

FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB

RICHARD OSMAN



**'Absurdly readable
and packed with
Osman's wry wit'
*Daily Mail***

We Solve Murders

**A cunning killer. A race around the world.
An iconic new detective team is born.**



PRAISE FOR

The Thursday
MURDER Club
SERIES

‘Funny, clever and achingly British’

ADAM KAY

‘A warning never to underestimate the elderly’

VAL McDERMID

‘Funny, clever and compelling. Mystery fans are going
to be enthralled’

HARLAN COBEN

‘A bundle of joy . . . Absolutely loved it’

JANE FALLON

‘I read the first page, then put all else on hold to devour
this pitch-perfect book in one sitting’

JEFFERY DEAVER

‘Darkly funny, offbeat and deftly written’

IRISH INDEPENDENT

‘This is the most perfect Sunday afternoon read’

RED

‘Twisty, witty fun’

SUNDAY EXPRESS

‘Clever, warm and very funny’

RICHARD AND JUDY, DAILY EXPRESS

‘Osman’s world is a soothing place to be’

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

‘Warm, funny and oh-so-British’

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Thursday Murder Club

The Man Who Died Twice

The Bullet That Missed

The Last Devil To Die

**We Solve
Murders**

**RICHARD
OSMAN**



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To Janet Elizabeth Wright 1946–2023
With love to fill a lifetime

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You must leave as few clues as possible. That's the only rule.

You have to talk to people sometimes; it's inevitable. There are orders to be given, shipments to be arranged, people to be killed, etc., etc. You cannot exist in a vacuum, for goodness' sake.

You need to ring François Loubet? In an absolute emergency? You'll get a phone with a voice-changer built-in. And, by the way, if it's not an absolute emergency, you'll regret ringing very soon.

But most communication is by message or email. High-end criminals are much like millennials in that way.

Everything is encrypted, naturally, but what if the authorities break the code? It happens. A lot of very good criminals are in prison right now because a nerd with a laptop had too much time on their hands. So you must hide as well as you can.

You can hide your IP address — that is very easy. François Loubet's emails go through a world tour of different locations before being sent. Even a nerd with a laptop would never be able to discover from where they were actually sent.

But everyone's language leaves a unique signature. A particular use of words, a rhythm, a personality. Someone could read an email, and then read a postcard you sent in 2009 and know for a fact they were sent by the same person. Science, you see. So often the enemy of the honest criminal.

That's why ChatGPT has been such a godsend.

After writing an ~~copyrighted~~ ~~material~~, you can simply

run the whole thing through ChatGPT and it instantly deletes your personality. It flattens you out, irons your creases, washes you away, quirk by quirk, until you disappear.

‘ChatGPT, rewrite in the style of a friendly English gentleman, please.’ That is always Loubet’s prompt.

Handy, because if these emails were written in François Loubet’s own language, it would all become much more obvious. Too obvious.

But, as it stands, you might find a thousand emails, but you would still have no way of knowing where François Loubet was, and you would still have no way of knowing who François Loubet is.

You would, of course, know what François Loubet does, but there would be precious little you could do about it.

PART ONE

From the New Forest to South Carolina

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It had *finally* happened.

Andrew Fairbanks had always known he would be famous one day. And that day – a quiet, sunny Tuesday in early August – had, at last, arrived.

The years of Instagram fitness videos had given him a following, sure, but nothing like this. This was *insane*.

There had been an on-off relationship with a minor pop singer, which had seen his picture in the papers from time to time. But not on the front pages like today.

The notoriety Andrew Fairbanks had chased for so long was finally his. His name on lips around the world. Trending on social media. That selfie on the yacht was everywhere. Andrew, shirtless and tanned, winking into the camera, the warm sun winking along behind him. His bottle of Krusher Energy Drink raised in a happy toast.

And the comments beneath the photo! The heart emojis, the fire emojis, the lust. Everything Andrew had ever dreamt of.

Some of the other comments might have dampened his spirits a little, however. ‘Gone too soon’, ‘So fit, RIP’, ‘So haunting to see that photo when you knew what was about to happen’ – but you couldn’t argue with the volume. Impressive **Copyrighted Material** of the *Love*

Island production team, his photograph was passed around, and there were discussions about how perfect he might have been if only, well, *you know*.

Yes, finally, everybody knew Andrew Fairbanks. Or, as he was now more commonly known, ‘Tragic Instagram influencer, Andrew Fairbanks’.

So it wasn’t all upside. And, in fact, even that slim upside is starting to dim. It is Wednesday afternoon by now, and his name is already beginning to slip down the rankings. Other things are happening in the world. A baseball star has driven his pick-up into his ex-wife’s swimming pool. A beauty vlogger has said something inappropriate about Taylor Swift. The conversation, like the tide, is turning.

Andrew Fairbanks had been found dead: shot in the head, tied to a rope and thrown from a yacht bobbing about in the Atlantic. There was no one else on the yacht, and no sign that anyone had ever been there, with the exception of a leather bag containing nearly one million dollars.

But none of this gives you the right to be famous more than a day or so. One day, perhaps, there might be a podcast about the case or, better still, a Netflix true-crime documentary, but, for now, Andrew’s limelight is turning to dusk.

Soon Andrew Fairbanks will be just a figure in a photograph, holding a purple energy drink in front of a blue sea, a corpse in a South Carolina mortuary, and the odd ‘Remember that guy that died on that yacht with all that money?’

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Who killed him? Who knows? Someone or other, certainly, and social media has a lot of opinions on it. Why did they kill him? No idea – someone must have had their reasons, mustn't they? Jealous partner? Instagram fitness rival? Could be all sorts of explanations. Can you *believe* what this vlogger has said about Taylor Swift?

