

PRAISE FOR OSKAR JENSEN

‘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*

‘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’

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, often against the odds. 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!’

Marion Todd, author of *Old Bones Lie*

‘Full of skulduggery and humour and with a denouement
that will take you by surprise. A fresh fix for lovers of
Golden Age crime’

Anita Frank, author of *The Good Liars*

‘As cunning as Christie, as elegant as Sayers, with a dash of Donna
Tartt thrown in for good measure. Not only a fiendishly clever
mystery on par with the best the Golden Age has to offer, but a deft
character study in the complex entanglements of old friendships’

William Hussey, author of *Killing Jericho*

HELLE'S HOUND

Also by Oskar Jensen and available from Viper

Helle and Death

HELLE'S HOUND

OSKAR JENSEN



First published in Great Britain in 2025 by VIPER,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.profilebooks.com

Copyright © Oskar Jensen, 2025

Text design by Crow Books

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978 1 80081 1768
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 80081 1775
eISBN 978 1 80081 1799

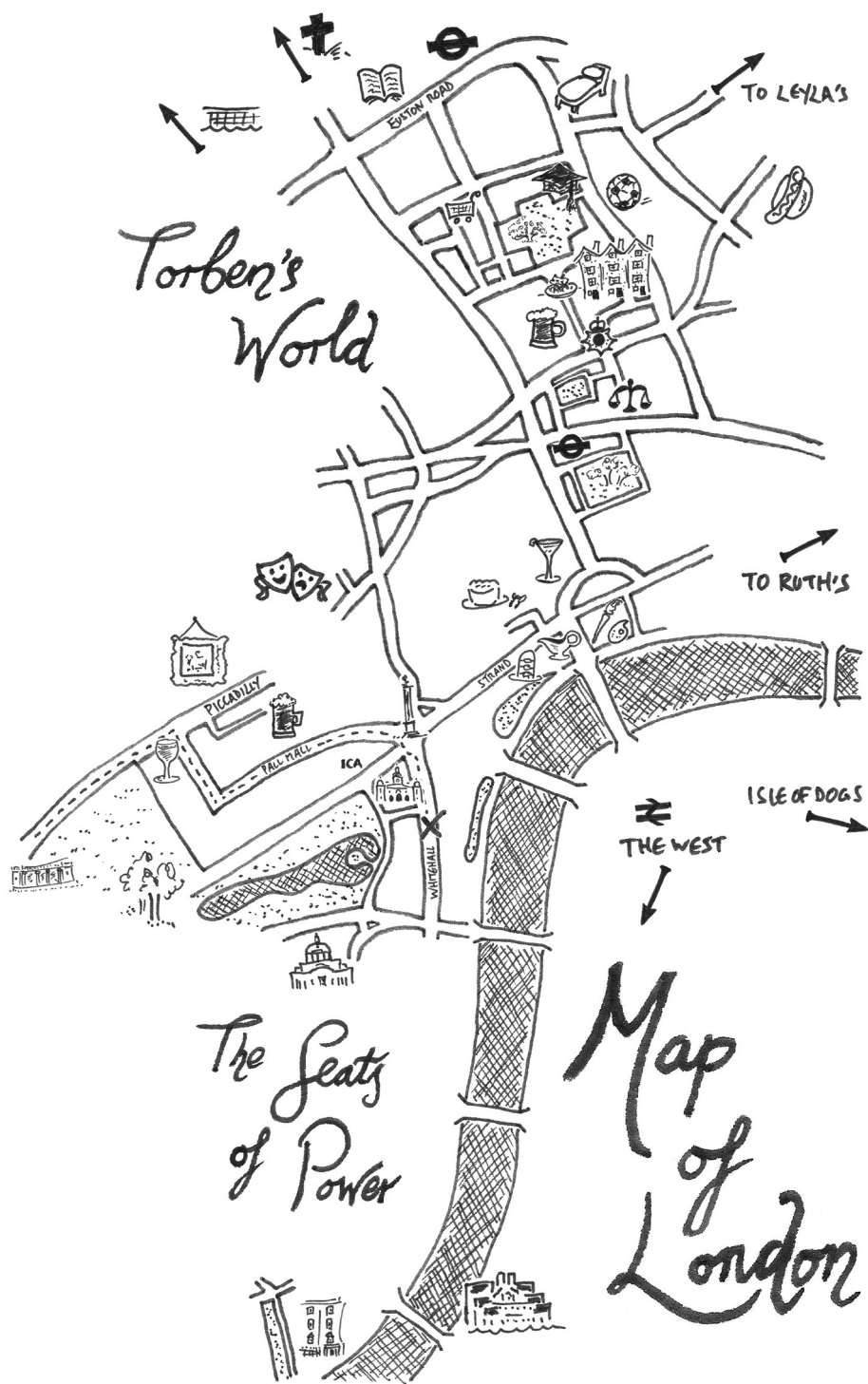


For Mark, Roger, and John

DANISH GLOSSARY

<i>Absolut</i>	Absolutely
<i>Det svin</i>	The swine, i.e. the bastard
<i>Er du sindsygg?</i>	Are you serious?
<i>For fanden!</i>	For the devil! (expletive)
<i>For helvede!</i>	For hell! (expletive)
<i>For Satan!</i>	For the devil! (again. Very Lutheran, the Danes, aren't they?)
<i>Fuck dig</i>	Fuck you
<i>Gudskelov</i>	Thank God
<i>Gymnasium</i>	Grammar school
<i>Hej</i>	Hi
<i>Hold kæft!</i>	Shut up! (Also as in 'No way!')
<i>Hold op</i>	Hang on
<i>Hvad?</i>	What?
<i>Hyggelig</i>	Cosy (but let's not get into all this again)
<i>Ja</i>	Yes
<i>Klap lige hesten</i>	Hold your horses (literally 'pat the horse')
<i>Lort</i>	Shit, damn, uh-oh
<i>Mange tak</i>	Many thanks
<i>Narre</i>	Fool
<i>Pølse(r)</i>	Hotdog(s)
<i>Præcist</i>	Exactly, precisely
<i>Prosit</i>	Cheers

<i>Riktig</i>	Correct
<i>Som du vil</i>	As you wish, if you like
<i>Strålende</i>	Brilliant
<i>Tak</i>	Thanks
<i>Tak for det</i>	Thank you (for this)
<i>Tilgiv mig</i>	Forgive me
<i>Vi ses</i>	Be seeing you, ciao for now, later! (Speaking of which, let's begin ...)



