

Character List

- Sabine Powys*, wealthy widowed owner of Mitras Castle
Asa Powys, Sabine's late husband
Lucy Ripley, companion and a cousin of Sabine's father, Perry Mordue
Nigel Ripley, her older brother, a bachelor antiquarian bookseller
Xan Fellowes, historian and biographer, Sabine's godson
Olive Melling, née Powys, Asa's second cousin
Frank Melling, her husband, a semi-retired cosmetic surgeon
Dominic Melling, their son, a dentist
Nancy Kane, academic turned vicar, now retired
Timothy Makepeace, family solicitor and old friend
Sophie, his divorced granddaughter, now living with him
Maria, housekeeper at Mitras Castle
Andy, Maria's husband, was the gardener at Mitras Castle
Dido Jones, owner of Heavenly Houseparties
Henry, Dido's business partner and friend
Paul and Celia Sedley Jones, Dido's grandparents



Prologue

The Die Is Cast

Mitras Castle

Early November 2018

Winter comes early to the remote uplands of Northumberland, where the remaining grey stones of the plundered Roman Wall cling like a straight, ragged-edged grey ribbon across the irregular landscape, punctuated at intervals by a series of half-excavated forts with adjoining visitor centres.

By October, the sound of curlews calling high above in a clear blue sky, the blowing wildflowers and the contented bleating of sheep are but very distant memories, as are the voices of the hikers and tourists. Many of those visitors thought what a lovely spot this must be to live in and how lucky the local inhabitants were, although they might just have changed their minds if they saw it as it was now, when winter's icy fingers were trying to throttle the life out of it and it seemed improbable that spring would ever manage to pry them loose.

Rowenhead, a few low stone cottages and the remains of a small Roman fort, was hunkered down below the ancient wall, divided from it by a narrow, meandering tarmac road. There

was a neat, square lodge and a pair of crumbling, eagle-topped gateposts, guarding the dark maw of a drive that vanished down through woodlands to the hidden splendours of Mitras Castle.

Earlier that day, a small red sports car had emerged from it on to the road and sped off in the direction of Newcastle, like a bright bead sliding along a greased grey string.

Now, under the heavy sky, the car was returning, swooping down through the tunnel of trees and coming to a halt on the sweep of gravel before the tall, battlemented wing that had been grafted on to the original old manor house, like a large baroque chunk of grit adhering to a grey pearl.

The house stood at the head of a deep, narrow, tree-lined valley, looking down across its sweep of lawn on to the sheltered terraces below, through which a stream ran, burbled and fell in a series of small waterfalls and pools. Far below, where it spread into a lake, was the verdigris-patinated domed top of a summerhouse.

Home, thought Sabine Powys, levering herself from the driver's seat, something that had never caused her any difficulty until recently, when her traitorous body had started to betray her.

She was a tall, thin and elderly woman, with a brittle cloud of pale golden hair and a face boldly made up in the style of her youth, with dark arched eyebrows and bright pink lips. She'd never been truly beautiful, but managed to give the impression of it, one that still lingered, along with the ghost of a slightly raffish charm.

Nearly a century ago, a whole colony of small, glossy creatures had been sacrificed to make the long, sleek fur coat she wore, but although she was fond of animals, the fact that it was so old and had also belonged to her beloved mother meant this caused her no qualms.

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She was not a very sentimental or over-sensitive woman, although charm could ooze from every pore at the flick of an inner switch and she had always been the life and soul of any party . . . until Asa had died six years ago and most of her life and soul had gone with him.

Maria, looking down at her employer from the first-floor landing window of the tower, turned and scuttled through to the old house and down the stairs to the Garden Hall, where she whipped her coat off a peg and let herself out, closing the door behind her with a click of the lock. Then she hurried off round the back of the house and up the drive, making for her own cottage next to the entrance gates.

Mrs Powys would not be pleased to find her note, informing her she'd left a pan of soup and a lamb casserole ready to be heated up for dinner, with a cold dessert in the fridge.

Usually at times like this, when there was no live-in household help to be had, she stayed to serve the meal before going home, leaving it to Lucy Ripley, that poor excuse of a woman who called Mrs Powys cousin, to clear and stack the dishwasher, then make the coffee. But now that Maria's husband, Andy, had had a stroke, things were different. Her priorities had entirely changed.

She'd explained to Mrs Powys this morning that she wouldn't be able to carry on working her usual hours for the foreseeable future . . . and perhaps ever again. It was, she had told her, in the hands of God.

Then she'd stood listening with downcast dark eyes and in stubborn silence to Mrs Powys's reply, for there was no point in trying to persuade her Lady that her comfort and convenience was no longer Maria's priority or that, once Andy was back at the cottage, she would not be able to resume her usual duties.

The cottage was rent free and she and Andy received generous

salaries. Maria was grateful for these and many other perks – like the soft red cashmere coat she was wearing, which Mrs Powys had decided didn't suit her.

But right now, none of that seemed as important as driving to the hospital to sit with her husband for as long as they would let her stay, before returning, late and weary, to an empty house.

And as she drove nervously along the narrow road (Andy had always done most of the driving, the small Citroën his pride and joy), she wondered briefly where Mrs Powys had been today. It wasn't her day to go to the beauty salon in Hexham, her only regular weekly expedition in winter, weather permitting. Maria might have asked Lucy, but as usual, as soon as Mrs Powys had gone out, Lucy had seized the opportunity to retire to her room with a box of chocolates and one of the romantic novels she was addicted to, with a half-naked man on the cover looking as if he'd been oiled ready for spit-roasting. And since Maria didn't hold much opinion of most men, she thought it would serve him right . . . though her own kind, gentle Andy was different. He was the reason she had remained here all these years, long after her parents had fled back to their native Corfu, unable to cope with the bleakness of winter at the Castle.

Maria, hands clenched on the steering wheel, began to murmur a Greek prayer from her childhood that had lain dormant in her memory, until fear pulled it back to the surface, the words familiar and comforting.

Sabine Powys let her coat and silk scarf fall on to a dark, carved chair in the huge entrance hall, and they slithered, snake-like, on to the tiled floor, with its central mosaic depicting Mithras.

She picked up a pile of letters from a side table, her lips

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tightening when she noticed the folded sheet on top, with her own name written in Maria's familiar hand.

She carried the post into the sitting room, where she switched on the lights against the darkening afternoon. Feeling chilled to the bone by more than the ice-spikes of the wind outside, she suddenly yearned for the comfort of hot tea and a roaring fire in the grate, despite the clanking but efficient old radiators.

She set a light to the laid fire herself, before reading Maria's note, the contents of which weren't a complete surprise, for she had recognized that stubborn expression on her housekeeper's face that morning.

Andy was no longer in danger and would be allowed home long before Christmas, so things should eventually become easier for Maria . . . which was just as well, because she would need her in the coming months . . . But she would have to try to find live-in help again, too, for Lucy had proved a sore disappointment in that respect.

She was not, she told herself, unreasonable, and if the stroke had left Andy unable to carry out his gardening duties, she would pension him off. She could even install a stairlift in the cottage and perhaps an easily accessible shower room, instead of the antiquated bath . . . That would make things easier for them.

Sabine, having thought about it, determined to put those alterations in train tomorrow.