Just for the one day, though, what a ride it had been. If Andrew had still been alive, he would have been looking for a full-time manager. Get me a few more deals, protein bars, teeth-whitening clinics, perhaps I could launch my own vodka?

Yes, just for a day, everybody had wanted a piece of Andrew Fairbanks. Although, after the sharks had finished with him, there weren't that many pieces left.

And that's showbusiness.

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‘What don’t you like about yourself?’ asks Rosie D’Antonio. She sits on an inflatable chair shaped like a throne, in a swimming pool shaped like a swan. ‘I always ask people.’

Amy Wheeler is sitting, bolt upright, on a garden chair at the poolside, the sun in her eyes and her gun within easy reach. She likes South Carolina. This hidden off-shoot of it, at least. Early morning and the temperature in the nineties, an Atlantic breeze, and nobody, for the time being, trying to kill her. She hasn’t shot at anyone in a while, but you can’t have everything.

‘My nose, I suppose,’ says Amy.

‘What’s wrong with your nose?’ asks Rosie, sipping something green through a non-recyclable straw, her trailing hand rippling the water.

‘Don’t know,’ says Amy. She is impressed that Rosie D’Antonio is in full, perfect make-up while in the pool. How old is she? Sixty? Eighty? A mystery. The age on her file reads *Refused to disclose*. ‘It’s just wrong, when I look at it. It’s off.’

‘Get it done,’ says Rosie. ‘Bigger, smaller, whatever you think you need. Life’s too short to not like your nose. Hunger and famine are problems, or no Wi-Fi; noses aren’t a problem. Why not?’

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‘Hair,’ says Amy. She is in danger of relaxing. Feels it creeping up on her. Amy hates relaxing. Too much time to think. She prefers to *do*. ‘It never does what it’s told.’

‘I see *that*,’ says Rosie. ‘But it’s easily fixed. There’s a hair technician I use. She flies in from somewhere. Chile, I think. Five thousand dollars and your troubles are over. I’ll pay.’

‘And my ears are lopsided,’ says Amy.

Rosie tilts her head and paddles herself towards Amy, considering her very carefully. ‘I’m not seeing that. You have great ears. Like Goldie Hawn’s.’

‘I measured them with a ruler once,’ says Amy, ‘when I was at school. It’s only a millimetre, but I always see it. And my legs are too short for my body.’

Rosie nods, pushing herself back into the middle of the pool, where the sun is hitting hardest. ‘More to the point, though, Amy, what do you *like* about yourself?’

‘I’m English,’ says Amy. ‘I don’t like anything about myself.’

‘Yawn,’ says Rosie. ‘I used to be English too, and I got over it. Pick something.’

‘I think I’m loyal,’ says Amy.

‘That’s a good quality,’ agrees Rosie. ‘For a bodyguard.’

‘And my short legs give me a low centre of gravity,’ says Amy. ‘So I’m very good at fighting.’

‘There you go,’ Rosie nods. ‘Loyal, and very good at fighting.’

Rosie raises her face to the sun.

‘If someone does try to shoot me this week, do you have to dive in from the other side?’

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‘That’s the idea,’ says Amy, without conviction. ‘Though that’s mainly in films.’

It’s hard to dive in front of a bullet, in Amy’s experience. They go very fast indeed.

‘Or in books, sure,’ says Rosie. ‘Would you like a joint? I’m going to have one?’

‘Best not,’ says Amy. ‘Maximum Impact gives us mandatory blood tests every three months, company policy. A single trace of any drug and I’m fired.’

Rosie gives a ‘fair enough’ grunt.

It’s not the most exciting job Amy has ever had, but it’s sunny, and she likes the client. Rosie D’Antonio, the world’s bestselling novelist, ‘if you don’t count Lee Child’. Her Spanish-style mansion on her own private island just off the coast of South Carolina. With her own personal chef.

For various operational reasons Amy once had to spend the best part of a month living inside an abandoned oil pipeline in Syria, so this is a step up. The chef brings her a plate of smoked salmon blinis. He’s not really a chef – he’s a former Navy SEAL called Kevin – but he is learning fast. Last night his bœuf bourguignon was a triumph. Rosie’s regular chef has been given two weeks’ leave. Amy, Rosie and Kevin, the Navy SEAL, are the only people on the island, and that’s how it’s going to stay for now.

‘No one’s allowed to kill me,’ says Rosie. She has paddled over to the side of the pool, and is now rolling a cigarette. ‘Except me.’

‘And I won’t,’ Amy says.

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‘But someone might try to shoot me,’ says Rosie. ‘Given one never knows any more, the world being as it is and so on. So, if they *do* try, no jumping in front of the bullet, okay? Not on my account. Let them kill the old woman.’

Maximum Impact Solutions, Amy’s employer, is the world’s biggest close-protection agency, possibly the second biggest since Henk van Veen left and took half his clients with him. If someone steals from you, or someone wants to kill you, or if there is discontent among your private army, they are the people to call. Maximum Impact Solutions has many mottos, but ‘Let them kill the old woman’ is not one of them.

‘I’m not going to let anybody kill you,’ says Amy.

Amy remembers watching Rosie on the communal TV when she was growing up. Those shoulder pads, that attitude. It had meant a lot to Amy, seeing how strong a woman could be, while she slept each night curled up in a ball under her bed and dreamt of better days. Rosie will not die on her watch.

‘What’s that accent?’ asks Rosie, taking the first drag on her joint. ‘It’s cute. Is it Manchester?’

‘Watford,’ says Amy.

‘Eesh,’ says Rosie. ‘I’ve been gone too long. Tell me about Watford.’

‘It’s a town,’ says Amy. ‘In England.’

‘I know that, Amy. Is it pretty?’

