

PRAISE FOR

The Thursday MURDER Club

'As the bodies pile up and more is revealed of the lives and loves of Joyce, Ibrahim, Ron and Elizabeth, you can't help cheering them on - and hoping to meet them again soon'

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The Who Man Died TWICE



PENGUIN BOOKS

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'What do you think you would have done otherwise?' 'I know you don't like to keep secrets, Poppy, but you have been very helpful with Ryan Baird. So here's something I don't think I've ever told anyone before. Not my family, none of my husbands, not even Joyce. I always fancied being a marine biologist.'

Poppy nods.

'Marine biologist?' says Joyce. 'What is that? Dolphins and so on?'

Elizabeth nods.

Joyce reaches over and places her hand on her friend's arm. 'I think you would have made a wonderful marine biologist.'

Elizabeth nods again. 'Thank you, Joyce, I might have, mightn't I?'

Douglas Middelmiss is in bed, reading a book about Nazis, largely anti, when he hears the noise. It is the door to the flat opening, very slowly and very quietly. It isn't Poppy; she came back an hour or so ago. Where had she been? Collared by Elizabeth, perhaps? That would be Elizabeth's style, killing the new girl with kindness. Speaking of killing, the door being opened quite so softly is bad news for Douglas. Only he and Poppy have keys, and the only other way to open a door that quietly is to be a professional. So what was this? A burglar or an assassin?

He would find out soon enough.

Douglas wishes he had a gun. In the old days he would have done. Once, in Jakarta, he accidentally shot a cultural attaché from the Japanese embassy through the arm during a bout of vigorous love-making. She was terrifically good about it. The National Gallery was persuaded to lend a Rembrandt to a Tokyo museum and nothing more was said about it. But from that day on he would tape his gun under the bed rather than leave it under the pillow.

He thought all this as he took off his reading glasses, did up the button fly on his pyjama bottoms and slipped out of bed. Poppy had a gun. She didn't seem the type to

ever use it, but she must have had the training, surely? Had she heard the front door open? Perhaps not. Douglas had grown alert to danger over the years, but Poppy would not have. Perhaps never would. He'd met Poppy's type many times before, and she would be out of the Service and having babies before you knew it. Not that you're allowed to say that these days. World gone mad etc.

As Douglas starts to straighten the bedclothes he hears the rattle of the padlock on his bedroom door. So, an assassin rather than a burglar? Douglas had suspected as much. Sent by Martin Lomax, perhaps? The Americans? The Colombians? It seemed ridiculous, really, but Douglas would prefer to be shot by someone British. English ideally, but beggars can't be choosers.

Bolt cutters would get through the padlock within a minute. But not without making a noise. Not without waking Poppy. He just needs Poppy to reach the intruder before the intruder reaches him.

The bed is straightened, and it now looks untouched, as if no one has slept there, as if the occupant is still out enjoying the night air. Douglas walks quietly over to the wardrobe, opens the doors and steps in. This will probably buy him only ten or fifteen seconds, but that might be enough. He closes the wardrobe doors behind him and stands in the dark.

You always wonder, in this job, where it might end for you. Douglas might have died, variously, on a glacier in Norway, in a car boot on the Iran-Iraq border, or in a missile attack on an American base in Kinshasa. But

perhaps it was all going to end in a tatty wardrobe, in his pyjamas, in an old people's home? Douglas was interested to find out. Scared too, certainly, but still interested. Of all the things that were to happen to you in life, death was one of the very biggest. Douglas hears the padlock give way. Surely Poppy heard *that*?

Through the thin crack between the wardrobe doors, Douglas can make out a man walking into the room, gun raised and pointed at the bed. A pale light from a street lamp shines a single thin column through the curtains.

He watches the man turn and look around him, having seen the bed is empty. Douglas is not breathing. Might never breathe again, he realizes, as the man turns to face the wardrobe. If someone is hiding, then this is the only conceivable place. And anyone who can silently open a door without a key and cut through an MI5 padlock within a minute will know that.

The man takes two steps towards the wardrobe, gun still raised. White, Douglas thinks, maybe forty? So hard in this light. What was his name, Douglas wondered. It felt like that was information he should be allowed to know. Had they ever met? Passed on a street like future lovers?

