

Copyrighted Material

It's a curious thing to realise you hate someone so much you could kill them. You might imagine it to be a conscious decision. Often, it comes as more of a discovery. Like stumbling on a box of belongings you must always have had but never realised were there.

Edward Finn came to this realisation while fetching in the rack of postcards and crabbing lines that stood outside his shop. He hadn't sold one all day. A couple of ramblers had passed through, but there were no tourists to sell to on New Year's Eve. Martha often said during the winter months that she wasn't sure why he even opened.

He supposed it was the routine that kept him going. Barring his stint in the navy, during which he met, married and convinced Martha to return with him to Hamlet Wick, Edward had spent his life in the shop. The place was in his blood, just as the salt was in the sea and the bracken was on the moor.

Lingering on the cobbled pavement, he took a breath, cold air filling his lungs. In years gone by, this white-stone building had been the harbour master's office. It was perched on the seawall, the water beneath smeared a deep shade of mandarin as

Copyrighted Material

the sun dipped low over the crest of Exmoor. Edward felt the breeze on his face and imagined how it would once have carried the cry of gulls and the bellowing of sailors.

Of course, the fishermen were long-since gone. Now, Hamlet Wick boasted a pub, Edward's shop and half a dozen single-storey cottages. Brightly painted sailing boats bobbed on the water, and the only building to be found without a thatched roof was Hamlet Hall, the stately home that presided over the shingle beach. It was a noble old place. Run-down, admittedly, but a reminder of how the little harbour in Hamlet Wick had once made the adjoining market town of Hamlet one of the most prosperous in all of Devon. Most days, the sight of the house caused Edward to swell with pride. But in that moment, it seemed only to worsen his mood.

He'd never been one for New Year's Eve celebrations, but he was especially unhappy about what lay ahead of him on that particular evening. A murder mystery party. He didn't know what Martha had been thinking by signing them up. Murder wasn't something to be made fun of. He'd even heard there were going to be *actors* involved.

The thought of Ian Davies and Will Hooper being behind it did nothing to put Edward at ease. Ian, the latest owner of Hamlet Hall, was a decent sort. But there was something odd about Will. Nothing you could begrudge him for exactly – what he'd experienced as a boy was something no child should have to face – but it seemed to Edward that a party treating murder as a game was made all the more inappropriate by Will's involvement.

The light dwindling, Edward turned back to the shop. As he did, his eyes were caught by the stark white of the lighthouse. Set on the crest of a small hill, just short of half a mile away, it

Copyrighted Material

still cut as imposing a figure as it must have done two hundred years earlier. It was beautiful, but even at a distance, he could make out the terrible work that was being done to it.

Tall fences had been set up, topped with barbed wire and emblazoned with the words *Cobb Construction Ltd.* When darkness fell, floodlights would cast the tower in a harsh light, the arched backs of the diggers looming like monstrous beasts.

Edward wasn't alone in his despair over the luxury home to which it was being converted. Tragedy has a way of lingering, and he could think of little as tragic as what had happened, more than twenty years ago, in Hamlet Wick. The lighthouse should stand as a reminder of that heartbreak; a place to be respected, not bought and renovated like some old warehouse.

He was encouraged to know how many local people seemed to share that view. Last time he checked, the petition that Martha had helped him set up on the internet, protesting the development, had accrued nearly a thousand signatures – not far off the entire adult population of Hamlet. Just that afternoon, she'd said an actress with a nearby holiday home had shown support. The woman had put it on social media, or something to that effect.

And then there was Gwen Holloway, head of the local tourist board. As always, Gwen had been kind. Edward remembered the morning she came to the shop, back at the beginning of the year, and told them of her plans for the lighthouse – to preserve it as a memorial for all to see. He had approved of that idea. As far as he was concerned, when the council changed their minds and reallocated the planning permission, Gwen had been betrayed nearly as badly as he and Martha.

The final nail in the coffin had been the two break-ins at the

Copyrighted Material

shop. Only a bit of money was stolen and the local handyman – who had bought sweets over the counter as a boy – had fixed the lock free of charge. Still, it had been salt in the wound, and while there was little hard evidence that the construction workers were responsible, Edward felt certain they must be. Nigel Cobb had needed to bring in outsiders to carry out the work, with none of his local boys willing to be involved, and both incidents had occurred in the short space of time since they arrived. It could only have been one of them.