‘It’s not the first word I’d use,’ says Amy. She is looking forward to ringing her father-in-law, Steve, later. It’s a Friday, so he should be in a good mood. He’ll get a kick out of

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hearing about Rosie. Strong women had certainly been his thing. Maybe they will be again one day.

Thinking about strong women makes Amy think about Bella Sanchez. And thinking about Bella Sanchez makes her think about Mark Gooch. And thinking about Mark Gooch makes her . . .

And that's the problem right there, Amy, isn't it! When you relax, you *think*. None of that stuff is her business. Stop thinking: it never works out for you. Hit things, drive fast, defuse explosives, but, for the love of God, don't *think*. Life isn't *school*.

'England is nuts,' says Rosie. 'In the eighties they loved me, then in the nineties they hated me, in the noughties they forgot me, in the twenty tens they remembered me, and now they love me again. I haven't changed a jot in all that time. You ever read any of my books, Amy the bodyguard?'

'No,' lies Amy. Everyone has read one of Rosie D'Antonio's books. Amy has been reading her books since she was a teenager. A social worker once handed one to her, a finger on their lips to warn Amy that this contraband was their little secret. And what a secret. The death, the glamour, the clothes, the blood. Shoulder pads and poison. But it's important not to fangirl a client. A bullet doesn't care how famous you are. Which actually *is* one of Maximum Impact Solutions' mottos.

Amy had been rereading *Death Pulls the Trigger* on the plane up here yesterday. They'd made a film of it with Angelina Jolie, but the book was better. Lots of sex with millionaires, lots of guns. Stuff Amy could relate to.

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‘You married?’ Rosie asks. ‘Kids?’

‘Married, no kids,’ says Amy.

‘He a good guy? The husband?’

‘Yeah, he is,’ says Amy, thinking of Adam. ‘As good as I am, anyway. I like him.’

Rosie nods. ‘That’s a good answer. Does he worry about you?’

‘He doesn’t like it when I get shot at,’ says Amy. ‘And once, in Morocco, I got attacked with a sword, and he cried.’

‘Did you cry?’

‘I haven’t cried since I was twelve,’ says Amy. ‘I learnt not to.’

‘That sounds healthy,’ says Rosie. ‘Can I put you in a book? Five six, blue eyes, blonde, never cries, kills bad guys?’

‘No,’ says Amy. ‘I don’t like publicity.’

‘I promise not to mention your ears.’

Amy and her father-in-law try to talk every day. They’ve never really discussed it; it’s just become a habit important to both of them. Well, it’s a habit important to Amy, and she hopes it’s important to Steve too. Occasionally they’ll miss a day. For example, Amy had to stay completely quiet for twelve hours in that oil pipeline, on account of a hit squad, so on that day she had to make do with texting. Steve understands. The job is the job.

‘Do you get to choose what you wear?’ Rosie asks. ‘Or is it a uniform?’

Amy looks down at her combat fatigues and faded Under Armour T-shirt.

‘I choose.’

Rosie raises a questioning eyebrow. ‘Well, nobody’s perfect.’

Amy doesn’t like to leave it too long between calls, because you never knew what Steve was eating, if he was looking after himself. It is illogical, in her opinion, to eat poorly.

She should probably ring her husband too, but she worries less about Adam. And, besides, what would they talk about?

‘When you came in,’ says Rosie, ‘there was a copy of *Death Pulls the Trigger* at the top of your bag. Thumbed through to about halfway.’

Amy nods. Busted.

‘So you *have* read one of my books? You said you hadn’t?’

‘Client research.’

‘Bullshit,’ says Rosie. ‘You like it?’

‘There was nothing else to read.’

‘Course you like it, I see you. You read the bit where she shoots the guy on the plane?’

‘That’s a good bit,’ says Amy.

‘Yeah, that’s a good bit,’ says Rosie, nodding. ‘A pilot I was seeing let me shoot a gun on his plane for research. Have you ever done that?’

‘Shot a gun on a plane? No,’ lies Amy.

‘Nothing really happens,’ says Rosie. ‘They had to replace the calfskin on one of the sofas, but that was it.’

‘If it had pierced the fuselage, the cabin could have depressurized and you could all have died,’ says Amy. Amy

had once parachuted out of a plane after exactly such an incident. She had spent the next five days evading rebel forces in Burkina Faso. Actually a lot of fun in the end. Amy finds adrenaline good for the soul, and very good for the skin. Sometimes she watches skincare tutorials on Instagram, but there's not a single one that will do for your skin what being shot at and then jumping out of a plane will do. Perhaps she should do her own videos? Again, she finds that she is thinking, and so she stops.

'Lucky it didn't, then,' says Rosie, knocking back the rest of whatever goop is sitting in her glass. 'I'm getting itchy feet, Amy. Can't we go somewhere on the mainland? Have a drink? Raise a bit of hell?'

Rosie's troubles had started when she had included a character in her most recent novel, *Dead Men & Diamonds*, very clearly based on a Russian chemicals oligarch named Vasilii Karpin. Vasilii, it seemed, had lacked the sense of humour one usually associates with chemicals billionaires, and, after a bullet in the post and a botched abduction at a Nashville book-signing, Rosie had called in the professionals, and was confined to barracks for the foreseeable future.

People are talking to people. Jeff Nolan, Amy's boss, has reached out to some of Vasilii's colleagues in London. Conversations are ongoing. Vasilii will be persuaded to drop this particular vendetta soon enough. Maximum Impact Solutions has clients who could do him a few favours. An accommodation will be found, Vasilii will be placated, and Rosie will be free to go about her business again. Copyrighted Material

Until then, Amy and Rosie are stuck on this idyllic island, with their hastily trained executive chef. Amy could definitely use a few days here, probably needs the rest if she's being honest, but she'll have to be back on the move soon. No one is going to kill Rosie D'Antonio, so Amy is essentially just a very expensive babysitter. And where's the fun in that for either of them?

