

Thursday Murder Club; a novel

(a summary by Pat Evert)

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

Part I: Meet New People and Try New Things

Joyce - Elizabeth asked me to imagine that a girl had been stabbed with a knife. She asked me to imagine she had been stabbed three or four times, just under the breastbone. In and out, in and out, very nasty, but without severing an artery. So there I was, imagining stab wounds, and Elizabeth asked me how long it would take the girl to bleed to death. Bernard Cottle was very kind to me when I first arrived at Coopers Chase. He was a professor, something in science, and had worked all around the world, including going to Dubai before anyone had heard of it. I guessed that unattended she would probably die in about forty-five minutes. Elizabeth's view was that the boyfriend had killed her. She asked me one final question, "Are you ever free on Thursdays?" And, that, believe it or not, was the first I had heard of Thursdays.



PC Donna De Freitas has given her talk, "Practical Tips for Home Security," many times. It gets her out of the station and gets her out of paperwork, so she volunteers. Fairhaven's police station is sleepier than Donna is used to. "Me?" says Joyce. "No story at all. I was a nurse, and then a mum, and then a nurse again. Elizabeth gives a short snort, "PC De Freitas. She is the type who 'gets things done.'" "Well," says Joyce. "Firstly, we are friends, of course; **we're the Thursday Murder Club.**"

Coopers Chase 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 three hundred residents. The old convent dominates Coopers Chase. You would find the Sisters of the Holy Church, an army that would never give you up, that would feed you and clothe you and continue to need and value you. All it required in return was a lifetime of devotion. 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 development sits on twelve acres of woodland and beautiful open hillside. There are two small lakes, one real and one created by Ian Ventham's builder.

*Joyce: I went to my first ever meeting of the Thursday Murder Club, and as I walked in, the three of them were already there in the Jigsaw Room, laying out photographs on the table. 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 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. 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.** I would never have therapy, because who wants to unravel all that knitting? Ron had all but invited himself. Elizabeth soon spotted his key strength—namely, **he never believes a single word anyone ever tells him.** 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. Penny and Elizabeth had solved all sorts of cases to their own satisfaction, but that was as far as they could go. So Penny and Elizabeth never really got their wish. All those murderers remained unpunished, all still out there.*

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.” There's a consultation meeting down at Coopers Chase, and he has to listen to what all the old people have to say. He's invited Tony along, so he can fire him straight afterward. Out in the open air, with witnesses nearby. The care home business boomed, and Ian built his fortune. He kept a few, he sold a few, he bought a few more. Coopers Chase, a waterfall of money—which, of course, was the source of today's problem. Twelve acres of beautiful countryside, with permission to build up to four hundred retirement flats. Tony Curran now owns 25 percent of everything that he built at Coopers Chase. 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. Ian feels emboldened. Kill or be killed.

“I'm not falling for that old bull, Ventham. This ain't a consultation, it's an ambush.” Ron simply loved to be the underdog. Anyone who, for any reason, had needed a champion had always been safe in Ron's tattooed arms. If someone doesn't ask about the cemetery, perhaps he should.

“That's Curran, the builder, with Ian. Ron looks over again. The conversation between the men looks tense. Talking fast and low, hands aggressive and defensive, but contained.

Ian is now sitting in the country kitchen of Karen Playfair. Her father, Gordon, owns the farmland at the top of the hill, adjoining Coopers Chase, and he seems in no mood to sell. No matter, Ian has his ways. “I'm afraid nothing has changed, Ian,” says Karen. “My dad won't sell, and I can't make him.” “I hear you,” says Ian. “He wants more money.” “No,” says Karen, “I think he just doesn't like you.” Hillcrest will be a real life

changer for Ian. It will eventually double the size of Coopers Chase, and double his profits. Profits he no longer has to share with Tony Curran.

Tony Curran is going to kill Ian Ventham; that's a given now. Surely Ian knows it too? You can only take so many liberties before even the most calm and rational man snaps. For many years his building company had really just been a front for his drug business. A way to explain away his income, a way to wash away his dirty money. Let the birds keep singing in the garden, let Ventham think he has won. And then strike. Tony hears the noise a second too late. He turns to see the spanner as it swings toward him. A big one too, real old-school stuff. There's no way of avoiding the swing, and in the brief moment of realization, Tony Curran gets it. You can't win 'em all, Tony. The killer places a photograph on the worktop, as Tony Curran's fresh blood begins to form a moat around his walnut kitchen island.

Many years ago, everybody here would wake early because there was much to do and only so many hours in the day. Now they wake early because there is **much to do and only so many days left**. "I have a job for you, Ibrahim," says Elizabeth, sipping a mint tea. "Well, a job for you and Ron, but I'm putting you in charge. All I need you to do is to lie to a senior police officer," says Elizabeth. "Can I trust you with that?" "When can you not trust me, Elizabeth?" says Ibrahim. This morning the Thursday Murder Club has a real-life case, a real corpse, and somewhere out there, a real killer.

PC Donna De Freitas carries a tray of teas into the incident room. Detective Chief Inspector Chris Hudson is addressing the team. "The biggest lead is the photograph the killer left by the body. So, three men, all of whom we obviously know very well. Shall we take them one by one?"

On a visit to Penny (in a coma) and her husband John, Elizabeth says, "I'm going to try and take a look at the financial relationship between Ian and Tony. Chase the money. There's a man in Geneva who owes me a favor, so we should be able to get Ventham's financial records by this evening. Either way, it sounds like fun, doesn't it? An adventure. I'm sure they'd appreciate a bit of help.

Elizabeth and Joyce take a minibus to Fairhaven police station. The security door opens and Donna De Freitas steps through. "Now, ladies, how can I—Help you?"