The fire was now glowing and she began to feel better, a little less of the shakiness caused by anger – mostly with her own rebellious body, which was striking off on a path she had not set for it. After that earlier barrage of tests, she'd guessed what the verdict would be . . . but the progression into pain and debility mapped out for her today, the talk of painkillers and

palliative care – no, that she *hadn't* been prepared for. And she wasn't having it.

She liked to be in control of every situation, and now, with new determination, she decided that she *would* damned well stay in control and play her own endgame, not have the consultant's version forced on her.

Going to the door, she shouted impatiently for Lucy, who scuttled in a few minutes later, looking flustered, dishevelled and with a smear of chocolate on one side of her mouth.

She always reminded Sabine of a mouse, with her small face pinched in around a pointed nose, dull brown hair cut into a childish bob and bright, inquisitive dark eyes.

Sabine had never been fond of rodents, with the possible exception of those that formed the fabric of her fur coat.

Lucy's brother, Nigel, who was taller, plumper and more unctuous, was, Sabine thought, more of a glossy water vole – a Mr Ratty.

She really should have smelled a rat when Nigel wrote to her, saying how alone she must feel now and in need of companionship, then hinting that his sister, also alone and out of work, would be glad of a comfortable home. But after all, Sabine thought now, if it was such a good idea, why didn't he have Lucy to live with him in the cottage attached to his antiquarian bookshop in Alnwick?

She must have been mad to have offered Lucy a home in exchange for a little housework and secretarial duties, even if it was almost impossible to get live-in staff any more.

As to companionship, Sabine considered Lucy's intellectual capacity to be on a par with a not-very-bright toddler, and in any case, she was happier dwelling in thoughts of the past now, walking hand in hand with Asa among her happy, sun-filled memories.

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‘Oh, Cousin Sabine, I’m so sorry that I didn’t hear you come in, or I’d—’ Lucy began in a twittery, high-pitched voice even before she was through the door, but Sabine cut her short.

‘Never mind that, Lucy. Fetch me some hot tea – make sure the kettle is boiling this time – and then you’d better do something about dinner. Here, read Maria’s note.’

She thrust the folded paper into Lucy’s hand. ‘She’s bunked off to the hospital to see Andy, but I suppose warming soup and putting a casserole in the oven isn’t beyond your capabilities?’

‘No, of course not,’ Lucy assured her, after scanning the note quickly and then, looking more like a terrified mouse than ever, scurried off towards the kitchen, which was in the Castle’s old wing.

Sabine knew it was more than likely she would allow the soup to boil over, and burn the casserole, but she had more important things to think about now, plans to make . . .

She sat down at a small papier mâché desk and slowly the ideas that had been forming at the back of her mind since that first hospital appointment began to come together in her head: she’d hold one final Christmas house party at the Castle, a gathering of the last distant dregs of her family – and of Asa’s, too, for she’d include his distant cousins, the Mellings, although they hadn’t spoken to her since Asa had died without leaving them anything. In fact, neither he nor Sabine had made a will, feeling somehow that it tempted fate . . .

But now fate had crept up on her and she couldn’t afford to put it off any longer – not when it was the fate of her beloved Mitras Castle at stake.

The house party would help her make up her mind on *that* one . . . with the fall-back option of leaving it, suitably endowed, to the National Trust.

Sabine was very wealthy, having inherited both the house

and a fortune from her mother, the last of the Archbold family who had added the battlemented wing early in the nineteenth century. Her father, Perry Mordue, had left what money he had to her younger half-sister, Faye, thinking that made things fair, though Sabine considered it yet another betrayal, like the way he'd married her mother's nurse so soon after her death.

If *Faye* hadn't died so young, she'd have been next in line to inherit – and, by now, Sabine would definitely have taken steps to ensure that didn't happen.

She pushed the idea of Faye away from her; she was out of the reckoning and would be no more than the ghost at the feast.

Some of the guests she'd invite for Christmas would be more welcome than others. Her godson, dear Xan, must be there; she could see another letter from him among her unopened mail. He wanted to write Asa's biography and she had been putting him off, but now she'd give him the answer he wanted . . . on her own terms.

Lucy crept in with a tea tray, laid it at Sabine's elbow and tiptoed out again, as if hoping to go unnoticed, despite the nervous rattling of the crockery. Sabine poured a cup of Earl Grey, added a dash of milk and then unlocked a little drawer at the back of the desk. Taking out the last report she'd received from a private detective she'd hired, she read it through, frowning.

Her half-sister had run away at seventeen – to America, it transpired – but when she was twenty-one, had returned with an illegitimate child in tow, to claim the money their father had left her.

The family solicitor had informed Sabine, of course, and of the child's subsequent adoption by a relative of Faye's mother.

At the time, Sabine had been curious enough to hire a

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private investigator to provide her with photos of the boy, but he'd proved to be a small, brown-haired and insignificant child. And since in all the following years he'd never contacted her, she'd assumed he either didn't know about the connection, or didn't care.

But after her diagnosis, Sabine had found herself feeling suddenly curious about what he'd made of his life.

The private detective's report had been a bit of a surprise, not only because that nondescript child had become the curator of a large private art collection in California, but because he, in turn, had fathered an illegitimate child of his own . . . another cuckoo in the nest, it seemed, for his adoptive mother to take on.

There had followed some brief details about the life and career of this second child – now a woman in her thirties – and suddenly, Sabine could see how she might weave this particular thread into her pattern, to provide some extra and entirely secret amusement for herself.

Not only that, but it would solve all the difficulties over Maria and of catering for her Christmas house party in one go.

She'd perhaps left it a little late to arrange, but then, she'd always found that there was no problem that couldn't be fixed if you threw enough money at it.

She sat there, sipping tea and plotting, thinking that it would be fun to direct her cast of characters in the way she wanted, like a vintage murder mystery, where everyone was invited to a remote house and then events unfolded.

Of course, in her plot there would be no body in the library, or anywhere else, for Sabine Powys was not about to leave the building just yet.

She took a large pad of heavy cream writing paper from one of the desk pigeon holes, picked up a pen and began to write.

Trisha Ashley

Christmas at the Castle
Cast of Characters

- Sabine Powys, wealthy widowed owner of Mitras Castle
Lucy Ripley, companion and a cousin of Sabine's father,
Perry Mordue
Nigel Ripley, her older brother, a bachelor antiquarian
bookseller
Xan Fellowes, historian and biographer, Sabine's godson
Olive Melling, née Powys, Asa's second cousin
Frank Melling, her husband, a semi-retired cosmetic
surgeon
Dominic Melling, their son, a dentist

Sabine's pen paused here. A dentist didn't sound quite the thing for her cast list, even if he did only take private patients and called himself by some fancy name – 'cosmetic orthodontist', was it?

To leaven the mix, she added the name of her oldest – indeed, only – close friend:

Nancy Kane, academic turned vicar, now retired

She put down her pen and looked over what she'd written. They would be eight for Christmas dinner if everyone accepted her invitation, and she'd be very surprised if they did not.

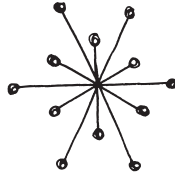
There might even be another guest or two, for now she came to think of it, she would need to consult her solicitor at some point soon, so why not invite him to join the house party? He and Asa had been old friends, after all. She remembered that his divorced granddaughter had recently gone to live with him, and included her, too. Along with Dominic Melling, she would supply some younger company for Xan.