'We're going nowhere for the moment,' says Amy. 'You might get murdered.'

Rosie rolls her eyes and starts to roll another joint. 'Oh, Amy, I'd rather be murdered than *bored*.'

And on that point, Amy Wheeler, who spent so much of her childhood trying to be as quiet and as small as possible, is inclined to agree.

‘Cat, ginger, unapproachable. Haughty even, the little bugger. Mason’s Lane. Contact attempted but rebuffed. 3.58 a.m.’

Steve puts his Dictaphone back in his pocket. He hears the sound of the ginger cat inexpertly scaling a back fence. It was not often he saw an unfamiliar cat on his walk. It was almost certainly nothing, but almost everything was almost certainly nothing, wasn’t it? And yet some things did eventually turn out to be something. He once caught an armed robber because of a Twix wrapper in a blast furnace. One rarely knows the significance of things at the time, and it doesn’t cost a penny piece to note things down.

Steve turns left on to the top of the High Street, and sees it stretch out like an unspooling grey ribbon before him, lit by the dim bulb of the moon.

If you were to visit Axley – and you should, you’d like it – you might think you had found the perfect English village. A gently sloping High Street, looping around a touch at the bottom where it skirts the bank of the village pond. There are two pubs, The Brass Monkey and The Flagon, identical to the tourists but teeming with subtle and important differences to the locals. For example, one flies a Union Jack and the other the Ukrainian flag.

There's a butcher, a baker. No candlestick-maker, but you will find a little gift shop selling scented candles and book-marks. Striped awnings, bicycles leant against shopfronts, chalkboards promising cream teas or tarot readings or dog treats. There is a church at the top of the village, and a small bookmakers at the bottom of the village, take your pick. Steve used to visit both, and now visits neither.

And, all around, there is the New Forest. The forest is the whole point of the place. The village itself simply found itself a small clearing and settled in. There are walks and trails, the chirrup and buzz of wildlife, and the backpacks and rain macs of the tourists. Stray New Forest ponies some days wander on to the main road and are accorded due reverence. It was their forest long before it was yours, and it will be theirs long afterwards too. Axley simply shelters among the trees, curled into a little nutshell.

When Steve first moved here – twelve years ago, was it? Something like that, Debbie would remember, probably fifteen the way time goes – it hadn't fooled him for a second. Steve hadn't been hoodwinked by the holly-hocks and the cupcakes and the cheery 'Good morning' greetings. Steve had seen secrets behind every pastel front door, seen corpses in every back alley, and every time the church bells rang in the hour, Steve had heard the chimes of death.

A crisp packet has blown into a hedge. Steve retrieves it and places it in a bin. Monster Munch. They don't sell Monster Munch in the local shop, so that will have been a tourist.

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No, Steve had refused to be fooled by Axley. Twenty-five years in the police force had taught him to always think the worst of everyone, and everything. Always expect the worst, and you'll always be prepared. Never let anyone, or anything, take you by surprise.

Ironic, given what soon happened.

Steve stops by the window of the estate agent and peers through the glass. If he was moving to the village today, he wouldn't be able to afford it. The only way anyone can afford to buy a house these days is to have bought it fifteen years ago.

Steve had been wrong about Axley – he'd be the first to admit it. There were no murderers lurking behind the doors, no mutilated corpses in blood-soaked alleys. And, thus, Steve had begun to relax.

Steve had never relaxed as a child; his dad had made sure of that. School? Too bright to fit in but not bright enough to get out. Then joining the Metropolitan Police at the age of eighteen, seeing the worst that London had to offer, day after day. Sometimes this included his own colleagues. Every day a fight.

Steve takes out his Dictaphone once more. 'Pale-blue Volkswagen Passat, registration number PN17 DFQ, in car park of 'The Brass Monkey.' Steve walks around the car. 'An ancient tax disc.' There is the wrapper from a Greggs in the footwell. Where is the nearest Greggs? Southampton? The services on the M27?

He resumes his walk. He will go as far as the pond, sit there for a while, then head back up. Of course he will – that's what Steve does every night.

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Axley had transformed Steve. Not all at once, but, smile by smile, favour by favour and scone by scone, the people and the place had taken down the wall that he had built up over so many years. Debbie had told him it would, and he hadn't believed her. She had been born here, and, when Steve finally left the Met, she had persuaded him to make the move. She knew.

Steve had worried there would be no excitement, no adrenaline, but Debbie had reassured him. 'If you get bored, we're only twenty miles from Southampton, and there are plenty of murders there.'

But Steve didn't miss the excitement, and he didn't miss the adrenaline.

Steve liked to stay in; he liked to cook for Debbie; he liked to hear birdsong; he found himself a solid pub-quiz team. Good but improvable.

A stray cat, a proper bruiser, came to visit them and refused to leave. After a week or two of snarling and bullying, from both Steve and the cat, they each let down their guard. And now you'll find Steve, reading his paper in an old armchair, Trouble curled up on his lap, purring in his sleep. Two old rascals, safe and sound.

Debbie persuaded him to set up his agency. He was happy not working – she was bringing in enough money from painting – but she was right. He probably needed something to do, and probably needed to contribute something to the community. The name of his agency, 'Steve Investigates', was his idea. He remembers a Sunday lunch when his boy, Adam, had come round with his wife, Amy. Amy is a highly paid, well known work

and oligarchs, always on the other side of the world. Adam does something or other with money. Steve speaks to Amy more than he speaks to Adam. She's the one who rings; she's the one who makes sure they visit if she's in England on a job.