THAMES EMBANKMENT

‘Torben, darling, I am the bearer of grave tidings – Boris is no more.’

‘What? Dead?!’

‘Oh yes, quite dead. It was very sudden, apparently, too quick to feel any pain ...’

‘When did this happen?’

‘Last night. He was hit by a bus, I believe.’

‘*For helvede*. That’s a brutal bit of karma.’ Torben Helle looked around at the crowd of other Londoners walking on the Embankment.

‘No one seems very excited,’ he added.

His companion frowned. ‘Excited?’

‘Or shocked, or whatever. I mean to say – Boris!’

‘Well, no, dear. Frankly I’m surprised you’ve taken it this much to heart; he was *very* old, after all, and he’d had a good innings. It’s just such a shame for the children ...’

Torben had the feeling he was missing something. ‘*His* children?’

‘What? No, no, little Marko and the others, you know – my neighbours. As far as I’m aware Boris himself was neutered as a puppy.’

Only then did Torben remember the venerable animal in question, who so far as he knew had never held public office, and whose

mercifully swift passing was unlikely to occasion much distress among the general public. Poor old Boris. The question was, which was more at fault – his memory, or his companion’s rather dark sense of humour?

Dame Professor (Emerita) Charlotte Lazerton, Fellow of the British Academy et cetera et cetera, was one of the world’s most eminent art historians, besides being his ex-supervisor. With her shock of pure white hair, Hermès scarf and exquisite bone structure, she looked like a piece of finely wrought jewellery, with cut-glass voice to match. Yet despite all these markers of respectability, he couldn’t shake off the creeping suspicion that she had been pulling his leg.

He said as much.

‘Nonsense,’ she replied, ‘I was doing nothing of the kind. Really, Torben, to accuse me of levity at a time of grief – I mean, W. T. Fuck?’

He stopped walking. “W. T. Fuck?”

‘Yes,’ she said, sounding – for the first time – a little abashed. ‘That’s what the young people say, isn’t it?’

‘You’re getting confused with W. G. Grace,’ said Torben. ‘Or H. G. Wells.’

‘Meaning, my contemporaries? The cheek of it! That’s the problem with you millennials; you’re all so ageist. Now keep walking, Torben. Mortimer isn’t going to exercise himself.’

The two of them – well, three, counting Mortimer, Charlotte’s Irish wolfhound – were heading west from Somerset House, along the Embankment on the north side of the Thames. It was an unseasonably warm spring day, perfect sky, trees in blossom – even the dirty old river itself was putting on a show, glinting with reflected light. Before long, they would make it to St James’s Park, where the enormous dog would finally be allowed off his lead, and Torben could stop restraining an animal that weighed as much as he did. Ever

sceptical of Charlotte's reassurances, he had taken the precaution of checking the Royal Parks FAQs before agreeing to this jaunt ...

'So,' said Torben, as Mortimer tugged him right, into the minor detour of Victoria Embankment Gardens, 'what's new this week?'

They had been meeting like this for a couple of months now, ever since Torben's unexpected legacy of £50,000 from an old university friend had allowed him to move out of Charlotte's spare room in Bloomsbury and rent his own studio. Well, 'friend' wasn't exactly the word; Anthony Dodd had been more of a frenemy. Not that they had known terms like that back as undergraduates. But unravelling the mystery of his death, at a reunion held at Bastle House – Dodd's remote Northumbrian mansion – had taught all of those caught up in it rather more than they'd bargained for.

Still, the affair had liberated Torben from his status as Charlotte's lodger. At the age of thirty-one, she had declared, it was high time for him to have his own place. 'You can catch up on all that wild bachelor sex you've not been having,' was how she had actually put it. Now, they spent two hours together each week pacing the London streets.

'Don't think I want you for the company and conversation, or anything soppy like that,' Charlotte insisted. 'I'm just using you as a free dog-walking service. Either he's grown too big, or I've shrunk too small, but he needs his daily workout, and even I, entitled boomer that I undoubtedly am, cannot afford to hire dear Ximena every day of the week.'

Ximena Podenco was Charlotte's regular dog walker, Torben had gathered: a young Mexican employed by a firm that charged exceedingly reasonable rates, so long as these were paid in cash. 'I said to her, "Visa?" and she looked terrified, but then again, I suspect we might not have been talking about quite the same thing, poor girl. So now of course I give her these great big tips, and it's practically as

expensive as hiring someone legitimate ...’

That all sounded about as blunt as Torben had come to expect from his old supervisor. Still, aside from Leyla Moradi, there wasn’t anyone he could think of with whom he’d rather spend his time than Charlotte. And given that Leyla was a human rights barrister of his own age, certifiably gorgeous, and his one true unrequited love, whereas Charlotte was a retired professor who knew a lot about oil painting in Tsarist Russia, this was saying something. And, unlike Leyla, Charlotte always seemed to be in a good mood. Although right now ...

“What’s new?” she said, finally returning to his earlier question. ‘Well, I’m afraid it’s rather more a case of “what’s ongoing”.’ Nimble sidestepping a Deliveroo driver, she led them across Northumberland Avenue. ‘You know, Torben dear, I’d much sooner not trouble you with this, but I feel I really should tell *somebody*, and since that little contretemps of yours at Bastle House has acquainted you with the serious side of life ...’

