

The following Thursday . . .

‘I was talking to a woman in Ruskin Court and she said she’s on a diet,’ says Joyce, finishing her glass of wine. ‘She’s eighty-two!’

‘Zimmer frames make you look fat,’ says Ron. ‘It’s the thin legs.’

‘Why diet at eighty-two?’ says Joyce. ‘What’s a sausage roll going to do to you? Kill you? Well, join the queue.’

The Thursday Murder Club has concluded its latest meeting. This week they have been looking at the cold case of a Hastings newsagent who murdered an intruder with a crossbow. He’d been arrested, but then the media had got involved, and the consensus was that a man should be allowed to protect his own shop with a crossbow, for goodness’ sake. He walked free, head held high.

A month or so later police had discovered that the intruder was dating the newsagent’s teenage daughter, and the newsagent had a long record of GBH, but at that point everybody had moved on. It was 1975, after all. No CCTV, and no one wanting to make a fuss.

‘Do you think a dog might be good company?’ asks

Joyce. ‘I thought I might either get a dog or join Instagram.’

‘I would advise against it,’ says Ibrahim.

‘Oh, you’d advise against everything,’ says Ron.

‘Broadly, yes,’ agrees Ibrahim.

‘Not a big dog, of course,’ says Joyce. ‘I haven’t got the hoover for a big dog.’

Joyce, Ron, Ibrahim and Elizabeth are enjoying lunch at the restaurant that sits at the heart of the Coopers Chase community. There is a bottle of red and a bottle of white on their table. It is around a quarter to twelve.

‘Don’t get a small dog though, Joyce,’ says Ron. ‘Small dogs are like small men: always got a point to prove. Yapping it up, barking at cars.’

Joyce nods. ‘Perhaps a medium dog, then? Elizabeth?’

‘Mmm, good idea,’ replies Elizabeth, though she is not really listening. How could she be, after the letter she has just received?

She’s picking up the main points, of course. Elizabeth always stays alert, because you never know what might fall into your lap. She has heard all sorts over the years. A snippet of conversation in a Berlin bar, a loose-lipped Russian sailor on shore leave in Tripoli. In this instance, on a Thursday lunchtime in a sleepy Kent retirement village, it seems that Joyce wants a dog, there is a discussion about sizes and Ibrahim has doubts. But her mind is elsewhere.

The letter was slipped under Elizabeth’s door, by unseen hand.

Dear Elizabeth,

I wonder if you remember me? Perhaps you don't, but without blowing my own trumpet, I imagine you might.

Life has worked its magic once more, and I discover, upon moving in this week, that we are now neighbours. What company I keep! You must be thinking they let in any old riff-raff these days.

I know it has been some while since you last saw me, but I think it would be wonderful to renew our acquaintance after all these years.

Would you like to join me at 14 Ruskin Court for a drink? A little housewarming? If so, how would 3 p.m. tomorrow suit? No need to reply, I shall await with a bottle of wine regardless.

It really would be lovely to see you. So much to catch up on. An awful lot of water under the bridge and so on.

I do hope you remember me, and I do hope to see you tomorrow.

*Your old friend,
Marcus Carmichael*

Elizabeth has been mulling it over ever since.

The last time she had seen Marcus Carmichael would have been late November 1981, a very dark, very cold night by Lambeth Bridge, the Thames at low tide, her breath clouding in the freezing air. There had been a team of them, each one a specialist, and Elizabeth was in charge. They arrived in a white Transit van, shabby on the outside, seemingly owned by 'G. Procter – Windows, Gutters, All Jobs Considered', but, on the inside, gleaming, full of

buttons and screens. A young constable had cordoned off an area of the foreshore and the pavement on the Albert Embankment had been closed.

Elizabeth and her team clambered down a flight of stone steps, lethal with slick moss. The low tide had left behind a corpse, propped, almost sitting, against the nearest stone pillar under the bridge. Everything had been done properly, Elizabeth had made sure of that. One of her team had examined the clothing and rifled through the pockets of his heavy overcoat, a young woman from Highgate had taken photographs and the doctor had recorded the death. It was clear the man had jumped into the Thames further upstream, or been pushed. That was for the coroner to decide. It would all be typed into a report by somebody or other and Elizabeth would simply add her initials at the bottom. Neat and tidy.

The journey back up those slick steps with the corpse on a military stretcher had taken some time. The young constable, thrilled to have been called to help, had fallen and broken an ankle, which was all they needed. They explained they wouldn't be able to call an ambulance for the time being, and he took it in fairly good part. He received an unwarranted promotion several months later, so no lasting harm was done.

Her little unit eventually reached the Embankment, and the body was loaded into the white Transit van. 'All jobs considered'.

