

Seven guests. Three courses.  
One deadly evening.

# SEVEN REASONS TO MURDER YOUR DINNER GUESTS

*K. J. Whittle*



HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperNorth  
Windmill Green  
24 Mount Street  
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1

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*In memory of my incomparable mum Christine Harden  
who taught me everything I know about love.*

*Let us never know what old age is.  
Let us know the happiness time brings, not count the years.'*  
— *Ausonius*

# The Dinner Party

## *November 2015*

### **Vivienne**

Stepping out of the taxi, Vivienne squints at the dark street for any sign of the restaurant.

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

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

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

*Serendipity's, 13 Salvation Road...*

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

## *Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

*A waste of time.* She pulls her mobile from her bag to ring another taxi. A few more minutes in this rain and her make-up will landslide down her face, her hair panicking and heading in the other direction. If she hurries, she'll still make her 6.28 p.m. train home and her feet will be happily nestled in her sheepskin slippers with a Poirot mystery on the telly.

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

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

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

'Yes,' Vivienne snaps. 'Why?'

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

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

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

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

‘It’s addressed to the Deputy Editor, *not* the junior writer,’ Vivienne had snapped, snatching the invitation back.

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

When Vivienne had started out at the magazine, a wide-eyed twenty-three-year-old, she’d been one of only two women in the place. Through sheer hard work she’d eventually made it to Deputy Editor, but then she’d got stuck. Vivienne had become part of the furniture while the house around her had been renovated. All of a sudden, the work-experience girls were lecturing her about Facebook and Instagram. One of them – with skin so flawless Vivienne could hardly bear to look at her – had even offered to read through her copy to give it a ‘younger vibe’. Let’s just say, *she* didn’t last long.

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

Last week, the latest incarnation, a thirty-eight-year-old former teen magazine editor called Damian, with a bald spot shining through his spiky hair and a very loose grip on the basic rules of grammar, had asked for ‘a quick conflagration’ in his office. Vivienne had been shaken to hear that magazine sales had dropped further in the last six months and there was real risk of closure. The editor himself had seemed unfazed as he’d patted

## *Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

on his most sympathetic face, whilst glancing at his watch. Perhaps he was already in receipt of another job offer. Vivienne could only imagine having the kind of bulletproof confidence that requires no evidentiary talent to sustain it.

Back at her desk, she'd picked up the envelope again, turning the thick card over in her hands. Her name was spelt out in the intricate gold writing, but it didn't say who was holding the dinner and there wasn't even an email address to RSVP. For the next two days, it had stayed propped up behind her keyboard, and her eyes had regularly drifted towards the ornate lettering.

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

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

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

'Vivienne, magazine editor,' she snaps back, no need to mention the 'deputy' bit. 'I'm off home now, looks like the place doesn't even exist...'

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

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

'Look, you really must get out of this rain...'

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

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

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

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

'I can't see a thing,' she whispers, taking tiny steps forward.

'Look, there's a sign,' Tristan murmurs.

As Vivienne's eyes adjust to the darkness, a large gold plaque appears on the wall ahead of them. The word 'Serendipity's' is written in stern capitals, just above a staircase leading down. Vivienne's heart is galloping, but she doesn't want to come across as a scared older woman, so she takes a deep breath and walks

towards the steps. She reaches out for the smooth wooden banister as her toes tentatively feel for each step.

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

At the bottom of the stairs, they’re greeted by a heavy, dark wood door, with a huge gold handle in the centre. Muffled voices, then a screeching laugh, emanate from the other side. Vivienne’s racing heart slows a smidgeon at the sound of other people. Even though her conscious mind is telling her that she’s in central London, with thousands of people just metres away from her, she had started to feel like she and Tristan had entered a different world. She pushes the door open and gasps. It is the most splendid dining room she’s ever seen, with its roaring fire framed by an elaborate marble fireplace, dark wood panels, and enormous oil paintings hanging from the walls. Vivienne had always dreamed of living in a grand house with rooms like these. She’d been glued to *Downton Abbey* imagining herself right at home alongside the well-bred ladies. Vivienne puts her hand on the smooth marble fireplace and looks up at the image above. Unlike the other paintings, which depict generic landscapes and plump, dreamy women, this is a black-and-white inked drawing. A devilish face pokes through the centre of the circular image, which features a series of animals dressed as humans. At the top is a peacock wearing a top hat and tails; then an eagle holding up weighing scales; two brawling dogs in white shirts; a pig in a suit digging into a roast chicken; a bow-tied lizard peering at a scroll; a pipe-smoking cat; and a top-hatted sheep gazing at a well-dressed ewe. Could this be a clue to tonight’s event? If so, then Vivienne is impressed. This is a cut above the usual lacklustre marketing tricks. Stepping closer, Vivienne gazes into the eyes of the devil, who seems to be looking right at her. She leans forward and notices that the image is slightly coming away at the corner. She reaches her hand to it.

