

THE RECORD-BREAKING NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

RICHARD OSMAN



'So smart
and funny.
Deplorably good'

IAN RANKIN

The Thursday MURDER Club

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A THURSDAY MURDER CLUB MYSTERY



RICHARD
OSMAN

The
Thursday
MURDER
Club



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To my mum, ‘the last surviving Brenda’, with love

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Killing someone is easy. Hiding the body, now that's usually the hard part. That's how you get caught.

I was lucky enough to stumble upon the right place, though. The perfect place, really.

I come back from time to time, just to make sure everything is still safe and sound. It always is, and I suppose it always will be.

Sometimes I'll have a cigarette, which I know I shouldn't, but it's my only vice.

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PART ONE

*Meet New People
and
Try New Things*

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Joyce

Well, let's start with Elizabeth, shall we? And see where that gets us?

I knew who she was, of course; everybody here knows Elizabeth. She has one of the three-bed flats in Larkin Court. It's the one on the corner, with the decking? Also, I was once on a quiz team with Stephen, who, for a number of reasons, is Elizabeth's third husband.

I was at lunch, this is two or three months ago, and it must have been a Monday, because it was shepherd's pie. Elizabeth said she could see that I was eating, but wanted to ask me a question about knife wounds, if it wasn't inconvenient?

I said, 'Not at all, of course, please,' or words to that effect. I won't always remember everything exactly, I might as well tell you that now. So she opened a manila folder, and I saw some typed sheets and the edges of what looked like old photographs. Then she was straight into it.

Elizabeth asked me to imagine that a girl had been stabbed with a knife. I asked what sort of knife she had been stabbed with, and Elizabeth said probably just a normal kitchen knife. John Lewis. She didn't say that, but that was what I pictured. Then she asked me to imagine this girl had been stabbed, three or four times, just under the breastbone. In and out, in and out, very nasty, but without severing an artery. She was fairly quiet about the whole thing, because people were eating, and she does have some boundaries.

So there I was, imagining stab wounds, and Elizabeth asked me how long it would take the girl to bleed to death.

By the way, I realize I should have mentioned that I was a nurse for many years, otherwise none of this will make sense to you. Elizabeth would have known that from somewhere, because Elizabeth knows everything. Anyway, that's why she was asking me. You must have wondered what I was on about. I will get the hang of writing this, I promise.

I remember dabbing at my mouth before I answered, like you see on television sometimes. It makes you look cleverer, try it. I asked what the girl had weighed.

Elizabeth found the information in her folder, followed her finger and read out that the girl had been forty-six kilos. Which threw us both, because neither of us was sure what forty-six kilos was in real money. In my head I was thinking it must be about twenty-three stone? Two to one was my thinking. Even as I thought that, though, I suspected I was getting mixed up with inches and centimetres.

Elizabeth let me know the girl definitely wasn't twenty-three stone, as she had a picture of her corpse in the folder. She tapped the folder at me, before turning her attention back to the room, and said, 'Will somebody ask Bernard what forty-six kilos is?'

Bernard always sits by himself, on one of the smaller tables nearest the patio. It is Table 8. You don't need to know that, but I will tell you a bit about Bernard.

Bernard Cottle was very kind to me when I first arrived at Coopers Chase. He brought me a clematis cutting and explained the recycling timetable. They have four different coloured bins here. Four! Thanks to Bernard, I know that green is for glass, and blue is cardboard and paper. As for red and black, though, your guess is still as good as mine. I've seen all sorts as I've wandered about. Someone once put a fax machine in one.

Bernard had been a professor, something in science, and had worked all around the world, including going to Dubai before anyone had heard of it. True to form, he was wearing a suit and tie to lunch, but was, nevertheless, reading the *Daily Express*. Mary from Ruskin Court, who was at the next table, got his attention and asked how much forty-six kilos was when it was at home.

Bernard nodded and called over to Elizabeth, ‘Seven stone three and a bit.’

And that’s Bernard for you.

Elizabeth thanked him and said that sounded about right, and Bernard returned to his crossword. I looked up centimetres and inches afterwards, and at least I was right about that.

Elizabeth went back to her question. How long would the girl stabbed with the kitchen knife have to live? I guessed that, unattended, she would probably die in around forty-five minutes.

‘Well, quite, Joyce,’ she said, and then had another question. What if the girl had had medical assistance? Not a doctor, but someone who could patch up a wound. Someone who’d been in the army, perhaps. Someone like that.

I have seen a lot of stab wounds in my time. My job wasn’t all sprained ankles. So I said then, well, she wouldn’t die at all. Which she wouldn’t. It wouldn’t have been fun for her, but it would have been easy to patch up.

Elizabeth was nodding away, and said that was precisely what she had told Ibrahim, although I didn’t know Ibrahim at that time. As I say, this was a couple of months ago.

It hadn’t seemed at all right to Elizabeth, and her view was that the boyfriend had killed her. I know this is still often the case. You read about it.

I think before I moved in I might have found this whole conversation unusual, but it’s pretty par for the course once

you get to know everyone here. Last week I met the man who invented Mint Choc Chip ice cream, or so he tells it. I don't really have any way of checking.

I was glad to have helped Elizabeth in my small way, so decided I might ask a favour. I asked if there was any way I could take a look at the picture of the corpse. Just out of professional interest.

Elizabeth beamed, the way people around here beam when you ask to look at pictures of their grandchildren graduating. She slipped an A4 photocopy out of her folder, laid it, face down, in front of me and told me to keep it, as they all had copies.