The team dispersed, save for Elizabeth and the doctor, who stayed in the van with the corpse as it was driven

to a morgue in Hampshire. She hadn't worked with this particular doctor before – broad, red-faced, a dark moustache turning grey – but he was interesting enough. A man you would remember. They'd discussed euthanasia and cricket until the doctor had dozed off.

Ibrahim is making a point with his wine glass. 'I'm afraid I would advise against a dog altogether, Joyce, small, medium, or large. At your time in life.'

'Oh, here he comes,' says Ron.

'A medium dog,' says Ibrahim, 'say a terrier, or a Jack Russell perhaps, would have a life expectancy of around fourteen years.'

'Says who?' asks Ron.

'Says the Kennel Club, in case you want to take it up with them, Ron. Would you like to take it up with them?'

'No, you're all right.'

'Now, Joyce,' Ibrahim continues, 'you are seventy-seven years old?'

Joyce nods, 'Seventy-eight next year.'

'Well, that goes without saying, yes,' agrees Ibrahim. 'So, at seventy-seven years old, we have to take a look at your life expectancy.'

'Ooh, yes!' says Joyce. 'I love this sort of thing. I had my Tarot done on the pier once. She said I was going to come into money.'

'Specifically, we have to look at the chances of your life expectancy exceeding the life expectancy of a medium dog.'

'It's a mystery to me why you never got married, old son,' says Ron to Ibrahim, and takes the bottle of white

wine from the cooler on the table. ‘With that silver tongue of yours. Top-up, anyone?’

‘Thank you, Ron,’ says Joyce. ‘Fill it to the brim to save having to do it again.’

Ibrahim continues. ‘A woman of seventy-seven has a fifty-one per cent chance of living for another fifteen years.’

‘This is jolly,’ says Joyce. ‘I didn’t come into money, by the way.’

‘So if you were to get a dog now, Joyce, would you outlive it? That’s the question.’

‘I’d outlive a dog through pure spite,’ says Ron. ‘We’d just sit in opposite corners of the room, staring each other out, and see who went first. Not me. It’s like when we were negotiating with British Leyland in ’seventy-eight. The moment one of their lot went to the loo first, I knew we had ’em.’ Ron knocks back more wine. ‘Never go to the loo first. Tie a knot in it if you have to.’

‘The truth is, Joyce,’ says Ibrahim. ‘Maybe you would, and maybe you wouldn’t. Fifty-one per cent. It’s the toss of a coin, and I don’t believe that is a risk worth taking. You must never die before your dog.’

‘And is that an old Egyptian saying, or an old psychiatrist’s saying?’ asks Joyce. ‘Or something you just made up?’

Ibrahim tips his glass towards Joyce again, an indication of more wisdom to come. ‘You must die before your children, of course, because you have taught them to live without you. But not your dog. You teach your dog only to live *with* you.’

‘Well, that is certainly food for thought, Ibrahim; thank you,’ says Joyce. ‘A bit soulless perhaps. Don’t you think, Elizabeth?’

Elizabeth hears, but her mind is still in the back of the speeding Transit van, with the corpse and the doctor with the moustache. Not the only such occasion in Elizabeth’s career, but unusual enough to be memorable – anyone who knew Marcus Carmichael would have known that.

‘Beat Ibrahim’s system,’ Elizabeth says. ‘Get a dog that’s old already.’

And here was Carmichael again, years later. Looking for what? A friendly chat? Cosy reminiscence by an open fire? Who knew?

Their bill is brought to the table by a new member of the serving staff. Her name is Poppy and she has a tattoo of a daisy on her forearm. Poppy has been at the restaurant for nearly two weeks now and, thus far, the reviews have not been good.

‘You’ve brought us table twelve, Poppy,’ says Ron.

Poppy nods. ‘Oh, yes, that’s . . . silly me . . . what table is this?’

‘Fifteen,’ says Ron. ‘You can tell because of the big number fifteen written on the candle.’

‘Sorry,’ says Poppy. ‘It’s just remembering the food, and carrying it, and then the numbers. I’ll get the hang of it eventually.’ She walks back to the kitchens.

‘She is very well meaning,’ says Ibrahim. ‘But ill suited to this role.’

‘She has lovely nails, though,’ says Joyce. ‘Immaculate. Immaculate, aren’t they, Elizabeth?’

Elizabeth nods. 'Immaculate.' Not the only thing she has noticed about Poppy, who seems to have sprung from nowhere, with her nails and her incompetence. But she has other things on her mind for now, and the mystery of Poppy can wait for another day.

