

Wednesday, 26th December, lunchtime-ish

‘I once married a woman from Swansea,’ says Mervyn Collins. ‘Red hair, the lot.’

‘I see,’ says Elizabeth. ‘Sounds like there’s quite a story there?’

‘A story?’ Mervyn shakes his head. ‘No, we split up. You know women.’

‘We do know them, Mervyn,’ says Joyce, cutting into a Yorkshire pudding. ‘We do.’

Silence. Not, Elizabeth notes, the first silence during this meal.

It is Boxing Day, and the gang, plus Mervyn, are at the Coopers Chase restaurant. They are all wearing colourful paper crowns from the crackers Joyce has brought along. Joyce’s crown is too big and is threatening to become a blindfold at any moment. Ron’s is too small, the pink crêpe paper straining at his temples.

‘Are you sure I can’t tempt you to a drop of wine, Mervyn?’ asks Elizabeth.

‘Alcohol at lunchtime? No,’ says Mervyn.

The gang had spent Christmas Day separately. It had been a difficult one for Elizabeth, she would have to admit that. She had hoped that the day might spark

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something, give her husband Stephen a burst of life, some clarity, memories of Christmas past fuelling him. But no. Christmas was like any other day for Stephen now. A blank page at the end of an old book. She shudders to think about the year ahead.

They had all arranged to meet for a Boxing Day lunch in the restaurant. At the last minute, Joyce had asked if it might be polite to invite Mervyn to join them. He has been at Coopers Chase a few months and has, thus far, struggled to make friends.

‘He’s all alone this Christmas,’ Joyce had said, and they had agreed that they should ask him. ‘Nice touch,’ Ron had said, and Ibrahim had added that if Coopers Chase was about anything, it was about ensuring that no one should feel lonely at Christmas.

Elizabeth, for her part, applauded Joyce’s generosity of spirit, while noting that Mervyn, in certain lights, had the type of handsome looks that so often left Joyce helpless. The gruff Welshness of his voice, the darkness of his eyebrows, the moustache and that silver hair. Elizabeth more and more is getting the hang of Joyce’s type, and ‘anyone plausibly handsome’ seems to cover it. ‘He looks like a soap-opera villain,’ was Ron’s take, and Elizabeth was happy to accept his word on the matter.

Thus far they have tried to speak to Mervyn about politics (‘not my area’), television (‘no use for it’) and marriage (‘I once married a woman from Swansea’, etc.).

Mervyn’s food arrives. He had resisted the turkey, and the kitchen agreed to make him scampi and boiled potatoes instead.

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‘Scampi fan, I see,’ says Ron, pointing to Mervyn’s plate. Elizabeth has to hand it to him, he’s trying to help things along.

‘Wednesdays I have the scampi,’ agrees Mervyn.

‘Is it a Wednesday?’ says Joyce. ‘I always lose track around Christmas. Never know what day it is.’

‘It’s Wednesday,’ confirms Mervyn. ‘Wednesday, the 26th of December.’

‘Did you know that “scampi” is the plural?’ says Ibrahim, his paper crown fashionably askew. ‘Each individual piece is a “scampo”.’

‘I did know that, yes,’ says Mervyn.

Elizabeth has cracked harder nuts than Mervyn over the years. She once had to question a Soviet general who had not uttered a single word in more than three months of captivity, and within the hour he was singing Noël Coward songs with her. Joyce has been working on Mervyn for a few weeks now, since the end of the Bethany Waites case. She has so far gleaned that he has been a headteacher, he has been married, he is on his third dog, and he likes Elton John, but this does not amount to all that much.

Elizabeth decides to take the conversation by the scruff of the neck. Sometimes you have to shock the patient into life.

‘So, our mysterious friend from Swansea aside, Mervyn, how’s your romantic life?’

‘I have a sweetheart,’ says Mervyn.

Elizabeth sees Joyce raise the most subtle of eyebrows.

‘Good for you,’ says Ron. ‘What’s her name?’

‘Tatiana,’ says Mervyn.

‘Beautiful name,’ says Joyce. ‘First I’ve heard of her though?’

‘Where’s she spending Christmas?’ asks Ron.

‘Lithuania,’ says Mervyn.

‘The Jewel of the Baltic,’ says Ibrahim.