Poppy wasn't coming. How had she not heard? Unless? Oh, of course. Of course. Perhaps Poppy had not been with Elizabeth this evening at all. Perhaps there had been a briefing? Orders handed down. We want this problem to go away. Just turn a blind eye, no one's to know. We'll send in one of our men. Douglas doesn't have any relatives, no kids to be asking questions. Poppy was junior enough to

fall in line. She would be in her room now, cowering. When they found his body, would Elizabeth work out what had happened? A ridiculous thought, no one would find his body. A Special Ops group would be on hand to clear everything up. A military coroner would be waiting for him somewhere. All the paperwork done right. Probably a suicide. Elizabeth would never get close enough to know any different. Elizabeth really was looking good, Douglas had to admit it. He would have loved another crack at her. Will she find his other letter? Of course she will.

The man hooks an outstretched foot under one of the wardrobe doors and pulls them open. He smiles to himself as he sees Douglas standing there.

The man looks English. The gun isn't Service issue, but sometimes they employed freelancers. 'Worth a go,' says Douglas, his hands indicating the inside of the wardrobe.

The man nods. Douglas waits for an epiphany, a sudden flash of clarity about his life. Something to take with him on whatever journey he is about to embark upon. But there is nothing. Just a man with a gun, and the label of his pyjama top itching against the back of his neck. What a way to go.

'Where are the diamonds?' asks the man. An English accent. That brings Douglas some peace.

'Afraid not, old boy,' says Douglas. 'You're going to kill me anyway, and I'd rather someone else ended up with the diamonds.'

'I might not kill you,' says the man.

Douglas smiles and raises a dubious eyebrow at the man with the gun. The man with the gun nods in concession.

'This will sound ridiculous,' says Douglas. 'But let me solve one final mystery. I'd love to know who sent you?'

The man shakes his head and Douglas watches as he squeezes the trigger.

Now it is Elizabeth who is staring down the barrel of Sue Reardon's gun. How many gun barrels had she stared down in her career? Twenty? Thirty? None of them had killed her yet.

The basic rule is, if they don't kill you immediately, they're not going to kill you. There are always exceptions, but no point worrying about them for now.

The coroner's van is heading towards Coopers Chase. How had Siobhan found the diamonds at Joyce's? Someone had told her exactly where they were. Ibrahim? Stephen? Been *forced* to tell her? Please no. She has to keep calm.

'Can I tell you what I think happened?' asks Elizabeth. 'Just to pass the time. Or is that all a bit "James Bond" for you?'

'Please do,' says Sue. 'I can't tell you how delighted I was to fool you.'

Poppy found the letter, Elizabeth begins. 'Just as Joyce said. But she didn't go after the diamonds, and she didn't give it to her mum. She gave it to you, because that's what Poppy would do. She did her job. So you read the letter, you read Douglas's confession. But the confession part wasn't news to you, you'd known all along. You and Douglas had planned the whole thing together. Yes?'

'A little retirement plan, yes,' agrees Sue.

'I had a brief, awful thought at one point that Douglas and Poppy were lovers,' says Elizabeth. 'But I was wrong, wasn't I? You and Douglas were lovers.'

'Ooh, yes,' says Joyce. 'I can see that.'

'Have I got that right?' asks Elizabeth.

'You have,' says Sue.

Joyce looks between the two of them. 'He definitely had a type, didn't he?'

'I see the appeal, I promise,' says Elizabeth. 'I was almost ten years older than him, you ten years younger. He very neatly spanned our generations, didn't he?'

'He was very handsome,' says Joyce. 'Not my type at all, no offence to either of you, but very handsome.'

Elizabeth looks straight into Sue's eyes. 'So you were reading the letter, saw the key, the locker number and what have you. I assume he hadn't told you where he'd hidden them?'

'He told me they were safe,' says Sue.

Elizabeth nods. 'So, it was interesting information to you. Lucrative at the very least. But the big news came further down in the letter, didn't it? When he said he still loved me? That he would wait for me if needs be. That must have been the moment you realized the two of you weren't in this together? That you and Douglas weren't about to head off into the sunset with the twenty million? That was the moment you realized you would have to kill him?'

Sue shrugs. The barrel of the gun shrugs with her.

'He wanted it all for himself,' says Elizabeth. 'Or worse,

he wanted it for him and me. Though you're bright enough to know that would never happen. Originally the two of you were just going to see out the investigation, let it fizzle down to nothing and cash in. So now you needed a change of plan.'

'Perfect so far,' says Sue. 'Too late, of course, but perfect.'

'So you decide you want the money for yourself,' says Elizabeth.

'I don't blame you one bit,' says Joyce.

Joyce is still doing her word search. You had to hand it to Joyce sometimes. Even with a gun pointed at her best friend, Joyce trusts her to get out of this situation. Does Elizabeth trust herself? That's a very good question. What is going to face them back at Coopers Chase? Is Stephen safe? Is Ibrahim safe?