She is going through the text of the letter again in her head. *I wonder if you remember me? An awful lot of water under the bridge . . .*

Did Elizabeth remember Marcus Carmichael? What a ridiculous question. She had found Marcus Carmichael's dead body slumped against a Thames bridge at low tide. She had helped to carry that body up those slick stone steps in the dead of night. She had sat feet away from his corpse in a white Transit van advertising window-cleaning services. She had broken the news of his death to his young wife and she had stood beside the grave at his funeral, as an appropriate mark of respect.

So, yes, Elizabeth remembers Marcus Carmichael very well indeed. Time to be back in the room though. One thing at a time.

Elizabeth reaches for the white wine. 'Ibrahim, not everything is about numbers. Ron, you would die long before the dog, male life expectancy is far lower than female life expectancy, and you know what your GP has said about your blood sugar. And Joyce, we both know you've already made up your mind. You'll get a rescue dog. It'll be sitting somewhere right now, all alone with big eyes, just waiting for you. You will be powerless, and, besides, it'll be fun for all of us, so let's stop even discussing it.'

Job done.

‘And how about Instagram?’ says Joyce.

‘I don’t even know what that is, so feel free,’ says Elizabeth, and finishes her wine.

An invitation from a dead man? On reflection, she will be accepting.

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‘We were watching *Antiques Roadshow* the other night,’ says DCI Chris Hudson, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. ‘And this woman comes on, and she’s got these jugs, and your mum leans over to me and says –’

PC Donna De Freitas slams her head against the dashboard. ‘Sir, I am begging you. I am literally begging you. Please stop talking about my mum for ten minutes.’

Chris Hudson is supposed to be mentoring her, smoothing her eventual path into CID, but you wouldn’t know it from the almost total disrespect with which they treat each other, or, indeed, from their friendship, which had blossomed the moment they met.

Donna had recently introduced Chris, her boss, to Patrice, her mum. She thought they might get along. As it turned out, they are getting along a little bit too well for her liking.

Stakeouts with Chris Hudson used to be more fun. There would be crisps, there would be quizzes, there would be gossip about the new DS who’d just started at Fairhaven and had accidentally sent a picture of his penis to a local shopkeeper who was asking for advice on security grilles.

They’d laugh, they’d eat, they’d put the world to rights.

But now? Sitting in Chris's Ford Focus on a late-autumn evening, keeping a watchful eye on Connie Johnson's lock-up? Now Chris has a Tupperware container filled with olives, carrot batons and hummus. The Tupperware container bought by her mum, the hummus made by her mum and the carrot batons sliced by her mum. When Donna had suggested buying a KitKat he'd looked at her and said 'empty calories'.

Connie Johnson was their friendly local drug dealer. Well, Connie was more a drug *wholesaler* these days. The two Antonio brothers from St Leonards had controlled the local drug trade for some years, but they had gone missing around a year ago and Connie Johnson had stepped into the breach. Whether she was just a drug wholesaler, or whether she was a murderer too, was open to question, but, either way, that's why they were spending their week sitting in a Ford Focus, training binoculars on a Fairhaven lock-up.

Chris has lost a bit of weight, he has had a nice haircut, and is now wearing a pair of age-appropriate trainers – everything Donna had ever told him to do. She had used all the tricks in the book to encourage him, to convince him, to cajole him into looking after himself. But it turned out that, all along, the only real motivation he needed to change was to start having sex with her mum. You have to be so careful what you wish for.

Donna sinks back into her seat and puffs out her cheeks. She would kill for a KitKat.

'Fair enough, fair enough,' says Chris. 'OK, I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with Y.'

Donna looks out of the window. Far below she sees the line of lock-up garages, one of which belongs to Connie Johnson, the new drugs kingpin of Fairhaven. Queenpin? Beyond the lock-ups is the sea. The English Channel, inky black, moonlight picking out gentle waves. There is a light on the horizon, far out to sea.

‘Yacht?’ says Donna.

‘Nope,’ says Chris, shaking his head.

Donna stretches and looks back towards the row of garages. A hooded figure on a BMX bike rides up to Connie’s lock-up and bangs on the door. They can hear the faint metallic thunder even up on the hill.

‘Youth on bicycle?’ says Donna.

‘Nope,’ says Chris.

Donna watches as the door opens and the boy walks inside. All day, every day, this was happening. Couriers in and out. Leaving with coke, Es and hash, coming back with cash. It was non-stop. Donna knows they could raid the place right now and find a nice little haul of drugs, a bored middleman sitting at a table and a youth on a bicycle. But, instead, the team were biding their time, taking photographs of whoever walked in or out, following them wherever they were going, trying to build up a full picture of Connie Johnson’s operation. Gathering enough evidence to take the whole thing down in one go. With any luck there would be a series of dawn raids. With a bit more luck they would have a tactical support group armed with pneumatic battering rams to smash a few doors down and one of the tactical support officers would be single.