DCI Chris Hudson has been given a file on Tony Curran so thick it makes a thud if you drop it on a desk. There are transcripts of a number of interviews held with Tony Curran over the years, with the last one being after a shooting in 2000 in a pub called the Black Bridge, which left a young drug dealer dead. A witness recognized Tony Curran as firing the fatal shot, and Fairhaven CID called him in for questioning. Tony Curran had been in the middle of everything back then. Ask around and anyone would tell you. He ran the drug trade in Fairhaven, and plenty more besides. He reads that the witness, a local taxi driver, had disappeared soon after. Scared away, or worse. Tony Curran, local builder, walked away scot-free. Chris looks at the photograph the killer

had left by the body. Three men. Tony Curran, now dead, a local dealer from back in the day, Bobby Tanner, hired as muscle. And the third man, whereabouts very much known. The ex-boxer Jason Ritchie.

Elizabeth stops writing and looks up again. “Wouldn’t you like to be part of this murder investigation, Donna?” “When could you make that happen, Elizabeth?” Elizabeth looks at her watch and gives a small shrug. “An hour, perhaps?” Donna holds up her hands, open and honest. “If this doesn’t sound too juvenile, I would really, really like to chase murderers.” “I’ll need your mobile number, by the way, Donna,” says Elizabeth. “I don’t really want to fake a crime every time I need to see you.” Donna looks at Elizabeth, shakes her head, and sighs. She writes down another number on the card.

DCI Chris Hudson swings his Ford Focus onto the long, broad driveway leading up to Coopers Chase. Ron Ritchie. Well, wasn’t that quite the thing? Chris was taken aback the moment they were introduced. The father of a man Chris was investigating? What was that? Luck? Ibrahim turns to Ron. “Ron, he just wants to ask you about the argument you saw. Remember, we talked about it?” He looks back to Chris. “He forgets things. He’s very old, Detective Inspector.” Ron leans forward. “I think I’d be happier talking to the lady.” “Oh yes!” says Ibrahim. “PC De Freitas! She often comes to talk to us, Detective Inspector.” “Of course, yes. She is one of my team.” “So she is part of the investigation? Well, this is excellent news,” says Ibrahim, beaming. “We love PC De Freitas here. So if the handsome detective here, and our friend PC De Freitas came to talk to you together? Would you be happy, Ron?” Ron takes his first sip of tea. “That’d be perfect, Ib. I’d like that. I’ll talk to Jason too.”

*Joyce - So it seems we are investigating a murder. And better still, I have been in a police interview room. This diary is bringing me luck. It was interesting watching Elizabeth in action. She is very impressive. Very calm. I think that **if I have a special skill, it is that I am often overlooked. Is that the word? Underestimated, perhaps?** Something no one ever seems to notice. So I am very happy to be overlooked, and always have been.*

“I do think you have a moral obligation to leave the Garden of Eternal Rest, the graveyard, exactly where it is,” continues Father Mackie. “And I wanted to meet you face-to-face, man-to-man, and see if we can come to a compromise.” Ian Ventham listens closely, but in honesty is really thinking about **how clever he is. He is the cleverest person he knows, that’s for certain. That’s how he gets what he wants.** It feels almost unfair sometimes. He’s not just one step ahead of you; he’s on an entirely different path. “We’re only moving the bodies, Father,” says Ian. “It will be done with the greatest of care, and the greatest of respect.” But you said it yourself, all we’ll find now is bones. That’s all there is. And you can choose to be superstitious, or religious in your case, I see that, but I can choose not to be. Now, we’ll take care of the bones, and I’m happy for you to be there and watch the lot if that’s what floats your boat. But I want to move the cemetery, I’m allowed to move the cemetery, and I’m going to move the cemetery. **Bones don’t mind where they are.**”

*Joyce: Elizabeth and I went into London on a visit to my daughter Joanna. I like Elizabeth to be in charge, but it doesn't hurt to make your presence felt every now and again. **I think she rubs off on me, and in a good way.** I have never really thought that **I was a pushover**, but the more time I spend with Elizabeth, the more I think I probably am. Elizabeth had, of course, acquired detailed financial records of Ian Ventham's companies. By hook or, more likely, by crook. The long and short was that Ventham's companies were in very good shape. He knew what he was doing.*

Memory was the bogeyman that stalked Coopers Chase. Forgetfulness, absentmindedness, muddling up names. Elizabeth's husband, Stephen is on the brink. He is over the brink, if Elizabeth is honest with herself. She grinds the temazepam into Stephen's tea. HOW MUCH MONEY DID IAN VENTHAM MAKE FROM THE DEATH OF TONY CURRAN? She writes the answer farther down the page, £12 MILLION, and closes her appointments diary for another day.

Joyce: Elizabeth is inviting Donna and her DCI to come to see us later. She is planning to give them the information we found out from Joanna and Cornelius, and to see what we might get in return. Because it isn't Thursday, Elizabeth asked if we can use my front room to meet them.

Chris has shown her the photograph left near the body. Surely it's a red herring, though? It must be. If you're Jason Ritchie, or Bobby Tanner, or whoever took the photo, you're asking for too much trouble. It would be idiocy for any of the men to have left the photograph by the body.

"I don't suppose you and Tony had a falling-out, Mr. Ventham?" says Chris. "Before he died?" I wonder if I could ask what the argument was about?" "Of course, sure," says Ian. "I want to fit all the new flats with automatic sprinklers; Tony didn't want the expense. This is just how I do business—the safety of my clients is paramount. And I mean paramount. Interview concluded they leave. Donna's phone pings as she and Chris reach the car. A text from Elizabeth, "It's the Thursday Murder Club," she tells Chris, "asking if we could come over to Coopers Chase, sir. They have some information." "The Thursday Murder Club?" asks Chris. "That's what they call themselves." "Tell her we'll visit when we decide, not when she decides. We're the police."

Father Matthew Mackie visited Ian Ventham to put his case, and he had been disappointed. The Woodlands was continuing as planned. The cemetery was to go. Time to conjure up a plan B, and quickly. Matthew Mackie turns and looks back across the garden. The oldest graves are nearest to Christ, with the newest joining the queue when their time had come. There are about two hundred bodies high on the hill, a spot so beautiful, so peaceful, so perfect. The first grave is dated 1874, a Sister Margaret Bernadette.