Elizabeth keeps thinking as she talks. 'So how to kill him? Well, first attempt, you tell Martin Lomax where Douglas is, which is as good as signing Douglas's death warrant. Cowardly, but you need him out of the way if you're going to escape with the money yourself, and you're angry. Lomax sends his man, Andrew Hastings, to kill Douglas, but poor Poppy gets in the way and shoots Hastings. Douglas very much still alive, a bump in the road, but never mind. You are still determined, and that's understandable. We all fall out of love, don't we?'

'We most certainly do,' says Sue.

'Not me,' says Joyce.

'Nonsense, Joyce, you're in and out of love monthly,' says Elizabeth, then returns to staring into Sue Reardon's

gun. 'So you still need Douglas out of the picture, and you realize you are going to have to do it yourself. You know you can move Douglas and Poppy to Hove. To a house you have used before, a house you can access easily. So killing him yourself will be easy. But how to get away with it? That was your question.'

'It was,' agrees Sue Reardon. 'I didn't need to get away with it for long. Just until I found the diamonds.'

'And perhaps,' says Elizabeth, 'you were worried that I might work things out?'

'I was,' says Sue. 'I just needed you to find the diamonds before you worked out I was the killer. And you didn't let me down.'

'She worked it out eventually, to be fair,' says Joyce.

'But I still get to the diamonds,' says Sue. 'As soon as I've picked them up, I'll be off. I can disappear easily, Elizabeth, as you'll know. So that's what I'll do. Feel free to tell everyone what I did. They won't find me.'

'You're not going to shoot us?' says Joyce.

'Not if you behave yourselves,' says Sue.

'Not really our speciality,' says Joyce.

'I knew you wouldn't be able to resist a clever little mystery, Elizabeth,' says Sue. 'I knew I'd have you chasing your tail. You were having lunch with the killer, talking tactics, without even knowing. Isn't that a hoot?'

Elizabeth nods. 'Your plan forms, and you realize you are going to need help with it. So you call Siobhan. Now this is where I'm hazy. Who exactly is she? An old friend, I imagine? An old colleague who owed you a favour?'

'Guess again,' says Sue Reardon.

Who is Siobhan (?)

'No matter,' says Elizabeth. 'She agrees to whatever terms you present her with. Help me with a double murder and . . . what?'

'A million pounds,' says Sue Reardon.

'That would do it,' says Elizabeth. 'You come to Coopers Chase to take Andrew Hastings's body away, and on your way out you slip a note into Joyce's cardigan, simply saying "RING MY MUM", with Siobhan's phone number.'

'Wait,' says Joyce, 'Siobhan isn't Poppy's mum?'

'Keep up, Joyce,' says Sue.

'Don't speak to Joyce like that,' says Elizabeth.

'Oh, I don't mind,' says Joyce.

Elizabeth feels the coroner's van take a sharp left turn and slow down. It crosses a cattle grid. They are at Coopers Chase.

'You send Siobhan to check the lockers for the diamonds. You'd been in before, I presume, to make sure there were security cameras?'

'I had,' says Sue.

'Trusting that I would eventually check the recordings. And be led to Siobhan. And put two and two together?'

'Which you were, and which you did,' says Sue. 'I knew you wouldn't be able to resist it! The idea of Poppy faking the whole thing. So unlikely. I knew you were just clever enough to fall for it.'

Sirens go past them at speed. Sue pauses, then visibly relaxes. Ambulances, not police. Elizabeth goes cold. Driving at speed from Coopers Chase. Who was in the ambulances? Stephen?

'You even thought Douglas had faked it at first, didn't you?' laughs Sue. 'That was a delightful surprise. Not my plan at all, but I was happy enough to go along with you for a few days. You were my useful idiot, Elizabeth, if you don't mind me saying?'

Elizabeth tries to take her mind off the ambulances, their sirens now faint in the distance. 'Siobhan comes back to you, empty-handed. The next day you enter the safe house on St Albans Avenue. You shoot Poppy first, I'm guessing?'

'Correct,' says Sue. 'A shame, but needs must sometimes. She'd seen the letter.'

'And helpful in encouraging Douglas to let you know where the diamonds were? What did he tell you? Before you shot him? He obviously didn't let on?'

'He just said, "Stick close to Elizabeth, she'll find them." I thought that sounded true enough, and the best I was going to get, so I shot him.'

'And you did stick close to me, I'll give you that.'