‘I’m all ears,’ said Torben.

‘Then you should probably see an otolaryngologist,’ said Charlotte, in an admirable impression of her usual manner. ‘In the meantime, however, you can listen to my problem. Torben, I think someone’s tapping my ’phone calls.’

There was something about the way she pronounced ‘phone’ that made the contraction audible, and Torben almost smiled.

‘Oh, I’m quite serious,’ she said, as Mortimer broke aside to relieve himself against the statue of William Tyndale. And for once, she looked it. ‘It sounds just like it did in the eighties, that same little click-pop noise. Really you’d think their methods would be more sophisticated by now, but then, I haven’t changed my landline in forty years, so why would they bother—’

‘Why were you wiretapped in the eighties?’

‘Now, Torben, don’t distract me, I’ll lose my thread. The point is that they’re doing it *now* – not that I can be entirely sure whether *they* means Millbank or Fleet Street – and it’s a teensy bit concerning.’

He considered. Not for the first time, it occurred to him that Charlotte’s chief vice was indulging herself by pretending to an old age that she had not, in reality, attained: some of her expressions, her mannerisms, must be those of her parents’ generation. Whenever she answered her phone – sorry, her *’phone* – her first words were invariably ‘London seven-four-two-six-triple-four-oh’, delivered in a sort of trill that sounded like something out of a Noël Coward comedy. All charmingly eccentric, of course, but he worried that this pose of venerability might be self-fulfilling. ‘You could finally get a mobile?’ he suggested.

‘Hmm,’ said Charlotte. ‘I think not, that smacks of defeatism. No, there’s nothing to be *done* about it, I just wanted someone else to know in case ... in case there are any more unpleasant developments. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I’m actually just a little bit scared.’

He hesitated. If Charlotte was prepared to admit to genuine emotion, this might actually be serious. “‘Unpleasant developments”?’ he prompted.

‘Well, that’s a euphemism, of course. Really I mean something positively nasty, but I didn’t want to worry you, you’re much too young to be cultivating morbid thoughts.’ Charlotte sighed. ‘You know, Torben, for more than seventy years on this earth, I was doing pretty well, *je ne regrette rien* and so on – in fact, there is only one action I sincerely regret in all those years, and that happened awfully long ago. But lately, this past year or so, I believe I have begun to act really rather foolishly.’ She sniffed. ‘Hence, you know – unpleasant developments.’

For an instant, as they crossed Whitehall just past the Cenotaph, Torben had a sense of dislocation. The expression on her face was entirely alien to him, no longer that of a cosy old don, but of a woman whose long and hard-fought life held secrets of unfathomable depth and importance.

‘Oh, and I *also* think someone’s stolen one of my bedroom slippers,’ she added, rather spoiling the effect.

Walks with Charlotte – and, perforce, Mortimer – were one of a handful of regular commitments in Torben’s London life. His slot for this was Monday (he suspected her of two-timing him with other susceptible colleagues; the city was full of art historians, critics, painters, whom she had mentored or fought with at some point in her career, and curiously, it was the rivals and antagonists who seemed most devoted to her, and might be good for the occasional dog walk). On Tuesday evenings he generally took the Central Line out to Stratford, where he trained with the Great Dane Handball Club for his weekly ration of ex-pat atmosphere and minor injuries. On Wednesday afternoons there was usually a research seminar he was expected to attend at the Courtauld, and this year he had wangled it so that the one master’s degree module he was teaching happened right beforehand. He chilled on Thursday. Friday nights were dedicated to five-a-side football at his old international hall of residence, Oarwright College, where he had spent his first year as a postdoctoral fellow. This left the weekends free for inventing new reasons to see Leyla.

The rest of the working week he spent not writing his second book. Unaccountably, Taschen had given him an advance contract for a swanky coffee-table survey of Scandinavian domestic paintings

of the nineteenth century, which they hoped would do very well on Instagram. They wanted to call it *Art of the Interior*. He was still fighting for it just to be called *Room*. Both titles were, of course, already taken, but originality did not seem to feature very high up the desiderata of commercial publishers. Either way, the real trick was smuggling in enough actual research to satisfy his employer and his grant funder without alienating his editor. Impressively, this was not even the most first-world of his struggles. He had also decided to give up meat, and sausages were proving to be a real problem.

There was the ScandiKitchen on Great Titchfield Street, for one thing. True, he still allowed himself the odd pickled herring, but to forgo their *pølser* was tantamount to blasphemy. Worse still, he did his weekly food shop at the Brunswick Centre branch of Waitrose – the only supermarket within walking distance, which told you all you needed to know about this part of Bloomsbury – and on a Saturday, there was this Polish guy outside whose hotdogs could be smelt from the other side of the square. Until recently, his *kielbasa* had been the crowning glory of Torben's weekends. Now he couldn't even look the man in the eye. Instead he hurried past, hat pulled low over his face, whilst conducting an impassioned mental debate with Charlotte, who in recent years had expanded from art history to environmental activism. In part, this meant borderline illegal activity and orchestrating major campaigns. In part, it meant telling Torben off for eating sausages.

Charlotte always won these arguments in Torben's head, with her verifiable statistics about carbon emissions, her reasonable points about animal welfare, and her inspiring suggestions for the redistribution of land usage. Torben's counter arguments, which tended to be drawn from the *but it's delicious* school of philosophy, faltered in the face of imaginary Charlotte's flawless logic. *What about*

Mortimer? Torben had reasoned, assuming a hound that size came with a hefty carbon footprint. *Plant-based dog food; it's been around for decades*, came the answer. *Plus I know this enterprising chap-pie in Camden who sells London pigeon from his rickshaw*. Only in London. *Righteous smug eco git*, Torben said. Imaginary Charlotte looked disappointed in him, and gestured to a river contaminated with slurry from an under-regulated pig farm. Torben said sorry. By this point, unless he had been distracted by the spectacle of an eight-a-side game of football at Coram's Fields, or had contrived to trip over the leads of one of the army of professional dog walkers that had sprung up around Mecklenburgh Square, he had usually made it safely back to his studio flat.