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

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

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

Vivienne squints at the dark silhouette behind a candelabra. Walking towards the table, she spots two empty spaces, both with small black cards between the cutlery. As she gets closer, she sees her own name, written in the same style as the invitation. Peering at the card, she sees the eagle with weighing scales once again. To her right sits a lean man wearing a fitted grey suit and an arrogant expression; he nods at Vivienne. To her left is Tristan’s setting. They both sit down.

### **Matthew**

Leaning back in his chair, Matthew watches the old lady and drippy (literally – the floor around him is soaked) bloke make their way to the table, taking the last two seats. Well, now he really is confused. The woman is the same genre of dried-up spinster you find in every office across London. A couple of cats at home and a freezer full of ready meals no doubt. As for the drip: too-long hair, smudged glasses, a fan of outdated rock music (judging by his T-shirt). Adding all this together, Matthew would surmise that he has a badly paid job involving computers. Already seated are the Botoxed lingerie boss with huge knockers, the old Welsh police officer who clearly loves a drink-or-ten, the too-skinny

*Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

YouTuber frowning at her phone, and the dull TV doctor desperately waiting to be recognised. Glancing around the table, Matthew flicks his glossy hair and wonders who has brought this random wedge of humanity together – and why.

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

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

‘My name’s Vivienne ... it took us a while to find the restaurant...’ the older woman babbles, trying to smooth down her hair as she takes Melvin’s hand.

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

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

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

‘Delicious,’ she responds, beaming and flashing her cat-like, amber eyes.

It's clear to Matthew that Janet had been stunning in her twenties, but now, in her early forties, at a guess, she's past her prime. Sure, the wonders of Botox have ironed out her forehead, but the lines around her eyes and mouth cruelly betray her. And Matthew would hedge a bet that she's put on a few stone in the last five years. Great boobs, but she's 'paying the ass-tax', as his colleagues at the investment bank would say. Noticing Matthew's appraising eye, a blotchy, pink rash spreads unattractively across Janet's mighty cleavage, which bounces heavily as she lifts her wine glass and takes three large gulps.

'Malbec, Argentinian, at a guess.' Janet grins at him, her lips already turning inky thanks to the tannins.

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

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

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

*Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

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

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

'You can keep your fancy wine.' Melvin is addressing the group now. 'Beer's my tipples, always has been.'

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

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

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

'No Gordon, there aren't many black people in Wales, but that makes us all the more special,' he chuckles. And just like that, the tension is defused. Matthew imagines that Melvin is a good police officer, equally capable of taming flying fists and providing

comfort when needed. It's not the sort of life that would appeal to Matthew, though. His more subtle skills are better suited amongst the traders. In fact, when he thinks about it, he approaches his work life in much the same way as his personal life. He befriends new, inexperienced traders so that they confide in him when it all inevitably goes wrong. He offers to help and then swoops their clients away before the poor kids know what's happening. The turnover is so high in his company that no one seems to notice Matthew's predatory approach, except perhaps his boss who simply gives him a look of admiration when he turns in impressive monthly figures.

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

He decides to indulge her with his attention once again.

'Simon Cowell, Ryan Gosling, Prince Charles?' he grins, giving a wink.

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

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

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

'Marry Cowell. I'd never have to work again,' she squeals. 'Kill Ryan; nice guy but not much fun. And snog Prince Charles; he might appear like Mr Sensible with his grey suits and cufflinks, but I bet he knows how to please a lady.'