Amy had told him to call the company 'Maverick Steel International Investigations'. Branding is very important in the world of private investigations, she had said, but Steve had countered that his name was Steve, and he investigates things, and if that wasn't a brand, what was?

Amy is working with Rosie D'Antonio, the author, somewhere or other in America. Steve will play it cool when he next talks to Amy, but he will want all the gossip. There's always gossip when she's protecting celebrities. Once Amy was working with a singer in a boy band, and he took heroin on an elephant.

'Google America time difference,' says Steve into his Dictaphone.

Steve Investigates keeps him pleasantly busy and adequately afloat. He has a few contacts with insurance companies. If you've ever claimed a year's salary because of a bad back anywhere in the New Forest, Steve has probably sat outside your house at some point, perhaps followed you to the gym. It makes Steve happy to find that people are almost always telling the truth about these things. He'll look into affairs if you really, really want him to. His only rule is that he won't travel any distance. Steve doesn't want to stray too far from Axley. He'll drive up to Brockenhurst if you need him to, couple of nice pubs up there. If it rains, he'll head over towards

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Ringwood or down towards Lymington, but ask him to go to Southampton, or Portsmouth, and Steve will politely decline.

Get yourself involved in a murder case, say, and before you know it your time is not your own. Steve never misses the Wednesday-night quiz at The Brass Monkey now. A murder would almost certainly get in the way of that at some point. No thank you.

Steve reaches the pond and takes his customary seat. Debbie's favourite. The ducks love this bench, but they are all safely asleep now, tucked up, like the rest of the village, Steve keeping watch over them all. Least he can do after everything Axley has done for him.

Steve still remembers that feeling of relaxation, of finally letting life settle around him. Of trusting that people wished him well, and that each day would bring happiness. Of feeling safe. It didn't work out that way, of course. When does it?

In one sense, Debbie's death hadn't taken him by surprise. He'd mentally prepared for it every day since they'd fallen in love. That *something* would surely take her away. Cancer, heart disease, a car hitting her bike on a country road, a stroke, burglars. Something would steal his immense good luck at loving her, and being loved by her.

In the end it had been a train carriage that derailed as it approached a country station. There had been three people on the platform: Debbie and two other poor souls, who left their lives behind that rainy January day.

And, despite his assiduous preparation, it had taken him by surprise. Copyrighted Material
You can think something often enough,

but you will never be prepared for your heart dis-integrating.

After Debbie's death the village gathered around him, carried him through. Walking through this village, where he knows everyone and everyone knows him, Steve is grateful that at least he feels loved. Because if you don't feel loved, it's difficult to feel anything at all.

A lone pony wanders by the side of the pond, head bobbing as he walks. Steve eyes him suspiciously. Well, Steve eyes him. His looks are always suspicious. He gets in trouble for it at the pub all the time.

'You should be asleep,' he tells the pony.

The pony turns his head towards Steve, as if to say, 'So should you.' Steve accepts that the pony has a point. The pony continues his slow walk, moving across the High Street and down the passage alongside the greetings-card shop, stopping to nuzzle something in a dustbin along the way. Axley belongs to Steve once again.

Steve rubs his fingers across the brass plaque on the bench. Debbie's name, the date of her birth, the date of her death. He presses 'record' on his Dictaphone, because otherwise he would just be a man on a bench talking to himself.

'Hey, Debs. We came second in the quiz yesterday. Norman from the shop had his brother-in-law staying and he's been on *The Weakest Link*, so we had no chance. The gang was going to lodge a complaint – seemed a bit suspicious, you know – but I took a look at it all when I got back home, and he really is Norman's brother-in-law, so there's not a lot of trouble here. I killed a vole, first

one in a while; nice to know he's still got it in him. And he took it into Margaret's house, not ours, so that was a result. Just saw a new cat on Mason's Lane, ginger, tough guy, you know the sort. Umm . . . Amy's working with Rosie D'Antonio, you know, the writer. Very beautiful, people say, but not my type. I'll send her your love. Amy, not Rosie D'Antonio. I'll get the gossip for you. There's a new pie at the shop, chicken and something. I think you can just heat it up in the microwave; I'll let you know if I feel adventurous. Nothing else this evening. Love you, Debs.'

Steve switches off his Dictaphone and puts it back in his pocket. He pats the bench.

'Love you, doll. I'm going to see if that cat is still around.'

Steve begins his walk back up the High Street. Tomorrow he is resuming the search for a dog that got lost on a local campsite; the owners, down from London, were understandably beside themselves. Steve knows how dogs think – he'll find him in no time. £500 they've paid him, upfront too, cash. Steve would have done it for £50. Londoners and their money are soon parted. And there's a local shop that has had money go missing from the till. Steve set up a remote camera last week, and he's going to head over to pick up the footage. It's the daughter of the owner – Steve worked that out almost immediately. Steve knows how people think too; they're surprisingly similar to dogs, in actual fact. But the owner isn't going to believe it was her daughter until she sees the evidence.

Axley is peaceful and quiet, and Steve is grateful for it.

Other old coppers he knew, they're all in their late fifties now, are still chasing around on dodgy knees for dodgy bosses, drinking or smoking or stressing themselves to death. But Steve understands how life ends, and he has no intention of raging against it.

You can't have the thrills of life without the pain of life, so Steve has decided to go without the thrills. He chooses to watch the TV, to do his pub quizzes, to help people when he can, but always to return to his armchair with a cat called Trouble.

When you arrest someone, you generally get two different types of reaction. Some people kick and scream all the way to the cells, while others go quietly, knowing the game is up.

Who knows when your own game will be up? When you're standing on that platform and the train derails?

Whenever it might be, Steve intends to go quietly.