Life, in short, was good to Torben Helle. Take today, for instance: a Sunday, six days after his stroll on the Embankment. Tomorrow, it would be his next dog-walking slot. He also planned to spend a few hours in the British Library consulting a PhD thesis from 2003 on Vilhelm Hammershøi and the concept of interiority, before walking off the stultifying after-effects with Charlotte and Mortimer. Tonight, he was going to a party at Cameron Plott's rooms in Oarwright College.

Cameron, whom he knew through football, was a student, and Torben would usually steer clear of student parties, so as to avoid meeting anyone he might teach. But this one would be safe enough: Cameron was studying for a PhD in mechanical engineering, and tended to socialise with the other footballers. This crowd – mostly male scientists, hailing from everywhere from Rio to Riyadh, Lagos to Lahore – was about as far as you could get from the art history crowd without actually leaving academia. Cameron himself was from somewhere in New Jersey. Torben's main task for the day was to prep for this party, which meant buying some beer, and catching up on last night's *Match of the Day*. Probably not in that order.

He groaned, stretching luxuriantly in the sunlight stealing in from a crack in the shutters. This involved his feet poking over the end of the bed with which the studio had come ready-equipped. But no matter: they could rest on the imitation leather of the one-and-a-half-seater sofa that, together with the bed and glass-topped table, comprised the entirety of the room's furnishings. Still, he had got lucky: a first-floor studio in this no man's land between Bloomsbury and Clerkenwell, carved out of a terraced house built, so *British History Online* had told him, in 1826. The kitchen was a whole other room; the extractor fan in the windowless en suite occasionally even worked. To have all this *and* be able to walk everywhere still seemed ridiculous, and he raised another mental toast to the memory of Anthony Dodd, whose atypical act of posthumous generosity was subsidising this lifestyle – at least until the autumn, when both the studio's lease and Torben's fellowship would come to an end. Even then, the cash would smooth the transition to whatever came next. *Prosit, Anthony!*

Torben allowed himself another catlike yawn. What was the time? Nine-thirty? No hurry yet. Gary Lineker and Ian Wright could wait a little longer. After all, he couldn't have *Match of the Day* without a cup of black coffee, and that meant going through to the kitchen, which meant getting out of bed ... Might as well check his phone first. Sorry, his *'phone*. God, but he loved Sundays.

One missed call from late last night. Unknown number – so not Wilson, badgering him about his new podcast again, or Frances wanting a drunken gossip about Sara's weird home counties relatives. And a voicemail. Seriously? Who did he know who would leave a *voicemail*?

'Hello, is that ... let me check ... yes, this is a call for Torben Hell. Really, hell? Um, sorry, sir, yes, Torben Hell. This is Police Constable Meera Rampur. I'm looking at the appointments diary

of Professor Charlotte Lazerton and I believe you're scheduled to meet on Monday lunchtime. As this appears to be one of Professor Lazerton's regular engagements I'm calling to inform you ... wait ... I mean, I'm afraid I have some bad news and you may wish to sit down at this stage. I regret to inform you that Professor Lazerton passed away on ...' – at this point, the line went silent for several seconds – 'actually, we're not quite sure when. Look, sir, perhaps you'd better call me back as soon as possible. Basically, she's dead. And, well, it's not a pretty sight.'

ISLINGTON & ST PANCRAS CEMETERY

‘We therefore commit her body to the deep ...’

Leyla Moradi started in surprise. Admittedly, she hadn’t attended many Anglican funeral services, but something about the wording seemed a bit off.

‘... to be turned into corruption, looking for the resurrection of the body, when the sea shall give up her dead ...’

She risked a glance around. No, it wasn’t just her: most people were looking a little disconcerted. And that was definitely grass beneath her feet, the only waves the motion of the trees, rippling in a light spring breeze. At her side, Torben gave a discreet cough, and she refocused.

‘... and the life of the world to come, through our Lord Jesus Christ who at his coming shall change our vile body, that it may be like his glorious body, according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself ...’

‘I was talking to the chaplain beforehand,’ Torben whispered to her in the next pause. ‘Turns out that Charlotte found a loophole in the order of service. Apparently she’s always quite liked the trappings

of being buried at sea’ – Leyla glanced down at the body in the grave, stitched inside a sailcloth cocoon – ‘and she even had the cannonballs, a gift from some marine archaeologist she once met in New Orleans. See, they’re weighing down either end. So, when she found out she couldn’t have her *ideal* option—’

‘Ssh!’ said someone.

‘Sorry,’ they both said, automatically.

Leyla was quietly impressed. She’d never met Dame Charlotte – until a few months ago, Leyla hadn’t even seen Torben in a decade – and was only here because he had asked her. It took quite a lot to drag her as far north as East Finchley, but these woodlands and their ancient gravestones were really rather magnificent, and she’d rarely seen such a crowd. OK, seventy-three wasn’t old, but Torben said Charlotte had no family to speak of, only second cousins or removed cousins, Leyla never knew which was which, which meant that most people must be here because they *cared*. And there were hundreds of mourners of all ages, almost all of them adhering to the dress code on the invitation – ‘any colour, so long as it isn’t black’ – many of whom looked surprisingly, well, chic.

Maybe it was because the deceased had become something of a minor celebrity in environmentalist circles, in recent years. Even Leyla’s work as a barrister representing campaigning charities had brought up the name of Dame Charlotte Lazerton more than once. Or just maybe, she thought, looking up at the tears streaking Torben’s face, it was because she had been a genuinely good person, whom people loved. Such things were possible, after all.