'And you did find them. So thank you,' says Sue. 'As I say, a useful idiot. I'll be out of your hair very soon, I promise.'

The van pulls to a halt. Sue puts her gun hand into her handbag, but keeps the gun pointing at Elizabeth. The driver opens the back doors.

'After you, ladies,' says Sue, and the driver helps Elizabeth and Joyce climb down. Sue follows, needing no help.

'We won't be long,' says Sue to the driver. 'Just need to spend a penny.'

It is 5 p.m. The sky is darkening, and lights are coming on across Coopers Chase. The normal business of a normal day. Quizzes on the TV, books being read, grandchildren on the phone, a few tardy birds flying to their roosts. Elizabeth sees Colin Clemence taking in a garden chair from his patio. Miranda Scott from Wordsworth Court is posting a letter. She enters competitions, and last year won a lifetime's supply of washing powder. Persil must have rubbed their hands with glee when they discovered she was ninety-two.

All is quiet in this happy place. Another day done, family safe and sound, curtains closed and heating on. Nothing you'll ever see on the news, but something you should really pay more attention to, just the gentle hum of contentment.

Take a look out of the window, and there is nothing to see except two old women taking an evening stroll together. It's Joyce and Elizabeth, isn't it? Thick as thieves, those two. There is a younger woman walking a few steps behind. Heading over to Joyce's, I think.

'As soon as the shooting on the pier had finished, I was on the phone,' says Sue. 'Three men Martin Lomax put me in touch with a while ago. Men who could do a few jobs off the books. Ex-special forces, armed to the teeth. They were standing by, so I sent them straight here with Siobhan. I knew someone would know where the diamonds were. Your friend with the broken ribs, or that husband of yours, Elizabeth. Though from what I read you could tell him anything and he wouldn't remember.'

Poor thing,' She sees Elizabeth stiffen in front of her and she smiles.

'My God, this was harder than it was supposed to be. "The perfect crime," Douglas had said to me. No victims. How many deaths now? Five? Although we all heard the ambulances, so who knows? Maybe a couple more.'

Elizabeth's phone starts ringing in her bag.

'Don't touch it,' says Sue.

Elizabeth does as she is told. But she doesn't need to touch it. She has recognized the personalized ringtone.

They reach the front door of Joyce's building. Elizabeth looks up at her best friend's window. The curtains are shut. They were not shut when she picked Joyce up this morning. Joyce keys in her security code and the three women enter the building.

The lift doors are directly in front of them. Elizabeth presses the button and the doors open. Sue Reardon smiles.

'If you try anything in that lift, I've got three armed men upstairs.'

'We've given up, Sue,' says Elizabeth. 'Don't you get it? Just get your diamonds and go.'

The doors close and the lift jolts upwards. Sue stands behind Joyce and Elizabeth, the gun at their backs. As the lift doors open on the first floor, her view is obscured.

'Joyce, hit the ground!' shouts Elizabeth.

Elizabeth and Joyce throw themselves to the floor, giving Bogdan a clear shot. He hits Sue exactly where he

aims, through the shoulder. Sue drops her bag and her gun, her eyes wide in surprise.

Bogdan kicks Sue's gun away, then helps Joyce and Elizabeth to their feet.

'Come in,' says Bogdan. 'I've put the kettle on.'

Bogdan says Sue.

'You've never seen anything like it,' says Stephen, sitting on Joyce's sofa. 'I was having forty winks in my chair, when I hear a noise. I open my eyes. Three fellas pointing guns at my head. "Hold your horses," I say, "what's this about? I'm imagining you're looking for Elizabeth?" You know, all dressed in black, guns and what have you. "Not a bit of it," says the fellow in the middle. "Tell us where the diamonds are."' "

He is interrupted by a low moan. Joyce is tending to Sue Reardon's shoulder while she sits on a kitchen chair.

'Stop moaning, you big baby,' says Joyce, tightening a bandage.

'So I play the innocent Frenchman as it were, "What diamonds?" all this caper, and they don't like it one bit. Then madam here . . . ' Stephen nods to another kitchen chair, where Siobhan sits, hands tied behind her, 'walks in, friendly as you like, "Just tell us, Stephen, tell us and we'll be on our way." Anyway, I stall for time, I couldn't remember where you'd gone, Elizabeth, but perhaps you'd be getting back soon. So here's me, "Oh, I don't know about diamonds, I'm afraid, not my area, you need the boss, she'll be back presently," and this lady - I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name?'

'Siobhan,' says Siobhan.