The council had been useless. Edward had complained several times, only to be told that the lighthouse would look magnificent when it was finished. The woman on the phone seemed to have intended it as a comfort, but it only made his resentment burn even brighter. Resentment for his disregarded pleas. And for Damien White, the man whose selfishness – whose arrogance – had descended on Hamlet Wick in the form of barbed wire and floodlights.

Edward stood there, his fingers going numb with cold as he looked at the lighthouse. Over the years, he'd often wondered how something so beautiful could mark the scene of such terrible loss. Now, as he despaired at how it was being violated, he realised that if he ever had the opportunity, he could happily kill Damien White.

Returning his attention to the shop, he saw Martha in the upstairs window, readying herself for Hamlet Hall. He knew that he had to go, however much he disapproved. He was all too aware of how rarely he agreed to an evening out. If it made Martha happy, he could bear it for one night.

He dropped his head and stepped inside, doing his best to leave all thoughts of the lighthouse, and of Damien White, at the door. But some wounds really did just run too deep.

Copyrighted Material

Justin Fletcher typed furiously at his desktop computer. It was an ancient machine, whirring and rattling as if threatening to take off. On the days he resented it most, he wondered if it might be the same dusty contraption on which the *Hamlet Herald's* stories were first written in 1845.

The office in which he sat was certainly the same, sandwiched on Hamlet's high street between a butcher's shop and a store selling fishing equipment. In the new year, he hoped his editor would finally see sense and consider a new location. It had become far too expensive for a dwindling local paper to sit on the high street – even a high street as modest as Hamlet's – but she had so far resisted. They were the beating heart of the community, she would say. They needed to be visible. Perhaps that had been true when she was his age, back in the 1980s. But right now, the *Hamlet Herald* was on its last legs.

He sat in total darkness, the window foggy with condensation and an electric heater in the corner providing bugger all in the way of actual warmth. The logo that had once been proudly

Copyrighted Material

inscribed on the glass was fading, the Christmas lights on the high street flickering through the specks that had peeled away.

Justin typed even more fervently, all too aware that he needed to leave soon for Hamlet Hall. The murder mystery party would make a nice feature, his editor had said. Something a little different. And if Gwen Holloway thought it worth attending, then the *Herald* ought to as well.

While Justin agreed that time with Gwen was always valuable, the thought of spending New Year's Eve in Hamlet Wick didn't fill him with enthusiasm.

A travel blogger had once written that arriving in Hamlet Wick was like arriving at the end of the world. She'd meant it in a wistful, romantic sort of way, as she described standing on the beach and gazing out at the Bristol Channel. For Justin, that was exactly the reason he loathed it. Even getting there was tedious. The little harbour clung to Hamlet by the Lane; a two-mile track so narrow that if you ran into another car coming the other way, you'd often have to reverse the best part of a hundred metres before finding a spot where you could pass without clapping wing mirrors. Dropping down to Hamlet Wick served only to remind him of how he was wasting his youth in this quiet corner of Devon. Of the busy, bustling life that a nineteen-year-old such as himself could be living somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

Yes, reporting on the murder mystery event was a change from the local bake sales, amateur dramatics and charity raft races. But there still were a dozen other places he would rather spend New Year's Eve than in Hamlet Wick, and a dozen other ways than at a party organised by Will Hooper. It was three years since they'd been at school together, and Justin doubted

Copyrighted Material

his old classmate had become any more interesting as they approached their twenties. There was always a big reveal at the end of a murder mystery, wasn't there? Perhaps tonight's would be that there hadn't been a murder at all. The victim had actually done themselves in after spending an hour talking to Will.

Instead, Justin's sights for the evening would be firmly set on Damien White's project at the lighthouse. The greatest local outrage for generations. An exclusive scoop from Gwen on *that* particular topic . . . Now that would be worth writing about. It might even be the story large enough to finally earn him a place at a *real* newspaper.

This wouldn't be the first time Justin had written about the lighthouse – far from it, in fact. Reporting on the work that was taking place had become almost a daily occurrence, to the extent that, even in that particular moment, he was trying desperately to finish an article on Edward Finn's campaign to save it from Damien White. An actress with a nearby holiday home had tweeted a link to the petition, and Justin was determined to file his article on this new development before setting off for Hamlet Hall.