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

*Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

‘Who cares?’ she snorts, turning back to Matthew. ‘Your go: Beyonce, Hillary Clinton and Nicole Kidman?’

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

‘Could I kill them all?’ he says, sending Janet into hysterics.

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

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

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

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

‘What about you, Vivienne, was it?’ He draws the old bag in, deliberately excluding Stella, the YouTuber. ‘Does Prince Charles do it for you?’

‘Oh God, no. Benedict Cumberbatch is more my type...’ says Vivienne, taking a sip of her wine, briefly closing her eyes as the rich taste hits her.

‘Ew, he’s ancient,’ Stella suddenly pipes up, her voice much more refined than Matthew had anticipated.

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

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

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

‘Who needs water when the wine tastes so good,’ Matthew says, reaching for the carafe and turning back to Janet. As he does so,

his place setting catches his eye. Underneath his name is a drawing of a sheep wearing a top hat and monocle, looking down at a ewe. Shrugging, he pushes it to one side and proffers the carafe to Janet.

‘Don’t mind if I do,’ she says, beaming as Matthew carefully pours the dark red liquid into her glass.

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

### **Stella**

Stella looks from gorgeous Matthew to past-it Janet and back again. *WT actual F.* Why is he bothering with her? Sure, she’s got huge boobs, but she’s big all over, and old enough to be his mother – probably. Stella’s eyes glide over Matthew’s sculpted cheekbones, his long eyelashes, and she realises she’s seen him somewhere before. Then it comes to her: he’d featured in an article she’d recently read, ‘London’s Most Eligible Hotties’ – or something equally lame. But one bachelor, with impossibly dark eyes, had stood out. The writer had clearly been taken with Matthew, too, describing him as ‘devastatingly dishy’ (*please!*). The article had featured the net worth of each ‘hottie’, and Matthew’s was nowhere near her father’s, from what she can recall, but he was definitely going in the right direction. She takes in his Savile Row suit, the gold signet glinting on his pinkie finger. She’d sworn off dating for a while, but perhaps she can make an exception for this Matthew. After all, her father has been threatening to cut her off again, and she could really use a back-up. Matthew had definite potential. And yet he’d barely looked her way since she’d walked in...

Sighing, Stella wonders if she’d made a mistake coming along today. The invitation had looked expensive, she’d anticipated some luxury freebies, a few glasses of champers and perhaps some exclusive content for her channel. When all she got was a dreary dinner party with gross red wine and a load of weirdos. Not to mention a racist thrown in. She’s still fuming over what that doctor said to

## *Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

Melvin about being black and Welsh. With a mum from Ghana and a white dad, she'd heard it all before she was twelve. Melvin should have torn a strip off that weedy man, but instead he'd just laughed. Infuriating!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'And you're a doctor?' Stella asks, trying to sound like she gives a flying F. Her boarding school had drilled into her the importance of small talk, along with other useful skills like using the correct cutlery and how to foxtrot.

'You might recognise me.' He clears his throat and touches his powder blue tie. 'I regularly appear on *The Morning Show*...'

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

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

'Oh, darling, now I know where I've seen you,' Janet calls from the other side of Stella. 'You were on the other day, labelling some poor celeb as bonkers for her maple-syrup diet. And there I was, just about to stock up.'

*Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

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

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

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

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

Stella rolls her eyes, zoning out of this lame chat. With no bubbles in sight, she decides she might as well give the red wine a go. She leans forward to push her place setting (which weirdly features a lizard reading a scroll) aside and picks up her glass. The blackcurrant-y wine tastes bitter on her tongue but then slips easily down her throat, sending a pleasurable warmth through her.

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

She shakes her head. ‘I prefer champagne.’

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

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

Matthew picks up his wine glass by its stem and slowly swills it round and round, the scarlet fluid spinning then starting to climb up the sides in tiny tidal waves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Tristan**

Staring down at his gnawed fingernails, Tristan listens carefully to the conversation going on around him. Chatter weaves in and out, certain words hanging in the air, like cartoon speech bubbles.