4

Jeff Nolan, CEO of Maximum Impact Solutions, is thinking about Andrew Fairbanks.

People have to be killed sometimes; that's just business, and Jeff understands that more than anyone. But eaten by a shark? Sends a message, Jeff supposes, and perhaps that's the point. When Bella Sanchez had been killed, it hadn't really made much of a splash. Mark Gooch had got people talking a little, joining the dots, but this was the first one to really get serious attention. The first one that had people asking questions. The police for one. Jeff doesn't like the police visiting him at work. He had tried to be helpful – after all, a young man was dead – but there is, after all, such a thing as client confidentiality.

Jeff knows the connection between the three deaths. Knows who's behind them all too.

François Loubet.

Jeff has work to do. He's not going to lose his business over three murders, for goodness' sake.

The police aren't the real problem here; they very rarely are. The real problem is the clients. Already this morning he'd had a Premier League footballer and a Dutch cannabis importer cancelling their contracts. They no longer had confidential information. Maximum Impact

Solutions. You couldn't blame them. There would be other calls as news spread. No doubt they'd go to Henk, his former partner, and very former best friend.

And now Max Highfield, of all people, has paid him a visit. You'd think Max Highfield would have better things to do with his time, and yet here he is, shoes off, feet on Jeff's boardroom table, stirring up trouble.

'It makes me look bad, Jeff,' says Max, running a hand through his hair like a grizzled veteran who has seen too much war, rather than like a man who has just had breakfast at The Ivy.

'I see that, Max,' says Jeff. 'I see that.'

Jeff knew it. As soon as Andrew Fairbanks had died, he knew that other clients would start putting two and two together. People google. Especially celebrities – they're never off it.

'How much business do I bring you?' asks Max.

'Oh, plenty, plenty,' says Jeff. 'That's why we pay you three quarters of a million pounds a year, Max.'

That's Max Highfield's 'consultancy' fee. Plus a ten-grand bonus for each new recruit. Introducing other famous people to the business. Actors mainly, but Max is handsome enough to know everyone.

'Three quarters of a million?' Max laughs. 'D'you know what I got for the last Marvel movie?'

'No,' says Jeff. 'And you don't need to tell me. I'm sure it's confid—'

'Eight point five million,' says Max. 'Eight point five million. And that's pounds, not dollars. You ever been paid eight point five million for a job, Jeff?'

‘I have, yes,’ says Jeff. ‘A number of times – but that’s beside the point. I understand, reputationally, that this is difficult for you.’

‘Three clients dead,’ says Max, now drumming out a pattern on his voluminous superhero thighs. ‘That’s a lot of dead clients.’

‘I mean,’ says Jeff, ‘playing devil’s advocate here, between us, not big clients, small fry, with all due respect to their souls. It’s not like Andrew Fairbanks was going to win an Oscar any day soon. He was a fitness influencer.’

Max suddenly turns very serious. He even takes his feet off the boardroom table. ‘Oscars are overrated, Jeff. It’s all politics.’

‘I’m sure,’ says Jeff. ‘Now, if –’

‘Lot of great actors never won an Oscar,’ says Max.

‘Agreed, agreed. So here’s my plan,’ says Jeff.

‘Samuel L. Jackson has never won one. Did you know that?’ Max Highfield is shaking his head, slowly and sadly.

‘I confess I didn’t,’ says Jeff. ‘I’ve got an operative on the scene in South Carolina, where Andrew Fairbanks was murdered. She’s –’

‘Travolta’s never won one,’ says Max. ‘Johnny Depp. Jason Statham. It’s politics. Your face has to fit.’

‘I’m going to speak to her,’ says Jeff. ‘Make discreet enquiries.’

‘Sorry, you’re asking who to do what?’ says Max. ‘We were talking about the Oscars, bro?’

‘I’m saying I have an operative in South Carolina,’ says

Jeff again. ‘Amy Wheeler – she looked after you briefly years ago.’

‘I remember her,’ says Max. He stares at Jeff intensely for a while. He has clearly been told at some point that his intense stare is effective. ‘Tom Cruise, there’s another one. Jeff, has anyone ever told you that you look like a black Jason Statham?’

Jeff decides he might as well just plough on.

‘It’s all delicate, Max, I’m sure you get it,’ says Jeff. ‘You know the nature of this business. But I want you to know we’re taking this very seriously.’

‘I’m thinking of joining Henk,’ says Max, putting his feet back on the table. ‘I thought I should let you know. I bet he’d pay more money too.’

‘Well, I’d be shocked if you weren’t thinking about it,’ says Jeff. Max Highfield would be Henk’s highest-profile steal yet. ‘And we can talk about money.’

‘Amy Wheeler was the one who stopped me riding my motorbike off that bridge,’ Max says.

‘That was her,’ says Jeff. ‘I believe you’d taken too much of your painkiller medication?’

‘They don’t tell you not to mix it with whisky,’ says Max.

‘Don’t they?’ Jeff says. ‘I’m sure I’ve heard somewhere that –’

‘And she bled all over my denim jacket.’

‘To be fair,’ says Jeff, ‘she broke up a fight you’d started in a bar, and someone attacked her with a piece of broken glass.’

‘Harry Styles gave me that jacket,’ says Max.

‘Max,’ says Jeff, **Copyrighted Material** the conversation,

‘will you trust me, for the next few weeks? Until we can find out what’s going on?’

‘Course, course,’ says Max. ‘Couple of weeks.’

Max begins to slip his shoes on, the signal that he is ready to move on to the next stop in Max World. Jeff stands.

‘Loved the new film by the way. *Rampage* 7.’

‘Thanks, man,’ says Max. ‘I wasn’t in love with *Rampage* 6, but we’re back on track here. And it’s nice to play triplets.’

