

THE DARKEST EVENING

A COUNTRY HOUSE MYSTERY

Instructions: Choose four volunteers to read the parts of Dorothy, Mark, Juliet, and Crispin. Pause while the audience writes down their guess as to who the murderer is. Lastly the volunteer/murderer reads the confession.

The Darkest Evening Murder Mystery Script can be performed in person or virtually.



MINOTAUR BOOKS

DOROTHY

Mid-winter at Brockburn has always been special. I visited often when I was a teenager and it was my favourite time of year. For a city girl, the log fires, the huge tree, cut from the forest, and the rather glamorous parties, seemed to belong to a different age. Juliet was my best friend at school. When she came to stay with me in Newcastle, we went to the theatre or the cinema to see some art house movie; my mother was an academic who thought all entertainment should be improving. When I was at her home, there were long walks in the hills. Juliet always worried that I'd be bored, but I thought I got the better deal. We were left pretty much to ourselves and I loved that freedom and all the space.

As we got older, we were invited downstairs for the adult dinners, and then we'd get all dressed up, dreaming perhaps of some Prince Charming to sweep us off our feet. In the event most of the guests were old enough to be our grandfathers, but still we dreamed. My mother was invited once or twice, though she never really fitted in, and she soon made excuses to stay away.

There was always a party to celebrate the solstice, the darkest evening of the year, and some of the younger people from the village were there for that: tenant farmers and their families, local artists and musicians. There was always music.

Now I'm back at Brockburn, not as a guest but as a member of staff. After school, Juliet came straight home to help her parents to manage the estate. I went on to Cambridge to read law and ended up as a barrister in a Chambers in London. But neither the work nor the city suited me and I had a sort of breakdown. By then Juliet was married and she and her husband were pretty much running the big house, with the help - or interference - of her mother, Harriet.

Crispin, her father, is an elderly man now, but he's still got an eye for the women, especially the younger women. He tried to get friendly with me once, when I was still a student, and I was almost seduced by his charm and his flattery. He was a good-looking man even in middle-age. Juliet warned me off though:

'He and mummy haven't got on for years, but he'd never leave her. You'd just be one of a string of his conquests.'

And when I came back to Brockburn to work, I'm not sure that he even recognized me, until Juliet reminded him who I was. Though there was something about the way he looked at me that made me wonder if he was regretting his earlier behaviour. He seemed almost apologetic.

The grand house was suffering from years of neglect. I had a sense of it, creaking and groaning, in need of care and restoration. Mark, Jules' husband, comes from a theatrical background and has this idea of turning it into a sort of Glyndebourne of the north, with a performance space inside as well as out, rehearsal rooms,

weekend retreats for writers. He's looking for funding, but in this financial climate, it's not easy. When she heard I'd been ill and that I needed a job, Juliet asked if I'd like to work for them as a live-in housekeeper. She was embarrassed to ask, but I could tell she was desperate and it really wasn't about creating a post to do me a favour. I love it! I've always enjoyed cooking and bringing order out of chaos. Just as well, with all that goes on here... They all act as if there's still a regiment of servants and instead there's only me.

Juliet and Mark planned a very special party for his year's mid-winter's eve. There would be a few of the usual guests from the village, but they'd also invited a group of Mark's wealthier arty or business friends. The idea was that we'd give them an old-fashioned country house party and they'd want to buy into the place and his scheme. Mark planned to ask them to pledge lots of cash, that he could match fund from other sources. So, not only was there the meal to prepare, but those guests were staying the night with us. It meant a lot of work and I so wanted it to be special.

In the end, I wasn't sure if the party would actually take place, because it started to snow. Just a flurry at first and then a blizzard, huge flakes, that stuck to the freezing ground. A few couples cancelled but most turned up early, before I was really ready for them. We provided tea in the lounge and the fires were all lit, and there was that reflected light that you only get when everything outside is white. I spent most of the evening in the kitchen. Juliet had asked me to eat with them, but I was far too busy and anyway Harriet would never have approved. She treats me like a kitchen maid, despite my very good degree and the fact that she's known me since I was a school girl. But perhaps it's not a good idea to speak like that about Harriet. Not now that she's dead. It could be taken the wrong way.