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Timothy Makepeace, family solicitor and old friend
Sophie, his divorced granddaughter, now living with him

She laid down the pen with finality, feeling suddenly tired.

But as Scarlett O'Hara (a heroine she rather admired, except for her obsession with the milky Ashley) said at the end of *Gone with the Wind*, tomorrow was another day.



1

Disconnected

Dido

27 November

I flew across to California to spend my annual pre-Christmas week with my father, though it has to be admitted that he wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't. Dad was both absent-minded and unpaternal to the point of forgetting my existence, unless I actually appeared under his nose, the evidence of his brief lapse from the pursuit of academia some thirty-five years before.

My ex-fiancé, Liam, suggested in his parting letter that the lack of any paternal figure in my life was a big part of my problem . . . though actually, I didn't *have* any problems until that point, when he ran off with Mia, so I'd no idea what he meant by that.

My father, Thomas, was of medium height, stooping and scholarly, with a narrow, beaky face that looked as if it might once have been slammed shut inside a large book, possibly his own, *The Cautious Conservator: An argument against excessive restoration*.

That was hardly a runaway bestseller, but at least the fact

that it was now in its sixth edition showed it was a valuable resource in his own rather rarefied field.

On my arrival, he seemed mildly pleased to see me, once he'd got over the surprise. Luckily, he must have told his employer about my email announcing my arrival date before it went out of his head, because a long, lush limo met me at the airport and whisked me to the mansion where Thomas both lived and worked: he had a small cottage in the grounds. He was in charge of an extensive private art collection, which had its own gallery wing attached to the main house, most of it underground, iceberg fashion.

At night, I often wondered whether I was sleeping over a Matisse, or possibly a cubist Picasso, which might account for my often fractured dreams when I was staying there. I don't think it can have been subterranean surrealism, though, which would have given me proper nightmares.

Dad was also surprised to be reminded that Granny Celia and her friend, Dora, were somewhere in the middle of their latest long cruise, even though I could see a series of bright postcards propped along the mantelpiece, probably put there by one of the housekeeping staff, who came down to the cottage daily, like invisible house elves, while he was at the gallery.

Granny – Celia Sedley Jones – adopted Thomas, the illegitimate son of a distant relative, when he was a small child, and when I came along in my turn she became my guardian: dumping your inconvenient offspring on Celia seemed to have become a family habit. I called her Granny, anyway, my other one, Dad's birth mother, having died not long after depositing her cuckoo in Celia's nest.

My family, or what little of it there was, was not so much dysfunctional as dislocated.

My stay with Dad was as uneventful as usual, but pleasant.

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I had a tour of the gallery and saw the latest acquisitions, was invited to dinner twice with the millionaire owner of all those hidden treasures and a young wife I hadn't seen before, also presumably recently acquired.

Other than that, we saw something of Dad's friends from the university, where he was occasionally persuaded to give a lecture, and with whose family he always spent Christmas Day. They collected him – he'd have forgotten what day it was, otherwise.

They had a large family and I'd spent a lot of time with them when I was younger, learning to surf and skateboard, getting a California tan in the process. It was good catching up with them again and hearing the latest news.

In fact, it was a very relaxing break, apart from the long flight home again, which as usual rendered me spaced out with jet lag and rattling with airline peanuts and pretzels. It always took me a day and night to adjust my vision from warmly glorious Californian Technicolor, to monochrome, dark and drippy November in Cheshire.

Still, the thought that Christmas was on the horizon was very consoling because soon Henry and I would be off to provide seasonal cooking, comfort and cheer to one of our regular clients, and too busy working to even notice what the weather outside was doing.

Henry was both my business partner and my best friend – or one of them, since I also had Charlotte, even if I only now saw her very infrequently.

Henry and I, on the other hand, couldn't *miss* seeing each other, since we occupied twin lodges on either side of the gated drive to Cranberry Chase, a bijou Queen Anne des res that belonged to a distant relative of his. His family were cash-strapped, but had a wealth of rich and posh connections.

So there we were: Henry was the Grace and I was the Favour, which is why *he* had the lodge with the large extension on the back and all mod cons, while mine was the original box, though with the outside loo and coalhouse now knocked through into a tiny bathroom. It had the kind of shower cubicle you need to stand in with your elbows clamped to your sides, feeling as if at any moment you might be sucked up a force-beam to a starship, starkers and slippery as an eel with soap.

Henry had filled my fridge with fresh food and drink before my return, but then left me alone to recover. But as usual, by the next morning I was more or less back in my right mind and ready for action.

This was just as well, because as I was finishing my second round of buttered toast and Marmite, he sent me a text:

Disaster, darling! Come quickly – I'll put the coffee on!

I wasn't unduly worried by this, because he's such a drama queen – it's his way of making life exciting and squeezing the last drop of enjoyment out of everything.

We run our business, Heavenly Houseparties, from the huge kitchen extension at the back of his lodge, where there's plenty of room to spread out the paperwork on the pine table and stick up the charts of our bookings – *and* our projected absences, during which we both had other fish to fry – so I texted back that I was on my way and headed over.

Henry kissed me on both cheeks rather distractedly and exclaimed, in a voice of sepulchral doom: 'You have come!'

Then he led the way into the kitchen, where he handed me a large mug of coffee.

'Though given the bad news, it ought to be a stiff gin and

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tonic!' he said, in more natural tones, but since he wasn't looking desperately worried, I assumed the problem wasn't life or death.

Henry had curling, rose-gold hair, pink cheeks and round, bright blue eyes, so he looked like a Botticelli cherub with attitude . . . until you noticed the short, square, muscular, rugby-playing physique. His curls were currently dishevelled from having agitated fingers raked through them, but he stopped now after suddenly catching sight of himself in the mirror and asked if I thought it was a good look.

'No, people will simply think you've forgotten to brush your hair,' I said, taking a gulp of good coffee. 'And I couldn't have drunk alcohol anyway, because I'll have to drive over to Granny's house in a bit, to make sure Mrs Frant has watered the succulents this week. It's a pity Granny couldn't take them on the cruise with her, because she does fret about them.'

Henry abandoned the mirror and plumped down opposite me. 'Don't you want to know what the bad news is?'

'You haven't had a single date from that upmarket dating site you paid so much money to join, while I've been away?' I guessed.

'No, it isn't that . . . though actually, I haven't had a single bite yet, you're quite right,' he said. 'But this is *business* bad: Lady B has done a Grinch and cancelled Christmas!'

'What, Lady Bugle has cancelled her booking?' I exclaimed, astounded, because we'd catered for her Christmas house parties for four years running.

'Tootled her tin trumpet and toddled off,' agreed Henry. 'I thought she was as good as money in the bank.'

You certainly *needed* a lot of money to afford the services of Heavenly Houseparties – 'complete, carefree house party catering: from a weekend to a month' – and especially the Christmas bookings, which came at a premium.

‘Why?’ I demanded. ‘I mean, it’s nearly the end of November, a bit late in the day for her to cancel, or for *us* to find another gig.’