Chris sometimes forgets the impact a police officer can have on members of the public. The gang in front of him are looking at him with something approaching awe. It's nice to be taken seriously once in a while, and he is happily giving them the benefit of his wisdom. "I didn't say we had a suspect, but we have persons of interest, and that's normal." Elizabeth hands Chris a bright blue file about six inches thick. "It's a few financials on Ian Ventham. Details of this place, details of his relationship with Tony Curran. Probably all nonsense, but I'll let you be the judge." "I'll look through it, don't panic," says Donna, and gives Elizabeth a reassuring look. The door swings open and Joyce walks in with Jason Ritchie himself. The tattoos, that nose, those forearms. "Mr. Ritchie," says Chris. "We meet at last."

Elizabeth had come straight over to Willows after meeting with the police. She makes sure that Penny has a wash and a set once a week. Elizabeth sits by Penny. "Here's another thing, though, Pen. They took young Jason out for a photo afterward. "Do you think they were asking Jason about something? "Perhaps it wasn't Ventham at all? Perhaps we're just being blinded by what's in that file? By the twelve million. I mean, where was he when Curran was killed?"

Elizabeth texts Donna, "What time was Tony Curran killed?" Ian Ventham left Coopers Chase at 3:00pm. Donna replies, "3:32. His Fitbit broke when he fell."

Joyce: Elizabeth has sent me a message. We are off on a road trip tomorrow. No idea when, and no idea why, but I shall look forward to it very much.

Meeting the Thursday Murder Club was the first good thing that had happened to Donna in a long time. That, and Tony Curran being murdered. She'd like to have a little chat about Elizabeth's file. So, it's either Chris, her boss, or Elizabeth, her . . . well, *friend*, but surely that isn't right.

Not too late at all, PC De Freitas," says Elizabeth. "Here's the first headline that's of interest to us. We discover that Tony Curran owns twenty-five percent of Coopers Chase. But then we discover that Curran is not a partner in the new company Ventham is using for the Woodlands. There is an appendix in your folder—four C, I think. The Woodlands was due to be exactly the same as the rest of Coopers Chase—seventy-five percent Ian Ventham, twenty-five percent Tony Curran—until Ventham changed his mind and cut Curran out entirely. Now, you know what question to ask next?" "When did Ventham change his mind? Precisely. Well, Ventham signed the papers to cut Curran out of the deal the day before the consultation meeting. Which was, of course, the day before their mysterious row. And the day before someone murdered Tony Curran." "So Curran misses out on the Woodlands," says Donna. "What would that have cost him?" "Millions," says Elizabeth. And it would get even worse after the next phase of the development, Hillcrest. That's what our expert says. The real golden goose. Buying the farmland on top of the hill. Doubling the size of the development." "And when will Hillcrest happen?" asks Donna. "Well, that's a sticking point for

Ventham. He doesn't even own the land yet," says Elizabeth. "It is still owned by the farmer Gordon Playfair." What that folder tells you are two key things. Firstly, Ventham double-crossed Tony Curran the day before Curran died." "Agreed." "And secondly, listen carefully to this. Tony Curran's shares have all reverted back to Ian Ventham. Our expert says Tony Curran's death just earned Ian Ventham around 12.25 million pounds." "And it's cute you keep saying 'our expert' instead of 'Joyce's daughter.' Very loyal. I promise we'll look into it." "Thank you, Donna, and no comment. When you're over next, I would like you to meet my friend Penny."

Ian Ventham is on his treadmill. As Ian runs, he is thinking about the graveyard, and he's thinking about Father Mackie. The diggers are due to start in a week. Get the graveyard done first; that's the tough bit.

Joyce: So, could Ian Ventham have killed Tony Curran? Well, according to Ibrahim—Ian Ventham would have been cutting it very fine, but it would have been possible. If he had left Coopers Chase at three p.m., he would have arrived at Tony Curran's house (big, but a bit tacky, but still nice) at 3:29. That would have given him two minutes to get out of his car, get into the house, and hit Tony Curran with a large object.

Elizabeth cannot sleep. She is getting used to that these days. One by one, the lights of the village switch off. The only remaining illumination comes from behind the thick hospital blinds of Willows. **The business of dying keeps different hours than the business of living.**

"Diggers are here, coming up the drive, two of them. . . ." That beacon lit, the news was across the whole village by six forty-five a.m. At the very latest, the news spread by landline alone. More residents have reached the gate now, and they begin to crowd around Ron, all waiting for an answer. "Ventham's little gang. No warning, no consultation. Coming into our village and digging up our nuns. We're all weak, Mr. Ventham—you can see that, right? We're feeble, the lot of us; we're a pushover. We got fighters. And you, with your diggers at seven thirty in the morning, have picked a fight." "Thanks, Ron. All rubbish, but thank you. There's no fight here. You've had your consultation, you've made your objections, they were all overturned." Joyce and Bernard, who had slipped away together during Ron's grandstanding, are now returning with garden chairs under their arms. They walk through the crowd and open them out on the path. Ron turns to the crowd. "Who's up for a nice sit-down and a cup of tea?"

The call from Ian Ventham comes through to the Fairhaven police station at around seven thirty a.m. In front of the gate that leads to the Garden of Eternal Rest, there are now twenty chairs. Mainly sun loungers, some of whom are taking the opportunity to stretch out in the morning sun and have a well-earned nap.

Elizabeth is not at the scene. Instead, after dropping Stephen at home, she's just up the path leading to the Eternal Garden of Rest. Bogdan emerges from the trees, with a shovel over his shoulder. "Bogdan," she replies. "I know you have work to do, but I wonder if I might ask you a question. Did Mr. Ventham tell you he wanted Tony Curran murdered?" asks Elizabeth. "After their row? Perhaps he asked you to help? Perhaps you did help?" "No, he didn't tell me, and no he didn't ask, so no I didn't help." "Can I ask if you fitted Tony Curran's alarm system?" Bogdan nods. "Sure, Ian gets me to do all that stuff for people." "So you could have got in, very easily? Waited for him?" "Sure. Would have been simple. There are some jobs I do, like fix alarms, tile swimming pools, and there are some jobs I don't do, like kill people. So, if he ask, I say, 'Listen, maybe you have good reason,' but I would say, 'Kill him yourself, Ian.' It is nice to meet you." "It is nice to meet you too. My name is Marina," says Elizabeth as she shakes his huge hand. Marina was his mother's name, tattooed on his arm.