I found her body. There was a lull after I'd taken in the pudding for our guests and I could take a moment to catch my breath. The snow had stopped and looking through the kitchen window I saw the sliver of a moon. Everything was freezing and very still. Brockburn is close to the dark skies reserve in Kielder Forest and I wanted to be outside for a moment to look up at the stars. There are no street lights for miles, no houses either. I pulled on my wellies and a jacket and went out through the back door. And there was Harriet, in a heap, not very far from the outhouse where we keep coal and logs. Not far from the bins.

She was still in her party clothes, a long dress in a soft black wool and a shawl sparkled with silver. On her feet little silver shoes. My first thought was that the cold would have killed her, lying there, icy, with no coat or boots. If it weren't for the knife, stuck in her chest, and the blood which had turned the snow red all around her.

I don't know how she could have got there. I was in and out of the kitchen all evening and I didn't see anyone go through. Even if someone had lured her outside without my noticing, surely, she would have dressed properly for the weather. There were no footprints in the snow so she must have been put there before the blizzard stopped. It was all very mysterious.

I didn't scream. I'm not the screaming type. I phoned Vera Stanhope, who lives in a cottage in the hills not far from Brockburn. I knew from Juliet that she's a sort of relative of the family. And that she's a detective.

'I don't know if you'll get through,' I said. 'It's stopped snowing but it's freezing.'

She told me her Land Rover could cope with more severe weather than this.

'Just keep the buggers away from the scene.'

And that was what I did. I went into the dining room and explained that Harriet was dead and that they all had to say where they were until the police arrived. I stood at the door, like some sort of security guard. Mark demanded to be let through, Juliet was weeping and Crispin was blustering, but I stood my ground until I heard the Land Rover growling to a stop, and Vera made her entrance.

MARK

When I married Juliet, I knew I'd have to take on the house too. And her bonkers parents. The deal came as a package and Jules would never live anywhere else. I've always been a city boy. My background is in the arts: a degree in Theatre and Performance at Northumbria Uni, specializing in script-writing and direction. When Juliet and I hooked up, I was creative director for a theatre which encourages new writing in Newcastle and I still work for them part time as a consultant. At first, I was seduced by the whole country living, Lord of the Manor thing. It was like wandering into a scene from *Brideshead Revisited* with the hunting and shooting and weekend house parties. It didn't take long to realise it was all show and that the house was crumbling around our ears. The family might own lots of land, but it has very little ready cash.

So, I came up with this idea to turn Brockburn into a creative centre with performance spaces, a theatre, where writers and performers can inspire each other. We'd have audiences flocking to the place, because it's such a stunning background. And of course, we'd have a bar selling locally brewed beer and a café with homemade cakes. Maybe allow glamping in the grounds, put up a tepi or two and a cluster of shepherds' huts. Once it was up and running, the place would be a goldmine.

Of course, Harriet and Crispin resisted at first. Harriet, especially couldn't bear the idea of her home being over run by arty plebs from the town. She married into the place, so I couldn't quite understand her obsession with tradition. She wasn't stupid. She must have seen that the plumbing hardly functions, that the place is freezing even in the summer – this is Northumberland – and that it's become a struggle even to settle the bills in the shops in the village.

Crispin, however, quite liked the idea of young actresses wandering through the grounds. He's always been a lechy goat and I had enough dirt on him to persuade him to my point of view. Naturally, I wouldn't stoop to blackmail, but I did remind him of an affair he had quite a long ago with a woman of my acquaintance. Harriet must have known about his flings – there were enough of them – but this lover had kept a letter from him. It was rather moving, actually. I think he might even have loved her. But not as much as he loved Brockburn and besides, Crispin would have hated any notion of scandal.

I had no reason at all to kill Harriet. Any resistance to my development scheme for the house would have been ridiculous once Crispin was on board. The woman might have acted as if she was in charge, but she knew that in the end any decision would be his. The house is his inheritance and the upper classes set great store on breeding, don't they? The bloodline is everything.