‘I’m not sure we’ve seen her at Coopers Chase, have we?’ asks Elizabeth. ‘Since you’ve moved in?’

‘They’ve taken her passport,’ says Mervyn.

‘Goodness,’ says Elizabeth. ‘That sounds unfortunate. Who has?’

‘The authorities,’ says Mervyn.

‘Sounds about right,’ says Ron, shaking his head. ‘Bloody authorities.’

‘You must miss her terribly,’ says Ibrahim. ‘When did you last see her?’

‘We haven’t, just as yet, met,’ says Mervyn, scraping tartare sauce off a scampo.

‘You haven’t met?’ asks Joyce. ‘That seems unusual?’

‘Just been unlucky,’ says Mervyn. ‘She had a flight cancelled, then she had some cash stolen, and now there’s the passport thing. The course of true love never did run smooth.’

‘Indeed,’ agrees Elizabeth. ‘Never did it.’

‘But,’ says Ron, ‘once she’s got her passport back, she’ll be over?’

‘That’s the plan,’ says Mervyn. ‘It’s all under control. I’ve sent her brother some money.’

The gang nod and look at each other as Mervyn eats his scampi. **Copyrighted Material**

‘Apropos of nothing, Mervyn,’ says Elizabeth, adjusting her paper crown just a jot, ‘how much did you send him? The brother?’

‘Five thousand,’ says Mervyn. ‘All in all. Terrible corruption in Lithuania. Everyone bribing everyone.’

‘I wasn’t aware of that,’ says Elizabeth. ‘I have had many good times in Lithuania. Poor Tatiana. And the cash she had stolen? Was that from you too?’

Mervyn nods. ‘I sent it, and the customs people nicked it.’

Elizabeth fills up the glasses of her friends. ‘Well, we shall look forward to meeting her.’

‘Very much,’ agrees Ibrahim.

‘Though, I wonder, Mervyn,’ says Elizabeth, ‘next time she gets in touch asking for money, perhaps you might let me know? I have contacts and may be able to help?’

‘Really?’ asks Mervyn.

‘Certainly,’ says Elizabeth. ‘Run it past me. Before you have any more bad luck.’

‘Thank you,’ says Mervyn. ‘She means a great deal to me. Been a long time since someone paid me any attention.’

‘Although I’ve baked you a lot of cakes in the last few weeks,’ says Joyce.

‘I know, I know,’ says Mervyn. ‘But I meant romantic attention.’

‘My mistake,’ says Joyce, and Ron drinks to stifle a laugh.

Mervyn is an unconventional guest, but Elizabeth is learning to float on the ride of life these days.

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Turkey and stuffing, balloons and streamers, crackers and hats. A nice bottle of red, and what Elizabeth assumes are Christmas pop songs playing in the background. Friendship, and Joyce flirting unsuccessfully with a Welshman who appears to be the subject of a fairly serious international fraud. Elizabeth could think of worse ways to spend the holidays.

‘Well, Happy Boxing Day, everyone,’ says Ron, raising his glass.

They all join in the toast.

‘And a Happy Wednesday, 26th of December, to you, Mervyn,’ adds Ibrahim.

Mitch Maxwell would normally be a million miles away when a consignment was unloaded. Why take the risk of being in the warehouse when the drugs were present? But, for obvious reasons, this is no ordinary consignment. And the fewer people involved, the better, given his current circumstances. The only time he has stopped drumming his fingers is to bite his nails. He is not used to being nervous.

Also it's Boxing Day, and Mitch wanted to be out of the house. Needed to be out, really. The kids were playing up, and he and his father-in-law had got into a fist fight about where they'd seen one of the actors on the *Call the Midwife: Christmas Special* before. His father-in-law is currently in Hemel Hempstead Hospital with a fractured jaw. His wife and his mother-in-law are both blaming Mitch, for reasons he can't fathom, and so he thought discretion might be the better part of valour, and driving the hundred miles to East Sussex to oversee things himself turned out to be very convenient.

Mitch is here to ensure one simple box containing a hundred thousand pounds' worth of heroin is unloaded from a truck straight off the ferry. Not a lot of money, but that wasn't the point.

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The shipment had made it through customs. *That* was the point.