He sat back in his chair, swearing loudly as he struggled to think of an appropriate adjective for his final paragraph. If there'd been anyone else in the little office, he would have done so under his breath. But at this late stage in the afternoon he was completely alone, his editor having clocked off a good forty minutes earlier. She hadn't thought the actress's tweet was worth writing about, but then Justin wasn't convinced that she knew exactly how Twitter worked. She'd certainly never made any effort to help him run the *Herald's* own pitiful account.

Copyrighted Material

Deplorable. That would do. He typed it in, ignoring the Christmas lights on the high street as they blinked in his peripheral vision.

There would be free booze at Hamlet Hall. And dinner, too. However mundane Will's murder mystery game might prove, at least that was something to look forward to. He'd heard as well that a few of their old schoolmates would be seeing in the new year at The Boatyard. Will wouldn't show his face, of course, but if the party wrapped up quickly, Justin might make his way there and see if he could convince someone to buy him a drink.

He skimmed through his editorial. Considering how quickly he'd written it up, he was pleased. It contained all his usual criticisms of Damien White, with just enough embellishment of the actress's involvement in the lighthouse campaign to offer a fresh spin. He'd even managed to include a scathing line about the construction workers breaking into Edward Finn's shop. That always riled the locals. It was bad enough that White had put an end to the memorial Gwen had been planning for the lighthouse, but for the men working on his development to have upset the Finns was unforgivable.

Glancing at the time, Justin checked his emails. Failing to find what he wanted in his inbox, he tried his junk mail instead. He was looking for a name. Specifically, the name of Damien White's personal assistant. But there was nothing. If her increasingly curt deflections over the phone were anything to go by, he knew there was no chance of her granting an interview by email. Still, he checked. And each time he did, his disappointment grew.

Copyrighted Material

At first, he'd felt a sense of pride in taking on Damien White, the local boy turned London property magnate. If he was honest, though, he now realised that he didn't bear any genuine resentment towards him. He knew about the lighthouse's tragic history, and the scandal White had caused by stealing the planning permission from Gwen. But he didn't see why it should matter. What mattered to Justin was the story. Writing the piece that would help him to apply for a position at a broadsheet. Or a tabloid. Even another regional. All he wanted was his ticket out.

His article finished, Justin hit send. But rather than disappearing into the ether, the words stayed where they were, staring at him defiantly as the computer froze. Silently, he cursed his editor. He'd tried several times to argue that he should be allowed to work on his own laptop. Anything, frankly, would be an improvement on this useless antique. But she remained adamant that he needed to use the *Herald's* machines.

Swearing even more loudly than before, he thumped the monitor with his fist. It was a procedure he'd carried out so many times he was surprised he hadn't dented it. With the article finally vanishing, he turned off the computer, zipped up his coat and hurried to his feet.

Nigel Cobb had been waiting forty-five minutes for his wife.

In fairness, he was used to it. When Sylvia had first placed their enormous wicker chair in the hallway, he even wondered if it had been to provide him with a place to sit while she prepared for their next excursion. It was a theory he had long-since abandoned. She didn't care enough about his comfort for such a kindness.

One small mercy, he supposed, was that while this was a familiar routine, over the years it was one he'd found himself playing out considerably less frequently. Until recently, there'd barely been a luncheon, cocktail party or even afternoon tea in Hamlet to which Sylvia didn't procure herself an invitation. Nigel, on the other hand, had never been one for socialising. He had installed a pair of wrought-iron gates at the end of their driveway for a reason, and his ideal evening was spent firmly behind them. Preferably watching a football match, with a cold Budweiser in his hand. Sylvia had tried to convince him to drink Birra Moretti instead, claiming that it looked more civilised, but he hadn't taken to it.

Copyrighted Material

Meanwhile, she engrossed herself in the outside world more than enough for both of them. Nigel was happy with that. He knew she was too.

But the evening that lay ahead of them was different. Sylvia had insisted they both attend the murder mystery party at Hamlet Hall. They were on a diplomatic mission. One to restore their place in society.

From the enormous wicker chair, Nigel surveyed the oversized Christmas tree that filled half of the hallway, the only place in their house big enough to contain it. The tree had been positioned by the staircase, so that the tip reached over the banister and he found himself face to face with a Christmas angel every time he left his bedroom.

