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# LUCY FOLEY

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Lies.  
Murder.**



**Let the  
festivities  
begin...**

# THE MIDNIGHT FEAST

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# THE MIDNIGHT FEAST

Lucy Foley



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## Dedication

For Kim, for ten wonderful years working together.  
Thank you for everything!

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# The Woods

An engine idling on the edge of the woods at night.

A message left in a hollow tree.

A summoning.



*A fox, browsing in the dead beech leaves for the trail of a rabbit, stops still. Raises its head, ears pricked, paw raised, before turning and fleeing. The owls halt their night-time chorus, lifting as silent pale ghosts from the branches to find another patch of woodland. A small herd of deer scatters more noisily, crashing through the undergrowth in its haste to get away.*

*Something is moving through the trees now, disturbing the normal night-time harmony. Shadows with form, with substance. Rustling through the leaves, treading upon the woodland floor, snapping twig and bracken.*

*Deep in the woods they gather. The same clearing they have always used; and their forebears before them, since the legends began. A strange flock. Black-robed, beast-headed. Born of the unknown depths of the wood: an image from a medieval woodcut, a dark folktale to frighten badly behaved children. In the modern world, a world of busyness, of speed and connection, they make no sense. But here among the trees, hidden from moonlight and starlight, it is as if the modern world is the fairytale: other and strange.*

*A short distance away, the old man sits in his study in the woods: a converted cabin surrounded by ancient trees.*

*The door is ajar to the elements. Now that darkness has fallen there's a chill to the air. It creeps in at the open door, it rifles through the papers on the desk.*

*In front of him is a single feather, its black down ruffled by the breeze.*

*The old man doesn't pay it any attention.*

*He doesn't pay it any attention because he is dead.*

# JUNE 2025, OPENING NIGHT

## BELLA

It's opening night of The Manor, the 'new jewel of the Dorset coastline'. The drama is all out front: soaring ocean views, emerald lawns stretching to the cliff edge, the Owen Dacre-designed infinity pool. But on this side, the landward side, there's another world. A bristle of dense ancient forest behind the main building, which guests can access via a series of gravel paths that wind between the 'Woodland Hutches'. One of these is mine.

I close the door. Follow the sound of music and laughter through the purple twilight to the welcome drinks, which are taking place on the very edge of the trees. I step into a chic take on a woodland grotto. Hundreds of lanterns hang from branches. An actual harpist plays. Antique rugs and huge scatter cushions have been strewn about the forest floor with bohemian abandon. I sit down on one, gulp back a 'Woodland Spirit' cocktail – 'a dash of locally harvested birch bitters and rosemary infused gin'.

My fellow guests loll around, chatty and giddy with the anticipation of a weekend in the sun beside the sea with nothing to do but eat, drink, swim and make merry. Many of them seem to know one another: wandering about shrieking as they bump into old friends, some reclining on the rugs and calling to acquaintances to join them. The vibe is relaxed, albeit spiced with a faint note of social competition.

No one needs the ultra-soft woollen blankets provided because – though the sun is setting – it's still warm enough to wear only a single layer of linen (there's a lot of linen). The first flare of the impending heatwave.

In the middle of the scene, like a fairy queen – like Titania on her woodland throne – sits the owner of The Manor. Francesca Meadows. Radiant in a pale rose, off-shoulder fantasia of washed silk, hair rippling

down her back, face aglow with candlelight. *The culmination of a dream:* that's what she said in the article. *I'm so excited to share this place with everyone.* Well, everyone who can afford it, anyway. But who's quibbling?

I look around me. I suppose it's all pretty idyllic if you're part of a couple or larger group, if you've come here for a weekend of escaping the city. Maybe it's just me for whom it doesn't feel quite so mellow and chummy.

I wait for the alcohol to hit, my gaze flitting towards the deepening shadows between the trees, to the ragged ceiling of branches uplit by the lanterns, down to my own outfit: linen, yes, but with the tell-tale creases that show it's just been pulled from a packet. But the one place my eyes linger time and again – I can't help it – is on the face of Francesca Meadows. She looks so zen. So very fucking content.