‘Family illness, apparently. You can’t really argue with that, and she said she wasn’t expecting her deposit back.’

I sighed. ‘It must be serious then, because even though she’s *loaded*, she always expects her money’s worth out of us, and more, doesn’t she?’

We did work very hard for our money, though: we cooked, served, tidied, made beds and generally took the stress out of house parties (Henry even did a very grand butler, if the host was out to impress), but it’s surprising how many of our clients seemed to expect us to do all the cleaning and provide twenty-four-hour room service, too.

‘She only told me yesterday, so I suppose I’d better change our availability on the website,’ Henry said. ‘I could try contacting people who enquired about a Christmas booking and were turned away, I suppose. There was that woman quite recently who was very pressing and didn’t want to take no for an answer.’

‘They’ve probably all made alternative arrangements by now,’ I said rather gloomily. Our Christmas booking is so lucrative we don’t have to take another one till Easter.

‘It gets even worse, Dido,’ Henry said. ‘If I’m not away working, Mummy will force me to join the annual family gathering instead, and apart from feeling I’d rather be shut into a small walled town rife with bubonic plague, I simply can’t afford all those presents.’

‘I suppose that’s the drawback with having so many richer relatives,’ I said, and of course, *we’d* be much richer if we worked for most of the year, and not just a few selected weeks of it. But we preferred to earn just enough to keep us during

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our precious time off, when Henry worked on his increasingly popular blog and I wrote my recipe and reminiscence books.

It was a way of life that had worked well for us both for ten years now.

‘Well, Granny Celia and Dora will still be away and I’ve just seen Dad, so if we don’t get a booking I won’t have anywhere else to go.’

‘You could come to the gathering of the clan with me,’ suggested Henry.

I shuddered, remembering the year I’d tried that, before the business took off. ‘No, thank you. I’m still traumatized by the experience of dancing the Gay Gordons with your cousin Hector.’

‘He’s very *hearty*,’ he agreed, which was one way of putting it.

‘We could simply both stay at home over Christmas and pretend we’re away,’ I pointed out, and he brightened slightly.

‘Of course, Mummy would find out eventually, but by then it would be too late. We could overindulge in the eating and drinking, play Scrabble and watch old films back-to-back.’

If those were the Interests he’d listed on that dating site, it wasn’t really surprising he hadn’t had any takers . . . though it sounded fun to me.

‘There we are then, we have a contingency plan if we don’t get a last-minute booking,’ I said. ‘We could make up some of the shortfall by taking a spring half-term post, as well as our usual Easter booking next year.’

I got up and stretched – economy aeroplane seats are cramped and not designed for any known human form, especially one six foot tall in her bare flippers, and my spine was still kinked into knots.

‘I’d better leave you to it, Henry, and get over to Great

Mumming to make sure Granny's succulents still *are* succulent. I'll see you later.'

I grew up in Great Mumming, a pleasant small market town in West Lancashire, set where the fertile farmlands start to rise towards the moors. Granny's cottage was right on the edge of it and built from mellow old bricks. The central part dated back to the early 1800s, though it had seen a lot of changes since then.

When Granny and her husband, Paul, had bought it, soon after their marriage, it had been in need of total renovation and they'd worked hard to turn it into a happy family home, completed by the adoption of my father.

I'm very sure that Granny hadn't been expecting to have to start all over again with a newborn – me – when she was widowed and in her late fifties. It was lucky that she and her best friend, Dora, also a widow, had by then decided to pool their resources and share the cottage – and, as it turned out, the childcare.

Mrs Frant, Granny's long-term cleaner, lived in one of a nearby row of terraced houses and kept an eye on the cottage when Granny and Dora were away. Once Dora, who was younger than Granny, had retired from teaching, they could indulge their shared passion for travelling outside the school holidays, so nowadays they seemed to be away more often than they were at home. Luckily they were both well enough off to globetrot – or globe-cruise – to their hearts' content.

Mrs Frant had a major fear of burglars learning about their habits, so popped in and out of the cottage several times a day, opening the curtains in the morning, drawing them at night and making sure the switches that caused random lights to go on and off, like a mini version of the Blackpool Illuminations,

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were still working. She religiously reset the burglar alarm after every visit, too, not just at night.

She refused to let the man who came to do the garden into the house, which was why she was in charge of the row of huge, tree-like succulents in the conservatory, though unfortunately, she didn't have green fingers.

As soon as I'd got there and turned off the alarm, I checked on them, but they looked fine to me, and the heating was kept on a low setting, so they never got too cold.

Everything in the cottage was dusted and polished immaculately, the air smelling of lavender, beeswax and, indefinably, *home*: I might always have felt like a giant and inconvenient cuckoo in the nest, but there had been a place for me there.

The mahogany wall clock ticked, the old floorboards creaked and sighed, and, apart from the pile of post on a small gateleg table in the hall, you would have thought the owners had just stepped out for a walk, rather than being afloat on a far-flung ocean, cocktail of the day in hand.

I noticed one of the kitchen taps had begun to drip, so I changed the old-fashioned rubber washer before it became any worse – I'm nothing if not practical – then went through the post, tossing the junk in the recycling bin and putting anything else in the bureau. Granny and Dora preferred not to be bothered while on their travels, unless it was something really urgent. There was nothing else to do, so I'd put my coat back on and headed for the door when, with perfect timing, Mrs Frant arrived and insisted on setting the burglar alarm for me, as if I'd never done it before.

As we walked down the path, I told her our Christmas booking had fallen through so I might be able to come over occasionally if we didn't manage to get another one, and she said it made no difference to her, she'd be keeping an eye on

the place as usual, Christmas or no Christmas, but to let her know.

‘I will, and I’ll be here again next week anyway, whatever happens,’ I promised. I had her Christmas present from Granny Celia and Dora to leave in the cottage, along with one from me, and all our cards.

We stood at the gate for a few minutes while Mrs Frant filled me in on the local gossip, then she toddled off home, her grey curls bobbing and her long tweedy cape flapping, looking just like Margaret Rutherford in a Miss Marple film.

Henry’s predilection for old movies had permanently warped my subconscious.

Time was getting on and I suddenly decided to treat myself to lunch at the café in the town square before going home. I’d only just parked and got out, when I spotted Liam, my loathly ex-fiancé, pushing a monstrous baby buggy along the street, in which were the twins, side by side, and a toddler seated above and behind them – followed by a very pregnant Mia. She had to walk behind, because the ginormous buggy took up most of the pavement. I knew they had an older child, too, presumably at school.

The noise from two screaming infants and a toddler who was having a tantrum was clearly audible even after I’d flung myself back in the car and closed the door. Liam and Mia both looked harassed, but I knew from previous inadvertent encounters that, on sight of me, those expressions would immediately switch to a strange mix of defiant guilt and smug domestic bliss. If fecundity was an Olympic sport, they’d both be wearing gold medals.

This was extremely irritating, for although their double betrayal – Mia had been a friend – had hurt at the time, it seemed now as if it had happened to someone else. I was only

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avoiding them because it was annoying they thought I still cared, or envied them.

I bent my head down as if I'd dropped my keys on the floor, then as soon as the wailing receded, I sat up again. I'd gone right off the idea of lunch now and was just about to start the car and head home, when my phone burst into that mad xylophone thing that I'm always meaning to change. It was Henry.