Joyce: Elizabeth and I went to see Donna and Chris, collecting Ron on the way. Ibrahim walked over to the barricade picnic, which was in full swing, and suggested that anyone who didn't want to be arrested should perhaps move their chairs off the path. When Ibrahim reassured the rest that they only had to clear the path, and they were very welcome to stay out and watch the action, there was a proper exodus.

Father Matthew Mackie is relieved to see that the gate up to the garden is still locked and guarded, and that the diggers are idling on their trailer. Mackie noticed the "troops" to be the three women in black standing stock-still by the gate. In front of them are a woman and two men in chairs. Ventham must have caught sight of Father Mackie, because over he rushed, with Chris, Donna, and Ibrahim chasing behind.

Bogdan has been digging for a long time. He started at the very top of the Garden of Eternal Rest, he knows that the older, grander coffins here will be intact. They will be solid oak. Bogdan's shovel finally strikes something solid, but it is not the lid of the coffin. It is pure white. Beautiful, in fact, thinks Bogdan, in the moment before he realizes what it is. Bones. So even 150 years ago they were cutting corners? Cheap coffins—who would ever find out? He realizes he is kneeling on the solid oak lid of a solid oak coffin. Which can't be. A body can't escape from a coffin. Bogdan tries to force out a horrific thought. That someone had been buried alive? Had managed to somehow clamber out of the coffin, but no farther? After considerable effort he breaks open the lower third. Inside is another skeleton. Two skeletons. One inside the coffin, and one outside. One small, one big.

The police have had a placatory chat with Ian. He'll come back tomorrow. Ian aims a shove at Mackie's shoulder, knocking the older man backward. Mackie reaches out for balance, grabbing Ian's T-shirt, and the two men lose their balance and fall to the ground together. Only Chris Hudson was really able to hold Ventham back. Ian is frightened and starts to cry. Don't cry, Ian. He reaches out for something to hold, but to his surprise there is only air. Ian Ventham is dead before he hits the ground.

Part II: Everyone Here Has a Story to Tell

Joyce: Elizabeth says he was killed, and if Elizabeth says he was killed then I expect he was. I hope I don't sound callous. It's just that I have seen a lot of people die, and I have shed so many tears. But I have shed none for Ian Ventham. It is sad that he is dead, we can all agree on that, but it hasn't made me sad. I wonder if it has made anyone sad? Will anyone miss him? Poor Ian.

Chris opens a folder. "Ian Ventham's death was caused by fentanyl poisoning. A massive overdose, delivered into the muscle of his upper arm, almost certainly in the moments leading up to his collapse. And they see enough fentanyl overdoses at the path lab these days to know one when they see one.

Elizabeth is laying out a series of full-color photos of the corpse of Ian Ventham, alongside every conceivable angle of the scene. She had taken them on her phone while pretending she was calling for an ambulance. Ibrahim begins. "Somebody in that crowd administered an injection to Ian Ventham which killed him, almost certainly within a minute. There was a puncture wound found on his upper arm. In total there were sixty-four residents at the scene, ourselves included. Then we add DCI Hudson and PC De Freitas, the builder Bogdan, who went missing—" "We add the driver of the low-loader, whose name was Marie. Karen Playfair, the lady who lives at the top of the hill, was there, as she was supposed to teach us about computers yesterday. And then, of course, Father Matthew Mackie." "That makes seventy, Ibrahim," says Ron. "We eliminate those with mobility handicaps or proximity issues. Thirty names. Ourselves included. And one of them is the killer." "Who wanted him dead?" says Ron. "Who gained? Did the same person kill Curran and Ventham?"

Elizabeth is back in Willows, sitting in her low chair in Penny's room. She is filling in Penny on the drama. "Simply everyone was there, Penny. Now, Ian Ventham, meanwhile, dies within seconds of being injected with a huge dose of fentanyl. You know fentanyl, John?" "Of course," says John. "Used it all the time. Anesthetic, mainly." John the vet. "One man bludgeoned, Penny; the other poisoned. But by whom? If Ventham was killed straightaway, then somebody out there this morning killed him. **Who loses what, Penny? That's the question**, isn't it?"

The door opens. It's DI Terry Hallet. "I've got a car that took twelve minutes to travel the half mile between the two speed cameras either side of Tony Curran's house. Exactly the right time frame too." "So it stopped somewhere between the two? Nice little ten-minute break for something or other?" "That's our killer, surely?" Chris has to agree. Time to go and have a chat.

Bogdan has seen where Marina lives, and now is as good a time as any. She will know what to do about the bones; he sensed that as soon as he met her. He has brought her

flowers from the woods. “Marina? Of course, of course, come in, let’s get the kettle on, shall we? “I don’t know where she is, old chap, but she won’t be long,” says Stephen.

I was looking through the call logs,” says Donna. “And I recognized the number.” “The mobile that called Tony Curran?” She nods, then takes out a scrap of paper for Chris to see. “Remember this? Jason Ritchie’s number. He’s the one who phoned Tony three times on the morning of the murder. Is this worth a change of plan?” Chris holds up a finger to silence her and takes from his jacket pocket the piece of paper Terry Hallet gave him. He hands it to Donna. “Vehicle records, from the day of the murder.” Donna reads, and then looks up at Chris. “Jason Ritchie’s car?” Chris nods. “Jason rings Tony Curran that morning. Jason’s car is outside Tony’s house when he dies? So we’re going to see Jason?”