I told her that was very kind of her, and she said not at all, but she wondered if she could ask me one final question.

'Of course,' I said.

Then she said, 'Are you ever free on Thursdays?'

And, that, believe it or not, was the first I had heard of Thursdays.

PC Donna De Freitas would like to have a gun. She would like to be chasing serial killers into abandoned warehouses, grimly getting the job done, despite a fresh bullet wound in her shoulder. Perhaps developing a taste for whisky and having an affair with her partner.

But for now, twenty-six years old, and sitting down for lunch at 11.45 in the morning, with four pensioners she has only just met, Donna understands that she will have to work her way up to all that. And besides, she has to admit that the last hour or so has been rather fun.

Donna has given her talk 'Practical Tips for Home Security' many times. And today there was the usual audience of older people, blankets across knees, free biscuits, and a few happy snoozers at the back. She gives the same advice each time. The absolute, paramount importance of installing window locks, checking ID cards and never giving out personal information to cold callers. More than anything, she is supposed to be a reassuring presence in a terrifying world. Donna understands that, and it also gets her out of both the station and paperwork, so she volunteers. Fairhaven Police Station is sleepier than Donna is used to.

Today, however, she had found herself at Coopers Chase Retirement Village. It seemed innocuous enough. Lush, untroubled, sedate, and on her drive in she had spotted a nice pub for lunch on the way home. So getting serial killers in headlocks on speedboats would have to wait.

'Security,' Donna had begun, though she was really

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thinking about whether she should get a tattoo. A dolphin on her lower back? Or would that be too much of a cliché? And would it be painful? Probably, but she was supposed to be a police officer, wasn't she? 'What do we mean when we say the word "security"?' Well, I think that word means different things to different . . .'

A hand shot up in the front row. Which was not normally how this went, but in for a penny. An immaculately dressed woman in her eighties had a point to make.

'Dear, I think we're all hoping this won't be a talk about window locks.' The woman looked around her, picking up murmured support.

A gentleman hemmed in by a walking frame in the second row was next. 'And no ID cards please, we know about ID cards. Are you really from the Gas Board, or are you a burglar? We've got it, I promise.'

A free-for-all had commenced.

'It's not the Gas Board any more. It's Centrica,' said a man in a very good three-piece suit.

The man sitting next to him, wearing shorts, flip-flops and a West Ham United shirt, took this opportunity to stand up and stab a finger in no particular direction, 'It's thanks to Thatcher that, Ibrahim. We used to own it.'

'Oh do sit down, Ron,' the smartly dressed woman had said. Then looked at Donna and added, 'Sorry about Ron,' with a slow shake of her head. The comments had continued to fly.

'And what criminal wouldn't be able to forge an ID document?'

'I've got cataracts. You could show me a library card and I'd let you in.'

'They don't even check the meter now. It's all on the web.'

'It's on the cloud, dear'

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‘I’d welcome a burglar. It would be nice to have a visitor.’

There had been the briefest of lulls. An atonal symphony of whistles began as some hearing aids were turned up, while others were switched off. The woman in the front row had taken charge again.

‘So . . . and I’m Elizabeth, by the way . . . no window locks, please, and no ID cards, and no need to tell us we mustn’t give our PIN number to Nigerians over the phone. If I am still allowed to say Nigerians.’

Donna De Freitas had regrouped, but was aware she was no longer thinking about pub lunches or tattoos – now she was thinking about a riot training course back in the good, old days in south London.

‘Well, what shall we talk about then?’ Donna had asked. ‘I have to do at least forty-five minutes or I don’t get the time off in lieu.’

‘Institutional sexism in the police force?’ said Elizabeth.

‘I’d like to talk about the illegal shooting of Mark Duggan, sanctioned by the state and –’

‘Sit down, Ron!’

So it went on, enjoyably and agreeably, until the hour was up, whereupon Donna had been warmly thanked, shown pictures of grandchildren and then invited to stay for lunch.

And so here she is, picking at her salad, in what the menu describes as a ‘contemporary upscale restaurant’. A quarter to twelve is a little early for her to have lunch, but it wouldn’t have been polite to refuse the invitation. She notes that her four hosts are not only tucking in to full lunches, but have also cracked open a bottle of red wine.

‘That really was wonderful, Donna’, says Elizabeth. ‘We enjoyed it tremendously.’ Elizabeth looks to Donna like the sort of teacher who terrifies you all year but then gets you a grade A and cries when you leave. Perhaps it’s the tweed jacket.

‘It was blinding, Donna,’ says Ron. ‘Can I call you Donna, love?’

‘You can call me Donna, but maybe don’t call me love,’ says Donna.

‘Quite right, darling,’ agrees Ron. ‘Noted. That story about the Ukrainian with the parking ticket and the chainsaw, though? You should do after-dinner speaking, there’s money in it. I know someone, if you’d like a number?’

The salad is delicious, thinks Donna, and it’s not often she thinks that.

‘I would have made a terrific heroin smuggler, I think.’ This was Ibrahim, who had earlier raised the point about Centrica. ‘It’s just logistics, isn’t it? There’s all the weighing too, which I would enjoy, very precise. And they have machines to count money. All the mod cons. Have you ever captured a heroin dealer, PC De Freitas?’

‘No,’ admits Donna. ‘It’s on my list, though.’

‘But I’m right that they have machines to count money?’ asks Ibrahim.

‘They do, yes,’ says Donna.