‘Yellow jacket?’ says Donna, seeing a woman walking along the high path towards the car park.

‘Nope,’ says Chris.

The big prize was Connie Johnson herself. That’s why she and Chris were there. Had Connie murdered two rivals and got away with it?

Occasionally, among the youths on bicycles they would see more familiar faces. Senior figures from the Fairhaven drug scene. Every name was noted. If Connie had murdered the Antonio brothers, then she hadn’t done it by herself. She was no fool. Sooner or later, in fact, she would notice she was being watched. Then things would become less blatant, harder to track. So they were getting all their evidence lined up while they could.

Donna jumps as a knuckle raps on her side window. She turns and sees the yellow jacket of the woman who had been walking along the path. A smiling face appears at the window and holds up two cups of coffee. Donna registers the shock of blonde hair and the smear of red lipstick. She winds down her window.

The woman crouches, then smiles. ‘Now, we haven’t been introduced, but I think you’re Donna and Chris. I bought you coffees from the garage.’

She hands the coffees over, and Donna and Chris look at each other and take them.

‘I’m Connie Johnson, but I think you know that,’ says the woman. She pats the pockets of her jacket. ‘I also bought sausage rolls, if you’d like one?’

‘No, thank you,’ says Chris.

‘Yes, please,’ says Donna.

Connie hands Donna a sausage roll in a paper bag. 'I'm afraid I didn't buy anything for the policewoman hiding behind the bins, taking all the photographs.'

'She's vegan anyway,' says Donna. 'From Brighton.'

'Anyway, just wanted to introduce myself,' says Connie. 'Feel free to arrest me any time.'

'We will,' says Chris.

'What's your eye-shadow?' Connie asks Donna.

'Pat McGrath, Gold Standard,' says Donna.

'It's lush,' says Connie. 'Anyway, business all done for today if you wanted to go home. And you haven't seen anything I didn't want you to see for the last two weeks.'

Chris sips his coffee. 'Is this really from the garage? It's very good.'

'They've got a new machine,' says Connie. She reaches into an inside pocket, takes out an envelope and hands it to Donna. 'You can have these. There's photographs of you in there, photographs of all the other officers you've had crawling around, too. Two can play at that game. Bet you didn't see anyone take them, eh? Followed a few of you home too. They took a nice one of you on a date the other day, Donna. You can do better, that's my opinion.'

'Yep,' says Donna.

'I'll be on my way, but nice to finally say hello in person. I've been dying to meet you.' Connie blows them a kiss. 'Don't be strangers.'

Connie straightens up and walks away from the Ford Focus. Behind them a Range Rover appears. The passenger door is opened and Connie climbs in and is driven away.

'Well,' says Chris.

'Well,' agrees Donna. 'What now?'

Chris shrugs.

'Great plan, boss,' says Donna. 'What was your I spy? Something beginning with Y?'

Chris turns his key in the ignition and puts on his seat-belt. 'It was your mother's beautiful face. I see it every time I close my eyes.'

'Oh, Christ,' says Donna. 'I'm asking for a transfer.'

'Good idea,' says Chris. 'Not until we've nicked Connie Johnson though, eh?'

Joyce

I do wish something exciting would happen again. I don't mind what.

Perhaps a fire, but where no one gets hurt? Just flames and fire engines. We can all stand around watching, with flasks, and Ron can shout advice to the firefighters. Or an affair, that would be fun. Preferably mine, but I'm not greedy, so long as there's a bit of scandal, like a big age difference, or someone suddenly needing a replacement hip. Perhaps a gay affair? We haven't had one of those at Coopers Chase yet, and I think everyone would enjoy it. Maybe someone's grandson could go to prison? Or a flood that doesn't affect us? You know the sort of thing I mean.

When you think of how many people have died around here recently, it is quite hard to just go back to pottering around the garden centre and watching old episodes of *Taggart*. Although I do like *Taggart*.

When I was a nurse, patients would die all the time. They were popping off left, right and centre. Don't get the wrong idea, I never killed anyone, although it would have been very easy to. Easier than a doctor. They used to check up on doctors a lot. They probably check up on

everyone these days, but I bet you could still do it if the mood took you.

Ibrahim doesn't want me to get a dog, but I am sure I can change his mind. Before you know it, he'll be dog this and dog that. You can bet he'll be first in line to walk it, too. I wish I'd got my hands on Ibrahim thirty years ago.

