

Al Fresco

“Dinner’s served!” announced Steven. Caught between discretion and display, he worried for a moment his proclamation might have been too bold. He need not have worried. His call echoed through several different voices in any case as the guests swooped to take their place around the platter. Resplendent in their white suits, the gathered fancied themselves as the suavest wedding party in town. In reality, they looked more like a scruffier John Lennon crossing Abbey Road.

So fresh was the delivery; so *joyously* fresh, considered the host with pride. Oh, how the scent of juice and flesh carried succulence on the wisps of steam lifting into the air. Appetites would be whet without compromise. He just hoped there would be enough to go around.

“Fast food at its finest,” celebrated the arriving Dominic, with youthful joy.

“It’s always better when the skin’s still on” Steven’s paternal voice confirmed the thoughts of fellow feasters as they tugged gannet-like at the carcass.

The exuberance of the picnickers was not passing unnoticed. Magnus, magnificent in tuxedo, observed curiously from the corner of his black-bead eye. He cocked his head a centimetre or two, then cackled a feigned indifference. He was manifestly aware his presence had been noted, but enjoyed the cloak-and-dagger of it all too much to make a move just yet.

In any case, it was the arrival of other unwelcome visitors that had caught the attention of the host. Both arrived together, clad in funeral black and in turn dipping in and out of church wall shadows.

“Russell’s here,” Steven warned his colleagues; “Sheryl, too.”

Most were too engrossed in the banquet before them to pay any attention. Dominic, heir apparent, was not amongst them.

“Shall I have a word,” he offered, menace etched across the shoulders he stretched wide in scuffle-ready anticipation.

Father Steven looked around. “Not yet,” he said. “And I see Mr Cousin’s here too now. Didn’t think this was his sort of party. You can’t keep anything a secret round here.”

“No,” said Dominic. “At least he has the sense to keep a distance. Not sure the red shirt was called for, mind ...” He noticed a sudden look of alarm fill his father’s eyes. “What?”

The time for explanation evaporated in the instant the question was asked. Steven squawked alarm.

“INCOMING!”

The mechanical roar of engine came as suddenly as Steven’s call. A cloud of white rose high into the air as two heavy tyres of rubber ripped through the banquet, scattering morsels across the ring road in its wake.

“Well,” sighed Steven from the wall of the multi-storey carpark. “Looks like that’s that then. We’d barely started and all.”

Dominic gave a wry shrug. “Indeed. And poor Rat ... if it wasn’t dead before, it certainly is now. Shall I go and check the Chapel Street menu?”