'You'll never believe this, Dido, but not ten minutes after I changed our Christmas availability on the website, we had a new booking. Haven't you always *yearned* to spend December in a castle in Northumberland?'

'Frankly, *no*. It's bleak as hell up there in winter,' I told him, shivering, but he was too jubilant to listen.

'Come home, darling, all is forgiven!' he said, then rang off.

Sabine

I spent a satisfactory morning, securing the services of Heavenly Houseparties and discussing the arrangements with a young man who, of course, had no idea that I'd bought off his former client, Lady Bugle!

After that, it was necessary to put Lucy in the picture about both my illness and my plans, even if not the *entire* picture, but a rather washy watercolour version.

After lunch, I explained that I'd recently seen a hospital consultant and knew that I wasn't long for this world, a saccharine euphemism I despised, but which I knew would resonate with her.

I allowed her to run the full gamut of her emotions, from blank incomprehension, via shocked surprise, to lachrymose sympathy, but once she'd reached the stage of emitting faint moans and wringing her thin hands, like an actress in a cut-price *Macbeth* production, I finally snapped.

'Oh, never mind all that, Lucy! I hate fuss.'

'But it's so dreadful!' Lucy wailed. 'What are you going to *do*?'

'Well, *die*, obviously, though not just yet,' I said tartly. 'First, I need to put my affairs in order and make a will, once I've

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decided what will best secure the future of Mitras Castle. And to that end,' I continued, 'I've decided to hold one last Christmas house party and invite all the family . . . or what's left of it. I want to look them over, before I finally make up my mind.'

Lucy gazed at me, her mouth half open, and then surprised me by blurting out: 'But Nigel and I are your *only* relatives, aren't we? I mean, we're your father's cousins!'

'Second cousins,' I agreed.

'Nigel says that if Faye was still alive, or had married and had children, things would be different . . .' Lucy began revealingly, then tailed off, for the name of my half-sister is not usually uttered aloud in this house.

'That's immaterial, because she didn't,' I snapped, reflecting that Lucy wasn't quite as stupid as she looked, and also that it sounded as if she and her brother had already been anticipating their eventual inheritance.

'In any case, the question of who inherits as my nearest relative only applies if I die without making a will, and I've no intention of doing so.'

'No, Cousin Sabine,' she agreed meekly. 'But there *aren't* any other close relatives, are there?'

'No. When I came to think about it, I realized the direct line had dwindled almost entirely away. But of course, there's Olive Melling, Asa's second cousin.'

'But . . . Cousin Sabine! Surely you'd prefer Mitras Castle to descend in your own family, rather than your late husband's?'

'Since you and Nigel are related to my father, a Mordue, rather than from my mother, whose family built the Castle, that doesn't really seem to make much difference,' I said. 'The Mellings have a son, too, and I do want to ensure there will be some continuity of ownership in the Castle's future.'

Of course, I had no real idea of leaving the Castle to the Mellings, but Lucy rose to the bait beautifully.

‘Nigel might still get married,’ she said quickly.

‘As far as I can see, he’s wedded to his old books and his amateur theatricals,’ I said. ‘But I’ll have him over, and the Mellings, and I’m sure seeing them all again will help me come to a decision. I’m inviting a couple more people to leaven the mix too. Xan, for instance.’

‘Xan?’ Lucy echoed blankly.

‘Xan Fellowes, my godson – you’ve met him here at past Christmas parties. He was Asa’s godson, as well as mine, and he was very fond of him.’

‘But of course I remember him, because he’s so *very* handsome, just like my idea of a romantic hero!’ she simpered.

I shot her a scornful look; she’s more than old enough to distinguish real life from that found between the pages of the novels she reads.

‘I’ve already invited Xan to spend the month of December with us, because he’s going to write a biography of Asa and needs access to his papers, but the rest of them can just come for Christmas – and you can write the invitations, Lucy.’

I grinned, a little maliciously, I fear. ‘Even the Mellings will come, if I make it sound like an offer they can’t refuse!’

She blinked and then began to count on her fingers. ‘It will be quite a small party, then, Cousin Sabine? Me and Nigel, the three Mellings, Xan . . .’

‘Plus my dear old friend Nancy and also, I hope, my solicitor, Timothy Makepeace, and possibly his granddaughter.’

Lucy began to count all over again. ‘I think that makes . . . ten, including yourself? But do you think Maria will be able to cope with a houseful of guests?’

‘Of course not, but I’ve already thought of that and engaged

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a couple who will live in and take care of the cooking and housekeeping over December. It will mean that Maria can take some time off when Andy returns home, and then she'll be able to come back to work refreshed in the New Year.'

'You've found some live-in staff?' Lucy exclaimed, surprised.

'I have, though only temporary. And I'm sure, Lucy, that *you* will step up to the mark and help make things run smoothly behind the scenes. Another pair of hands, however inept, is always useful.'

'You know I'd work my fingers to the bone for you,' Lucy assured me earnestly, but I reflected that there was so little flesh on them that that wouldn't take very long.



2

Accommodations

I stopped at the supermarket and then returned to my lodge, still feeling somewhat ruffled and also hollow, so I assuaged the howling wolves of hunger before heading over to Henry's to hear all about our new Christmas booking.

I must still have looked a little less than my usual serene and sunny self, because once we were in the kitchen, he asked: 'Are you cross with me for accepting this new Christmas booking without consulting you first, darling?'

He'd automatically switched on the coffee machine and popped in my favourite pod. His glass teapot was on the table, full of some pale green fluid with drowned flowers floating in it, but I'm not a fan of any kind of tea, including those made from random berries, herbs and spices.

'No, of course I'm not!' I assured him. 'We need the booking and we were lucky to get one at all at this late date.'

'Well, something's up, Dido,' he said, putting a mug in front of me. 'What is it, O Queen of Carthage?'

I smiled at this old joke and said wryly, 'You know me too well, Henry, although I'm not *upset*, just a bit . . . unsettled,

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because I saw Liam, Mia and the youngest children in Great Mumming.'

'Oh, right!' he said, light dawning. 'And did they give you pitying looks, before treating you to a demonstration of marital bliss and Happy Families?'

'No, because luckily I saw them before they spotted me. I'd just got out of the car in the market square, so I dived straight back in and hid until they were past. Mia is pregnant again.'

'My God!' he said with feeling. 'Haven't they heard of television and box sets?'

I ignored that. 'They had the twins and the toddler in one enormous kind of two-tier baby buggy that took up the entire width of the pavement, so everyone else got pushed off.'

'People must have thought the circus had come to town,' said Henry.

'It certainly *sounded* like it, because the twins were howling like banshees and the toddler was throwing a roaring tantrum. And I don't think it can be good for a child to turn that shade of dark puce,' I added.

He grinned engagingly. 'Only think, if Liam hadn't suddenly dumped you and taken off with Mia, all that family bliss could have been yours.'

'I know, that was the thought that really unsettled me.'

I shuddered, then took a reviving draught of coffee. 'When Liam and I used to talk about our future lives together, we agreed we only wanted one, or perhaps two, children.'

'These childhood sweetheart things rarely work out long term, Dido. Too claustrophobic.'