‘Wonderful,’ says Ibrahim, and downs his glass of wine.

‘We bore easily,’ adds Elizabeth, also polishing off a glass. ‘God save us from window locks, WPC De Freitas.’

‘It’s just PC now,’ says Donna.

‘I see,’ says Elizabeth, lips pursing. ‘And what happens if I still choose to say WPC? Will there be a warrant for my arrest?’

‘No, but I’ll think a bit less of you,’ says Donna. ‘Because it’s a really simple thing to do, and it’s more respectful to me.’

‘Damn! Checkmate. OK,’ says Elizabeth, and unpurses her lips.

‘Thank you,’ says Donna.

‘Guess how old I am?’ challenges Ibrahim.

Donna hesitates. Ibrahim has a nice suit, and he has great

skin. He smells wonderful. A handkerchief is artfully folded in his breast pocket. Hair thinning, but still there. No paunch, and just the one chin. And yet underneath it all? Hmmm. Donna looks at Ibrahim's hands. Always the giveaway.

'Eighty?' she ventures.

She sees the wind depart Ibrahim's sails. 'Yes, spot on, but I look younger. I look about seventy-four. Everyone agrees. The secret is Pilates.'

'And what's your story, Joyce?' asks Donna to the fourth member of the group, a small, white-haired woman in a lavender blouse and mauve cardigan. She is sitting very happily, taking it all in. Mouth closed, but eyes bright. Like a quiet bird, constantly on the lookout for something sparkling in the sunshine.

'Me?' says Joyce. 'No story at all. I was a nurse, and then a mum, and then a nurse again. Nothing to see here I'm afraid.'

Elizabeth gives a short snort. 'Don't be taken in by Joyce, PC De Freitas. She is the type who "gets things done".'

'I'm just organized,' says Joyce. 'It's out of fashion. If I say I'm going to Zumba, I go to Zumba. That's just me. My daughter is the interesting one in the family. She runs a hedge fund, if you know what one is?'

'Not really,' admits Donna.

'No,' agrees Joyce.

'Zumba is before Pilates,' says Ibrahim. 'I don't like to do both. It's counter-intuitive to your major muscle groups.'

A question has been nagging at Donna throughout lunch. 'So, if you don't mind me asking, I know you all live at Coopers Chase, but how did the four of you become friends?'

'Friends?' Elizabeth seems amused. 'Oh, we're not friends, dear.'

Ron is chuckling. 'Christ, love, no, we're not friends. Do you need a top-up, Liz?'

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Elizabeth nods and Ron pours. They are on a second bottle. It is 12.15.

Ibrahim agrees. 'I don't think friends is the word. We wouldn't choose to socialize, we have very different interests. I like Ron, I suppose, but he can be very difficult.'

Ron nods, 'I'm very difficult.'

'And Elizabeth's manner is off-putting.'

Elizabeth nods, 'There it is I'm afraid. I've always been an acquired taste. Since school.'

'I like Joyce, I suppose. I think we all like Joyce,' says Ibrahim.

Ron and Elizabeth nod their agreement again.

'Thank you, I'm sure,' says Joyce, chasing peas around her plate. 'Don't you think someone should invent flat peas?'

Donna tries to clear up her confusion.

'So if you aren't friends, then what are you?'

Donna sees Joyce look up and shake her head at the others, this unlikely gang. 'Well,' says Joyce. 'Firstly, we *are* friends, of course; this lot are just a little slow catching on. And secondly, if it didn't say on your invitation, PC De Freitas, then it was my oversight. We're the Thursday Murder Club.'

Elizabeth is going glassy-eyed with red wine, Ron is scratching at a 'West Ham' tattoo on his neck and Ibrahim is polishing an already-polished cufflink.

The restaurant is filling up around them, and Donna is not the first visitor to Coopers Chase to think this wouldn't be the worst place to live. She would kill for a glass of wine and an afternoon off.

'Also, I swim every day,' concludes Ibrahim. 'It keeps the skin tight.'

What *is* this place?

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If you are ever minded to take the A21 out of Fairhaven, and head into the heart of the Kentish Weald, you will eventually pass an old phone box, still working, on a sharp left-hand bend. Continue for around a hundred yards until you see the sign for 'Whitechurch, Abbots Hatch and Lents Hill', and then take a right. Head through Lents Hill, past the Blue Dragon and the little farm shop with the big egg outside, until you reach the small stone bridge over the Robertsmere. Officially the Robertsmere is a river, but don't get confused and expect anything grand.

Take the single-track right turn just past the bridge. You will think you are headed the wrong way, but this is quicker than the way the official brochure takes you, and also picturesque if you like dappled hedgerows. Eventually the road widens out and, peeking between tall trees, you will begin to see signs of life rising on the hilly land up to your left. Up ahead you will see a tiny, wood-clad bus stop, also still working, if one bus in either direction a day counts as working. Just before you reach the bus stop you will see the entrance sign for Coopers Chase on your left.

They began work on Coopers Chase about ten years ago, when the Catholic Church sold the land. The first residents, Ron, for one, had moved in three years later. It was billed as 'Britain's First Luxury Retirement Village', though according to Ibrahim, who has checked, it was actually the seventh. There are currently around 300 residents. You can't move here until you're over sixty-five, and the Waitrose delivery

vans clink with wine and repeat prescriptions every time they pass over the cattle grid.