I can't even remember when I last saw Harriet this evening. We pushed the boat out for our special dinner guests. Anything to make them agree to contribute to our arts' development fund. A great deal of wine was consumed throughout the evening and really, my plan was working big style. The pledges of cash were flying in. I just hope this dreadful murder doesn't make them change their mind. If anything, perhaps the publicity will work to our advantage. I can see the headlines in the *Nationals*: *A Real Country House Murder Mystery*. Or, how did they describe all those Golden Age detective stories? I know: *Snobbery With Violence*. At least that would put Brockburn on the map.

Harriet was still there for the dessert and the cheese, but I don't think she came with us when Dorothy brought coffee into the drawing room afterwards. I have an idea that Jules went to look for her at one point, to check that she was okay. Harriet was a bully and Juliet was always terrified of upsetting her, always running after her. I suspect that Harriet would have respected her more if she'd been a little less solicitous. Crispin was in and out all evening. I'm not sure why he kept disappearing. Perhaps he was phoning one of his young lovers. I know I shouldn't say this, but I rather admire his style. I hope I'm as lively when I'm his age.

Yes, I did go outside at one point, just to clear my head. I'd got caught up in the general festivities and needed a moment on my own. But I went out through the main door from the entrance hall, not through the kitchen. That's very much Dorothy's domain and I didn't want to disturb her. She doesn't welcome interference. She might be Juliet's old school friend, but there's something surly about her manner and I'm not sure that she'll fit in to the new, more relaxed regime of the arts centre. I didn't go very far. I just stopped under the portico, on top of the impressive stone steps that lead from the huge wooden doors to the main drive. It was still snowing then, though the wind had dropped a little and there was the glimmer of a moon.

The grounds looked so beautiful that I thought how lucky I was to be a part of the place. Despite the aggravation and the effort, I was proud to be bringing the old house back to life. Harriet brought something special to Brockburn too. A timeless grandeur and a sophistication. In a strange way, I'll miss her.

JULIET

I can't actually believe that Mummy's dead. She's always been a force of nature, so strong, so determined. Mark said I shouldn't let her bully me, but I don't think he ever felt the strength of her personality. She never really took to Mark – she would have preferred someone who understood the obligations and traditions attached to a house like Brockburn – and perhaps the bravest thing I did was to marry him. In the end, she didn't consider him worth fighting with. She tended simply to ignore him. Deep down, I think she realised his plans were the only way to keep the house in the family. The alternative would have been to sell up and lose the place altogether. She would have hated that. The place defined her.

Dorothy did most of the work for this evening's grand dinner party. Mummy dismissed her as a glorified skivvy, but she's a brilliant cook and wonderfully organised. I was always mortified at the way my mother spoke to a woman, who was far more educated than any of us and who kept the whole show on the road. It was so embarrassing! Dorothy and I have been friends since we were eleven and I can't imagine managing all this without her.

I got into a panic when people turned up early and spent the afternoon trying to make them comfortable. The rooms upstairs are a bit chilly if you're not used to them and so once people had changed for dinner, they all appeared downstairs before I was quite expecting them. Dorothy was a star as always and turned out with mulled wine and home-made nibbles though that wasn't part of the original plan. At about six thirty, I went up to ask Mummy to join us. After all, she was technically the hostess, and she was so much better at entertaining than me. She brought a touch of sparkle, of magic, wherever she went. The radiator in her room always seems miraculously to work, so I suspected she was hiding away in there in the warm.

In the end I didn't even knock at her door because I could hear her shouting at someone. At first, I thought she must be on her phone, but there was a mumbled reply, so someone else must have been there. I really didn't want to interrupt in case she and Daddy were having one of their mega-rows. She appeared downstairs, looking amazingly glamorous and perfectly calm and collected, just before we were all about to move into the dining room.