It would be coming down in the morning. If he'd had his way, it would never have gone up. He suspected that was why Sylvia had it delivered while he'd been out pitching – unsuccessfully – for another contract. He should make a New Year's resolution to keep a closer eye on her spending. If their efforts at Hamlet Hall were unsuccessful, he might have no choice.

When he'd first received Damien White's contract to renovate the Hamlet Wick lighthouse into a luxury mansion, Sylvia had been all too keen for him to accept. The adjoining bungalow that had once been home to the lighthouse keepers was to be a double garage, while the tower itself would contain a guest room, a lounge, a kitchen and a dining room. It would be snug, but lavish beyond belief, with only the finest designer furnishings and trimmings. The most significant part of the project was to be the very top, with the light completely removed to make

Copyrighted Material

space for a master bedroom that boasted a panoramic view of the Bristol Channel.

It was an enormous undertaking; the single largest job that Cobb Construction Ltd had ever been offered. When Sylvia heard the proposed fee, Nigel could almost see the new Range Rover and Caribbean holiday gleaming in her eyes. He, however, had been wary. All he could think of was the tragic history that surrounded the lighthouse, and of the local sentiment towards it.

But Damien White's offer was ultimately too much to resist. In the end, and largely at Sylvia's insistence, he had accepted.

It was the greatest mistake of his career.

Within days of the work beginning, Edward Finn had raised a petition against the project, and with it, Sylvia's luncheons and afternoon teas had quickly dried up. The *Hamlet Herald* began writing brutal editorials on a near-daily basis and the crew that Nigel had brought in had even been accused of breaking into the Finns' shop.

'This can't go on,' Sylvia had said. 'We have to do something. For the firm.'

For the firm, Nigel thought bitterly.

He didn't doubt that his wife cared about Cobb Construction Ltd. It funded every social engagement she could squeeze her way into, not to mention her monthly shopping excursions to Exeter and Bristol, the receipts for which he was too frightened to look at.

It was the word 'we' that he objected to. He was the one getting his hands dirty. He was the one who would incur the wrath

Copyrighted Material

of Damien White and need to grovel to restore his reputation in the community. Still, if it meant the survival of the company, it would be worth it. And if it meant that Sylvia once again attended her afternoon teas and cocktail parties – in short, if it meant getting her off his back – then it would be better still.

What Nigel hadn't understood was why she'd chosen a murder mystery party as the moment to take action. She wasn't interested in that sort of thing. And the costume she'd made him wear – the double-breasted, pinstriped suit and the black trilby – was, frankly, humiliating. But all became clear when he learned that Gwen Holloway would be there.

He had to admit, it was canny. To be in Gwen's good graces was to be in all of Hamlet's. Quite how Sylvia had found out she would be attending, though, given her current state of excommunication from her various social circles, Nigel couldn't say. In the end, he'd decided not to ask. Sylvia had her ways, and however she'd managed it, he was sure that he didn't want to know.

When she finally descended the staircase, brushing a bauble with black-gloved fingers, she looked to Nigel almost exactly as when she'd disappeared nearly an hour earlier. The same glittering dress, same feathered headband . . . All that seemed to have changed was the black feather boa now draped around her shoulders.

He didn't point this out, of course. Instead, he simply stood, fetched the keys to the Audi from inside his jacket and opened the door for her. Not a word was spoken between them as they stepped into the cold.

In fifteen years, only a handful of the countless functions and events Gwen Holloway had attended in Hamlet had ever made her nervous.

There was the funeral of the teenager who died in a yachting accident and whose parents had asked her to deliver the eulogy. And the open day she'd attended at the local retirement home, having just recovered from a vicious bout of the flu.

This time, it was her own husband putting her on edge.

In a seaside community that thrives on tourism, everyone vies for the attention of the head of the local tourist board. You don't marry her if you aren't prepared to shake a few hands and smile for a few photographs. Hugh knew that. He followed Gwen to every engagement without a word of complaint. Never resented her for the spotlight in which she spent her every public moment.

The murder mystery party at Hamlet Hall would be different.

When Gwen had first signed them up, she'd looked forward to it. Christmas had been lovely, but you could only turn on the Hamlet high street lights so many times before the novelty wore thin. Hearing that such a unique event was taking place in

Copyrighted Material

Hamlet Wick, and on New Year's Eve . . . In the rare absence of any other engagements, she'd been keen to go, even buying a brand-new bottle-green ball gown especially.