The old convent dominates Coopers Chase, with three modern residential developments spiralling out from this central point. For over a hundred years the convent was a hushed building, filled with the dry bustle of habits and the quiet certainty of prayers offered and answered. Tapping along its dark corridors you would have found some women comfortable in their serenity, some women frightened of a speeding world, some women hiding, some women proving a vague, long-forgotten point and some women taking joy in serving a higher purpose. You would have found single beds, arranged in dorms; long, low tables for eating; a chapel so dark and quiet you would swear you heard God breathing. In short, you would find the Sisters of the Holy Church, an army which would never give you up, which would feed you and clothe you and continue to need and value you. All it required in return was a lifetime of devotion, and, given there will always be someone requiring that, there were always volunteers. And then one day you would take the short trip up the hill, through the tunnel of trees, to the Garden of Eternal Rest – the iron gates and low stone walls of the Garden looking over the convent and the endless beauty of the Kentish High Weald beyond, your body in another single bed, under a simple stone, alongside the Sister Margarets and Sister Marys of the generations before you. If you had once had dreams they could now play over the green hills, and if you had secrets then they were kept safe inside the four walls of the convent for ever.

Well, more accurately, three walls, as the west-facing side of the convent is now entirely glazed to accommodate the residents' swimming-pool complex. It looks out over the bowling green, and then further down to the visitors' car park, the

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permits for which are rationed to such an extent that the Parking Committee is the single most powerful cabal within Coopers Chase.

Beside the swimming pool is a small ‘arthritis therapy pool’, which looks like a Jacuzzi, largely for the reason that it is a Jacuzzi. Anyone given the grand tour by the owner, Ian Ventham, would then be shown the sauna. Ian would always open the door a crack and say, ‘Blimey, it’s like a sauna in there.’ That was Ian.

Take the lift up to the recreation rooms next. The gym, and the exercise studio, where residents could happily Zumba among the ghosts of the single beds. Then there’s the Jigsaw Room for gentler activities and associations. There’s the library, and the lounge for the bigger and more controversial committee meetings, or for football on the flat-screen TV. Then down again to the ground floor, where the long low tables of the convent refectory are now the ‘contemporary upscale restaurant’.

At the very heart of the village, attached to the convent, is the original chapel. Its pale cream stucco exterior makes it look almost Mediterranean against the fierce, Gothic darkness of the convent. The chapel remains intact and unchanged, one of the few covenants insisted upon by the executors of the Sisters of the Holy Church when they had sold out ten years ago. The residents like to use the chapel. This is where the ghosts are, where the habits still bustle and where the whispers have sunk into the stone. It is a place to make you feel part of something slower and something gentler. Ian Ventham is looking into contractual loopholes that might allow him to redevelop the chapel into eight more flats.

Attached to the other side of the convent – the very reason for the convent – is Willows. Willows is now the nursing home for the village. It had been established by the Sisters in

1841 as a voluntary hospital, charitably tending to the sick and broken when no other option existed. In the latter part of the last century it had become a care home, until legislation in the 1980s led to the doors finally closing. The convent then simply became a waiting room, and when the last nun passed away in 2005, the Church wasted no time in cashing in and selling it as a job lot.

The development sits in twelve acres of woodland and beautiful open hillside. There are two small lakes, one real, and one created by Ian Ventham's builder, Tony Curran, and his gang. The many ducks and geese that also call Coopers Chase home seem to much prefer the artificial one. There are still sheep farmed at the very top of the hill, where the woodland breaks, and in the pastures by the lake is a herd of twenty llamas. Ian Ventham had bought two to look quirky in sales photos and it had got out of hand, as these things do.

That, in a nutshell, is what this place is.

Joyce

I first kept a diary many years ago, but I've looked back at it, and I don't think it would be of any interest to you. Unless you're interested in Haywards Heath in the 1970s, which I am going to assume you're not. That is no offence to either Haywards Heath or the 1970s, both of which I enjoyed at the time.

But a couple of days ago, after meeting Elizabeth, I went to my first ever meeting of the Thursday Murder Club, and I have been thinking that perhaps it might be interesting to write about. Like whoever wrote that diary about Holmes and Watson? People love a murder, whatever they might say in public, so I will give it a go.

I knew the Thursday Murder Club was going to be Elizabeth, Ibrahim Arif, who lives in Wordsworth, with a wraparound balcony, and Ron Ritchie. Yes, *that* Ron Ritchie. So that was something else exciting. Now I know him a bit better, the shine has worn off a little, but even so.

Penny Gray also used to be part of it, but she is now in Willows, that's the nursing home. Thinking about it now, I fitted right in. I suppose there had been a vacancy, and I was the new Penny.

I was nervous at the time, though. I remember that. I took along a nice bottle of wine (£8.99, to give you an idea), and as I walked in, the three of them were already there in the Jigsaw Room, laying out photographs on the table.

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Elizabeth had formed the Thursday Murder Club with Penny. Penny had been an inspector in the Kent Police for many years, and she would bring along the files of unsolved murder cases. She wasn't really supposed to have the files, but who was to know? After a certain age, you can pretty much do whatever takes your fancy. No one tells you off, except for your doctors and your children.

I'm not supposed to say what Elizabeth used to do for a living, even though she does go on about it herself at times. Suffice to say though, that murders and investigations and what have you wouldn't be unfamiliar work for her.

Elizabeth and Penny would go through every file, line by line, study every photograph, read every witness statement, just looking for anything that had been missed. They didn't like to think there were guilty people still happily going about their business. Sitting in their gardens, doing a sudoku, knowing they had got away with murder.