'We did spend a lot of time apart after junior school, though, because he went to the local grammar and I went to a small boarding school,' I pointed out. 'After that, I only saw him in

the school holidays . . . when I wasn't staying with Charlotte's family, or in California with Dad. Still, since Liam and I were best friends too, when we met up, it was as though we'd never been apart.'

Except, I suddenly remembered, the summer when I'd turned sixteen when, while staying with Charlotte and her family near Hexham, I'd developed a major adolescent crush on a friend of her brother's . . .

It was over by the time I'd got back to Great Mumming but I'd still felt guilty when I saw Liam again, though also safe and secure: I knew where I was with Liam.

Henry waved this aside with an airy hand. 'But it was never *exciting*, was it? Don't tell me friendship didn't just drift into a relationship, because I wouldn't believe you.'

Since that was exactly how it had been, I said nothing.

'It's only surprising you didn't split up when you went to university, but by the time we all graduated and set off for our road trip, I could see you were drifting apart, even if *you* couldn't. And then, in Avignon, up popped Mia in the middle, a sleek, spoilt little seal, ready to pounce.'

'I suppose we'd sunk into a boring, comfortable rut, but although I knew she'd always fancied him I still didn't see it coming.'

In our second and third years at university, Liam and I had shared a house rented by Mia's rich father, with Henry and his boyfriend, Kieran. We'd all become friends, so that after we graduated, it had seemed like a good idea to travel around Europe together for the summer, all crammed into Henry's battered old Ford estate car. And it *had* been fun, right up until we reached Avignon, which proved to be a bridge too far.

Early one evening, Henry, Kieran and I had gone out to buy food and wine and then, as usual, stopped at a small café for a

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drink on the way home. But when we got back to our digs, the birds had flown, leaving only a brief note of explanation.

‘At the time, you said if it was a film you’d call it: *Abandoned in Avignon: an epic story of love and betrayal*,’ I reminded him.

‘It wasn’t a lucky place for either of us, after Kieran decided to stay on and move in with that waiter,’ Henry said sadly. Then he brightened. ‘Never mind, we still managed to have some good times after that, didn’t we?’

‘We certainly did,’ I agreed, remembering our slow, meandering journey down to the South of France, detouring to look at anything that sounded interesting.

‘And stepping in at the last moment to cater for that big house party at Uncle Rafe’s villa in Antibes, after all the staff walked out, gave us the idea for Heavenly Houseparties,’ Henry reminded me.

‘I still can’t figure out how you came to be distantly related to a prince!’

He shrugged. ‘Foreign princes are two a penny. They pop up in lots of family trees.’

They were unlikely to pop up in mine, even if I’d been able to fill in the gaps and trace it back far enough. I’d never really been interested, though I had sometimes wondered where I’d got my height and fairness from.

‘It was so kind of your uncle Rafe to let us use his name and title to promote our website. I mean, being recommended by a *prince* looks so impressive, it’s no wonder our business took off, even at the prices we charge,’ I said, thinking warmly of Henry’s uncle, who resembled a small, jolly frog attired in full nautical gear, as interpreted by an expensive and exclusive couturier.

‘Yes, the only thing we both lack now is True Lurrve,’ Henry said. ‘I expected both our Mr Rights to put in an appearance

long before this, but it's simply never happened. I've no idea why, since we're both *gorgeous*.'

'Speak for yourself,' I said, because although I'm tall, blonde and leggy, my eyes are an odd shade of duck-egg blue, rather than Henry's limpid cerulean, and also, I have the kind of long, straight nose that only looks good on a Greek statue.

'Maybe in the New Year you'll find someone nice on that new dating site,' I suggested encouragingly. 'I've given up on them. The men I've met so far have all been at least twenty years older than their photographs and a foot shorter than me.'

I'd always specified in my dating profile that I was looking for someone over six foot tall. Ever since I was a student I'd usually worn my hair plaited around my head like a crown, which added another inch or two. It was such an old-fashioned style that I thought it looked pleasantly bizarre, especially when teamed with T-shirt and jeans, or a short shift dress and leggings.

'It's the challenge they can't resist,' Henry said vaguely, pouring out the last of the green liquid from his glass teapot. Then he looked up and said, more briskly, 'I suppose we'd better get back to business – and aren't you *dying* to hear all about our new client?'

'Go on: tell me all,' I said encouragingly, reaching out for Henry's biscuit barrel and finding it full of home-baked madeleines. 'All I know is, it's a castle in Northumberland, so I may have to stock up on Uggs and thermal underwear.'

'I've found out a bit more since Mrs Powys – that's our client – rang me first thing and booked us. She said she was just checking in case of late availability. She certainly picked the right moment!'

'Serendipity,' I agreed. 'Have you sent her the standard contract?'

'Yes, I emailed it to her. We discussed the details of the

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booking in general terms on the phone, but she said I could email for any further information I needed and her cousin, Lucy Ripley, would reply on her behalf – which she already has and she's OK'd the contract.'

'That was fast!'

'There isn't a lot of time to arrange things in,' Henry pointed out. 'Besides, Mrs Powys came across as quite a forceful character.'

I wasn't entirely sure I liked the sound of the persistent and forceful Mrs Powys . . .

'I don't suppose you'll have time to go up and check the place out, so a contact will be useful,' I said, because normally with a new client Henry would pay an advance visit to see what the kitchen arrangements were like, and inspect the staff accommodation, which was frequently something our employers overlooked. Perhaps they assumed we just slept hanging from the rafters, like bats, for a few brief hours between duties. It also gave him an opportunity to settle the finer details of what, exactly, they needed – or expected – from us. The rules of engagement, as it were.

'No, there certainly won't be time to visit first, and it's a very long drive,' he agreed. 'This time I'll find out everything we need by email. I've already discovered quite a bit of background information about the venue, too: Mitras Castle *isn't* a real castle, it's just called that. And it's near the Roman Wall.'

'Have you been googling it?'

'Of course! But there isn't a huge amount of information to be had, because it's a private residence.'

He flipped open his laptop and turned it to show me a view of an old stone manor house on to which had been grafted a battlemented wing, like a giant turret, set against a dark backdrop of trees.

I frowned over it. ‘It looks *vaguely* familiar. I know the area quite well because when I used to stay with Charlotte’s family near Hexham in the school hols, we often visited the Roman Wall, but I can’t have been to Mitras Castle if it’s never open to the public.’

‘Rowenhead Roman Fort is right next to it, though, so you might have glimpsed it from there,’ he suggested, and I agreed that that was probably it.

‘We visited the remains of a lot of forts; they’re dotted right along the wall.’

‘The Rowenhead one is run by a trust, but the land belongs to the family at Mitras Castle,’ he said.

‘Who *are* the family, other than this Mrs Powys?’

‘Mrs *Sabine* Powys, and she’s an elderly widow with no children.’

‘Did she tell you that, or was it more internet snooping?’

‘Internet *research*,’ he said with dignity. ‘And very interesting it was, too.’

He moved round to sit next to me, the laptop between us.

‘When I googled her name, a whole load of stuff came up about her and her husband, Asa Powys. Apparently, they were pioneers of marine archaeology way back in the late fifties, early sixties. They made several hugely popular TV documentary series.’

‘Just a little before our time,’ I pointed out, though I was interested.

‘It certainly was, but there are some clips of them on YouTube.’