## *Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

*Mysterious ... Serendipity's ... celebrity...* The truth is, Tristan can't remember the last time he'd been to a dinner party. Perhaps it had been back when he was a student, sharing pizza with some like-minded computer-science undergrads. Counting on his fingers, it dawns on him that he hasn't even spoken to anyone face-to-face for five days. The number of people in this room, their loud voices, their different personalities, their range of opinions, it is all hurting Tristan's head. All he wants to do is run out of this place, jump on the tube and get home, return to the safety of his little flat in Manor House.

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

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

His hand instinctively reaches up to touch the scar on his cheekbone; the tip of his forefinger fits perfectly into the hollow left by that thug's boot. The wound has healed, but the dent will always be there to remind him of that night. He looks down at his old Metallica T-shirt and thinks he probably should have made more of an effort. Janet appears to be wearing a ballgown of some sort; Matthew and Gordon are in suits; Stella is wearing a tight black dress and cowboy boots, diamonds sparkling in her ears. Tristan rarely thinks about his appearance these days, but today, before he'd got dressed to come out, he'd stood naked in front of his bathroom mirror and had wondered where this nearly-forty-year-old had come from. It had felt like mere months ago he was a nowhere-near-twenty-year-old with an exciting and possibly lucrative future at his stretched fingertips. Lately he'd grown his hair longer, brushing it across his forehead so it just about hid the worst of his widow's peak. It doesn't seem fair that his hair is disappearing and he still suffers from acne... Then his eyes had fallen to his sad-sack belly, which has surprisingly inherited the hair he's lost from his head. Lately, he finds himself patting it protectively, like you see pregnant women doing.

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

'Why did you take so long to answer? You scared me half to death,' his mother had shrieked.

'I was just on my way out.'

'Oh, are you seeing Ellie?'

'No Mum, it's over, remember?' he'd sighed.

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

'Mum, I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow,' he'd told her, hopping from one foot to the other.

*Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

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

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

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

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

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

‘It reminds me of a murder-mystery night,’ he mumbles. He’d gone to one with Ellie, had hated every second. His teeth push together, his jaw clenches at the memory. His words drift across the table and disperse like cigarette smoke as the other guests watch Matthew and Janet resume their excruciating flirting. Looking at Matthew, Tristan notices how the candlelight creates a halo effect around his thick chestnut hair, his eyes as dark as a well. Vivienne had at least acknowledged Tristan before dismissing

him, whereas Matthew's gaze had hopped over him, stopping only briefly on Vivienne to flash his luminescent teeth. The older chap Melvin had greeted them both enthusiastically and introduced Janet, who hadn't taken her eyes off Matthew; then Stella, briefly glancing up from her phone to give him a reluctant wave. As for Dr Gordon, Tristan had earned a curt nod of the head.

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

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

'*Foie gras* – my favourite,' Matthew says, beaming at Janet, who grins back.

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

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

'And they say there's no such thing as a free lunch,' Janet chuckles, picking up her cutlery.

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

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

## *Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

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

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

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

Despite its unappealing appearance – and dubious ethics – the *foie gras* is utterly delicious, and Tristan's plate is cleared in no time. His tastebuds are celebrating. Poor things are more familiar with beans on toast.

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

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

'My wife and I used to go out lots when we first married but not so much these days... She's recovering from chemo...' For the first time, Melvin's voice is low, almost a whisper. A strange expression on his face.

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

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

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

### **Gordon**

Gordon finds he cannot tear his eyes away from Janet as she hungrily smears thick, sticky *foie gras* on to the cracker. She

doesn't seem to notice that she has also coated her thumb; her focus is totally taken with the food carefully balanced on the tips of her fingers. As if in slow motion, she raises the cracker, her blood-red lips parting – Gordon can see her expensive dental work – and it is devoured. Then she finally spots the blob of beige on her thumbnail and that too disappears into the red cavern. He tries to ignore the twitch in his groin.

Looking down at his own plate, Gordon scrapes a modest amount of the *foie gras* on to his knife and carefully spreads it around the cracker. Made up mostly of duck fat, *foie gras* is certainly calorific, but, in actual fact, in small quantities, the monosaturated and polyunsaturated fats can be a beneficial part of a healthy diet. Then he picks up his wine glass and takes a small sip of the red wine, allows the liquid to swill around his mouth, one, two, three times and then swallows. With its links to lowering heart disease, Gordon allows his wife Elizabeth to pour them a glass of red wine each once or twice a week. Elizabeth inevitably tries to persuade Gordon into a second glass, but then he reminds her the health benefits most likely stop after just one. As he's always telling his wife, it's all about moderation, a principle this Janet woman clearly doesn't live by.

