she’d got so used to it being only the two of them in the house, so accustomed to each other that there was little need for conversation? No, it was more than that: these people were different, you could see it in their gaze.

This sort, they looked at things differently, like they were seeing things that weren't visible. And the world that lay behind their words, it felt wider than hers, in a way she didn't entirely like. That was what London did to you, she supposed; London more than Oxford maybe, because Anthony was never like this, so quick it was almost impatience.

Strange, really, that none of them had ever been invited before. She'd have liked a bit more practice, a dummy run or two, before doing this for real. Even with all the preparation, she hadn't counted on feeling so exposed. Open to judgement on grounds she couldn't anticipate or understand. They all *seemed* nice enough, but how could you really tell, when half of it went right over your head?

Wait, what had she missed now? *Focus*, Kirsty. This was it, after all. After practically a whole year twiddling her thumbs, demeaning herself, treading water, this was their chance. Make or break. A full house. Just keep it together for a few hours more.

Torben blanched. He had written her a poem! Nine years ago, granted, and in the madness that ruled the last weeks after Finals, but still – a poem. What kind of way was that to declare your love for someone? Rather than face Leyla directly, Torben had left it in her pigeonhole: an act at once both rash and cowardly, gauche in its affectation – hah, gauche and maladroit indeed – and infinitely less excusable than a drunken declaration. They had spoken at length only twice after that, on unavoidable occasions like

Ruth's wedding – and never alone. In the years since, it had been less a case of active avoidance than ... drifting, he supposed. He'd stayed on at Oxford, she went to London. By the time he arrived in the capital they had lost touch completely. Though two years ago, he had kept away from the Gaudy – the wilfully eccentric name, he had learnt, given to formal college reunions – mostly because he had feared she might be there.

It was not as if it had been a *bad* poem, considering that it was written in his third language. Fifth, if you counted Norwegian and Swedish, which he didn't. He remembered most of it; it had form, rhyme, meter. But the detachment afforded by even a few months had shown him it was ... problematic. Orientalising. Leyla was, by birth, an Iraqi, and he had rather overdone the imagery.

The thing was, he thought, as he watched her coming down, that her eyes really *were* like gemstones; her lips *did* wear the curve of a Parthian's bow; and she *did* trail the scent of summer nights 'neath garden walls. It was the *way* she moved, too – Leyla never 'walked'; she slunk, sashayed, swayed ... But it was her way of being, not her appearance, that really quickened his emotions; he should have written about *that*. The knife-edge of her wit, forever pressed into the small of your back, so you never knew whether to expect a caress or the point jabbed home – and all of it a front for what lay behind the words: real principles, emotional and political sincerity, unswerving loyalty ...

Oh, hell. All the things he had spent nine years trying to forget.

And here she was, slim as ever, with a bloom to her skin that her younger self, tired and overworked, had never known. Gone too were the hoodie and drainpipe jeans. She wore a casual suit of midnight blue, Nehru collar, trousers wide at the knee and tight at her waist and her ankles, above small yellow slippers, and with each step towards him his spirit rose in counterpoint. Her hair was up, exposing *that* neck, and at her throat – he blinked – an amber necklace, the sort they sold on Nyhavn. Surely he had once bought her that? Then—

‘Lunch,’ muttered Ruth, vaguely, and she was gone. Torben opened his mouth. That’s what you did, wasn’t it, to make conversation?

‘I bought your book,’ said Leyla, and hugged him. That scent, Le Labo ‘Oud 27’ – she still wore Le Labo! – the case for his defence was strengthening by the minute. God she smelt good.

‘Leyla I’m sorry,’ he said in a rush.

She stepped back, appraising him, and picked a curling red hair from his shoulder, one that clearly belonged to Frances. She raised one arched eyebrow. Maybe she could give him lessons in that ...

‘Oh, don’t be sorry, I had a discount code,’ she said. ‘And bits of it were quite interesting. Lovely pictures.’ She took his arm before he could explain himself. ‘You look well. I bet the others don’t. Anyway I’m ravenous – I think it’s this way.’ And, keeping up a light but insistent flow of chatter, she led him towards the smell of fresh coffee.

Torben realised something important. *He* was ravenous too.

The long gallery gave on to a cavernous dining room, unearthly in the failing light that swam in from high windows. Sara and Frances were already seated at a long, low table, their backs warming at the hearth. Its ancient stone surround was topped by a dark beam of oak, on which a heap of conkers and pinecones jostled merrily. Torben half-remembered a short story that began with a couple gathering pinecones for fuel ... or had they perhaps been brother and sister? Anyway, the effect was charming.

At the far end of the room, Ruth seemed to be wrestling with Kirsty, who was inching through one of a pair of double doors with a large tray, shaking her head.

‘Trying to help, as usual,’ said Leyla. ‘Ruth never learns.’ Slowly, she turned on the spot. ‘This place though ...’

He knew what she meant. It was not just the scale of the house; they all knew Anthony had Made It. No, it was—

‘When did he get so *tasteful*?’ he said. It was, Torben thought, nothing like he might have expected of Anthony – which would have been, what? Heavy carpets, gold brocade, reams of flock wallpaper ... Instead, the interior decoration of Bastle House was all bare boards, exposed plaster, mere highlights of paintwork in shades he could probably name, at a pinch, from the Farrow & Ball archive – or possibly even Rose of Jericho. Distemper paint cracked across half-height panelling. In a bay window, a rough wooden sill housed stoneware jars from which sprouted teasels, seed-heads, spiralling bare branches ... A long, low

refectory table, weathered and pitted; ladder-back chairs in age-darkened elm – and the other rooms, too: he could swear he'd not seen a stick of furniture that looked even slightly comfortable. It was perfect.

Leyla laughed. 'You don't think he did it himself, do you? The Anthony Dodd *I* remember couldn't have less taste if you tore his tongue out. No, he'll have hired an agency, got someone in from one of those trusts ...'

But Torben had stopped listening. Kirsty had laid the tray on the table. It contained an enormous pie.

'Are you sure we should start without Anthony and the others?' said Ruth.

'Yes!' said everyone else. Sara made a pretence of interest in the accompanying salad. Torben had already taken its measure and found it wanting – frisée and iceberg lettuce, fridge-cold tomatoes, and a vinaigrette straight out of a bottle – incongruous, almost an afterthought, and hard to believe the same genius that had created the main attraction had laboured to produce this – this mere *garnish*. But plainly, salad was not where the estimable Kirsty's talents or interests lay. You didn't ask Turner for a portrait, did you, or go to Rembrandt when you wanted a seascape? But give her pastry, rabbit, bacon and root vegetables, and Kirsty was capable of wonders. Substantial as it was, his portion of pie was swiftly disappearing. He made a quick calculation based on who was missing. Anthony, Tom Goring, Wilson, and some for the cook – they would in all decency