The warehouse is on an industrial estate, haphazardly constructed on old farmland about five miles from the South Coast. There were probably barns and stables here hundreds of years ago, corn and barley and clover, horses' hooves clattering, and now there are corrugated-iron warehouses, old Volvos and cracked windows on the same footprint. The old creaking bones of Britain.

A high metal fence surrounds the whole plot to keep out petty thieves, while, inside the perimeter, the real villains go about their business. Mitch's warehouse bears the aluminium sign SUSSEX LOGISTICS SYSTEMS. Next door, in another echoing hangar, you'll find FUTURE TRANSPORT SOLUTIONS LTD, a front for stolen high-performance cars. To the left is a Portakabin with no sign on the door, which is run by a woman Mitch has yet to meet, but who apparently churns out MDMA and passports. In the far corner of the lot is the winery and storage warehouse of BRAMBER — THE FINEST ENGLISH SPARKLING WINE, which Mitch recently discovered is actually a genuine business. The brother and sister who run it could not be more charming, and had given everyone a crate of their wine for Christmas. It was better than Champagne, and had led, in no small part, to the fist fight with his father-in-law.

Whether the brother and sister at Bramber Sparkling Wine had their suspicions that they were the only legitimate company in the whole area, Mitch couldn't

guess, but they had certainly once seen him buying a crossbow from Future Transport Solutions Ltd and hadn't batted an eyelid, so they were sound enough. Mitch suspected there was good money to be made in English sparkling wine, and had thought about investing. In the end he hadn't taken the plunge, because there was also good money to be made in heroin, and sometimes you should stick to what you know. He's beginning to revise that opinion now, however, as his troubles keep piling up.

The warehouse doors are shut, and the back door of the lorry is open. Two men – well, a man and a boy, really – are unloading plant pots. The minimum crew. Again, because of the current situation, Mitch has already had to tell them to be careful. Sure, the little box hidden deep among the pallets is the most important cargo, but that doesn't mean they can't make a few quid off the plant pots too. Mitch sells them to garden centres around the South East, a nice legitimate business. And no one is going to pay for a cracked plant pot.

The heroin is in a small terracotta box, made to look old, like a tatty piece of garden junk, in case anyone comes snooping. A boring ornament. It's their regular trick. Somewhere in a farmhouse in Helmand, the heroin has been placed in the box, and the box has been wedged shut. Someone from Mitch's organization – Lenny had drawn the short straw – had been in Afghanistan to oversee it, to make sure the heroin was pure and no one was trying to pull a fast one. The terracotta box had then made its way in Lenny's care to Moldova, to a town that knew how to mind its own

business, and there it had been carefully concealed among hundreds of plant pots and driven across Europe, by a man called Garry with a prison record and not much to lose.

Mitch is in the office, on a makeshift mezzanine level at the far end of the warehouse, scratching the ‘God Loves a Trier’ tattoo on his arm. Everton are losing 2–0 to Man City, which is inevitable but still annoying. Someone had once asked Mitch to join a consortium to buy Everton Football Club. Tempting, to own a piece of his boyhood club, his lifelong passion, but the more Mitch looked into the business of football, the more he thought, once again, that he should probably stick to heroin.

Mitch gets a text from his wife, Kellie.

Dad’s out of hospital. He says he’s going to kill you.

This would be a figure of speech to some, but Mitch’s father-in-law is the head of one of Manchester’s largest gangs, and once bought Mitch a police-issue Taser as a Christmas present. So you had to be careful with him. But doesn’t everyone have to be careful with their in-laws? Mitch is sure it’ll be fine – his marriage to Kellie had been the love that conquered all, the Romeo and Juliet that had united Liverpool and Manchester. Mitch texts back.

Tell him I’ve bought him a Range Rover.

There is a hollow knock at the flimsy office door, and his second-in-command, Don Mather, comes in.

‘All good,’ says Dom. ‘Pots unloaded, box in the safe.’

‘Thanks, Dom.’

‘You wanna see it? Ugly-looking thing.’

‘No thanks, mate,’ says Mitch. ‘This is as close as I ever want to get.’

‘I’ll send you a picture,’ says Dom. ‘Just so you’ve seen it.’

‘When’s it heading out?’ Mitch is aware that they are not yet home and dry. But his big worry had been customs. Surely it was safe now? What else could go wrong?