Ice Spectacular. How was anyone making money from an ice rink just off a ring road, sandwiched between a tile warehouse and a Carpet Right? A business in their neighborhood that didn’t make any sense, which had no customers, then it was a front for a drugs business. An ice rink with a neon sign that last lit up in 2011. He was an athlete, strong and brave, a magnificent flowing machine, everything given, nothing wasted. With his grace, his poise, and his movement, Jason Ritchie was beautiful to watch. However, as Chris and Donna sit on their plastic seats and sip on coffees, it becomes apparent that Jason Ritchie cannot ice-skate. “What were you doing at Tony Curran’s house on the day he was murdered?” “None of your business,” says Jason. “I’ve got one too,” says Donna. “The day that Tony Curran was murdered. Did you ring him?” “Don’t remember, I’m afraid.” “I wonder if you’d like to come in and give us some fingerprints and a bit of DNA?” says Chris. “Just to eliminate you from our inquiries? We could eliminate you from two murders at once.”

“I can trust you?” he asks, staring deep into her eyes. “You can trust me,” she says, her eyes never leaving his. Bogdan nods. He believes her. “Can we go for a walk? You and I? This evening?” “And where will we be walking, Bogdan?” “To the cemetery.” “I meet you here,” says Bogdan. “And wear warm clothes; we be there for a while.” “I think you can count me in,” says Elizabeth.

Joyce: Joanna came over with a new Audi A4 after having dumped her boyfriend for cheating on her.

Elizabeth has been thinking some more about Bernard, has had to under the circumstances. She always gets the sensation that he is keeping guard for the cemetery. That he’s somehow on sentry duty on his bench. He won’t go in, but he’s never far away. “You said I can trust you, okay?” says Bogdan. “Is okay, whatever you need to do. But if I show you something, you don’t tell the police, you don’t tell no one?” “You have my word.” Bogdan nods. “You sit while I dig.” As Bogdan’s torch plays over the bones and the coffin lid on which they rest, she has to admit this wasn’t what she had been expecting. “So two bodies. One where it belongs, and another,

by Richard Osman

much newer, where it doesn't belong?" She looks back at Bogdan, shoveling earth into the grave. **She thinks this is absolutely the sort of son she would like to have had.**

Donna and Chris are in the Fairhaven police station. Not so long ago, Donna had been sitting in this interview room talking to someone pretending to be a nun. She now sat in front of a man pretending to be a priest. The parallel is not lost on her. Just a few background checks on Father Matthew Mackie. It had taken a couple of days because absolutely nothing popped up. "The facts, Mr. Mackie?" says Chris. "You are not Father Matthew Mackie, that's a fact. You do not work for the Catholic Church, or any church. You are - Dr. Michael Matthew Noel Mackie? Can we have that one as a fact too?" "Yes," admits Matthew Mackie. "You retired from private practice as a GP fifteen years ago. You don't even attend Mass?" Mackie nods without looking up. "All facts. I thought I saw a man pushing a Catholic priest. A Catholic priest protecting a Catholic graveyard. I actually saw a man pushing someone impersonating a priest, for reasons still known only to himself. Moments after scuffling with this con man, the first man drops down dead from a lethal injection. Which puts a different complexion on things, especially when we discover the con man is a doctor.

"A few of the old faces, and someone says Tony's been found dead at home. I go cold, you know? I get sent the photo that morning, and Tony dies that afternoon. Which leaves me worried. I mean, I can look after myself, but Tony could look after himself too, and see where that got him? So I'm nervous, that's natural, and then the police get wind that I've been to Tony's, and they get records saying I'd rung Tony's phone that day too. And next to the body they've got a photo of me. You can't blame them—they think that stinks, and so would I." "But you didn't kill Tony Curran?" asks Elizabeth. "No, not me," says Jason. "But you can see why the police think I did. Well the way my Dad tells it, however good the police are, you lot are better. But if Bobby or Johnny killed Tony, then they're still out there, and if they're still out there, then why not me next? "Whatever you've done, and whatever we might think of that, I would like to catch a murderer. Before that murderer catches you. Even if it's you."

I would say these have been down here some while." "Some while, Austin?" asks Elizabeth. "I would say so," he replies, considering. "Just by the coloration. Thirty, forty, fifty years, perhaps, depending on the soil, but not a hundred and fifty." "So we got to tell police now?" "Oh, I think we can probably keep this to ourselves until Austin gets back to us," replies Elizabeth. "If everyone agrees?" Everyone agrees.

Joyce: There was a jolly atmosphere, but when Austin laid the pile of bones on my dining table, while we still knew it was an adventure, I think they began to have a sobering effect on all of us. Even Ron. Just for the time being, we wanted to keep it for ourselves. As soon as we get the results from Austin we will have to tell all, of course. So we are trying to solve two murders—possibly three, if the skeleton was murdered.

by Richard Osman

“So, Jason Ritchie for the Tony Curran murder,” says Chris. “And Matthew Mackie for Ian Ventham? Unless we’re missing something,” says Donna. “Have you heard anything from your pals in the Thursday Murder Club?” asks Chris. “Not a peep,” says Donna. “Which makes me nervous.” “Perhaps Mackie’s got something buried in the graveyard,” he says. “Doesn’t want it dug up?” “Good place to bury something,” agrees Donna.

Joyce: We did a Skype call with Austin. The body was a man, which he’d already told us. He had a gunshot wound to the femur. That probably wasn’t the cause of death. The body was buried sometime in the 1970s, probably earlier rather than later. So fifty-odd years ago, give or take.

“It’s Elizabeth. She wonders if we might like to pop over this evening? She says she has something for us. I quote, ‘Please do not read another file until you have seen what we have found. Also there will be sherry. See you at eight.’” Eventually he looks up at Donna, who has her eyebrows raised waiting for an answer. “I’m a reluctant yes.”

“Why did you dig up a body?” says Chris. “As I stated previously, we didn’t dig up the body. But our attention was drawn to the fact that a body had been dug up,” says Ibrahim. “We wouldn’t have wanted to waste your time,” agrees Ibrahim. “We know you are busy with two murders already.” Elizabeth sighs, “Well, this is exactly what I meant, Donna. I knew you’d both make a fuss. If you’re going to arrest us, arrest us. Take the four of us to the station, question us all night. Get the same answer all night.” “No comment,” says Ron. “Or,” continues Elizabeth, “you can forgive us, and believe us when we say we were trying to help.” “So you think the same person might have committed two murders? But nearly fifty years apart?” “It’s an interesting question, isn’t it?” asks Elizabeth.