Suddenly there's a commotion, deep in the wood. Her gaze snaps in that direction. The guests fall silent and peer into the gloom. The harpist stops playing.

Suddenly a group of newcomers burst into the grotto. Not dressed in linen. A raggle-taggle bunch in hiking boots. Mainly women, a few piercings and tats, untouched grey roots. Francesca Meadows doesn't move, her smile doesn't snag. But a member of the staff – a small blonde woman in a white shirt and heels, perhaps a manager – walks towards them, as if dispatched by silent command. She speaks in a discreet murmur. But the leader of the raggedy pack is having none of it.

'I don't give a flying fuck,' she says. 'There's been a right of way through here for centuries – before that house even existed. *You're* the ones trespassing. Local people have always walked among these trees ... using their wood, their flora and fauna. There's a unique convergence of ley lines here. Keeping people away from the land – from *their* land – like this, it's evil. It's a kind of murder.'

She looks over the woman's head and straight at Francesca Meadows as she shouts: 'I'm talking to you, by the way! I don't care that you clearly paid off the council, whatever it was you did. As far as we're concerned these woods belong to *us* more than they ever will to you. So you can just let us carry on through here, or we can *really* make a scene. What's it gonna be?'

The manager takes a step back, uncertain. There's a split-second glance towards the owner. Perhaps the tiniest inclination of Francesca Meadows' golden head. Then the manager mutters something to the little crew. Whatever it is it seems to work because after a moment's deliberation they

carry on their way. Straight through the clearing – looking around in distaste. Beneath the force of their glares the lounging guests sit up a little straighter, rearrange their rumpled clothing. One of the trespassers tips a cocktail over with her foot and the group departs to the sound of breaking glass.

The harpist resumes her playing, the barman picks up his cocktail shaker. But I can feel it. Something in the air has changed.

## THE DAY AFTER THE SOLSTICE

The fishing boat goes out just before dawn, wake shining silver in the halogen lamps. The fishermen are heading for the deep water, tracking a wide berth around The Giant's Hand, five limestone stacks that stick out beyond the line of the cliffs like four huge fingers and a thumb. It's a little before five in the morning. This is almost the earliest the sun will rise all year: the day after midsummer, the longest day.

Already the sky is pinkening from violet to mauve. Something strange this morning, though. A second streak of colour has appeared, like a duplicate sunrise but in the opposite direction, over the land. A paint spatter of livid scarlet.

Later, they will say they could actually feel the heat of it. Even there, all the way out to sea. The hot breath of it on the backs of their necks like the warmth of a second sun.

'What's that light?' The first to notice points it out to the guy next to him.

'What, mate?'

'There: right there above the cliffs.'

Now the other guys turn to look, too. 'That's not a light. That's ... what is that? Oh. Shit.'

'That's a fire.'

'Something's burning. Right on the coastline.'

As the wind shifts they smell the smoke, too. Flecks of ash appear in the air, dancing around them, settling upon the deck, the waves.

'Jesus. It's a building.'

'It's that place. The hotel that just opened ... The Manor.'

They cut the engine. Stop and watch. All of them fall silent for a moment. Staring. Horrified. Thrilled.

One guy takes out a pair of binoculars. Another takes out his phone. 'Can't feel all that bad,' he says, snapping a few shots. 'The shit they've been up to. Feels like just deserts.'

A third man snatches at the phone. 'Nah – that's not on, mate. People could be dead in there. Innocent people ... members of staff ... locals.'

All of them fall silent as this possibility sinks in. They watch the smoke, which is beginning to billow in huge ashen clouds. They can smell it now, acrid, scoring the back of the nostrils.

One of the guys gets on the phone to the police.

The light changes again. The smoke spreads like ink in water, spilling fast across the blue-white of early morning, blocking out the newly risen sun. It's as though the darkness of night is returning, a shroud being drawn across the sky. It is as though whatever is happening back there on the cliffs has cancelled the dawn.