At first, Hugh had been up for it, too. Of all the restaurants and hotels in the county to which he delivered produce from the surrounding farms, Hamlet Hall had one of the most lavish menus. He didn't often get to sample his own wares, and he was looking forward to the dinner they'd be served before the mystery began.

But his mood had been catastrophically dampened that afternoon, when Sylvia Cobb had texted Gwen to say that she and Nigel would also be there.

Of course, Gwen had known straight away that she'd have to share this with Hugh. There needed to be some ground rules in place if he was going to meet Nigel. Specifically, there was to be no discussion of Damien White, and certainly none of his project at the lighthouse.

Since that conversation, Hugh hadn't said a word. He'd disappeared into the living room and closed the door behind him, although from her seat at the kitchen table, Gwen could still clearly hear the rugby match that he was watching on the TV. Theirs was only a small home. If she planned to one day pursue her ambition of becoming Mayor, she had to cement her image now. It wasn't enough to be warm and attentive. She had to be modest too. To that end, she and Hugh lived in a renovated cottage. Beautiful but compact. Just as she needed it to be.

She couldn't blame him for the way he felt. After all, they each had their own reasons for hating Damien White. The memorial she'd planned for the lighthouse had been years in the

Copyrighted Material

making; years of work that he'd snuffed out in an instant, with a rumoured substantial 'donation' to the local council.

But Hugh's hatred ran so much deeper. It was primal, a cocktail of grief and rage that fizzed in his blood. He would never forgive the damage Damien had done to the Holloway family. Nor would he forget how the police let him walk away.

As long as he lived, Gwen knew her husband's fury would never leave him. It was just unfortunate that, by association, it now extended to Nigel Cobb.

She would simply have to manage Hugh's temper. She understood his pain, but she couldn't have him coming to blows with Nigel at a public function. Least of all, one that was being attended by the *Herald*.

The discovery that Justin would be there too had done nothing to soothe Gwen's nerves. He was far too interested in the lighthouse, and to hear him interrogating Nigel about how he could lower himself to work on it might just light the fuse on Hugh's frustration.

Still, Hugh had his instructions and Nigel was ultimately a timid creature. If there was drama to be found, she could bring it to heel.

She fixed a glistening string of pearls around her neck, before lifting the invitation from the table and running her fingers over the letters. *Murder at Hamlet Hall* was printed in raised gold type. The invitation had been nicely produced. If it was anything to go by – combined, for that matter, with the catering order Hugh had delivered to Hamlet Hall that morning – Ian was putting significant effort into the evening.

But then, it wasn't all Ian's doing.

Copyrighted Material

Gwen's last encounter with Will Hooper had been at a school sports day event, perhaps ten years ago, where she'd been handing out the prizes. On her way there, she had wondered if she might be able to pick him out – the child from the news stories. When she arrived, she spotted him almost immediately. There was no doubt in her mind that the jumpy, nervous-looking boy who seemed so desperate to distance himself from the other children was the one everyone in Hamlet had been talking about.

It was hardly surprising. Few people would ever experience something so traumatic, and fewer still at such a young age. Nobody could deny that it might cause him to grow up a little different.

She heard the rugby cut out in the next room. Composing herself, she tucked the invitation into her handbag.

It was time to go.

Murder at Hamlet Hall

Guest list

Gwen and Hugh Holloway

Nigel and Sylvia Cobb

Edward and Martha Finn

Justin Fletcher

Lily and plus-one

Actors

Jack Marshall

Theo Bloom

Claire Foley

Staff

Ian Davies

Carl Gifford

Will Hooper

Copyrighted Material

Seven o'clock

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1



All at once, Will Hooper was seven years old again. He gambolled onto the beach at Hamlet Wick, plastic bucket in his hand, while his dad went in search of a ticket for the car park.

He was going to find a fossil that morning. He was sure of it. In the spring, he'd stumbled on an ammonite, barely larger than a button, but which immediately became his most prized possession. In the months that followed, he'd been so determined to find another that they'd had to visit Hamlet Wick every Saturday morning so he could comb the beach.

Buffeted by a bracing October wind, Will kept his eyes on the ground, the shale shifting and sliding beneath his feet as he made his way to the water's edge. This was where he'd found his fossil before. This was where there'd be another.