Jeff nods in agreement. As one of the triplets, Max has a moustache, and as one of the other triplets he has an eyepatch and a French, or possibly Dutch, accent.

‘Henk said someone needs to teach you to hold a gun properly, but I loved it,’ says Jeff. ‘I hold them sideways too sometimes.’

‘Henk said that?’ Max stands to his full height. The full six feet four inches that meant Max wasn’t stuck acting in minor British soap operas for long.

‘Afraid so.’

‘Huh,’ says Max. A man who has been given something to think about.

‘Not everyone gets cinema,’ says Jeff.

‘I am misunderstood, as a man,’ says Max. ‘And as an artist. And that’s Britain all over.’

‘Terrible country, agreed,’ says Jeff, his extended hand engulfed in Max’s. ‘I’ll get this sorted.’

As Max leaves, a heady haze of testosterone and Tom Ford lingering behind him, he passes Susan Knox on her

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way in to see Jeff. As he passes her, Max gives her a firm pat on the backside.

‘There she is,’ says Max. ‘My hot cougar.’

‘She’s the Head of HR, Max,’ says Jeff.

‘She doesn’t mind,’ says Max over his shoulder, as he leaves the room. ‘It’s a compliment.’

‘I’m guessing you do mind?’ says Jeff, inviting Susan to sit. ‘That sort of thing?’

‘That sort of thing? Yes,’ says Susan, impassively. ‘I mind *that sort of thing*.’

‘Would you like me to do something?’ Jeff asks.

‘Dismantle the patriarchy?’ suggests Susan.

‘I’ll talk to them,’ says Jeff. ‘They don’t really like black guys interfering, but I’ll do my best. Is that the François Loubet file?’

Susan nods and places the file on Jeff’s desk. ‘May I ask why you wanted it?’

They had done a job for Loubet around two years ago. Didn’t meet him, of course; no one meets François Loubet. He’s the world’s biggest money-smuggler and, as such, likes to keep himself to himself. They were protecting one of his staff. Henk had objected at the time; he was always a bit more particular than Jeff when it came to their clients. But, as Jeff had said, if you don’t protect criminals you very soon run out of clients. Henk will discover this in his new business. Perhaps this row had been the beginning of the end for the two of them?

Jeff opens the file and looks at Susan. ‘Have you read it?’

‘Have I read it?’ Susan asks. ‘No, it’s confidential.’

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Jeff nods. Of course she's read it; that's okay. Susan reads everything, but she knows how to keep quiet.

On top of the file is the printout of an email message Jeff had sent to François Loubet a few months ago, before the killings had started. Evidence, if he ever needs it.

Mssr Loubet,

I trust this email finds you well. You will remember we carried out some work for you around two years ago. Your prompt payment was greatly appreciated. I write with troubling news, however.

If I might express myself plainly, two of my clients have recently been caught carrying large sums of money through international customs.

This leads me to believe that my firm is being targeted by a professional money-smuggling syndicate, and the only money-smuggler who has had any connection with Maximum Impact Solutions is you. Your urgent help is needed in providing information that could assist me. Can we talk?

I'm afraid I cannot let this threat to my company continue, and I will take all the steps necessary to protect my clients and my business. Which also means that if you yourself, François, are behind it, which I believe you are, I will hunt you down.

Yours faithfully,

Jeff Nolan

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Jeff looks up from the printout.

‘You know what François Loubet does for a living, Susan?’

Susan shakes her head. ‘Without looking at his file, I would have no way of knowing.’

‘Perhaps you accidentally glanced at the file one day, though, while making copies, something like that?’

‘If I had glanced at it,’ says Susan, ‘and such things happen, I would say he was the world’s leading money-smuggler, is the number-one name on the FBI’s Most Wanted list and has recently been in email correspondence with you.’

‘That was a hell of a glance,’ says Jeff.

‘I do a lot of photocopying,’ replies Susan. ‘I also understand that no one knows who he is?’

Jeff nods. ‘You see why I’m looking at his file now?’

‘Andrew Fairbanks found with all that money?’ Susan suggests.

‘On top of everything else you might have accidentally glanced at in the file,’ says Jeff.

‘It’s certainly a situation,’ says Susan. ‘But you’ve been in situations before, and you always seem to struggle free. I hope you’ll be able to do so on this occasion. It would be useful to identify him, so is there anything I can do to help?’

‘Is there anyone with Amy Wheeler?’ Jeff asks. ‘On the Rosie D’Antonio job?’

‘An ex-Navy SEAL called Kevin,’ says Susan. As always, she has the answer to hand. ‘That’s why Jeff doesn’t mind her looking at documents, of course.’

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‘He’s not one of ours,’ says Jeff.

‘Booked through a local affiliate,’ says Susan. ‘Perfectly adequate, by all accounts, and a clean bill of health from the Lowesport Police Department.’

‘Amy’s recent client history makes for interesting reading,’ says Jeff. ‘Given the killings. What would your view be on that, as Head of HR?’

‘As Head of HR, I would say you need to speak to her as a matter of urgency,’ says Susan. ‘I would bring her home immediately.’

Susan has worked with him since his earliest days in the City. Jeff would say that she’s been with him through thick and thin, but, honestly, there hasn’t been all that much thin.

Jeff thinks about his next move. Amy will have worked out that the three murders mean big trouble for her. She will have realized that everything is pointing to her. He decides he will message her. Bring her back to London, and see her reaction.

Jeff picks up another piece of paper from his desk. ‘Thank you for the plot synopsis for *Rampage 7*, by the way.’

He had been reading it just before Max Highfield arrived.

‘It was a pleasure,’ says Susan. ‘Well, it was excruciating, but I live to serve.’