# OPENING NIGHT

## EDDIE

It's just before midnight. Nearly the end of my shift. All the guests are still at the welcome drinks so the inside bar is empty. I'm unloading glasses from a crate onto the shelves and listening to Rita Ora on my headphones. The guys on the rugby team used to give me crap for my music tastes, but 'I'll Be There' has really been getting me through the mountains of dirty dishes and glasses – stacking and unloading and rinsing and doing it all again as they come down from the Seashard (the restaurant here). I saw the food when it went out: it looked amazing. But it's like stuff you'd feed to pigs now. I'm hungry but not even tempted to steal a bite.

It's my first proper shift, now the hotel's full of guests. I still haven't got the hang of the sprayer hose thing: I've managed to soak my shoes twice. All the staff wear trainers here at The Manor, because the whole vibe is 'casual', but they're Common Projects, which I'd never actually buy myself because they cost about three times my weekly pay.

I jump as someone lifts one of the cans from my ear. But it's just Ruby, my mate from reception.

'All right Eds? Come to grab a Coke.' I reach into the fridge and hand her one. 'Need some caffeine. Frigging knackered from smiling all day.'

Ruby's moved down from London. Most front-of-house jobs were taken by non-locals, like her, with experience (she worked somewhere called Chiltern Firehouse) and the right accent.

A guy wearing a pale pink suit and posh trainers wanders in. 'Got any Macallan twenty-five in here?' He peers at the shelf behind me. 'Only eighteen? Huh.' He huffs off, clearly unimpressed. Ruby takes a slug of her Coke. When he's out of sight she says, 'Do you feel like there are men whose

entire personality is “rich white douche”?’ She takes another sip. ‘Think most of them are staying this weekend.’

Ruby’s one of the few members of staff here who isn’t white – her dad’s Trinidadian. When she’s not in uniform she wears a leather trench and little Matrix-style glasses and I’d find her too pretty and cool to chat to if she wasn’t also super nice and a bit geeky – she’s starting an English MA at Exeter soon. Besides, there’s no way she’s into Dorset farm boys who are miles thicker than her, so I don’t have a chance to blow in the first place.

After Ruby’s gone I turn my music up and get into a rhythm stacking tallboys, tumblers, martini glasses, champagne coupes. There’s a little game I play when I put them into the dishwasher: trying to guess the cocktail from the smell and the colour of the liquid left behind. Maybe it sounds lame, but I think of it like practice. I feel like a good bartender would be able to work it out. The indoor bar special is ‘The Manor Mule’: grapefruit, ginger, vodka and a dash of CBD oil – that stuff seems to be in everything here.

Turns out working summers on your dad’s farm doesn’t qualify you for more than washing dishes. But everyone has to start somewhere, right? And if I ‘prove myself’ over the next couple of days the manager, Michelle, says I can help out at the feast on Saturday night, serving drinks and that. I want to be a bartender, to escape Tome and have a whole new life in London. In a way the ACL injury was a relief. I didn’t want to play rugby at that level. It wasn’t fun any more, there was too much pressure. I don’t want to go to uni, either. And I definitely don’t want my dad’s life, to take over the farm. My brother was meant to do that.

I catch a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye. Just manage not to swear when I see a dark figure approaching the bar. Where did she appear from? She moves nearer, into the light.

‘Hi,’ she says. ‘Can I get a martini?’

She looks like London and money. Blonde, reddish lipstick, smells of smoky, expensive perfume. Kind of old. Not mum old but definitely a lot older than me. But she has a pretty face, nice normal eyebrows. Loads of scary eyebrows around these days. My ex-girlfriend Delilah went through a stage of drawing hers on with a Sharpie.

I wipe my damp hands on my jeans and clear my throat. I’m not supposed to make drinks. If Michelle caught me ...

But I can’t say it. I can’t bring myself to tell this woman that I’m just the guy who does the dishes.

‘Er ... gin or vodka?’ I ask.

‘Which would you choose?’