Daddy arrived at about the same time. I don't know where he'd been earlier in the evening. I have no evidence that he was the person with Mummy when I went to find her, but who else could it have been? Mark would certainly not have gone voluntarily into what he called 'the lion's den.' Mummy and Daddy have had separate bedrooms for as long as I can remember. When I was younger, I thought that was rather grand, that the arrangement was similar to that of the royal family; now I realize it was just because they couldn't stand each other. Father hid it well – he's a perfect gentleman in public, charming, making everyone in the room feel very special - but I thought he seemed flustered, a little distracted when he finally appeared. He took my mother's arm and led everyone into dinner.

We ate in the formal dining room and everything seemed perfect. There was the huge log fire, which had been roaring all day, and had made the room deliciously warm; we have no shortage of firewood living on the edge of the forest. The silver gleamed and the glasses reflected the light from the candles. Dorothy had employed a couple of teenagers from the village to help her serve. The food was as wonderful as I knew it would be.

When the meal was over, the group started to break up. Dorothy popped her head in to say she'd be serving coffee in the drawing room. I knew that was because she wanted to clear the table. The girls who'd been helping her, had walked back to the village after the main course to get home before the next flurry of snow. I don't think I saw mother after that. The whole evening became a bit of a muddle. We'd had lots of wine with dinner, and there was a tray with brandy and whisky in the drawing room, so most people were just a little bit tipsy. Free booze seems irresistible, it seems, even if you're stinking rich. I did escape on a couple of occasions. Since I've been a girl, I've had this dreadful social anxiety, and the whole evening had been an ordeal. Mark says I'll have to get over that when the house is open every night to different audiences and performances.

I went up to our room for ten minutes or so to re-do my make-up. Our room is what Mark calls 'effing Baltic',

and some time in there certainly sobered me up. At one point, I looked out of the window – we're at the front of the house – and the gardens looked magical. Mark had strung fairy lights on the huge cedar near the main drive. I thought I saw someone walking round the side of the house towards the kitchen door, but I just caught a shape from the side of my eye and when I looked properly it had disappeared. There was a line of fresh footprints, though it started to snow heavily again and soon they'd disappeared too. I wondered if I'd imagined the whole thing. Mummy always said I was given to fancies. But if the footprints really were there, the killer must have gone out through the front door and not via the kitchen, and that doesn't make any sense at all.

I'd not long returned to the drawing room, when Dorothy arrived. She was carrying a fresh pot of coffee, which she set on the sideboard, but instead of going back to the kitchen she came up to me and whispered that Harriet was dead! Perhaps she was hoping for discretion, but I'm afraid I lost control. It was the shock that made me cry out. I'm still not sure what I feel. Not grief. Certainly not that.

Dorothy stood at the door immovable. She said that a detective was on her way. Vera. She's a Stanhope too, a kind of cousin or aunt, but her Dad was black sheep of the family and we'd quite lost touch. I wonder what she'll make of us all now.

CRISPIN

Everyone thinks I'm an old fool, but I wouldn't have kept this place going - supporting my tenant farmers and maintaining all the old traditions - without a certain level of intelligence! Of course, things were very different when I was growing up. There was an assumption that we had certain entitlements, but we knew that obligations came with the privileges. Hector, my father's much younger brother, could never understand that. He was always chaffing against the restrictions. In the end the family just let him do his own thing and decided to have nothing more to do with him. He had a daughter, Vera. I met her at Hector's funeral. She seemed an ungainly, lumpen kind of creature and it was hard to believe that we were related in any way at all.

I know that I've never been a model husband or father, but I've tried to be discreet, to maintain my position in the community. It was the position that Harriet married; I think she'd have agreed to any proposal that brought with it a grand country house and status within the county. She was a beautiful young thing when we met though, slender and lithe, and I thought she'd do very well. But she turned out also to be rather demanding, bossy even, and there wasn't the support and the warmth that I'd been expecting.

Perhaps things would have been different if there'd been more children. I was never hung up on the notion of a son, but I was an only child and I had a hankering for a tribe of rowdy offspring to bring life back to the place. It would be a paradise for kids. All this land for them to explore, trees to climb, burns to dam.