Also, I think that Penny and Elizabeth just thoroughly enjoyed it. A few glasses of wine and a mystery. Very social, but also gory. It is good fun.

They would meet every Thursday (that's how they came up with the name). It was Thursday because there was a two-hour slot free in the Jigsaw Room, between Art History and Conversational French. It was booked, and still is booked, under the name Japanese Opera – A Discussion, which ensured they were always left in peace.

There were certain favours both of them could call upon, for different reasons, and all sorts of people had been called in for a friendly chat over the years. Forensics officers, accountants and judges, tree surgeons, horse-breeders, glass-blowers – they'd all been to the Jigsaw Room. Whomever Elizabeth and Penny thought might help them with some query or other. **Copyrighted Material**

Ibrahim had soon joined them. He used to play bridge with Penny, and had helped them out once or twice with bits and bobs. He's a psychiatrist. Or was a psychiatrist. Or still is, I'm not quite sure. When you first meet him you can't see that at all, but once you get to know him it makes a sort of sense. I would never have therapy, because who wants to unravel all that knitting? Not worth the risk, thank you. My daughter, Joanna, has a therapist, although you'd be hard pushed to know why if you saw the size of her house. Either way, Ibrahim no longer plays bridge, which I think is a shame.

Ron had all but invited himself, which won't surprise you. He wasn't buying Japanese Opera for a second and walked into the Jigsaw Room one Thursday, wanting to know what was afoot. Elizabeth admires suspicion above all else and invited Ron to flick through the file of a scoutmaster found burned to death in 1982, in woodland just off the A27. She soon spotted Ron's key strength, namely, he never believes a single word anyone ever tells him. Elizabeth now says that reading police files in the certain knowledge that the police are lying to you is surprisingly effective.

It is called the Jigsaw Room, by the way, because this is where the bigger jigsaws are completed, on a gently sloping wooden table in the centre of the room. When I first walked in, there was a 2,000-piecer of Whitstable harbour, missing a letterbox of sky. I once went to Whitstable, just for the day, but I couldn't really see what the fuss was all about. Once you've done the oysters, there's no real shopping to speak of.

Anyway, Ibrahim had put a thick perspex screen over the jigsaw, and this is where he, Elizabeth and Ron were laying out the autopsy photos of the poor girl. The one who Elizabeth thought had been killed by her boyfriend. This particular boyfriend was bitter at being invalidated out from the army, but there's always something, isn't there?

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We all have a sob story, but we don't all go around killing people.

Elizabeth told me to shut the door behind me and come and take a look at some pictures.

Ibrahim introduced himself, shook my hand and told me there were biscuits. He explained that there were two layers, but they tried to finish the top layer before they started the bottom layer. I told him he was preaching to the converted there.

Ron took my wine and put it by the biscuits. He nodded at the label and commented that it was a white. He then gave me a kiss on the cheek, which gave me pause for thought.

I know you might think that a kiss on the cheek is normal, but from men in their seventies it isn't. The only men who kiss you on the cheek are sons-in-law or people like that. So I had Ron down as a quick worker straight away.

I found out that the famous trade union leader Ron Ritchie lived in the village when he and Penny's husband, John, nursed an injured fox back to health and called it Scargill. The story had featured in the village newsletter when I first arrived. Given that John had been a vet and Ron was, well, Ron, I suspected that John had done the nursing and Ron had simply been on naming duties.

The newsletter, by the way, is called *Cut to the Chase*, which is a pun.

We all crowded around the autopsy photos. The poor girl, and that wound that should never have killed her, even back in those days. The boyfriend had bolted from Penny's squad car on the way to a police interview and hadn't been seen since. He had given Penny a belt for her troubles too. No surprises there. If you hit women, you hit women.

Even if he hadn't run off, I suppose he would have got away with it. I know you still read about these things all the time, but it was even worse back then.

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The Thursday Murder Club wasn't about to magically bring him to justice; I think everyone knew that. Penny and Elizabeth had solved all sorts of cases to their own satisfaction, but that was as far as they could go.

So I suppose you could say that Penny and Elizabeth never really got their wish. All those murderers remained unpunished, all still out there, listening to the shipping forecast somewhere. They had got away with it, as some people do, I'm afraid. The older you get, the more you have to come to terms with that.

Anyway, that's just me being philosophical, which will get us nowhere.

Last Thursday was the first time it was the four of us. Elizabeth, Ibrahim, Ron and me. And, as I say, it seemed very natural. As if I was completing their jigsaw again.

I will leave the diary there for now. There is a big meeting in the village tomorrow. I help to put the chairs out for these sorts of things. I volunteer, because (a) it makes me look helpful and (b) it gives me first dibs at the refreshments.

The meeting is a consultation about a new development at Coopers Chase. Ian Ventham, the big boss, is coming to talk to us about it. I try to be honest where I can, so I hope you don't mind me saying I don't like him. He's all the things that can go wrong with a man if you leave him to his own devices.

There has been a fearsome hoo-ha about the new development, because they're chopping down trees and uprooting a graveyard, and there's a rumour of wind turbines. Ron is looking forward to causing a bit of trouble, and I am looking forward to watching him do that.

From now on I promise to try to write something every day. I will keep my fingers crossed that something happens.

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The Waitrose in Tunbridge Wells has a café. Ian Ventham parks his Range Rover in the last empty disabled bay outside, not because he's disabled but because it's nearest to the door.