Isn’t someone like her meant to know how they take their martini? I notice there’s something jumpy about her now I look more closely. She’s fiddling with the stack of cocktail napkins, tearing one into ragged little strips. I clear my throat. ‘I guess it depends what you like?’ To sound more confident, I use a line I heard Lewis, the head bartender, use: ‘But it’s gin for the win, if you ask me.’ Like I make hundreds of them a day. ‘And I can do dirty or with a twist.’

She smiles almost gratefully. ‘Gin it is, then. I trust you. Two gin martinis, please. What does dirty mean?’

I blush. Hopefully it’s dark enough in here that she can’t see. ‘Er ... it means you add olive brine.’

‘Dirty then, please.’

Is she flirting? Delilah always said I was totally thick about girls coming onto me: ‘Fuckssake Eddie. They could come over, flash their tits and dry hump you and you’d be like: “Oh, that Jenny’s friendly, isn’t she?”’

‘Two dirty gin martinis coming right up,’ I say as confidently as I can. Do I sound like a knob? Like a West Country farm boy trying to be something he’s not? Well, guess that’s exactly what I am.

‘You know what?’ She slides off the bar stool. She’s shorter than I imagined, but then I’m taller than pretty much everyone. ‘Could you bring them to my room? I’m in Woodland Hutch number ...’ she fishes a key out of her bag, checks it, ‘eleven. The one nearest the woods.’

‘Er ...’ I think. If Michelle caught me going to a guest’s room she might actually murder me. Ruby told me yesterday she thinks Michelle has ‘crazy Liz Truss eyes’ and that: ‘you don’t want to get on the wrong side of her. She’d cut you in your sleep.’

‘I’d be so grateful,’ the guest says, and flashes a smile. There’s something kind of needy about it.

The guests are always right. Michelle literally told us that last week in training. Especially guests who stay somewhere like this.

‘Sure,’ I say. ‘Coming right up.’

I knock on the door to Woodland Hutch number 11 ten minutes later. It’s a pretty long walk to the Hutches along the lamplit gravel paths with a tray of drinks, especially while keeping an eye out for Michelle. The welcome drinks

must have finished: there's no music or voices, all I can hear are the owls and the sound of the wind in the leaves. This Hutch is the furthest away from the main building, pressed up against the trees, branches curling round it like they're trying to claw it deeper into the woods. You couldn't pay me to sleep here.

These rooms are called Hutches because rich people like to pretend they're roughing it when really they're tucked up in super kings with their own outdoor bath and rain shower. They're the cheapest ones, without the sea views of the Clifftop Cabins round the other side of The Manor. Cheap relative to the others, that is. The new Treehouse rooms, I suppose, will be for rich people who want the same sort of experience but also to sleep several feet off the ground.

'Hey,' the guest says as she opens the door. 'You were quick.' Somehow in her husky voice it sounds kind of dirty, like Nigella talking about sausages or melted butter (Mum and I used to watch a lot of cooking shows together; Nigella was my first major crush). Her lipstick's a little smudged and she's taken off her shoes.

I want to say something cool or clever, but all I manage is: 'Yeah, no worries.'

'How about you set the drinks down in here?' She holds open the door to the room. 'Come in.'

As I shrug off my soggy shoes (I've been hardcore trained in this sort of thing by Mum) I sneak a look around. I haven't been inside any guest rooms yet. I don't know what I was expecting but it's even posher than I'd imagined. It's small, but there's a big four-poster bed at one end draped in white linen and a couple of dark green velvet armchairs at its foot, a glass and gold coffee table between them. The fact that it's a wooden cabin somehow makes all the fancy furniture look even more fancy. And it *smells* expensive, like the rest of The Manor. They've been diffusing a 'signature scent' through all the spaces. Ruby says it gives her a migraine.

I set the tray down on the coffee table. I'm expecting a husband or boyfriend or the like to pop out for the second martini, but there's no one. The guest sits down in an armchair, takes one of the glasses. The breeze must have picked up because the branches are scrabbling against the windows now.

'And the other drink?' I ask. 'Shall I just leave it here?' Yeah, I'm hovering a bit as this could be my first chance – my only chance? – for a tip.