There is an animal rescue centre just across the border in Sussex, and they have all sorts there. The usual cats and dogs, but then also donkeys and rabbits and guinea pigs. I've never thought that a guinea pig might need rescuing before, but I suppose they do. We all need it once in a while, and I don't see why guinea pigs would be any different. They eat guinea pigs in Peru, did you know? It was on *MasterChef* the other day. They just mentioned it, they didn't actually eat one.

Lots of the dogs are from Romania; they save them and bring them over. I don't know how they bring them over, that's something I will ask. I don't imagine they have a plane full of dogs. In a big van? They will have worked out a way. Ron says they will bark in a foreign accent, but that's Ron.

We looked on the rescue centre website and you should see the dogs, honestly. There is one called Alan I have got my eye on. 'Indeterminate terrier', according to his profile. You and me both, I thought when I saw that. Alan is six years old, and they say you mustn't change their names, because they get used to them, but I won't call a dog Alan, whatever pressure I am put under.

Maybe I can persuade Ibrahim to drive me over next week. He's gone car mad recently. He's even driving into

Fairhaven tomorrow. He has really come out of his shell since everyone started getting murdered. Driving here, there and everywhere like he's Murray Walker.

I'm still wondering why Elizabeth was in a funny mood at lunch. Listening but not listening. Perhaps something is wrong with Stephen? You remember, her husband? Or perhaps she's still not over Penny. Either way, she has something on her mind, and she walked away from lunch with a purpose. That's always bad news for someone. Your only real hope is that it's not you.

I am also knitting. I know, can you imagine?

I got talking to Deirdre at Knit & Natter. Her husband was French but died some time ago – I think he fell off a ladder, but it might have been cancer, I can't remember. Deirdre has been knitting little friendship bracelets for charity and has given me the pattern. You make them in different colours, depending on who you make them for. People pay you whatever they choose and all the money goes to charity. I also put sequins on mine. The pattern doesn't say to put sequins on, but I've had some in a drawer for ages.

I made a red, white and blue bracelet for Elizabeth. It was my first go and was rather ragged but she was very good about it. I asked her what charity she wanted the money to go to and she said Living With Dementia and that's the closest we have got to talking about Stephen. I don't think she can keep him to herself for much longer, though; dementia just ploughs on through the woods and never turns back. Poor Elizabeth. Poor Stephen as well, obviously.

I also made a friendship bracelet for Bogdan. It was yellow and blue, which I had mistakenly thought were the colours of the Polish flag. According to Bogdan, the colours of the Polish flag are red and white, and, to give him his due, he would know. He thought that perhaps I had been thinking of Sweden, and perhaps I had. Gerry would have put me right. Like all good husbands, Gerry knew all the flags.

I saw Bogdan wearing his bracelet the other day. He was on his way up to work at the building site at the top of the hill, and he gave me a little wave and there it was on his wrist, wrapped around his tattoos of goodness knows what. I know it's silly, but I couldn't stop smiling. The sequins were sparkling in the sunshine and so was I.

Elizabeth hasn't worn hers yet, and I can't say I blame her. I am getting better at it though, and, besides, Elizabeth and I don't need a bracelet to show we are friends.

Last night I dreamt of the house Gerry and I lived in when we were first married. We opened a door and found a new room we hadn't ever seen before, and we were full of schemes as to what to do with it.

I don't know what age Gerry was, he was just Gerry, but I was me now. Two people who never met, touching and laughing and making plans. A pot plant here, a coffee table there. The stuff of love.

When I woke up, and realized Gerry had gone, my heart broke once again, and I sobbed and sobbed. I imagine if you could hear all the morning tears in this place it would sound like birdsong.

It is another glorious autumn day, but there is a bite in the air that tells you there won't be too many left. Winter is waiting impatiently round the corner.

It is 3 p.m., and Elizabeth is carrying flowers for Marcus Carmichael. The dead man. That drowned body, suddenly alive as you like and living at 14 Ruskin Court. The man she saw lowered into a grave in a Hampshire churchyard, now unpacking boxes and struggling with his new Wi-Fi.

She walks past Willows, the nursing home at the heart of Coopers Chase. The place Elizabeth would visit every day while Penny was there, just to sit and chat to her old friend, to plot and to gossip, not knowing whether Penny could hear her or not.

No more Penny now, of course.

The nights are beginning to draw in a little, and the sun is sinking behind the trees on top of the hill as Elizabeth reaches Ruskin Court and rings the bell for number 14. Here goes nothing. There is a brief wait and she is buzzed up.

There are lifts in all the buildings, but Elizabeth will use the stairs while she still can. Stairs are good for hip and knee flexibility. Also, it is very easy to kill someone in a lift when the doors open. Nowhere to run,

nowhere to hide, and a *ping* to announce you're about to appear. Not that she's worried about being killed, it doesn't feel to her like that's what is happening here, but it's always important to remember best practice. Elizabeth has never killed anyone in a lift. She once saw someone pushed down an empty lift shaft in Essen, but that was different.