Walking in, he spots Bogdan by the window. Ian owes Bogdan £4,000. He has been stalling for a while, in the hope that Bogdan is thrown out of the country, but thus far, no luck. Anyway, he now has a real job for him, so it's all worked out OK. He gives the Pole a wave and approaches the counter. He scans the chalkboard, looking for a coffee.

'Is all your coffee fair trade?'

'Yes, all fair trade,' smiles the young woman serving.

'Shame,' says Ian. He doesn't want to pay an extra fifteen pence to help someone he'll never meet in a country he'll never go to. 'Cup of tea please. Almond milk.'

Bogdan isn't Ian's biggest worry that day. If he ends up having to pay him, then so be it. Ian's biggest worry is being killed by Tony Curran.

Ian takes his tea over to the table, spotting anyone over sixty as he goes. Over sixty, and with Waitrose money? Give them ten years, he thinks. He wishes he'd brought some brochures.

Ian will deal with Tony Curran as and when, but right now he has to deal with Bogdan. The good news is that Bogdan doesn't want to kill him. Ian sits down.

'What's all this about two grand, Bogdan?' Ian asks.

Bogdan is drinking from a two-litre bottle of Lilt he has

smuggled in. 'Four thousand. Is pretty cheap to retile a swimming pool. I don't know if you know that?'

'Only cheap if you do a good job, Bogdan,' says Ian. 'The grouting's discoloured. Look. I asked for coral white.'

Ian takes out his phone, scrolls through to a photo of his new pool and shows it to Bogdan.

'No, that is filter, let's take off filter.' Bogdan presses a button and the image immediately brightens. 'Coral white. You know it.'

Ian nods. Worth a try though. Sometimes you have to know when to pay up.

Ian takes an envelope out of his pocket. 'All right, Bogdan, fair's fair. Here's three grand. That do you?'

Bogdan looks weary. 'Three grand, sure.'

Ian hands it over. 'It's actually two thousand eight hundred, but that's near enough between friends. Now, I wanted to ask you about something.'

'Sure,' says Bogdan, pocketing the money.

'You seem a bright lad, Bogdan?'

Bogdan shrugs. 'Well, I speak fluent Polish.'

'Whenever I ask you to do something, it gets done, and it gets done pretty well, and pretty cheap,' says Ian.

'Thank you,' says Bogdan.

'So I'm just wondering. You ready for something bigger, you think?'

'Sure,' says Bogdan.

'A lot bigger, though?' says Ian.

'Sure,' says Bogdan. 'Big is the same as small. There's just more of it.'

'Good lad,' says Ian, and drains the last of his tea. 'I'm on my way to fire Tony Curran. And I need someone to step up and take his place. You fancy that?'

Bogdan gives a low whistle.

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‘Too much for you?’ asks Ian.

Bogdan shakes his head. ‘No, not too much for me, I can do the job. I just think that if you fire Tony, maybe he kills you.’

Ian nods. ‘I know. But you let me worry about that. And tomorrow the job’s all yours.’

‘If you’re alive, sure,’ says Bogdan.

Time to go. Ian shakes Bogdan’s hand and turns his mind to telling Tony Curran the bad news.

There’s a consultation meeting down at Coopers Chase, and he has to listen to what all the old people have to say. Nod politely, wear a tie, call them by their first names. People lap that sort of thing up. He’s invited Tony along, so he can fire him straight afterwards. Out in the open air, with witnesses nearby.

There is a ten per cent chance that Tony will kill him on the spot. But that means there is a ninety per cent chance that he won’t, and, given how much money it will make Ian, he is comfortable with those odds. Risk and reward.

As Ian gets outside, he hears beeping and sees a woman on a mobility scooter furiously pointing at his Range Rover with a cane.

I was there first, love, thinks Ian, as he steps into the car. What is wrong with some people?

As he drives, Ian listens to a motivational audiobook called *Kill or Be Killed – Using the Lessons of the Battlefield in the Boardroom*. Apparently it was written by someone in the Israeli Special Forces, and it had been recommended to him by one of the personal trainers at the Virgin Active in Tunbridge Wells. Ian isn’t certain if the personal trainer himself is Israeli, but he looks like he’s from there or thereabouts.

As the midday sun fails to force its way through the illegally tinted windows of the Range Rover, Ian starts to think about Tony Curran again. They’ve been very good for

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each other over the years, Ian and Tony. Ian would buy up tattered and tired old houses, big ones. Tony would gut them, divide them up, put in the ramps and the handrails, and on they'd go to the next one. The care-home business boomed, and Ian built his fortune. He kept a few, he sold a few, he bought a few more.

Ian takes a smoothie from the Range Rover's ice box. The ice box had not come as standard. A mechanic in Faversham had fitted it for him, while he was gold-plating the glove box. It is Ian's regular smoothie. A punnet of raspberries, a fistful of spinach, Icelandic yoghurt (Finnish, if they are out of Icelandic), spirulina, wheatgrass, acerola cherry powder, chlor-ella, kelp, acai extract, cocoa nibs, zinc, beetroot essence, chia seeds, mango zest and ginger. It is his own invention, and he calls it Keep It Simple.

He checks his watch. About ten minutes until he gets to Coopers Chase. Get the meeting done, then break the news to Tony. This morning he had googled 'stab-proof vests', but the same-day delivery option had been unavailable. Amazon Prime? They must think he's a mug.

He's sure it will be fine, though. And great news that Bogdan's on board to take over. A seamless transition. And cheaper, of course, which is the whole point.