Joyce: I’m glad we told Chris and Donna about the bones. It seems right. Now everyone can keep an eye out. Who was here in the 1970s and is still here today? Everyone knows everything now, and that only seems fair. So where are Johnny and Bobby?

Chris is still sure that Mackie is guilty as hell. It added up. But these bones? Did they change things? Had there been two murders fifty-odd years apart, one to protect the other? If so, then Mackie wasn’t their man—they’ve been through the records; he hadn’t left Ireland until the nineties. Chris loved his job, was good at his job. **He always found it easy to get up in the morning; he just found it hard to go to sleep at night.** Leave Mackie be for a minute and focus on Tony Curran’s murder. Jason Ritchie had rung Chris earlier. Told his tale. Explained away the calls and the car. There was a good chance that Bobby Tanner was dead too. Steroids, pub fight, fell off a ferry—so many ways to go, and the only way to identify him was a false passport. And then the new name, Turkish Johnny. Chris had found plenty on record for him. Johnny Gunduz was his real name. Fled the country in the early 2000s after a tip-off he’d murdered the cabbie in the Black Bridge shooting.

Peter Ward is graying and smiling, and has the easy air of a man who has made a series of good decisions in life. **A Folkestone florist whom karma has rewarded for a lifetime of kindness and calmness, a man whose good deeds have won him the prize of happiness.** This impression is misleading. As the scar under his right eye and the bulge of his biceps will tell you, Peter Ward is Bobby Tanner. “So no one else knows where I am? No one else can find me?” “Not if you come and see us tomorrow, sit down with Jason and the police, and tell them what you just told us.”

What are you hiding up here?” “Hiding?” asks Bernard. “I don’t buy all this grief stuff, son. We all miss our wives, with the greatest respect. Something else is going on here.” “You’re talking to me about the murder?” asks Bernard. “I’m just an old man who misses his wife. So spare me.”

Joyce: Peter Ward is Bobby Tanner’s name now, but we are sworn to secrecy. He’s a florist. Why was Peter Ward a florist? And the benefit of going straight was that no one has ever come looking for him, no one has ever arrested him and taken a closer look at that passport, so Peter Ward had left his past behind and found some peace, which is not easy to do.

He lifts it by the handle but is quickly beaten by its weight. When did he get so weak? What happened to his body? To think he could now barely lift a spade? Digging was out of the question. So what now? Who could help? Who would understand? It was hopeless. Bernard Cottle sits in a folding chair and weeps for what he has done.

Willows was a prison from which no escape was possible. Where release could mean only one thing. They had walked into the room and Elizabeth had said, “Constable De Freitas, I’d like you to meet Detective Inspector Penny Gray.” Elizabeth had taken Donna through Penny’s career. Smart, resilient, opinionated, thwarted at every turn by her gender and by her temperament. Or, rather, by the unacceptable combination of them both. **“She’s a wrecking ball,”** Elizabeth had said. “A bit of blunt force. Fashionable if you were a man, at least, but it never helped Penny; she never made it higher than detective inspector. Elizabeth had told her to look into another of the residents, a Bernard Cottle.

Joyce opens up the envelope and slips out a handwritten letter, maybe three or four pages. She is grateful that her friends have come to her flat.

*Dear Joyce, I am sorry for the nuisance. Don’t try to come in, I have bolted the door. First time I have used that bolt since I moved here. You will know what I have done, and I suppose it’s nothing you haven’t seen before a thousand times. I will be lying on the bed, all things being well, and perhaps I will look peaceful, but perhaps I won’t. I would rather not take that chance, so I’ll leave it to the ambulance men to decide if I look in a fit state for you to say good-bye. That is if you wish to say good-bye.” I have the pills by my side. As you know, Asima died shortly after we moved to Coopers Chase. **Like***

someone reached in and took out my heart and my lungs, and told me to keep living. *Keep waking up, keep eating, keep putting one foot in front of the other. For what? I don't think I ever really found an answer to that. You will know that many Hindus have their ashes scattered on the Ganges. This was Asima's wish. Two days afterward Sudhi and Majid' – that's the daughter and son-in-law – 'flew to Varanasi in India, and scattered Asima's ashes on the Ganges. But Joyce, and here's where the pills and the whisky come in, I'm afraid. They weren't her ashes.' " I filled the urn with a mixture of sawdust and bonemeal, it's surprisingly convincing. The next day, as soon after dark as I dared, I took a spade from the allotment shed and walked up the hill. I cut the turf from underneath the bench, I dug a hole, and I buried the tin. I could never tell Sudhi what I had done. Until one morning I climbed the hill to find workmen laying a concrete foundation for the bench. They had dug down, not far enough to find the tin, and filled the hole with cement. They had the job done in half an hour.*

Joyce attempts a smile, which turns in an instant to tears.

Chris has a very interesting interview lined up in Cyprus. One that should tell them once and for all where Johnny Gunduz is. He feels sure that Turkish Johnny is their man; he's been around long enough to sense when something fits perfectly. Evidence is another thing.

Joyce: Anne, who edits Cut to the Chase, came to see me today. She has asked if I will write a column in Cut to the Chase. She knows I like to write, and she knows I have my nose in everything. We are going to call it "Joyce's Choices," which I like.

The walk to the Playfair farm had taken longer than expected. "We were wondering if you had any memories of this place? From the seventies, say?" says Elizabeth. "I certainly have plenty of memories," says Gordon. "Might even have a few photo albums, if they'd help."