She turns left at the top of the stairs, transfers the flowers to her left hand and knocks on the door of number 14. Who will answer the door? What is the story here? Should she be worried?

The door opens, and she sees a very familiar face.

It's not Marcus Carmichael, how could it have been? But it is certainly someone who knew the name Marcus Carmichael. And who knew it would get her attention.

And it turns out that, yes, she should be worried.

The man is handsome and tanned, strands of sandy grey hair still gamely holding on. She might have known he would never go bald.

How to play this one?

'Marcus Carmichael, I assume?' says Elizabeth.

'Well, I assume so, too,' says the man. 'Good to see you, Elizabeth. Are those flowers for me?'

'No, I have taken to carrying flowers around with me as an affectation,' says Elizabeth, handing them over as she is ushered in.

'Quite right, quite right, I'll put them in water, nonetheless. Come in, sit down, make yourself at home.' He disappears into the kitchen.

Elizabeth takes in the flat: bare, not a picture, not an

ornament, not a single frill to be seen. No sign of anyone 'moving in'. Two armchairs, both ready for the skip, a pile of books on the floor, a reading lamp.

'I like what you've done with the place,' says Elizabeth in the direction of the kitchen.

'Not my choice, dear,' says the man, re-entering the room with the flowers in a kettle. 'I daresay I'll grow into it, though I hope I shan't be here for long. Can I get you a glass of wine?' He sets the kettle on a windowsill.

'Yes, please,' says Elizabeth, settling into an armchair. What was happening? Why was he here? And what did he want from her after all this time? Whatever it was looked like trouble to her. A room barely furnished, blinds drawn, a padlocked bedroom. Number 14 Ruskin Court had the look of a safe house.

But safe from what?

The man walks back in, with two glasses of red wine. 'A Malbec for you, if I'm not mistaken?'

Elizabeth takes her glass as the man sits in the armchair opposite her. 'You seem to think that's a stunning feat of memory, to remember the wine I drank for the twenty-odd years we knew each other?'

'I'm nearly seventy, darling, everything is a stunning feat of memory these days. Cheers!' He raises his glass.

'And to you,' says Elizabeth, raising hers. 'Long time.'

'Very long time. But you remembered Marcus Carmichael?'

'That was very neat.'

Marcus Carmichael had been a ghost, invented by Elizabeth. She was an expert in it. A man who never

existed, concocted entirely to pass secrets to the Russians. A man with a past created from false documents and staged photographs. An agent who never existed, passing secrets that never existed, to the enemy. And when the Russians got a bit closer, and wanted a bit more from their new source, it was time to kill Marcus Carmichael off, to 'borrow' an unclaimed cadaver from one of the London teaching hospitals and bury it in a Hampshire churchyard, with a young typist from the pool bawling her eyes out as the grieving widow. And bury the lie with him. So Marcus Carmichael was a dead man who had never lived.

'Thank you, I thought it might amuse you. You look very well. Very well. How is . . . remind me . . . is it Stephen? The current husband?'

'Shall we not do this?' sighs Elizabeth. 'Shall we cut to you telling me why you're here?'

The man nods. 'Certainly, Liz. Plenty of time to catch up when everything is out in the open. I believe it is Stephen, though?'

Elizabeth thinks about Stephen, back at home. She left him with the television on, so hopefully he is dozing. She wants to be back with him, to sit with him, to have his arms around her. She does not want to be here, in this empty flat with this dangerous man. A man she has seen kill before. This is not the adventure she was hoping for today. Give her Stephen and his kisses. Give her Joyce and her dogs.

Elizabeth takes another sip of wine. 'I'm assuming you want something from me? As ever.'

The man sits back in his armchair. 'Well, yes, I suppose

I do. But nothing too taxing – in fact, something you might think is rather fun. You remember fun, Elizabeth?’

‘I’m already having my fair share of fun around here, but thank you.’

‘Well, yes, so I hear. Dead bodies and so on. Read the whole file.’

‘File?’ asks Elizabeth. A sinking feeling.

‘Oh yes, you’ve caused quite a stir in London, asking for all kinds of favours over the last couple of months. Financial records, forensics reports, I believe you even had a retired pathologist down here, digging up bones? You thought that might go unnoticed?’

Elizabeth realizes she has been short-sighted. She had certainly called in favours while she and the Thursday Murder Club were investigating the deaths of Tony Curran and Ian Ventham. And when they were identifying the other corpse they’d found, buried in the graveyard up on the hill. She should have known that somebody, somewhere was taking notes. You can’t expect favours without being asked to repay them. So what was it to be?