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

*Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

skin with his scalpel. Yellow and bulbous. Perhaps, if she saw that, she'd change her ways.

Slowly chewing his modest portion of *foie gras* (exactly thirty-two times to aid the digestion process), he briefly closes his eyes with pleasure. It is truly delicious. A small voice inside his head is saying: '*Go on Gordon, eat it all up. Worry about it later.*' He looks down at his plate and picks up a second cracker, smearing another thumbnail of *foie gras* on top. Again, he slowly chews and swallows before pushing the plate away from him, away from temptation. He leaves the last three crackers and barely touched *foie gras*. As he does so, he notices his place setting. Pleasingly, it reads, *Dr Gordon MacMillan,* and underneath there's a tiny drawing of a peacock in a top hat. He peers more closely at it: the peacock looks rather distinguished. Perhaps it is the emblem for some sort of high-profile guest-speaker society. Gordon allows himself a moment of excitement.

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

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

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

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

'You look like you'd make a good winger. There's no sport better than rugby,' Melvin bellows.

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

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

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

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

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

'Oh no, that's not what I was implying,' Gordon gives the police officer a reassuring smile.

'It's all about eating plenty of fruit and vegetables, wholegrains and proteins. Avoiding red meat, alcohol, and sugary foods.'

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

'Well, everything in moderation, I always say,' he splutters, looking quickly towards Janet.

Elizabeth has warned him before about his over-zealous 'lecturing' on healthy eating. But what does she expect? Conversation at dinner parties naturally turns to food and drink, and he can't miss the opportunity to educate others.

## *Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

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

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

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

'She's a teenage girl going through puberty, don't say a word,' Elizabeth had warned when he'd mentioned his concerns to her. But really, what would it look like for a respected *high-profile* doctor of nutrition and dietetics to have an overweight daughter? Hypocrisy, that's what. When Elizabeth was out of the room, he'd occasionally mention to his daughter the impact of fatty foods on the body, causing cellulite and acne. He was proud that he could talk in a language that teenagers would understand. He'd learned that through his television work. And goodness, he loves every second of it. When that camera is on him, he feels like a superhero, a world leader, royalty. Finally, his chance to educate the common man! Unfortunately, he's only asked on every few weeks, so, when the invitation for tonight's dinner party had appeared on his desk, he'd hoped to meet some media types to whom he could slip his new business card. The peacock on his place setting had made him wonder about a speakers' gathering. But the more he hears from his fellow dinner guests, the less likely this seems.

Then he looks down at his plate and realises with horror that it is scraped clean. Had he really eaten that huge portion himself? It didn't seem possible, yet everyone else was either chatting or

finishing off their own starters, so it had to be him. Suddenly, the heat from the open fire is unbearable, his suit jacket nipping under his arms.

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

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

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

### **Janet**

Gazing at the gorgeous young banker to her right, Janet feels alive for the first time in months. When her PA had handed her a pile of post last week, she’d been drawn to the thick black

*Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

envelope right away. As the MD of Sophia's Whisper lingerie company, she receives all manner of invitations every day, but when she'd opened the envelope, read over the words, she'd found herself pulled in by the air of mystery, as well as the promise of a proper sit-down dinner rather than those fiddly canapés. God knows, she needs some intrigue in her life right now. This morning, she'd spent yet another breakfast in silence. Her husband, Bill, had flicked through the *Financial Times* with his left hand while shovelling bacon, fried eggs, and buttered toast into his mouth with his right. Cheerful yellow egg yolk had dripped down his chin, but he hadn't noticed, just carried on flicking and chewing, flicking and chewing.

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

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

'I'll be late home tonight,' she'd told him. 'Work party. Don't wait up.'

'OK, dear,' he'd mumbled, his focus now returned to his paper and half-eaten – but never forgotten – full English breakfast.

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

'Did you get a chance to ring Caroline yet?' Bill had suddenly called over to her, finally looking at her. 'She wants to speak to you about the christening.'