Ian had worked out very early on that he needed to take his business upmarket if he wanted to make real money. The worst thing was when clients died. There was admin, rooms left earning nothing as new clients were found and, worst of all, you'd have to deal with the families. Now, the richer a client was, by and large the longer they would live. Also, the richer they were, the less often their family would visit, as they tended to live in London, or New York, or Santiago. So Ian moved upmarket, transforming his company, Autumn Sunset Care Homes, into Home from Home Independent

Living, concentrating on fewer, bigger, properties. Tony Curran hadn't blinked an eye. What Tony didn't know he would quickly learn, and no wet room, electronic key card or communal barbecue pit could faze him. It seemed a shame to let him go really, but there it was.

Ian passes the wooden bus stop on his right, and turns into the entrance to Coopers Chase. As so often, he follows a delivery van over the cattle grid, and is stuck behind it all the way up the long driveway. Taking in the view on the way, he shakes his head. So many llamas. You live and learn.

Ian parks up and makes sure his parking permit is correctly and prominently displayed, on the left-hand side of his windscreen, with permit number and expiration date clearly showing. Ian has been in all sorts of scrapes with all sorts of authorities over the years, and the only two that have ever truly rattled him are the Russian Import Tax Investigation Authority and the Coopers Chase Parking Committee. Worth it, though. Whatever money he had made before, Coopers Chase had been in another league entirely. Ian and Tony both knew it. A waterfall of money. Which, of course, was the source of today's problem.

Coopers Chase. Twelve acres of beautiful countryside, with permission to build up to 400 retirement flats. Nothing there but an empty convent, and someone's sheep up on the hill. An old friend of his had bought the land off a priest a few years before, then suddenly needed some quick cash to fight off extradition proceedings due to a misunderstanding. Ian did the sums and realized this was a leap worth taking. But Tony had done the sums too, and decided to make a leap of his own. Which is why Tony Curran now owned twenty-five per cent of everything that he built at Coopers Chase. Ian had felt compelled to agree to the terms because Tony had never been anything but loyal to him, and also because

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Tony had made it clear he would break both of Ian's arms if he refused. Ian had seen Tony break people's arms before, and so they were now partners.

Not for long, though. Surely Tony knew it couldn't last? Anyone can build a luxury apartment really – strip to the waist, listen to Magic FM, dig out some foundations or shout at a bricklayer. Easy work. But not everyone has the vision to *oversee* someone building luxury apartments. With the new development about to start, what better time for Tony to learn his true value?

Ian Ventham feels emboldened. Kill or be killed.

Ian gets out of the car, and as he blinks into the sudden glare of the sun, he just catches the aftertaste of beetroot essence that was one of the key obstacles to him launching Keep It Simple as a commercial proposition. He could leave the beetroot essence out, but it was essential to pancreatic health.

Sunglasses on. And so to business. Ian is not planning on dying today.

Ron Ritchie is, as so often, having none of it. He is jabbing a practised finger at a copy of his lease. He knows it looks good, it always does, but Ron can feel his finger shaking, and the lease shaking. He waves the lease in the air to hide the shakes. His voice has lost none of its power, though.

‘Now here’s a quote. And it’s your words, Mr Ventham, not my words. “Coopers Chase Holding Investments reserves the right to develop further residential possibilities on the site, in *consultation* with current residents”’.

Ron’s big frame hints at the physical power he must once have had. The chassis is all still there, like a bull-nosed truck rusting in a field. His face, wide and open, is ready at a second’s notice to be outraged or incredulous, or whatever else might be required. Whatever might help.

‘That’s what this is,’ says Ian Ventham, as if talking to a child. ‘This is the consultation meeting. You’re the residents. Consult all you like, for the next twenty minutes.’

Ventham sits at a trestle table at the front of the Residents’ Lounge. He is teak-tanned, relaxed and has his sunglasses pushed up over his 1980s catalogue-model hair. He is wearing an expensive polo shirt, and a watch so large it might as well be a clock. He looks like he smells great, but you wouldn’t really want to get close enough to find out for certain.

Ventham is flanked by a woman around fifteen years his junior and a tattooed man in a sleeveless vest, scrolling through his phone. The woman is the development architect; the tattooed man is Tony Curran. Ron has seen Curran

around, has heard about him too. Ibrahim is writing down every word that's said as Ron continues to jab in Ventham's direction.

'I'm not falling for that old bull, Ventham. This ain't a consultation, it's an ambush.'

Joyce decides to chip in. 'You tell him, Ron.'

Ron fully intends to.

'Thanks, Joyce. You're calling it "The Woodlands", even though you're cutting down all the trees. That's rich, old son. You've got your nice little computer pictures, all done up, sun shining, fluffy clouds, little ducks swimming on ponds. You can prove anything with computers, son; we wanted to see a proper scale model. With model trees and little people.'

This gets a ripple of applause. A lot of people had wanted to see a scale model, but according to Ian Ventham it wasn't the done thing these days. Ron continues.

'And you've chosen, deliberately chosen, a woman architect, so I won't be allowed to shout.'

'You are shouting though, Ron,' says Elizabeth, who is two seats away, reading a newspaper.

'Don't you tell me when I'm shouting, Elizabeth,' shouts Ron. 'This geezer'll know when I'm shouting. Look at him, dressed up like Tony Blair. Why don't you bomb the Iraqis while you're at it, Ventham?'

Good line, thinks Ron, as Ibrahim dutifully writes it down for the record.