Of course, I love the bones of Juliet, but you could never describe her as rowdy, and it doesn't seem as if she'll make me a grandfather any time soon. She's always been delicate, sensitive. We're very close, she and I, and I'd never do anything to hurt her. That's why I put up with her oik of a husband and all his disruptive notions. And some of them do make sense. I can see that something pretty dramatic has to happen if Brockburn is going to stay in the family. I couldn't bear to be remembered as the Stanhope who let the dear old place go.

Yes, Harriet and I had a discussion earlier this evening, though I certainly wouldn't call it a mega-row. Juliet can be a little over-dramatic about such things. We've had many stormier altercations during our marriage. Perhaps we both need the excitement of an argument to keep the relationship alive. I can't even remember what it was about now. I went in to ask her to be civil to Mark and Juliet's guests. This is a final attempt to keep Brockburn in the Stanhope family and I thought that would be as important to her as it was to me. But as always, she wanted to rake over the past. I certainly didn't raise my voice, however, and Harriet seemed very eager for me to go. I wonder if she was expecting another visitor. Someone with whom she did have a violent disagreement.

It's all terribly sad. Perhaps I should have been braver many years ago. There was somebody with whom I might have been happier, but I put the house and my family ahead of my own contentment. Perhaps, like Prince Andrew, I was too noble.

After the chat with Harriet in her room, I went to change and then I made my way to join the guests. They were a lively lot and they'd made a great effort to dress for the occasion. Everyone looked rather grand in a rather vulgar, exhibitionist way. Of course, I took my wife into the dining room. We know the importance of putting on a show. Mark isn't the only theatrical member of the family. We had a very pleasant evening. Of course, I can't think of anything that happened that might have triggered violence, and I have no idea at all who might have stabbed my wife in the snow. It was all completely civilised.

After the meal, I went with the others into the drawing room for coffee. Harriet muttered something to me about having had enough of the whole charade. That seemed a little ungracious, but she'd been polite enough throughout the meal and I thought perhaps it was best that she should leave while things were still going smoothly. I assumed she was going to her room. I certainly didn't expect to hear that she'd be found murdered only yards from the house.

Yes, I left the drawing room several times. The old bladder isn't quite what it used to be. I certainly didn't see Harriet again. We were adversaries, but I'd become used to her, to the jousts and the sparring, and I'm sorry that she's dead. It seems eerily fitting that it should have happened tonight, on the darkest evening of the year.

The Confession

JULIET

Yes, I killed my mother. It was a dreadful thing to do, but she provoked me to a violence, which was completely out of character. Everyone thinks of me as a timid little thing, easily bullied; tonight, I proved that I can only be pushed so far.

I didn't stab her because she treated me so unkindly, or because she despised me. I'd lived with that all my life. She was an arrogant woman, stubborn in her certainties. She couldn't even be happy for me when I found a man who loved me and whom I loved. But it was her treatment of Dorothy, my half-sister, that made me lose my temper and my reason. The killing wasn't planned. If mother had been sympathetic, listened, truly listened, to what I had to say, then we would have been able to come together as a family.

I only found out about my real relationship with Dorothy a month ago. I was looking in Mark's desk for some insurance papers and found the letter. It was an old-fashioned photo-copy; I assume he'd left the original where he'd found it. Mark had come across it when he was a third-year undergraduate at university and it had been written more than a decade before that. I assume the woman had thought it would be safer to keep it at work than at home, where Dorothy might find it, and couldn't bring herself to destroy it. Why had Mark taken a copy when he'd come across it? Perhaps, he'd thought it might be useful if his final dissertation failed to impress. None of this shows Mark in a very good light, but I don't suppose that matters now. He wouldn't stick by a wife who was a convicted killer, so I'm sure he'll divorce me. The decision is quite out of my hands.

When Mark had dug out the letter after all these years, he hadn't realized its full significance. To him, it was just leverage to persuade my father to support his plans for the house, but something about the small details rang a bell with me. It had been written by my father to a woman called Margaret, and it was clear she'd just told him that she was carrying his child. Mark's tutor at the university had been called Margaret, and that was the name of Dorothy's mother.