‘Erm ... not yet, I’ll see if I have time this afternoon,’ she’d responded, caught off-guard.

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

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

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

‘New dress?’ Bill had commented, getting up and coming towards her, his chin cleaned of egg yolk.

‘Yes, what do you think?’

‘A little on the tight side,’ he’d commented, appraising her. ‘Perhaps it’s time to size up. Or think about utilising that extortionate gym membership.’

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

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

‘My God, that *foie gras* was amazing,’ Matthew sighs. ‘Even better than at The Magnolia Room.’

*Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

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

'Agreed,' she says, nodding trying to ignore the single drip of sweat snaking down between her shoulder blades.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Thank you, my dear,' Janet replies, taking in the finest steak, beautifully sliced showing its obscenely pink insides. Nestled next to the meat are delicately roasted potatoes, bright green asparagus,

and a small jug of yellow béarnaise sauce. She wonders how anyone could even consider vegetarianism. Why deny yourself life's greatest pleasures?

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

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

'Let it go, Vivienne, love,' Melvin says. 'They'll get to it soon enough. Let's just enjoy this marvellous food.'

Thankfully, Vivienne seems to accept Melvin's advice and the waiter scuttles off. 'Marvellous' is certainly the right word for this steak, thinks Janet. She picks up her cutlery and feels her knife slip through the beef without resistance, it's so tender. She balances a piece of potato on her fork with the steak and closes her eyes as the flavours explode in her mouth. Was there really anything better in life than a plate of exquisite food? Except an afternoon in bed with a young man, perhaps, she thinks, drinking in Matthew's endless dark lashes, his long fingers tapping away at his phone. As she reaches for her glass, her eyes fall on her place setting. Under her name is an intricate drawing of a pig eating a roast dinner. Janet holds back a gasp, quickly glances over at Matthew, relieved that he hasn't seen it, then pushes the card into her tote. Looking around the table, she notices that Melvin the copper is tucking his white linen napkin into his shirt collar, the IT boy is fiddling nervously with his cutlery, and skinny Stella is poking at her steak and frowning. A motley crew, if ever there was one. What on earth does Janet have in common with that miserable old journalist or the rugby-loving police officer? And don't even get her started on the sanctimonious TV doctor trying to spoil all her fun. Thank goodness their mysterious host had thought to invite Matthew. He is obviously interested. Taking another bite of her steak, Janet decides to stop concerning herself with why she's here, and just enjoy the evening.

## *Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

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

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

'I don't think so...'

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

Janet narrows her eyes. Actually, that did ring a bell... It was about three months after she'd sold her company and just started at Sophia's Whisper. She'd been busy getting to grips with the new job, but this woman kept emailing and phoning her office until Janet had finally agreed to spend a miserable hour with her at a coffee shop near work. Vivienne had started off quite pleasant, complimenting her on the highly lucrative sale of her clothing app, and her new heels, but then she'd ambushed her, asking about the 'loyal staff' she'd fired. God knows why the woman was so bothered about them: a couple of barely literate graduates Janet had got to write the press releases; a faceless, computer chap who'd dealt with the technical side of things; a few savvy girls whom she'd sent out to scour charity shops for designer clothes and jewellery that she could sell on as 'vintage'. I mean, she *had* told a tiny lie when she'd encouraged them to invest in the company, but you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs, and this had been one hell of an omelette (it had paid for their summer house in Greece, a new place down in Cornwall, and new cars for her and Bill). Besides, those freelancers would surely have benefitted just from having the company's name on their CVs.

When the article came out, this journalist woman had referenced the 'ruthless' sale of the company, but the worst bit for Janet had been

the rather cutting comments about Sophia's Whisper's latest catwalk show. Her boss had thought the article was great publicity, but Janet had seethed at the writer's implication that she was letting the side down, 'a female boss reinforcing the male gaze', she'd put. Janet had even rung the magazine editor to give him a piece of her mind.

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

'I'm so pleased you read it.' Vivienne smiles tightly.

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

'And by plus-size, I'm guessing you mean size ten, maybe a twelve at a push?' Vivienne parries.

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

'Let's be honest, Vivienne, who wants to look at big girls in their bras?' Janet chuckles. 'Am I right, Matthew?'