‘Ach, *for helvede*, but at least that’s over,’ said Torben, as the service concluded and the throng began to break up. His face was still glistening,

but he didn't seem to care. Leyla had a handkerchief, a silk Liberty one in a nod to the dress code; part of her wanted to take it out and—

'Well, come on, Leyla, cheer me up,' he said. 'I haven't dragged you ten kilometres out of town so you can be all deferential and respectful of my grief. If I wanted sympathy, I'd've asked Ruth.'

Harsh, thought Leyla. But also undeniably fair. She glanced around for inspiration. 'See that woman over there? I hear she's buried nine husbands,' she said, in a music-hall sort of voice.

'A gold digger?' said Torben.

'No, a grave digger: she's a sexton.'

Torben groaned.

'I had to improvise, OK?' said Leyla. They were allowing themselves to drift with the tide, back towards the cemetery gates. There was some sort of reception planned, organised by the Academy of Western Art in lieu of a family gathering, back in the centre of town.

'So,' said Leyla. 'You said she couldn't have her *ideal* choice of burial ...?'

'Ugh,' said Torben. 'Well, no. You see, what she *really* wanted was to be ... to be fed to the tigers at London Zoo. They're Sumatran tigers, critically endangered; she said she wanted to do her bit.'

'Ah,' said Leyla. 'I suppose the keepers aren't keen on giving their charges a taste for human flesh.'

'I think it was more a health and safety issue,' said Torben. 'The average human body nowadays contains so many dangerous chemicals that ...' His voice trailed off.

'Sorry,' said Leyla. 'Too soon? Too much?'

He shook his head. 'Unfortunate coincidence. They kept this bit out of the eulogy, obviously, but, when they found her ... you see, she'd been lying there for some time, several days maybe ...'

'A fall, wasn't it?' she said softly. He had told her before that the

body had been found at the foot of the stairs.

Torben grimaced. 'So it seems. The point is, it was just her and Mortimer, her Irish wolfhound, in the house. Dogs that size, they take a lot of feeding, and of course, he couldn't get out, so ... well, the way the policewoman put it was that he'd "had a little nibble".' Torben looked like he was going to be sick.

'I'm so sorry,' she said. Side by side, her hand was very close to his. A simple matter to reach out; to squeeze it. Should she—?

'Torben!' came a voice from behind them; they both turned. A formidable-looking woman of middle years was advancing on them. 'A tragedy,' the woman said.

'Perhaps,' said Torben, reassembling his features. Now what on *earth* did he mean by that? 'Oh – Carmen Sabueso, Leyla Moradi,' he managed. 'Carmen edits the art history list for OUP,' he went on. 'She oversaw my book on Friedrich.'

Ah. This was shop; Leyla sensed power. Better play along for Torben's sake. 'I loved it,' she said, 'which always confused me – now I know who to actually credit.'

Sabueso smiled – the sort of tight-lipped smile people allowed themselves at funerals. 'Well, Charlotte had already done such a good job licking him into shape,' she said. 'Speaking of which, Torben, I have a new series, *Art Historiography in the 2020s* – shortish, accessible editions, around sixty thousand words, profiling seminal figures of our times – naturally the world needs a volume on dear Charlotte, and you were my first thought.'

Leyla started. Was this how publishing worked? The body barely in the ground five minutes, and already getting down to business ...

Sabueso was clearly taking Torben's silence as leave to continue. 'It needs, I think, the personal touch, not just a sober set of essays. As a close friend, new blood she's brought through, you'd be perfect for

the introduction, and then I'd want you to interview a lot of her contemporaries – scholars, but public figures too, names people know – and document their impressions, anecdotes, reminiscences – you know, the sort of stuff they go for in the *London Review of Books*. A rounded picture of the real woman. I think, with her media profile, there's crossover potential ... I mean, the wider public needs to read a fitting tribute to her impact.'

Still Torben said nothing.

'Well, think it over,' Sabueso said. 'But I'm looking to turn this one round quickly, before anyone else gets into gear. Trust me, it'll help open doors; I don't think you have your next position lined up, do you? Lovely to meet you, Leyla.' And with a final smile, she was gone.

'I thought the funeral service was meant to be the blood-chilling part,' said Leyla. 'Will you do it?'

'What? Oh, maybe.' Torben seemed not to be listening. Come to think of it, he'd barely spoken since the editor had shown up. Even now he wasn't looking at her, but instead—

'Leyla,' he said. His voice had changed; it was more awake, alert. 'Do you see that crowd over there?'

Her eyes followed the direction of his nod. Five mourners, conspicuous by their sombre black clothes, very formal, oddly out of place among the vivid colour all around. Doubly conspicuous by the shadowy presence of one or two bulky men a few paces back, also in black, wearing sunglasses.

She squinted. 'Isn't one of them that MP? Minister for whatever it is?' A Tory, she remembered that much; not the sort you'd expect to see in this sort of company. The politician – large, slow-moving – was being introduced to an austere but glamorous-looking woman by another dark-suited man, this one lean and bald. The body language of all three was stiff, awkward.

Torben nodded. ‘And that’s Professor Shani Rajapalayam, the art critic for the *Observer*. They seem to both know my old boss, Henrik Drever, the one making the introductions – he’s in senior management now, hardly an academic at all anymore. I don’t recognise the other two, but ...’

‘But?’ she prompted.

‘No,’ he shook his head. ‘Nothing. I’m imagining things.’

But, thought Torben, was he though?

On the one hand, he’d mugged up on a lot of Agatha Christie since that reunion weekend in Northumberland. He’d read ‘The Stymphalean Birds’ and knew how misleading first impressions, premonitions, gut instincts could be. Sometimes a prickling sensation at the sight of some ill-omened figures in dark clothes was nothing but an overactive imagination at best, rank bigotry at worst. And yet. And yet ...