His fingers moved on the keys and then he turned on the sound.

A deep voice intoned portentously: ‘Together with their photographer, Tommy Fellowes, and the trusty crew of the

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good ship *Artemis*, Asa and Sabine Powys once more set sail to explore the lost underwater civilizations that lie concealed beneath the azure waters of the Aegean Sea.’

The film showed a tall couple, presumably Asa and Sabine, standing in the prow of a boat, gazing out to sea. Even captured in this old footage, they looked vibrantly glowing and alive. The man was dressed only in shorts, showing a well-muscled torso, and his arm was around his wife, who was laughing. A breeze was blowing their blond hair back from their tanned faces.

There was some underwater footage, too, where they were exploring a fallen statue of huge proportions, almost concealed by the sand, while fish flicked past, disinterestedly.

‘I didn’t know they had scuba gear back then,’ I said.

‘I think they called them aqualungs at the time, Dido. I found an obituary for Asa Powys with loads of info. He was a lot older than she was, but he only died a few years ago. I’ll email you the links to the interesting stuff later, if you like?’

‘OK,’ I agreed. ‘But although it’s fascinating to know that our client has had an interesting past, I’m more concerned right now with the present and the details of our booking – like, when do we start and how long is it for?’

‘Well, that’s the thing,’ Henry said, slightly shiftily. ‘She’s booked us for four weeks, from December the third.’

I stared at him for a moment, then exclaimed, ‘But that’s less than a week away! She’s not holding a Christmas house party for a *month*, is she?’

While we often had longer bookings during the summer holidays, Christmas ones were usually confined to a week, at most.

A thought struck me: ‘She knows she’ll be charged the Christmas rate for the entire month, doesn’t she?’

‘Yes, I made that clear on the phone, before I accepted the

booking and she didn't quibble about it at all,' he assured me. 'She said her health was declining and she wanted to hold one last family gathering, with most of the guests arriving only a few days before Christmas.'

'How many guests?' I demanded.

'She thought a maximum of ten for Christmas dinner, including the household, which is usually just herself and this cousin.'

'That doesn't sound too bad. But why on earth does she want us so early, when it's only going to be the two of them in the house?'

'One guest will already be there when we arrive. He's a biographer, writing the life of Asa Powys.'

'That's still only three people. How does she usually manage?'

'She told me she had a daily cook/housekeeper, but due to illness in her family she can't work her usual hours at the moment. It doesn't sound as if she'd be up to cooking for a large house party anyway.'

'Did she tell you that on the phone?'

'No, I gleaned most of that from the emails in answer to mine from this cousin, Lucy. There's a weekly cleaning and laundry service too, so they're not going to expect us to do all the housework.'

'Just as well!' I said. 'I suppose if she wants to pay through the nose for us to look after just the three of them, that's up to her and we'll have lots of time to settle in before the other guests arrive and the festivities commence.'

I do enjoy organizing a good Christmas party and making sure everyone has a wonderful time, and good food plays a large part in that. There would be no damp, limp sprouts, dried-out turkey or instant gravy coming out of *my* kitchen. Henry, too, is adept at making sure there's enough alcohol

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flowing to oil the wheels of conversation and jollity, without derailing it.

‘It’s going to be chilly up there, so I hope the Castle has good central heating,’ Henry said. ‘I forgot to ask about that!’

‘So do I! Do you remember when we did that Christmas gig in the Highlands and the heating didn’t get as far as the kitchen or servants’ quarters?’

‘We’d better pack the down duvets and our thermals, just in case,’ he suggested. ‘And we’ll have to get a move on, if we’re going to be ready in time.’

‘We certainly will. There’s such a lot to do first and then the van to pack.’

We liked to be prepared for any eventuality . . . or emergency.

‘I expect we’ll have loads of time off before the rest of the guests arrive,’ Henry said optimistically, considering how much Mrs Powys would be paying for our services, ‘but we can chill, watch films and relax before we run ourselves ragged providing the Christmas cheer. And if it’s going to be really cold up there, I’ll put my snowboard in, just in case.’

‘I think that’s a bit *too* optimistic, Henry. It sounds to me as if Mrs Powys is the sort of woman who wants her money’s worth, like Lady Bugle, and will keep trying to add jobs to our workload, or sneakily tell the cleaning service not to come and expect us to do all that, too.’

These were all things that had happened more than once in the past.

‘Or she’ll expect us to look after the children as well,’ I continued, ‘like that ghastly couple in Hampshire a few years back.’

‘I like children, but I couldn’t eat a *whole* one,’ said Henry absently, smoothing the sleeves of his pale blue cashmere jumper over the cuffs of his Tattersall-check shirt. His sartorial style varies wildly between Hooray Henry and rather grungy

Trisha Ashley

teenage snowboarder. This seems to fascinate the followers of his very popular blog, Rudge the Roamer.

The tea cosy was lying within reach so I threw it at him, but he caught it and jammed it over his curls. Since it was knitted in the form of a giant strawberry, it looked very odd indeed.

Sabine

I kept Lucy busy, replying to emails from Heavenly Houseparties and sending out the invitations.

The final missive I dictated to her was to Xan, by which time she was looking a little harassed: although she had spent her working life as a secretary, competence in anything seemed to be beyond her.

Dear Xan,

Much though I enjoy your letters, the recent delay in receiving your last one, due to the tardiness of the postal service (which would be faster if they used carrier pigeons), means that I have decided to utilize Lucy's skills to email you for, as you know, since I cannot touch-type, I find it tiresome. Still, the fact that Lucy has any useful accomplishment never ceases to amaze me.

Lucy ceased pecking at the keyboard and said, with a weak smile, 'You will have your little joke, Cousin Sabine!'

'New paragraph,' I said, ignoring this.

I am delighted that you are prepared to fall in with my suggestion that you take up residence here for the month of December, which should give you sufficient time to go through Asa's papers and collect enough material for his biography. As you know, I have found myself unable to look at them myself – indeed, I have barely entered Asa's study since the terrible day he died, and keep it locked except when Maria goes in to air and dust it. I use the library now as my own study.

But I am sure Asa would be happy that you were the one to use it again and also to write an account of his life and works, because he was so very fond of you, as am I.

I paused again and waited for Lucy to catch up.

Still, now that I know my own days are numbered, it is time to throw open the door on to the past and enjoy reliving those wonderful early years in Greece. I expect your grandfather, Tommy, told you many stories of our underwater exploits in the Aegean: it was all a great adventure. You will dispel the ghosts and do justice to Asa's life and work. I also hope that you can assist me to decide what to do with Asa's papers – which his old university would quite like to have – and the many valuable artefacts in his collection.

I could see Lucy mouthing the word 'artefacts' as she typed and I hoped she knew how to spell it.

'Artefacts? Are those the treasures you found when you were diving?' Lucy asked eagerly, looking up. 'I'd love to see them!'

I couldn't imagine what Lucy thought was in the locked

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room – some kind of Tutankhamen’s treasure trove, perhaps, with added barnacles?

‘We weren’t plundering gold bullion from old shipwrecks, like the early so-called marine archaeologists,’ I said patiently. ‘Asa was passionate about discovering lost towns and sea defences: signs of civilizations that had been drowned centuries before. It was the people who lived at that time he was interested in.’