'Oh, I don't know, I've always had a soft spot for a curvy girl.' Matthew looks up from his phone and raises his eyebrows suggestively at her.

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

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

### **Melvin**

Melvin nearly spits out his wine as Matthew's 'curvy girl' comment reverberates around the room. He can see from the pink blush

climbing up Janet's neck that she has never thought of herself in this way. The woman's a stunner, no denying it. She's one of those women who carries her looks around like a queen wearing her mantle; she'd swept into the restaurant, surveying her property and her subjects. Those yellow-green eyes had flashed around all the chaps, landing first on Matthew, then Gordon, and finally Melvin, weighing up their worth. Young Tristan, with his smudged glasses and old T-shirt, hadn't got a look-in, poor kid. But her low-cut dress, her unladylike comments about sex, her flippant attitude towards her own marriage just aren't to Melvin's taste. He thinks of Mary. Despite everything she's been through, all the needles, the pain, the hair loss, she's retained her dignity. Mary is a lady, unlike Juicy Janet. Still, the last thing he wants is for Janet to get upset, she'd been having such a good night. He holds his breath as he waits to see how she'll handle this unwitting insult. Should he say something?

'Well, the whole world *is* talking about Kim Kardashian's bottom,' she eventually splutters, the thumb of her left hand absent-mindedly spinning her eternity ring round and round her finger, sending flashes of light across the table.

*Good save, fair play.* Melvin shoots her an encouraging smile. But really, at her age, she should know better than chasing after a young man like that. It's clear that she's a good twenty years too old for this Matthew. As he watches Janet wave at a passing waiter, demanding more wine, Melvin wonders about her husband: where is he tonight? Does he have any idea she's spending the evening flirting so obviously with another man? Then he thinks of a 999 call he'd answered a month or so before. There had been a reported domestic disturbance on a nice road in Belgravia. He'd been sent to have a quiet word and had pictured a tipsy well-to-do couple falling out over which Farrow & Ball shade to paint the drawing room. But, when he'd rung the bell, a man had come straight to the door, tears of blood streaming down his face.

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

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

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

Melvin looks from Janet to Matthew. It strikes him just how different young men are these days. When he himself was in his twenties, living in a small village just outside Cardiff, you were deemed 'well-groomed' if you had regular haircuts and wore clean shoes for a date. These days, young men have *manicures*, wax their chests, and spend hours honing their muscles at the gym. He'd even heard that some wear make-up! Mind you, Matthew looks pretty good on it. His dark brown eyes and high cheekbones remind Melvin of Christian, his new colleague at the station, and then he's wondering what Christian is up to right now...

*Stop it!*

During his fifty-eight years, Melvin has often wondered about certain men who have crossed his path. It was to be expected, he'd told himself. He'd spent his teen years on a rugby pitch – and in the communal baths afterwards – then joined the police force, working predominantly with men, spending weekends watching rugby or football and drinking in the pub with his male

*Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

friends. But the appearance of Christian has ramped this up. Now Melvin's 'wonderings' last for hours, epic daydreams whilst he sits next to Mary watching the *Antiques Road Show*, tortuous nightmares that leave him drenched in sweat and shaking all over with an all-consuming ache for this man. Christian's earnest brown eyes are the backdrop to his every waking moment.

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

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

'Not sure my belly can take much more,' Melvin says, but picks up his spoon anyway. As he digs into the sponge, dark shiny chocolate sauce comes oozing out, mixing with the vanilla ice cream, reminding him of the Yin-Yang sign. Years ago, Mary had taught him what it meant – a little bit of good in every bad person, and a bit of bad in every good person. Right now, Melvin feels all bad because his daydreams about Christian are teetering on the edge of reality. Yes, unbelievably, Melvin has started to think that Christian might have feelings for him, too. The way he holds his gaze for a second too long, the casual touch to his knee as they sit side by side in their patrol car, the charged air between them.

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

Last week, when the black envelope had appeared on his desk, he'd tossed it on top of the ever growing pile of paperwork that he never got around to looking at. It was only that afternoon, as he'd sat at his desk fighting his heavy eyelids, that he'd actually

opened the envelope and decided to go along. Leaning back in his comfy office chair, Melvin had pictured Christian excitedly pointing out restaurants as they'd patrolled the streets together, asking Melvin about the sorts of food he liked. As daydreams gave way to real life, Melvin had smiled to himself as he'd wondered if Christian had planned an intimate date for them, disguised as a dinner party.