He scurried forward, moving as quickly as he dared until, without warning, a loose stone went flying and his legs disappeared from beneath him.

Picking himself back up, he wiped his hands on his trousers, brushing off salt and dust, and looked around for his bucket. It

Copyrighted Material

hadn't gone far. But he immediately lost interest when he saw what lay beyond it.

A few metres away, heaped by the water, was a shapeless mass of dark fabric. A dozen gulls were fussing over it, flapping their wings and squawking at each other.

Transfixed, Will took a step forward.

At the sound of his approach, the gulls looked up. One shrieked at him angrily and hopped away. He took another step and one by one the birds all lifted into the air, revealing the scene like a Polaroid pulling gradually into focus.

He heard his dad, calling out for him to stop, but he paid no notice. He was just feet away now. As the gulls dispersed, he saw a shock of matted hair, a pair of wide, unblinking eyes and a pale, outstretched hand.

Rooted to the spot, he opened his mouth, cold air filling his lungs as a piercing scream rose to his lips.

The sound of a metal pan rattling to the floor wrenched Will from the twelve-year-old memory.

With trembling hands, he took an inhaler from inside his dinner jacket, shook it vigorously and drew in a breath. He closed his eyes, taking a moment to ground himself.

He was in Hamlet Hall, standing in the narrow corridor that was tucked away at the back of the hotel. The kitchen was a few short metres to his left, the smell of roasting lamb filling his nostrils. To his right, the muffled sound of a jazz record drifted across the entrance hall from the restaurant.

His eyes still closed, he pulled on the inhaler again.

He remembered that day so vividly, sometimes he could hardly

Copyrighted Material

believe it had been over a decade since it had happened. But it was difficult to forget something you revisited on a daily basis.

The flashbacks came without warning, often without provocation. If ever Will allowed his mind to wander, it seemed always to go straight to that moment on the beach. The moment that had gone on to engulf his entire life. From time to time, there was something just startling enough to tug him away. In school, it might have been a teacher snapping at him for daydreaming in class. At home, his dad grasping him by the shoulder.

This time, it had been Carl, Hamlet Hall's resident chef. He'd been clattering about all evening, using his pots and pans as more of a percussive ensemble than a means to prepare dinner for the guests. Will wondered if one of them might complain about the noise, and his palms began to sweat.

When he'd first asked about staging a murder mystery night at Hamlet Hall – a conversation that had taken him several weeks to muster the courage even to broach – Ian Davies, the hotel's owner, had been deeply sceptical. But after much nervous petitioning from Will, he had finally agreed. If the party was a success, he would make a regular feature out of it. It would become an invaluable way of drawing in the locals outside of tourist season.

It was no secret that he needed the income.

As grand as it was, Hamlet Hall had never been intended as a hotel. The old manor house had stood in Hamlet Wick for three centuries, built as an ancestral home by one of the first Earls of Hamlet when the harbour had been bustling and the adjoining market town one of the finest in Devon. Outside, it still looked the part. The first impression guests would receive

Copyrighted Material

was of the great oak doors, ivy creeping up stone walls and broad bay windows that looked out towards the Bristol Channel. It boasted ambience; promised comfort and luxury.

But a glance at Tripadvisor suggested that, for many guests, the fantasy ended there. Much of the stonework needed restoring, the wood panelling had dulled and the rooms lacked double-glazing. There were more functional complaints too: reports of faulty coffee machines, intermittent Wi-Fi – that is, for those who managed to access it at all – and rooms' worth of furniture that badly needed replacing.

In any other profession, Will thought it might be a relief for such criticisms to only need worrying about for half the year. But for a struggling hotel, in a little-known village on England's south-west coast, the almost complete lack of business during the autumn and winter months must have been just as disheartening as the barrage of complaints during the summer.

He'd heard all about Ian's attempts to draw in the locals out of season. There had been afternoon teas. Dance parties. Film nights. As far as Will knew, none had been successful.

All Hamlet Hall could offer that *did* seem to be of any interest was the restaurant. Carl's cooking had quite the reputation among the surrounding villages, but Ian couldn't turn a profit for six months of the year solely by serving Sunday lunches. And so, in a bid to try something different, he had allowed Will to use Hamlet Hall as the venue for his murder mystery party.

When the event was first announced, the ensuing silence had been deafening. A fortnight passed without a jot of interest. Then, miraculously, there'd been registrations. Within a week, they had eight eager participants.