Back in the days when he was in the papers, they called him 'Red Ron', though everyone was 'Red' something in those days. Ron's picture was rarely in the papers without the caption 'talks between the two sides collapsed late last night'. A veteran of picket lines and police cells, of blacklegs, blacklists and bust-ups, of slow-downs and sit-ins, of wildcats and walkouts, Ron had been there, warming his hands over a

brazier, with the old gang at British Leyland. Ron had seen, first-hand, the demise of the dockers. Ron had picketed Wapping as he witnessed the victory of Rupert Murdoch and the collapse of the printers. Ron had led the Kent miners up the A1 and had been arrested at Orgreave as the final resistance of the coal industry was crushed. In fact, a man less indefatigable than Ron might have considered himself a jinx. But that's the fate of the underdog, and Ron simply loved to be the underdog. If he ever found himself in a situation where he wasn't the underdog, he would twist and turn and shake that situation until he had convinced everyone that he was. But Ron had always practised what he had preached. He had always quietly helped anyone who had needed a leg-up, needed a few extra quid at Christmas, needed a suit or a solicitor for court. Anyone who, for any reason, had needed a champion, had always been safe in Ron's tattooed arms.

The tattoos are fading now, the hands are shaking, but the fire still burns.

'You know where you can shove this lease, don't you, Ventham?'

'Feel free to enlighten me,' says Ian Ventham.

Ron then starts to make a point about David Cameron and the EU referendum, but loses his thread. Ibrahim places a hand on his elbow. Ron nods the nod of a man whose work here is done and he sits, knees cracking like gunshots.

He's happy. And he notices his shakes have stopped, just for the moment. Back in the fight. There was nothing like it.

As Father Matthew Mackie slips in at the back of the lounge, a large man in a West Ham shirt is shouting about Tony Blair. There is a big turnout, as he had hoped. That's useful, plenty of objections to the Woodlands development. There had been no buffet service on the train from Bexhill, and so he is glad to see there are biscuits.

He grabs a handful when no one is looking, takes a blue plastic seat in the back row and settles himself in. The man in the tightly fitting football top is running out of steam now and, as he sits down, other hands go up. Hopefully this was a wasted trip, but it is far better to be safe than sorry. Father Mackie is aware that he is nervous. He adjusts his dog collar, runs a hand through his shock of snowy-white hair and dips into his pocket for a shortbread finger. If someone doesn't ask about the cemetery, perhaps he should. Just be brave. Remember he has a job to do.

How peculiar to be in this room! He shivers. Probably just the cold.

The consultation over, Ron is sitting with Joyce beside the bowling green, cold beers glinting in the sunshine. He is currently being distracted by a retired, one-armed jeweller from Ruskin Court, called Dennis Edmonds.

Dennis, to whom Ron has never spoken before, wants to congratulate Ron on the very salient points he made during the consultation meeting. ‘Thought-provoking, Ron, thought-provoking. Plenty to chew on there.’

Ron thanks Dennis for his kind words, and waits for the move that he knows is coming. The move that always comes.

‘And this must be your son?’ says Dennis, turning towards Jason Ritchie, also cradling a beer. ‘The champ!’

Jason smiles and nods, as polite as always. Dennis extends his arm. ‘Dennis. I’m a friend of your dad’s.’

Jason shakes the man’s hand. ‘Jason. How do you do, Dennis.’

Dennis stares for a beat, waiting for Jason to start a conversation, then nods enthusiastically. ‘Well, a pleasure to meet you, I’m a huge fan, seen all your fights. We’ll see you soon again, I hope?’

Jason nods politely again and Dennis ambles off, forgetting even to pretend to say goodbye to Ron. Father and son, well used to these interruptions, resume their conversation with Joyce.

‘Yeah, it’s called *Famous Family Trees*,’ says Jason. ‘They’ve researched the family history and they want to take me round

various places, tell me a bit about, you know, family history. Great-granny's a prostitute and all that.'

'I ain't seen it,' says Ron. 'What is it, BBC?'

'It's ITV; it's really very good, Ron,' says Joyce. 'I saw one recently, did you see it Jason, with the actor? He's the doctor from *Holby City*, but I've also seen him in a *Poirot*.'

'I didn't see it, Joyce,' says Jason.

'It was very interesting. His grandfather, it turns out, had murdered his lover. A gay lover as well. His face was a picture. Oh, you should do it, Jason.' Joyce claps. 'Imagine if Ron had a gay granddad. I'd enjoy that.'

Jason nods. 'They'd want to talk to you too, Dad. On camera. They asked if you'd be up for it, and I told them good luck shutting you up.'

Ron laughs. 'But are you really doing that *Celebrity Ice Dance* thing as well?'

'I thought it might be fun.'

'Oh, I agree,' says Joyce, finishing her beer and reaching for another.

'You're doing a lot at the moment, Son,' says Ron. 'Joyce says she saw you on *MasterChef*.'

Jason shrugs. 'You're right, Dad. I should go back to boxing.'

'I can't believe you'd never made a macaroon before, Jason,' says Joyce.

Ron knocks back some of his beer, then motions over to his left with the bottle.

'Over by the BMW, Jase – don't look now – that's Ventham, the one I was telling you about. I ran rings around him, didn't I, Joyce?'

'He didn't know if he was coming or going, Ron,' agrees Joyce.

Jason leans back and stretches, a casual look to his left as he does so. Joyce moves her chair to get a better view.