‘Oh,’ said Lucy, sounding disappointed.

‘You’ve already seen some of the larger artefacts, Lucy, because they’re on the pedestals around the Great Hall – the amphora in a niche and some of Asa’s collection of early diving helmets.’

There were other, smaller things in the locked study, many of them dating from our later, land-based years on Corfu, when we devoted ourselves to exploring and charting what turned out to be a surprisingly extensive temple complex.

Asa had always found the everyday domestic objects of the past more interesting than any gold or jewels. The spindles for spinning yarn, the millstones, worn with use, a broken toy or musical instrument – these were the finds that made the past come alive for him. *And* for me, for I had always caught fire at his enthusiasms and shared them, from the moment our eyes had met across a crowded room in Oxford, just after I had taken my final exams . . .

I blinked and came back to the present. At first after his death, it had hurt to even think of Asa, though now I found myself increasingly retreating into those heady, wonderful days. Once Xan arrived, I would positively revel in reminiscing to a sympathetic listener, though I must always be careful what I disclosed. Nothing must be allowed to tarnish the image of the glowing, golden couple we had been.

I must have been silent for some minutes, for Lucy now

gave a small, affected cough, and asked timidly: 'Would you like me to add anything more, Cousin Sabine?'

'New paragraph,' I snapped, and she resumed her position, poised like a pianist over the keyboard.

Your arrival on 3 December will happily coincide with that of the couple from an agency, whom I am employing for a month to cook and housekeep, since Maria's husband, though ready to come home from the hospital after his stroke, seems set to occupy most of her time. Her cooking was never up to much and Lucy can't even boil an egg without burning the pan dry . . .

Lucy made a small protesting noise, but continued to hammer doggedly on.

So, since I have invited a small party of guests for Christmas, mostly family connections, I thought it would be a good idea to employ some extra help. You will at least be assured of decent food during your stay with us, which I hope you will also consider as a holiday.

I silently pondered for a moment, then decided that I'd said everything I needed to.

'Final paragraph,' I announced.

Do pass on my regards to your parents. I miss the warmth of Corfu, but always felt that Christmas should be cold and, preferably, snowy. I look forward to seeing you very soon.

Your affectionate godmother,
Sabine

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‘I hadn’t realized before how fond you were of him,’ Lucy said, straightening and flexing her thin, twig-like fingers.

‘Why should you?’ I said. ‘I may have shut myself off from most visitors for the last few years, but not from Xan. Besides, he has remained a frequent and interesting correspondent. Goodness knows, the one thing lacking round here is intellectual conversation.’

Lucy blinked; this dart seemed to have passed right over her head. It’s a pity she so often brings out the worst in me. I’m sure when my friend Nancy arrives she will take me to task for it.

‘Shall I send the email off now, Cousin Sabine?’

‘I don’t know what else you imagine I want you to do with it,’ I said with a sigh, and when it had vanished, to be resurrected miles away by some magical process I couldn’t fathom, added: ‘I’m going for a walk in the garden and then I’ll lie down for a little while. Unless Maria puts in an appearance, I’ll expect you with tea in the sitting room later.’

‘Of course, Cousin Sabine,’ she murmured, but even before I closed the library door behind me, I could hear the click of her fingers tapping the keys again and was sure she was letting her brother, Nigel, know about both my illness and my plans – and that their anticipated inheritance was not quite the sure thing they had thought it.

As I put on my fur coat and tied a silk scarf around my head, I reflected that if this really was a vintage Christmas murder mystery, then I would be the prime candidate for the victim!



3

Due North

Only a few days later, following a flurry of emails between Henry and Lucy Ripley, who on no evidence whatsoever, he insisted on calling the Poor Relation, we climbed into our dark green Heavenly Houseparties van and pointed the bonnet due north.

It was crammed to the gunnels with everything we might possibly need, including some items you might not have thought of, had you not had our past experiences to make you think a very long way outside the box.

As always, I'd packed my favourite kitchen utensils and equipment, because you just never knew what you were going to find – or not find – in someone else's kitchen.

We also carried a basic stock of baking and cooking ingredients – spices, dried yeast, baking powder . . . tinned goods that could be jazzed up to make a meal in an emergency. Mitras Castle was not only in a remote spot, but far enough north to make winter driving conditions potentially hazardous, so we might well not be able to pop out to the shops for anything we'd run out of.

One of the first things I'd do when we'd settled in was make

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an inventory of what was in the store cupboards and freezer and what extras needed to be ordered in for the Christmas house party. I had some handy checklists I'd drawn up over the years. A successful house party is all in the planning and organization really, and in accommodating yourself to the usual household routine.

Henry's contribution to the cooking utensils was mostly confined to his madeleine baking trays and the rest of the equipment he would need for the production of tasty hors d'oeuvres, little cakes and biscuits, which were his speciality, while I did most of the rest of the cooking. We had our own roles and made a good team.

Even though Mrs Powys had expressed no desire to have her guests greeted with pomp and circumstance, Henry had packed his very natty butler's outfit, just in case, which made him look like an escapee from a Bertie Wooster novel. Also the things he considered vital to his existence: his glass teapot and a large supply of weird teabags, his down duvet and pillow, a supply of old films and a DVD player, for you never knew if the staff sitting room – if one even existed – would have one, let alone a Sky subscription . . . Unfortunately there was no guarantee of a fast internet connection, either.

He'd put his favourite snowboard in, too, though as I'd already pointed out, even if there was snow over Christmas, breaking his leg snowboarding in unfamiliar terrain would probably not go down well with our employer.

My personal comforts were a small coffee machine and a supply of pods to go in it, my Kindle, well stocked, and a box of real books too – plus a box of copies of my own new book, which had arrived while I was away in the States: *A Tiny Taste of Andalusia*.

By the time we'd added our suitcases and warm outdoor

clothing, boots and wellies, found a space for the box marked 'Instant Christmas' (for us, with a pop-up tree, crackers and decorations), there was little room left.

I squeezed in my toolbox and other household emergency equipment – people expect Henry to be the handyman, but he's almost entirely useless, even with a sink plunger, let alone coping with bigger plumbing or any other catastrophes – and then, right near the rear door, two folding snow shovels that we hoped we wouldn't need.

'Where's the picnic hamper?' Henry asked as he speeded up to join the M6.

'On the floor, next to my feet. Soup, tea, coffee, sandwiches, crisps and a packet of those mini chocolate swiss rolls you like,' I said. I'd assembled our travelling feast while he went to fill up the van with petrol and set the satnav with the Mitras Castle postcode.

'When can we stop for lunch?' he said greedily.

'Not until we're well north of the Blackpool turn,' I told him severely. 'We've barely started and you've not long since had breakfast.'

'That seems like hours ago,' he complained, then added suddenly: 'Did you remember your laptop and phone?'

'Of course – and my charger. We checked every single thing off the list, remember?'

'I know, but we *always* forget something.'

'True, but it's usually something we don't *know* we're going to need, like that house where we couldn't find a single corkscrew.'

'That was weird, considering they had a cellar full of wine. They must have pulled the corks out with their teeth,' he said. 'Where's the nearest shopping centre, if we need something urgently?'

'I don't know if there's a village with a shop anywhere near,