Copyrighted Material

Suddenly enthused, Ian had thrown everything he could at the party. Champagne was being served throughout the evening. Carl had been tasked with preparing a lavish three-course dinner. Rooms were even offered at discounted rates, for any guests who might want to stay the night, although Will noticed most had overlooked that particular offer.

He, meanwhile, had done his best to anticipate every problem they might encounter during the game itself. He'd thought of contingencies for a guest not attending, for the clues proving too difficult to find or an actor forgetting the prompts and instructions that would keep the mystery on track.

One thing he hadn't counted on was Carl making so much noise in the kitchen that it risked completely shattering the atmosphere.

As Will's panic at the thought of a guest complaining increased, a door opened to his side, causing him to jump. Realising that the sudden movement had only been Ian emerging from his office did not put him at ease.

During the weeks they'd spent organising the party, Will had never seen Ian bear any expression other than a frown. Set beneath a receding ginger hairline, on a square, flushed face, the creases on his brow seemed to be fixed in place, as if they'd been etched into an angry lump of clay. But at the sight of Will hovering in the corridor, that frown became as severe as he'd ever seen it.

'I just stepped away to meet the actress,' Will explained hurriedly. 'She wanted a glass of water before she joined Jack and Theo in the lounge.'

Ian murmured something that, for the most part, was

Copyrighted Material

unintelligible, although Will was fairly sure he'd caught the word 'useless' towards the end. Then he yanked the office door shut and strode into the entrance hall.

Will didn't follow straight away. Instead, he raised the inhaler a final time. Screwing his eyes shut, he breathed deeply.

He needed to be calm. To be in control.

Stuffing the inhaler back inside his dinner jacket, he hurried after Ian, shoes clicking on the tiled floor as he crossed the hall.

The music rang out even clearer as they stepped into the restaurant, Frank Sinatra's silky tones bouncing from the wood-panelled walls. Despite his growing nerves, the sight of the room caused Will to glow with pride.

He and Ian had spent the afternoon arranging the furniture, creating one long table that was now perfectly laid with sparkling glassware and gleaming cutlery. The fire was lit, crackling beneath an enormous portrait of the first Earl of Hamlet, while Will's gramophone stood proudly on an oak sideboard, beside an ornate drinks globe. Even the stag's head mounted above the door, which had been described in some of Hamlet Hall's most critical reviews as tacky, had an air of nobility to it. They'd adorned the place with a few props, too, just to drive home the evening's theme. A string of black and white tassels was draped over the sideboard, the table's ironed napkins swapped out for glittery gold serviettes. Ian had dug out a few brass candlesticks and Will had even managed to bring along an antique magnifying glass from the shop.

It didn't take long, though, for the pride to dwindle, and for his nerves to once again make themselves known.

To see people signing up had done wonders for Ian's attitude

Copyrighted Material

towards the party. Head of the local tourist board Gwen Holloway's attendance had been cause for celebration, while an email from the *Herald*, outlining their plans to send a reporter, had even prompted a hint of a smile.

People were interested. The fee of fifty pounds per head seemed not to have been balked at, and if all went well, the party could be replicated, with larger groups and more lavish menus. Throw in some breakfast the following morning and guests might even come from the surrounding villages, if they could be persuaded to stay the night. In short, Ian's dream of a regular, out-of-season event finally seemed on the cusp of being realised.

But when Nigel and Sylvia Cobb added their names to the guest list, Will had worried that Ian might call the entire night off.

Everyone in Hamlet knew that Nigel was working on Damien White's project at the lighthouse. Just as they all knew about Edward Finn's petition to see it cancelled and how White had effectively stolen the planning permission from Gwen. More than that, however, everyone knew what the lighthouse *meant*. It was more than a piece of history; it was the site of a wound from which many would agree Hamlet had never recovered. After it had stood derelict for more than twenty years, rusting and crumbling as it loomed over Hamlet Wick, Gwen had been the one to finally step in. To try to transform it, and create something that would honour the tragedy it represented.

That is, until Damien White had returned – until he'd snatched the place from under Gwen's nose and recruited Nigel Cobb to carry out his work. If you'd asked Will, he'd have said

Copyrighted Material

that having the Cobbs spend an evening with the Finns and the Holloways was like tossing dynamite onto a bonfire.