I remembered those few occasions when Dorothy's mother had come into the house. Usually she just dropped the girl off, but sometimes I dragged her in and persuaded her to stay for tea or supper. How awkward that must have been for Margaret! And how kind of her not to dissuade us from our very close friendship!

Tonight, my mother was insufferable. She'd been sniping at Dorothy all day, and I could see how tired Dorothy was and how much effort she'd put into making the evening a success. She had no idea that we were related, that she might actually have a stake in the place. She just wanted to help. I went to mother's room earlier in the evening to have the matter out with her and despite what I told you earlier, I found her alone. I told her about the letter I'd found in Mark's desk.

'Dorothy is my father's daughter. She probably has a claim on the estate. You can't treat her as if she were a servant.' I'd never talked to mother like that and she was shocked. But not completely surprised by the news. Perhaps she'd guessed about the relationship all along and had treated my friend so dreadfully in the hope that she'd leave. Dorothy's presence in the place must have been a constant reminder of her husband's infidelities.

My mother was unmoved, characteristically arrogant. 'Even if what you say is true, there's no proof.' A little laugh. 'Do you really believe Crispin would agree to a DNA test?' And then she dismissed me and said if the evening's performance was to go ahead with any style, she'd need to prepare herself.

After dinner, my mother came into the kitchen to demand herbal tea. To show, again who was boss. Dorothy was in the dining room clearing the table, and I was there to escape the crowd for a moment.

'The woman knows I can't take coffee in the evening,' Harriet said, her voice a whine of complaint. 'How thoughtless she is!'

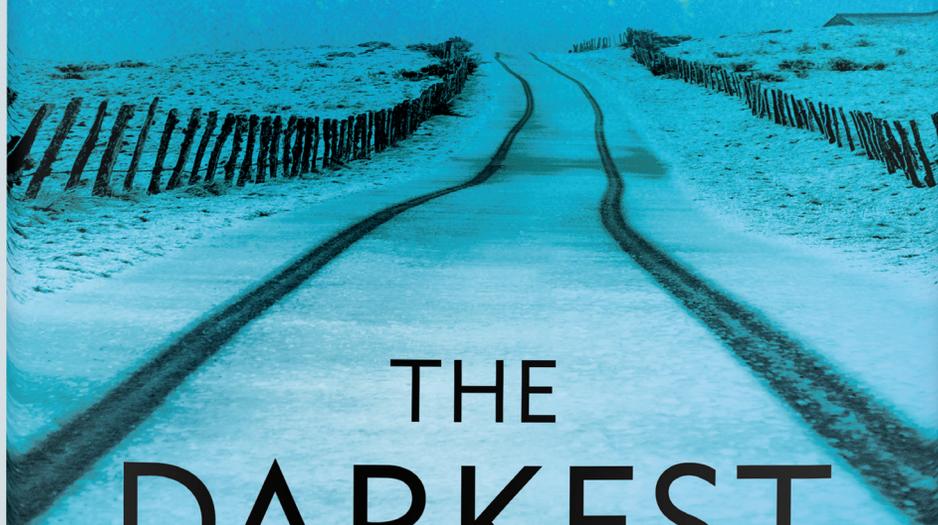
And that was all it took for me to kill her. There was a chef's knife on the table. Dorothy had used it to prepare our delicious dinner and it was very, very sharp. I stuck it into my mother's chest and I pulled her body out of the door and into the snow. It took a matter of minutes. Then I ran up the stairs and into my room before Dorothy returned. I had to wash the blood from my hands. Of course, there was no shadowy figure running round the house, no footsteps hidden by a sudden blizzard. I made those up. After all, this is a traditional country house murder and red herrings are important.

I was telling the truth, though, when I said I felt no grief at my mother's death.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANN
CLEEVES

A VERA STANHOPE NOVEL



THE
DARKEST
EVENING

The darkest evening hides
the deadliest secrets.