Jeff looks at Susan again. He would be lost in this place without her. His eyes and ears. His wise counsel. He owes her.

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‘I’m going to do something about Max Highfield,’ he says. ‘His behaviour is unacceptable.’

Susan stands. ‘I just want to do my job, Jeff. Now bring Amy Wheeler home; she might be in danger.’

‘Mmm,’ says Jeff.

Susan leans across and puts her hand on Jeff’s. ‘I love you, Jeff, but I don’t need you to save me from Max Highfield. I can take care of him myself – do you understand?’

Jeff understands, and is grateful. Max is worth an awful lot of money to him. He would be worth an awful lot of money to Henk too.

Henk van Veen. He and his old friend built this place together. Butch and Sundance, Cagney and Lacey. Then, three months ago, the split. Perhaps it was to do with Loubet? You never could tell with Henk.

Jeff looks over at a long mirror on the far wall of the boardroom. Behind it is Henk’s ‘secret den’. He would sit there, deadly quiet, in an armchair, tumbler of brandy in hand, and watch meetings through the mirrored glass. He said it was to add an extra layer of security to their business, but really it was to make sure no one was talking about him. That was Henk. Suspicious, paranoid. Useful skills in their business but irritating in a business partner.

Everyone quickly found out about the secret den, though, largely because Jeff quickly told them about it. Thereafter, whenever anyone wanted to talk about Henk, they would go to the pub instead.

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Jeff looks at Susan. 'May I ask you one more question?'

'Fire away,' says Susan.

Jeff picks up the Loubet file again.

'Do you think Henk has ever looked at this file?'

'Oh, Henk looked at *everything*,' says Susan.

‘What you up to?’ asks Steve. The phone is cradled between his shoulder and his ear, both hands rubbing Trouble’s head. If you rubbed his head with only one hand, he let you know you were doing a poor job.

‘Sitting by a pool drinking a protein shake,’ says Amy. ‘You?’

‘Watching *Tipping Point* while eating a Scotch egg,’ says Steve. ‘Where’s your client? Shouldn’t you be with her?’

‘She’s in an oxygen tent,’ says Amy. ‘She’s meditating. What’s *Tipping Point*?’

‘What’s *Tipping Point*?’ says Steve. ‘You’re serious?’

‘I’m guessing it’s a game show?’ says Amy.

‘Too right it’s a game show. “What’s *Tipping Point*” indeed.’ Sometimes Steve wonders what world Amy is living in. Everybody knows *Tipping Point*.

‘Couldn’t you go for a walk or something?’ asks Amy. ‘Do some tae kwon do? Get some fresh air?’

‘I’ve got the window open,’ says Steve. ‘And I’ve already been for two walks. I walked to the shop to get this Scotch egg, and I walked home again.’

‘You shouldn’t eat Scotch eggs,’ says Amy. ‘They’re not real food. They’re ultra-processed.’

‘That’s why they’re so delicious,’ says Steve.

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‘You have to eat properly, okay?’ Amy says. ‘How are those organic vegetable boxes I ordered for you?’

Steve looks through to the kitchen and sees a pile of uneaten vegetables. Bob from the bakery comes to get them once a week for his compost heap.

‘Terrific,’ says Steve. ‘Courgettes, all sorts.’ He knows he won’t get away with that easily. Amy is a trained interrogator.

‘And how do you cook courgettes?’ Amy asks.

‘Well, you know,’ says Steve. He must have seen this somewhere on a TV show. ‘Chop them up, whack them in a pan —’

‘Uh huh.’

‘Bit of oil, bit of salt.’ That sounds convincing. And, anyway, she can’t *prove* anything.

‘Steve, have you eaten anything from any of the boxes?’

‘Not yet,’ admits Steve. ‘I’ve been too busy to cook. I gave Margaret next door some spring onions and an aubergine, though.’

‘I just don’t want you to die,’ says Amy. ‘I know that’s selfish of me.’

‘I don’t want you to die either, but I don’t stop you flying off around the world with guns.’ Sometimes you need to go on the attack with Amy. That’s what she respects.

‘I know,’ says Amy. ‘But that’s different. I’m me.’

‘Scotch eggs and guns are the same thing, Amy. There’s an equivalence. How’s Rosie D’Antonio? Diva?’

‘Not yet,’ says Amy. ‘I quite like her. Would you get a nose job, if you were me?’

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'I once got my nose broken,' says Steve. 'A woman in a pub with a brick. I was trying to arrest her brother on the Old Kent Road. What's an oxygen tent?'

'A tent full of oxygen,' says Amy. 'Anything interesting on?'

'A lost dog,' says Steve. 'Londoners. What's the weather like?'

'Sunny,' says Amy. 'You'd hate it. You'd melt.'

'What SPF are you wearing?'

'I don't believe in it,' says Amy. 'I sweat a lot; it protects me naturally.'

'Jesus, Amy,' says Steve. 'Thirty on the arms, fifty on the face. So no one's shot at her yet?'

'Not yet,' says Amy. 'Where's the dog, do you reckon?'

'Having fun, I expect,' says Steve. 'Sniffing trees. I've got a plan, though.'

'You've always got a plan.'

'When am I going to see you next? Margaret was asking after you. She'd like to see you.'

'Straight after this, there's the Diamond Conference in Dubai,' says Amy. 'I'm going to join Adam there; you should come out.'

'To Dubai? Never going to happen in a million years.'

'They've rented us a villa,' says Amy. 'Pack your trunks and fly out.'

'I don't have trunks,' says Steve.

'I think they sell them in shops,' says Amy.

'And I don't fly,' says Steve. 'Sitting next to people. What if they want to talk to me?'

'No one wants to talk to you, don't worry.'

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