Now he sees how ludicrous that thought was, and reflects that he might have been better off in the pub after all. At least he'd just have himself to put up with. This is a mixed bunch, that's for sure. As well as handsome Matthew and sex-obsessed Janet, Vivienne is a lady of around his age and seems to have elected herself the headmistress of the group, looking offended at every turn. Melvin finds there's always someone who makes a daft comment about his colour, and tonight that award has gone to uptight Dr Gordon. If looks could kill, the Scottish doctor would have dropped dead thanks to young Stella, but Melvin just laughs these things off. He'd heard it all on the rugby pitches around Cardiff and found humour was the best reaction. The younger generation don't see it this way, you just needed to look at Stella's face to know that.

Now that Melvin thinks of it, he realises he's met Stella before. Over the summer, he'd been called to a nice flat in Kensington to a report of burglary. He'd got there and found a very well-dressed, well-spoken, middle-aged chap in a three-piece suit, who introduced himself as a barrister (putting Melvin firmly in his place) and announced that some 'extraordinarily expensive jewellery' had been stolen from his daughter's flat. When Melvin had started to take down the details, it had become clear that Stella was too inebriated to give a statement, telling her father to 'just buy me another one'. Melvin had then acted as a referee, as father and daughter had yelled at each other about the diamond-encrusted necklace. Watching them, Melvin had felt an almost

overwhelming urge to put his hands around both their necks and squeeze the life out of them. He'd had enough of privileged people wasting police time. At least Stella is more composed tonight. Not only that, she appears to be wearing a diamond necklace, just like the one they'd described. Good job he'd never got around to filing that police report.

After polishing off his dessert, Melvin picks up his glass and downs the lot. Then he forces himself to tune back into the conversational tennis flying over the table. The guests, now a little worse for wear, are sending balls in all directions.

'Oh, come on, you can't beat snogging a stranger on a sweaty dancefloor,' Janet screeches.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conversation at the table grinds to a halt as the other guests watch Janet open the envelope. Clearly enjoying the attention, she slowly peels it open, pulls out a small black card using the tips of her painted red nails and looks at it. Then her smile freezes.

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

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

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

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

'Get it away from me,' she yelps, throwing it to the centre of the table.

'Take it easy, Janet, love,' Melvin says.

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

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

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

'It's not silly, it's downright cruel,' snaps Vivienne, standing up. 'I'm going to speak to someone about this.'

'Hold up, Vivienne,' Melvin calls but, before he can do anything, Vivienne has marched towards the door through which the waiters had disappeared. They all watch as she abruptly stops, her hands pushing in vain against the solid wood.

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

*Seven Reasons to Murder Your Dinner Guests*

Vivienne goes back to her chair, as they all watch Janet sob quietly.

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

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

'You shouldn't have opened it,' Vivienne scalds. 'I'm certainly not opening mine.'

'Me neither,' Tristan mutters, pushing his own envelope away.

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

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

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

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

'It would be interesting if the ages were correct, though, wouldn't it?' Gordon mutters, turning over his own card as if hunting for clues.

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

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

'Something funny?' Janet snarls.

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

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

'I doubt that,' Janet snaps, dabbing at her eyes with her own napkin and looking forlornly up at Matthew.

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

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

Melvin looks over at Janet, whose smeared make-up reminds him of a tired clown. She glances gloomily at Matthew and Stella as she pulls on her coat. Melvin pushes the business cards and napkin into his pocket. He notices that two unopened envelopes are still on the table but leaves them be. He isn't sure how his name ended up on the guest list for this odd dinner party – maybe it's one of his colleagues winding him up. Truthfully, he doesn't care. He has no real interest in unmasking the dinner-party host. But, as a police officer, he should be seen to make an effort, to take control of upsetting situations. He'll make a few calls tomorrow, hopefully settle the ladies' concerns. Glancing at his watch, he sees it's just before 11 p.m. Bit early to head home, Mary might still be up. He just wants to get as drunk as possible and try to forget about his problems for a few more hours.

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