‘What do you need from me?’ she asks.

‘Just some babysitting.’

‘Babysitting who?’

‘Babysitting me.’

‘And why would someone need to babysit you?’

The man nods, takes a sip of his wine and leans forward. ‘The thing is, Elizabeth, I’m afraid I’ve got myself in a spot of bother.’

‘Some things never change, do they? Why don’t you tell me about it?’

There is the sound of a key in the lock and the door swings open.

‘Bang on time for once,’ says the man. ‘Here’s just the woman to help me tell the story. Meet my handler.’

Into the room walks Poppy, the new waitress from the restaurant. She nods to them both. ‘Sir, ma’am.’

‘Well, that explains an awful lot,’ says Elizabeth. ‘Poppy, I hope you’re a better operative than you are a waitress.’

Poppy blushes. ‘To be honest, I’m not sure I am, I’m afraid. But between the three of us I expect we can muddle through it all and stay safe.’

Safe houses, in Elizabeth’s experience, rarely stayed safe for long. Poppy moves the flowers in the kettle to one side. ‘Lovely flowers.’ She perches on the windowsill.

‘Safe from what, exactly?’ asks Elizabeth.

‘Well, let me start at the beginning,’ says the man.

‘I wish you would, Douglas,’ says Elizabeth, and downs her glass of wine. ‘You were an awful husband, but you always knew how to tell a good story.’

Ibrahim has just finished lunch with Ron. He had tried to persuade Ron to try hummus, but Ron was intractable. Ron would eat ham, eggs and chips every day if you let him. And to be fair, he was seventy-five and still going strong, so who's to say he was wrong? Ibrahim pulls the car door shut and buckles his seatbelt.

Ron had been excited because his grandson, Kendrick, is coming to stay next week, and Ibrahim is excited too.

Ibrahim would have made a wonderful father, a wonderful grandfather, too. But it wasn't to be, like so much else in his life. You silly old man, he thinks, as he turns the key in the ignition, you made the biggest mistake of them all. You forgot to live, you just hid away, safe and sound.

What good has it done him, though? Those decisions he had been too cautious to make? The loves he had been too timid to pursue? Ibrahim thinks of the many lives he has missed, somewhere along the way.

Ibrahim has always been good at 'thinking things through', but, now, he is choosing to take the proverbial bull by the horns. He has decided to live in the moment a little more. He is choosing to learn a lesson from Ron's chaotic freedom, from Joyce's joyful optimism and from the forensic wrecking ball that is Elizabeth.

Don't buy a dog, Joyce. That's what he had said. But of course she should. He will tell her when he gets back. Will she let him walk it? Surely she will. Terrific cardiovascular exercise. Everyone should buy dogs. Men should marry the women they loved, and not run away to England in fear. Ibrahim has had a lifetime to think about that decision. Has never even discussed it with his friends. Perhaps one day he should?

He turns left out of the gate of Coopers Chase. After checking, and then checking again, naturally.

There is a whole world out here, and, however frightened it makes him feel, he has decided he needs to get out of Coopers Chase every now and again. So here he is, out among the noise and the traffic and the people.

He has decided, once a week, to take Ron's Daihatsu out for a spin and visit Fairhaven. He passes the town sign. It is quite a buzz. Just him, by himself. He's going to do a bit of shopping, sit in a Starbucks with a coffee and read the paper. And while he's here, he's going to look and listen. What are people saying these days? Do they look unhappy?

Ibrahim is anxious that he won't be able to find anywhere to park, but he finds a space easily. He worries that he won't be able to work out how to pay for the parking, but that is a cinch too.

What sort of psychiatrist is frightened of life? All psychiatrists he supposes, I mean, that's why they became psychiatrists. Even so, it wouldn't do any harm to let the world in. A mind could calcify at Coopers Chase, if you let it. The same people, the same conversations, the same

grumbles and gripes. Investigating the murders has done Ibrahim a world of good.

He quickly discovers both self-service checkouts and contactless payments. The absolute minimum of human interaction. You don't have to nod hello to someone you have never met. To think he might have missed out on all this!

He finds a lovely independent bookshop where no one minds if you sit in an armchair and read for an hour. Of course, he buys the book he has been reading. It is called *You*, and is about a psychopath called Joe, for whom Ibrahim has a great deal of sympathy. He buys three other books too, because he wants the bookshop still to be here when he comes back next week. There was a sign behind the till saying 'Your Local Bookshop – Use It Or Lose It'.