He had first clocked the five black-clad mourners at the graveside, all keeping well back. A patch of shadow amid the sunshine. They had not, he thought, come together, and though some seemed to know each other, they were clearly not a set. Perhaps there had been a natural gravitation, caused by embarrassment, a sense of being out of place in their crow-like garb. Even then, there was something about them, an attitude, an energy, that seemed a little out of kilter. It was not as if anyone was actually happy to be here, it *was* a funeral, but this was something more, a shared sense of – of discomfort? Maybe they were just hot in their suits. Three men and two women, all of them almost *too* funereal, all at least a generation older than him, all conspicuously rich, and worldly, and yet somehow not at ease. The light just – just slipped off them somehow. And then, those goons in

the background – the MP’s security detail? – was it only that, that had raised the hackles on the back of his neck?

He had glanced at them once or twice since, expecting the group to have dissolved; they must know so many other people here. Shani Rajapalayam had briefly embraced Carmen Sabueso; he had seen Drever gladhanding some other academics. Yet the sombre knot of them remained – a nagging doubt, a question.

As the crowd, its chatter now general, funnelled itself down Viaduct Road, Torben contrived to steer himself and Leyla alongside the one of them he knew to talk to – Henrik Drever, former head of his department. The shiny-headed Swede gave a tight-lipped smile. It suited his general demeanour, the little trimmed beard, the crispness of his white shirt. ‘Awful, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘Such a loss to scholarship.’

It was not quite how Torben would have put it, but he forced himself to nod. People were milling about now, suddenly uncertain, some starting the trek for the tube, others looking for taxis or consulting their Uber apps. ‘Henrik, this is Leyla Moradi,’ he said. ‘She’s with a set of chambers on Bedford Row.’ He would like that, Torben thought; Drever’s nostrils flared like a warhorse whenever he got a whiff of power. But it wasn’t why he’d introduced her that way.

‘Delighted,’ murmured Drever, shaking Leyla’s hand. ‘Ah – I’m sure you both know Shani here, no?’ He indicated the elegant, fine-boned woman at his side. ‘Shani Rajapalayam, Torben Helle – you should talk actually; it would be good for you, Torben. And Leyla – Moradi, did you say? A ... barrister?’ Smiles all round; Drever’s sweeping gesture took in the others behind him, none of whom seemed overly keen to pursue their further acquaintance. But Torben was trying his best bright-eyed, ingenuous face, and was grateful to see Leyla beside him smouldering away, raising a characteristic eyebrow.

‘Simon Grey, of course, a junior environment minister, though junior hardly seems ...’ Drever had lowered his voice, trying to square the circle of fulfilling his social obligations without inconveniencing his reluctant companions. Grey, a rubicund, weary-looking man who would clearly never see either sixty or parts of himself below the waistline again, was already turning away and muttering at one of the security officers.

Drever resumed his *sotto voce* introductions, the light trace of his Swedish accent softening his words still further. ‘The rest of us have only just met. This is Katherine Trigg, one of Charlotte’s oldest friends, from her school days I believe’ – he inclined his head infinitesimally towards a very short, white-haired woman, leaning on a stick with an air of great impatience – ‘and Jonathan Azawakh, CMG, who, according to Simon here, practically runs some part of the civil service that we are not supposed to talk about. It’s been a pleasure to make their acquaintance.’ This fifth member of the group was a tall, bald black man dressed in a suit of such impeccable correctness that he would probably blend into the furniture at any official function of less *outré* appearance than this one.

As if on cue, two large people-carriers with tinted windows pulled up behind them. Grey and Azawakh, the government minister and the senior civil servant, made automatically for the opening doors of their vehicles. ‘Look,’ said Drever, ‘Shani and I have been offered a lift in Simon’s car; if you like, I’m sure I could ask—?’ He spoke in the tones of a man who would rather gnaw off his own toes than finish that sentence, and Torben, mission accomplished, decided to spare him.

‘It’s no problem; we’re taking the tube,’ he said. ‘Come on, Leyla.’

As the unsettling figures melted away inside the oversized cars, he and Leyla joined the now-dwindling trail of mourners heading south on Finchley High Road.

‘What the hell was all that about?’ said Leyla.

‘I don’t know,’ said Torben. The mood was still on him, but its pull was ebbing. In the absence of those black-suited omens, he found that the late afternoon sunshine, the mundane surroundings of suburban London, were weakening the spell. All he had left was the fundamental, stomach-hollowing sense that something about each of those five mourners had not been right. And there could, of course, be a million explanations for each of those five cases. He tried to shrug the thought away.

The problem was, he could think of only one reason why something could not be right at Charlotte Lazerton’s funeral. The same reason that had starved him of sleep ever since the news; ever since PC Rampur’s pained description over too-sweet tea, in a private room of Holborn Police Station. The thing that had adulterated his grief, robbing him of what he really needed: the head and heart space to simply *mourn* the loss of his mentor, his inspiration, his friend.

For helvede, he thought. He knew exactly how Leyla would react if he told her the truth: that he was increasingly certain, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that Charlotte Lazerton had been murdered.

THE RED LION

‘Seriously, Torben, what the actual— no. No no no,’ and Leyla reached for Torben’s beer, and pulled it across the table. ‘You’re not having this back until you promise me you’re joking. Either that, or your *completely understandable grief* has finally unseated what passes in your head for reason. We’re not doing this again. Not after the last time.’

They had left the reception (‘wake’ seemed wrong) early – soulless, schmoozy, strangely divorced from the person it was meant to commemorate and who, despite looming over the gathering, courtesy of a wall projection, was entirely absent from the discussions around them. The function room was on Piccadilly, and a quick slip through Princes Arcade had got them to the relative normality of the Red Lion. Still, all the lacquer and Victorian glass and varnished panelling were exerting their influence; you could practically choke on the ghost of pipe-smoke past, smell the gas in the flower-head lamps. One glance at the insipid ales on tap and the crush of tourists had nearly sent Torben back out through the black and gold japanned portals, but Leyla had found the bottled Weissbier, parlayed them a corner table, and was now holding his drink hostage as she berated

him. Still, it had gone much better than he could have hoped for. She had said ‘we’re’.