*Joyce: So we told Gordon Playfair about the body. And we all had a good old chat about who might have buried it there all those years ago. The offer for his land, by the way? It was from our mysterious friends at Bramley Holdings. That name is still driving me crazy. But it'll come. So, the kids are lucky, but Gordon says he has enough left over to buy himself a little place somewhere nice, and – we're going to give him a guided tour of Coopers Chase in a few days and see if anything takes his fancy. **It was in the fifth photo, a group shot.** At first you couldn't really see it. We've all changed a lot over fifty years. But we all looked, and we all looked again. And we all agreed.*

Matthew Mackie had scuffled with Ventham. A man who didn't seem to exist, yet was in a photo taken in this very chapel. A man who both was a priest and wasn't a priest.

A man who had brushed over his footsteps. Until someone had decided to dig up a graveyard. His graveyard?

Chris interviews Demir Gunduz, the father of Johnny Gunduz in Central Prison in Nicosia, Cyprus. Interesting conversation, but Demir would say nothing about Johnnie's whereabouts.

Matthew Mackie had been surprised to get the call from Elizabeth asking if he was available for a confession. It seemed that every bit of news he had received in the past month had been bad news. So what to make of the phone call? So what was on Elizabeth's mind? What sin could she no longer hide? And why ask for him? And why there? He realized Elizabeth hadn't actually mentioned **which of them would be doing the confessing**.

Elizabeth and Matthew Mackie are inches apart, in the confessional. "I see no point in dressing it up. And I don't want forgiveness—yours or the Lord's. I just want it on record. I want someone to bear witness, before I die and it's all dust. I know there are rules, even in the confessional, so you must do whatever you need to do with this information. I killed a man. This was a lifetime ago, and for what it's worth, he attacked me and I defended myself. But I killed him. I shot him. In the leg. I hadn't thought he would die, but he bled and he bled and he bled. So much blood, so quickly. And the knock at the door never came. In my dreams they knock every night. There have to be consequences. So what do you think? Please, just be honest with me." "Be honest with you?" Matthew Mackie lets out a long, slow sigh. "I'll be honest. I don't believe a word of it, Elizabeth." So, first things first, Matthew. Why did you kill Ian Ventham?"

Joyce: So I made the call to Donna, and I told her where Elizabeth had gone, and I told her she hadn't returned. Donna is on her way. I know she is very worried, and so am I. I have always thought Elizabeth was indestructible. I hope I'm not wrong.

She looks at the inscription.

SISTER MARGARET ANNE MARGARET FARRELL, 1948–1971.

Elizabeth takes Matthew's hand and interlaces her fingers with his. "It's a beautiful place, Elizabeth," he says. The peace is broken by a commotion farther down the hill, the sound of footsteps running. Elizabeth looks at her watch. "That'll be my rescue party," she says.

"Maggie and I fell in love and she would visit me in my dorm a couple nights a week. But one night she didn't come to me. She came to the chapel, and she slipped a noose around her neck. And she took her life, and the life of our child. Not a soul but me and Sister Mary saw the body hanging. She's up there in the graveyard."

They look out over Coopers Chase. "I could get used to this," says Gordon. "There seems to be a lot of drinking involved." "Always," agrees Ibrahim.

“So let’s just say I called a friend, someone we all trusted, but someone who Johnny would have trusted too, for different reasons. And he came down—no choice, really, if it’s the two of us ringing—and we asked him straight out. Has Johnny been over? You seen him? Just between us, and it never goes further? “I think I know what you’d like more than that, though,” says Jason. “To catch whoever killed Ian Ventham?” “Is that in your gift, Jason?” asks Elizabeth. “I reckon it is. Dad and I worked it out. Didn’t we, Dad?” Ron nods. “We did, son.”

*Joyce: So Jason imagines he has solved the case. And perhaps he has, though I doubt it very much. He says it’s obvious, but often in these matters the answer isn’t obvious at all. At least I have discovered that online dating is not for me. You can have too much choice in this world. **And when everyone has too much choice, it is also much harder to get chosen. And we all want to be chosen.***

Jason mentioned some drugs you could only get on the dark web and didn’t Karen work in IT? Wasn’t that convenient? Jason had solved the case, and felt sure he was about to get a confession. Honestly, some men. Karen remembers how crestfallen he had looked. He knew she was telling him the truth. That his little theory was wrong. He had apologized and offered to leave, but Karen had wondered if they shouldn’t make the best out of a bad deal and enjoy the rest of their lunch. What if they ended up together—wouldn’t it be the greatest “and how did you two meet?” story of all time? This had set them both laughing, and set them talking, and turned the whole thing into a lovely, long, boozy lunch.

They had then gone back to the original Tony Curran file. There was no doubt that in the early days Steve Ercan had been in and around Tony Curran’s crew. “Who was staying in the flat on June seventeenth?” asks Chris. “No idea, I’m not the Hilton. Maybe some kid, maybe me,” says Steve. “Could you stick this in Lost Property? Someone dropped it a couple of weeks ago, and I’ve asked and asked, but I don’t know who it belongs to.” He reaches into a drawer, pulls out a clear plastic wallet filled with cash, and hands it to Chris. “Five thousand euros. Some tourist must be kicking themselves.” Chris looks at the cash, looks at Donna, then back at Steve. Would this have prints on it? Doubtful, but at least Steve is letting him know he’s right. “You don’t want to keep it?” Steve shakes his head. “Nope, I know where it’s been.”