Use It Or Lose It. That was quite right. That is why he is here. Out in the noise, with cars speeding by, with teenagers shouting and builders swearing. He feels good. He feels less frightened. His brain feels alive. Use it or lose it.

He looks at his watch. Three hours have gone by in a rush and it is time to head home, his head full of adventure. After telling Joyce that she should get a dog, he will tell her all about contactless payments. She will know about them already, but perhaps she won't have looked into the technology behind them, which he just has. Time flies when you are living it.

He has parked Ron's Daihatsu near Fairhaven Police Station, because surely that's the safest place to park.

Perhaps one week he will pop in and see Chris and Donna. Are you allowed to visit police officers at work? He is sure they would be delighted to see him, but he wouldn't want to hold up, say, an arson investigation while they felt they had to make small talk. But those worries were old Ibrahim. New Ibrahim would just take the chance. You want to see someone? Just go and see them. That's what Ron would do. Though Ron would also go to the bathroom and leave the door open, so Ibrahim must remember there are limits.

He passes three teenagers on a corner near the police station, all on bikes, and all three with hoods up. He smells cannabis. A lot of people at Coopers Chase smoke cannabis. Supposedly to relieve glaucoma, but statistically not that many people can have glaucoma, surely? As a young man, Ibrahim had been persuaded by some of his richer friends to smoke opium. He had been too much of a coward ever to try it again, but perhaps that was another thing he should put on his list? He wonders where you can buy opium. Chris and Donna would know. It was very useful, knowing police officers.

These three youths are exactly the sort of people that Ibrahim should be scared of, he knows that. But they don't frighten him at all. Young men had always hung around on street corners on bicycles, and they always would. In Fairhaven, in London, in Cairo.

Ibrahim sees the Daihatsu up ahead. He will take it through the car wash on the way back. Firstly, to say thank you to Ron, but also because he likes car washes. He takes out his phone. This was the first thing he learned today.

You can pay for your parking on a mobile phone app, which is short for application. Perhaps it's OK that everyone is looking at their phones? Perhaps if you have the entire history of human knowledge and achievement in your pocket it's OK to spend your time looking at –

Ibrahim doesn't hear the bicycle approach, but he feels it rushing past him, sees the hand grabbing his phone, ripping it from his grasp with a jerk that sends him tumbling to the ground.

Ibrahim lands on his side and rolls until he hits the kerb. The pain is immediate, in his arm, in his ribs. His jacket sleeve is torn. Will he be able to get it mended? He hopes so – it is a favourite jacket, but the rip looks bad, the white lining shining through like bone. He hears footsteps, running, and teenage laughter. As the footsteps reach him, he feels two kicks. One in the back and one to the back of the head. His head hits the kerb once more.

'Ryan, come on!'

This is very bad, Ibrahim understands that. Something serious has happened. He wants to move, but he is unable to. The damp of the gutter is seeping through the wool of his trousers, and he tastes blood.

There are more footsteps running, but Ibrahim has no way of protecting himself. He feels the cold of the kerb against his face. The footsteps stop, but no kick this time, instead he feels hands on shoulders.

'Mate? Mate? Jesus! Christine, call an ambulance.'

Yes, the adventure always ends with an ambulance, it doesn't matter who you are. What was the damage here?

Just broken bones? Bad enough at his age. Or worse? He had taken a kick to the back of the head. Whatever happened next he knew one thing was certain. He had made a mistake. He should have stayed safe. So now there will be no more trips to Fairhaven, no more sitting in the armchair in the bookshop. Where were his new books? In the street, getting wet? He is being shaken.

‘Mate, open your eyes, stay awake!’

But my eyes are open, thinks Ibrahim, before realizing they are not.

6

Elizabeth is sipping her second Malbec, and listening to her ex-husband, Douglas Middlemiss, talking about international money laundering. Explaining the story of why a man of his age might need babysitting.

‘We’d been looking at him for a while, this chap Martin Lomax, lovely big old house, plenty of money, but with the paperwork to prove where everything came from. The financial boys couldn’t touch him. But when you know, you know, don’t you?’

‘You do,’ agrees Elizabeth.

‘There would be all sorts turning up at his house, at all hours. Russians, Serbians, the Turkish mafia. All coming to this secluded house outside a sleepy village. Hambledon, if you know it? They invented cricket there.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ says Elizabeth.

‘Range Rovers, Bentleys, up and down the country lanes. Arabs in helicopters, the full works. An Irish Republican commander once parachuted out of a light aircraft and landed in his garden.’

‘What’s his business?’ asks Elizabeth. ‘Unofficially?’

‘Insurance,’ says Poppy.

‘Insurance?’

‘He acts as a bank for major crime gangs,’ says Douglas, leaning forward. ‘Say the Turks are buying a hundred