‘I know, I know,’ he said. ‘Anthony Dodd wasn’t murdered in the way I thought. But his death *was* staged to look like it. We weren’t making things up back at Bastle House, we were correctly registering that the whole thing was fishy. And yes’ – he held up his hands – ‘you were right and I was wrong, but we *both* knew, right away, that it wasn’t a natural death. Well, this is the same.’

‘Tor, an old lady fell down her stairs. It’s tragic, but—’

‘*No!*’ he said. ‘*Not* an old lady. Leyla, she was seventy-three, that’s practically the prime of life these days.’ Albeit, he thought to himself, a prime in which she had no longer been capable of walking her own dog. Admittedly, Mortimer wasn’t just any dog, but he couldn’t deny that ageing was real; it could not be dismissed on ideological grounds. And Charlotte had been a *much* older seventy-three than many others of her generation. Still. ‘Just hear me out, because so long as you withhold that beer, I have nothing to do but talk.’ He paused. ‘Only – would you mind not gripping it so tight? Your hands will warm it up.’

Leyla did not slacken her grip, clearly taking this for a ruse.

‘Well, anyway,’ he said. ‘Meera – that’s PC Rampur – told me that, best guess, Charlotte died the, the day after I ... oh, *for Satan*.’ It had not been like this with Anthony Dodd. How was he meant to state his case dispassionately when his throat clotted up and his eyes kept watering? It was different when you loved them.

Leyla passed him a quite staggeringly vivid handkerchief. ‘*Tak*,’ he said, wiping his eyes. ‘As I was saying, Charlotte died the day after I last saw her. It took four days for the lodger in her basement to get worried enough by the random barks and scrabbling, and the general lack of other activity, to get in a locksmith and find – well, find one desperate dog, and a body, lying at the foot of the stairs.’

‘Mm,’ said Leyla. ‘All this presumably being confirmed by the post-mortem, which found no grounds for suspicion, plus no sign of a forced entry, nor a struggle ...’

‘And that’s another thing,’ said Torben. ‘If there was nothing odd about it, why even *order* a post-mortem? I checked with NHS Online: it has to be ordered by a coroner or a hospital doctor, and there have to be grounds. The police officer, Meera, she referred to it as a matter of course – but it isn’t. Which got me thinking. The day before she died, Charlotte told me she was scared. Someone had been wiretapping her landline. Either the press or MI5, she thought, but it could have been anyone, and she was worried there were about to be – how did she put it? – “unpleasant developments”. She said she’d been making foolish decisions, and that there might be consequences.’

She had also thought, he reminded himself, that someone had stolen one of her slippers. Was Leyla right, that Charlotte had simply grown old before her time? Was it all a case of a brilliant mind losing its grip; of a body grown fallible?

Well, no, obviously not, because how damn condescending was that?

‘And,’ he said, now raising his voice over the hubbub, ‘if you were a *criminal* barrister, you’d be rather less quick to accept the old “fell down the stairs” line – it’s the oldest one in the book. Oh, she fell down some stairs. Oh, I just walked into a door. It’s *always* cover for—’

‘For domestic abuse,’ said Leyla. ‘Which I accept. But unless you’re about to suggest Dame Charlotte was being knocked about by her dog, then—’

‘But the *timing*, Leyla,’ he persevered. ‘It’s too much of a—’

‘Coincidence.’

‘Look, would you stop doing that? If I can’t have my beer, I surely *can* have my—’

‘Sentences.’

‘Oh, *fuck dig*,’ he said. ‘I should never have said anything.’

‘It was those mourners in black, wasn’t it?’ she said, in an altogether gentler voice that he liked even less than her sceptical one. ‘They spooked you.’

‘Yes, yes they did. Leyla, I could smell it, there was something going on. Now, I’m not saying that we’ve just met Charlotte’s murderer or anything, but ...’ Oh, what the hell, she thought he was mad anyway. ‘You know, we actually might have done. Look, if you’d just murdered someone you knew and tried to pass it off as an accident, you’d go to their funeral, wouldn’t you? To be on the safe side. And you’d make *damn* sure you’d wear black. And of course, it *would* be someone she knew, because she had to let them in – no struggle, no forced entry—’

‘Tor, that’s beyond a logical syllogism, that’s – that’s just being silly. Think about it: even if we accepted your addlepatented theorising, surely that would mean *all* of them had done it. Since they were *all* dressed in black and acting a bit weird. A five-way murder?’

‘No, of course not, I only meant that we *could*—’

‘If *you* were a criminal barrister, rather than someone paid to wrap paintings in a string of polysyllables, you’d know that almost all murders are committed by close relatives. I didn’t see a single relative in black, did you? Just some acquaintances who probably forgot to read the invite properly.’

‘I don’t think Charlotte actually *had* any close rel—’

‘And OK, maybe I was being a bit ageist just now, I’m sorry. But why would anyone want to wiretap an old— I mean, a retired professor?’

He was damned if she was going to cut him off this time. He’d been thinking about this question for weeks. ‘One who’s repeatedly

courted controversy for her environmental activism? One who recently led the campaign to make the Academy of Art put “Western” in its name and, until her untimely death, was in the running to be elected its next president on a reformist agenda? One whose principles were likely to jeopardise a series of major arts sponsorship deals from oil companies? One who told me she’d previously been wire-tapped in the eighties and whose specialism in Tsarist Russian art frequently took her behind the Iron Curtain?’