Ron had come to her with the photograph that Karen Playfair had seen. Karen would have been young at the time, but she was sure. Elizabeth had tried to piece it all together in her head. It seemed impossible at first, but as she thought about it, it began to seem horribly true. She worked out the steps one by one. Ibrahim had come back an hour ago with the final piece of the jigsaw, so now is the time. The case is solved, and only justice remains.

by Richard Osman

Chris gets the nod. An international warrant has been issued for the arrest of Johnny Gunduz for questioning in the murder of Tony Curran. A good end to the day. The euros Steve Ercan gave them had no prints, but had been taken out at a bureau de change in Northern Cyprus three days before Tony Curran's murder. He's done all he can, and it's up to the Cypriots now,

"I've been waiting for that knock since the moment I did it," replies John. "Just took each day as a bonus. I do wish you'd taken a bit longer, though. What was it in the end?" "Karen Playfair recognized you," said Ibrahim. "The farmer was an old boy called Matheson, and I knew him well enough by that point. He'd had a mare just given birth. The foal had died. He was in distress, great distress. You have to believe that. And so, I reached into my bag and I offered him a flu shot, you know, see him through the winter and all that. He was glad of the offer. He rolled up his sleeve and I gave him his shot. The same shot I'd just given the mare. And that was the end of the screaming, and the end of the pain." "Forty years later, I saw an advert for this place. And here we all are. I persuaded Penny it would be a lovely place to retire to. In the panic of that morning, in all the chaos while we were holding him back, I slid a syringe into Ventham's arm, and seconds later he was dead. Which is unforgivable in every way. And from that moment I've been waiting for you to come, and I've been waiting to face the consequences of what I've done." "How did you magically have a syringe filled with fentanyl, John?" asks Elizabeth. He smiles. "I've had it for a long time. In case I ever needed it here. If they ever wanted to move Penny." "You committed an act you knew to be unforgivable. And I'm afraid we see only one reason for that. Love, John," says Joyce. "Always love." "Shall we get to the truth?"

"Anyway, John, after Karen Playfair recognized you, it got me thinking, and I just needed one final thing checking in one of the files. The case concerned a girl named Annie Madeley. You remember Annie Madeley, Penny? Stabbed during a burglary, and bled to death in the arms of her boyfriend. I bet you can guess the answer, John. Nearly fifty years ago Peter Mercer murdered his girlfriend, then vanished into thin air. And everyone thought he'd got away with it. But it's really not all that easy to get away with murder, is it, Penny? Sometimes justice is waiting just around the corner, as it was for Peter Mercer one dark night when you paid him a visit. And sometimes justice waits fifty years and sits beside a hospital bed holding the hand of a friend. Had you just seen one too many of these cases, Penny?" "When did she tell you, John?" asks Joyce. "When she was first ill?" "She'd forgotten what was a funny story and what was a secret." Elizabeth gently breaks the silence. "Here's what I think we should do, John. I'm going to get the others to take you home. It's late – have a sleep in your own bed. If you have letters to write, then write them. I'll come with the police in the morning; I know you'll be here. We'll step outside for a moment so you can say goodbye to Penny."

Elizabeth has Penny's hand in hers. "So did anyone get away with anything, darling? Tony Curran didn't, did he? And what about you, darling? You clever girl. Did you get away with it? If you can hear, Penny, you'll know that the man you love has just walked

by Richard Osman

off into the night to die. All because he wanted to protect you. I know what John did while he was holding you, Penny; I saw the syringe. So I know you're off too, and this is good-bye.

"Tony," says Bogdan. "Tony Curran." Well, I think you killed him." "Sure, I killed him. It's a secret, though. I had a friend, my best friend when I arrived in England, and he drove a taxi. One day he saw Tony do something he shouldn't." The taxi company is run by a man named Johnny. Johnny killed my friend, but Tony told him to." "What was your friend's name?" "Kazimir," says Bogdan. "Johnny, he ask Kaz to drive him to the woods; he has to bury something, and he needs help. They walk into the woods, they dig and dig, for whatever Johnny needs to bury. He was a hard worker, Kaz, and nice, you would like him very much. So then Johnny shoot Kaz, pop, one shot, and buries him in the hole. I tell Johnny I need to speak to him. Don't tell Tony, don't tell the others. I say a friend works in Newhaven, at the port, and there might be some money for him, and is he interested? And he's interested, so we meet at the port, about two a.m. The security man is a cousin of my friend, Steve Ercan. So we walk across to harbor steps and get in a little boat, and Johnny, he is stupid. I say, 'You killed Kazimir,' and I shoot him. I take his keys and his cards. We weigh him down with bricks and throw him over, never to be seen. Some of the money is Tony's, like, a lot, so I was glad to take it." "How much money?" asks Stephen. "It was, like, hundred grand. I send fifty grand to Kazimir's family. The rest I give to Steve. He wanted to open a gym. And so they check and check for Johnny for a bit in Cyprus, but he's disappeared.

Penny thinks of Annie Madeley, and everything she has missed. **Everyone has to leave the game. Once you're in, there is no other door but the exit.**

Joyce: They buried Penny and John the Tuesday before last. It was quite a quiet one, and it rained, which seemed about right. I can't see that she could really blame Penny for what she did. Would Elizabeth have done the same? I think so. I think Elizabeth would have got away with it, though. Penny killed Peter Mercer, and she kept it from John all her life. Until dementia broke her. And once John knew, he had to protect her. That's love, isn't it? Because Peter Mercer murdered Annie Madeley, Penny murdered Peter Mercer. Because Penny murdered Peter Mercer, John murdered Ian Venham. So it goes, I suppose. Gordon Playfair said good-bye to the house he'd lived in for seventy years and packed his belongings into a Land Rover and trailer. Then he drove the four hundred-odd yards down the hill and unpacked it all at a nice two-bedroom in Larkin Court. Joanna told me, "Your eyes are alive, your laugh is back, and it's thanks to Coopers Chase, and to Elizabeth, and to Ron and Ibrahim, and to Bernard, God rest his soul. And so I bought it—the company, the land, the whole development. And I bought it to say thank you, Mum. Though I know what you're going to say next, and I promise I will also make millions out of it, so don't panic. The Garden of Eternal Rest is staying exactly where it is.

Person died	Person responsible	How they died
Skeleton on coffin	Matthew Mackie	Shot in leg
Annie Madeley	Peter Mercer	Stabbed
Peter Mercer	Penny	?
Drug dealer	Tony Curran	Shot
Kazimir (taxi driver)	Turkish Johnnie	Shot
Turkish Johnnie	Bogdan	Shot/dumped in river
Bernard Cottle	Bernard	Pills
Tony Curran	Bogdan	Bludgeoned
Ian Ventham	John	Fatal injection
Penny Grey	John	Fatal injection
John Grey	John	Fatal injection