But of course, Ian wouldn't cancel. Not when this had been his first successful attempt to draw in the locals. The only option was to persevere; to keep a tight rein on the guests and do everything possible to keep the conversation away from the lighthouse.

For the time being, at least, they had remained civil. Carl had mixed a few cocktails that were supposedly popular during the roaring twenties, and the group now milled around the fireplace, sipping at Sidecars and Singapore Slings. Edward Finn was casting a poisonous glare at Nigel, who seemed to be doing all he could to pretend he hadn't noticed, but no unpleasantries had yet been exchanged. From his vantage point in the doorway, Will heard Gwen make a joke, prompting Sylvia to guffaw, all lipstick and gleaming teeth.

'Don't leave them again,' said Ian. 'They're behaving for now but we need to be careful.'

Will nodded, deciding it wouldn't do him any favours to point out that he had only left the group in the first place because while Ian was in his office, there had been nobody else to greet the actress. 'What about the final couple?' he asked.

'No sign of them. We can wait a little longer, but we might have to serve the starters without them if they don't arrive soon.'

'Have they got far to come?'

'They wanted rooms, so I suppose so. And it isn't a couple. It's a young woman and her father.' He fixed Will with a stern look. 'Is everything else ready?'

Will nodded again, forcing as much confidence into his voice as he could muster. 'The clues are in place, the letters are on the

Copyrighted Material

dinner table and the actors all seem happy. They'll wait in the lounge, just as you wanted.'

Ian let out a long breath and looked again at the guests. 'We just need to get through dinner. Once the game begins and we can split them all up, we should be in the clear.'

The sound of more clattering echoed from the kitchen.

'For Christ's sake.' Ian glared into the hallway. 'Stay here. Keep a close eye on them, and if it looks like someone might even *think* about that lighthouse, change the subject.'

'How should I do that?'

'Think of something! Ask if they want more drinks. Tell them a joke. Do whatever you need to; just make sure they're talking about something – *anything* – else.'

Before Will could reply, Ian hurried from the restaurant.

He understood why Ian was so nervous. With the *Herald* on hand to see any potential falling out between the guests, the pressure was most definitely on. But Ian wasn't the only one eager for the party to be a success. Nor was he the only one feeling uncomfortable about who had chosen to attend.

Will risked a glance towards the fireplace, where Hugh Holloway was hovering at Gwen's shoulder, sipping an Old-Fashioned while he made what looked like some painfully uncomfortable small talk with Nigel Cobb.

Will's greatest fear, *much* greater than a fight over the lighthouse, was that the guests might see through the mystery he'd prepared. That they'd spot the hidden purpose he'd buried among the clues, unbeknownst even to Ian.

If one of them saw through it . . . If *Hugh* happened to realise . . .

Copyrighted Material

He tucked his hands into his pockets, to hide that they were trembling.

That day alone he'd relived the morning on the beach four times already. Four times he'd heard the shrieking of the gulls, seen the bulging eyes and felt the scream upon his lips.

It was a last resort. He knew that much. And if it didn't work, he had no clue where he'd turn next. But if the game went the way he hoped, then perhaps the party would be where he finally rid himself of it. Perhaps, when this evening was through, he would be free.

His chest tightening, he fetched the inhaler from his pocket again and took another pull. Then he straightened up, adopted the most confident expression he could manage and made for the guests.

2



‘So, now I teach.’

In the lounge, Theo Bloom looked up from his script.

Upon discovering that the actress Will had recruited to play the maid looked to be somewhere in her forties, and was therefore much closer to his own age, Jack Marshall seemed to have completely forgotten his earlier suggestion that she might make good girlfriend material for nineteen-year-old Theo. This wasn’t something that Theo would usually have been upset by. He might actually have been glad, if Claire, the actress, didn’t look quite so uncomfortable about being the focus of Jack’s attention.

A dozen armchairs of various sizes, patterns and states of decay were dotted around the lounge. And yet, Jack had insisted she sit beside him, on a padded green sofa. Clutching a champagne flute, he angled himself towards her, the leather squeaking as he wriggled his behind into a comfortable position.

Claire, meanwhile, sat with her hands planted firmly on her knees. With the plain dress she wore for her role as the maid, and her dark hair tied neatly behind her head, she looked as if she were posing for a Victorian photograph.

Copyrighted Material