Leyla blinked. ‘OK, those – those were actually some really good points. I can see why she might have been worried someone was spying on her. But to go from that to *murder* ... Tor, I concede there may be a mystery here, and I can totally see why you want to uncover it. But you’re falling into the same trap as before, only this time, it’s you who’s setting it. You want a puzzle to solve because, on some level, you need the catharsis. But can’t you just, I don’t know, do a bit of research, write an obituary for some magazine? Do the book that ghoul of an editor suggested; it might as well be you rather than someone who didn’t truly care about her. It can’t always be murder just because there might be some foul play involved: the stakes just aren’t that high most of the time.’ She shook her head in an insufferably wise sort of way. ‘I get it, I do; that’s why I’ve specialised in a branch of law that actually matters to people’s lives. By contrast, most wrongdoing is petty, and petty is – well, it’s a drag. What’s fraud or theft or illicit surveillance, next to the big one? It’s why they call them murder mysteries. No one wants to be the “mystery of the silver salver” solver.’

Torben frowned. ‘Say that last bit again?’

Leyla paused. ‘Actually, I’m not sure I can.’

He sighed. ‘Leyla. I just don’t want her to be dead.’

She nodded. ‘I know, Torben, I know.’ And she slid his beer back across the table.

Lord spare me from the solipsism of sad boys, Leyla thought, as she finally closed the door of Torben's building, and began the slow walk home to benighted East London. Frederick Street was quiet now that the great rumbling engine of the Gray's Inn Road was dormant; quiet and a little forlorn. The overflowing rubbish sacks, the intermittent scaffolding. Everything that bit too narrow, too grimy, as if the spirit of the age that had erected it had given up halfway with a shrug, uncomfortably aware of the hypocrisy that lay behind that era's elegant façade.

For fuck's sake, Leyla Moradi, listen to yourself. Torben's mood must be catching.

She quickened her pace, trying to stride off the irritation. It was very touching, how hard he had taken his old mentor's death. Indeed, she was all too conscious of how the part of his sorrow that was entirely selfless had called to her, the sincerity and the vulnerability taking hold of something inside her ribcage – could be her heart, could be her spleen, she wasn't an anatomist – and squeezing it till her breath shortened.

But she had been here before, too many times, with blue-eyed boys whose anguish read as authenticity. Nice, well-spoken, sensitive boys, albeit rarely as tall or as blond as Torben, whose winning ability to display their feelings fooled her into thinking this might extend to empathy, when all they really wanted was for someone else to jump into their sadness with them and wallow around in it, like some great big onanistic hot tub. Preferably naked. After the fifth or sixth time, one started to lose patience.

She turned right at the police station, relishing the ability to walk out across the road without risking her life in the process.

Was that what this was, this maundering on of Torben's about murder? Hadn't he learned from the last time? Was he seriously proposing to make it all about him *again*? The private fears that Charlotte had confided in *him*, the hunch that only *he* had felt ... though, now she was alone, Leyla was prepared to admit that to her, too, there had been something decidedly *off* about those five sombre figures at the funeral. Couldn't this boy, just for once, have the humility to be sad, and move on?

Alternatively, said the part of her that was very good at analysing briefs, but an infuriating know-it-all when it came to these late-night self-examinations, could it be that you're cross with him, because he spent the evening talking to you about crime, when you hoped – thought? – *hoped* that he'd wanted you there to comfort him?

To hold his hand at the funeral. To make sparkling conversation at the glamorous art-world function. To take his mind away from a dog-bitten old lady by means of this respectable yet suitably exuberant contemporary floral number by Stine Goya, which she had selected for her outfit today at least half because the designer was from Copenhagen? Hoped that they might go on, not to an overcrowded Victorian pub, but to some discreet wine bar a little nearer his place? Hoped that the evening might end ... differently?

Really, inner voice? You want to do this *now*? God but it's going to be a long walk home.

Actually she loved this walk. The irony was that the street she was climbing right now, Wharton Street, was where she had wanted to end up, her dream location, ever since her first foray up the hill to see the ballet at Sadler's Wells in the first month of her pupillage. From that night on, she had coveted one of these preposterously square, almost mausoleum-like houses – which she knew really wasn't selling it – preferably on the left-hand side, so you got the sun. There were

cherry trees, like there had been at home; sometimes the blossom still made her cry. And all the gardens nearby, and the silly swanky shops. But above all, it was the sky. On this slope, there was an awful lot of sky.

Even then, nearly a decade ago, she had known it was a fantasy. But an aspirational one, something to work towards, the sort of home that befitted a hot-shot barrister. And of course, this was back when she'd still thought she'd go into commercial law, and had not followed the siren call of crusading causes, the irrefutable rightness of representing refugee charities, asylum appeal cases, campaigns for climate justice. Mostly she lost, but the wins actually mattered, and the work was infinitely more sustaining than another zero on her income. Still, it was goodbye to Wharton Street, unless she sold out and switched specialisms. And goodbye to it tonight, as she pressed on home. Something that was either a very large cat, or a young urban fox, flitted across her path, to crouch beneath a parked car, eyes on her passing, its fur ghostly pale. Oh, it was pathetic, but at times like this, she really did love London.

For now, she had a one-bed, second-floor flat in a shared ownership scheme on Haberdasher Street. Leafy, airy, half an hour's walk to work. The wrong side of the A501. Completely and utterly, appallingly alone.

ON PAPER

Art historian of Tsarist Russian oil painting who, in her final years, made a major contribution to environmental activism.

Charlotte Lazerton, who has died aged 73, was a former Deputy Director of the Academy of Western Art (AWA) and professor emerita at the Courtauld Institute, a college of the University of London. Her pioneering work on the art of nineteenth-century Russia did much to help thaw UK–Soviet diplomatic relations and forge cultural ties both before and after the dissolution of the USSR. In the course of a fifty-year career, she produced a series of magisterial works on leading painters and schools, whilst acting as mentor and inspiration to two generations of emerging scholars, artists and critics.

A leading light during the heyday of London's art schools in the 1970s and 80s, Lazerton was as much a champion of the contemporary as the historical, a tireless promoter of grassroots and early ages arts education, and a key figure in encouraging curatorial and knowledge exchange programmes between the UK and the rest of Europe, particularly in the Baltic region. Though