‘Nine in the morning,’ says Dom. ‘The shop opens at ten. I’ll send the boy over with it.’

‘Good lad,’ says Mitch. ‘Where’s it going? Brighton?’

Dom nods. ‘Antiques shop. Geezer called Kuldesch Sharma. Not our usual, but the only one we could find open. Shouldn’t be a problem.’

Man City score a third goal, and Mitch winces. He switches off his iPad – no need for any further misery.

‘I’ll leave you to it. Better head home,’ says Mitch. ‘Could your lad nick the Range Rover parked outside the Sparkling Wine place and drive it up to Hertfordshire for me?’

‘No problem, boss,’ says Dom. ‘He’s fifteen, but those things drive themselves. I can drop the box off myself.’

Mitch leaves the warehouse through a fire exit. No one but Dom and the young lad has seen him, and he and Dom had been at school together, been expelled together, in fact, so no worries there.

Dom had moved to the South Coast ten years ago after setting fire to the wrong warehouse, and he looks

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after all the logistics out of Newhaven. Very useful. Good schools down here too, so Dom is happy. His son just got into the Royal Ballet. All turned out nicely. Until the last few months. But they're across it. So long as nothing goes wrong with this one. And, so far, so good.

Mitch rolls his shoulders, getting ready for the journey home. His father-in-law won't be happy, but they'll have a pint and watch a *Fast & Furious* and all will be well. He might get a black eye for his troubles – he's got to give the guy a free punch after what he did – but the Range Rover should placate him.

One little box, a hundred grand in profit. Nice work for a Boxing Day.

What happens after tomorrow is not Mitch's business. His business is to get the box from Afghanistan to a small antiques shop in Brighton. As soon as someone picks it up, Mitch's job is done. A man, maybe a woman, who knows, will walk into the shop the next morning, buy the box and walk out. The contents will be verified, and the payment will hit Mitch's account immediately.

And, more importantly, he'll know that his organization is secure again. It's been quite a few months. Seizures at the ports, arrests of drivers, arrests of errand boys. That's why he's kept this one so quiet, talking just to the people he can trust. Testing the waters.

From tomorrow, he hopes he will never have to think about the ugly terracotta box again. That he can just bank the money and move on to the next one.

Had Mitch looked over the road to his left as he was leaving the bus stop, he would have seen a

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motorcycle courier parked up in a lay-by. And the thought might then have occurred to him that this was an unusual place at an unusual time on an unusual day for the man to be parked there. But Mitch doesn't see the man, so this thought does not occur, and he drives merrily on his way back home.

The motorcyclist stays where he is.

Joyce

Hello again!

I didn't write my diary yesterday because it was Christmas Day, and it all caught up with me. It does, doesn't it? Baileys and mince pies and television. The flat was a bit too hot, according to Joanna, and then, once I'd done something about it, a bit too cold. Joanna has underfloor heating throughout, as she isn't shy of reminding you.

The decorations are up all around me, making me smile. Reds and golds and silvers glinting off the light bulbs, cards on the walls from friends old and new. On top of my tree (it's not real, don't tell anyone, it's John Lewis and you wouldn't honestly know the difference), an angel Joanna made at primary school. It's a toilet roll, some aluminium foil, lace and a face drawn on a wooden spoon. It's been on top of the tree for forty-odd years now. Half a lifetime!

For the first four or five years Joanna was so proud and excited to see her angel on top of the tree, then there were two or three years of increasing embarrassment, leading to, I'd say, thirty years of outright hostility towards the poor angel. In the last few years, though, I've noticed there's been a thawing, and this year I

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came back into the room with Jaffa Cakes on a plate to find Joanna touching the angel, tears in the corners of her eyes.

Which took me by surprise, but, then, I suppose it's been there almost a whole lifetime for her.

Joanna came down with her beau, Scott, the football chairman. I had been expecting to go to theirs – Joanna's house looks so lovely and Christmassy on Instagram. Flowers and bows, and a real tree. Candles too close to the curtains for my liking, but she's her own woman.

Joanna left it until December 20th to announce they would be spending Christmas at mine, and told me not to worry about food, as they'd be bringing everything down, all precooked, from some restaurant in London. 'No need for you to cook a thing, Mum,' she had said, which was a shame, as I would have looked forward to cooking.

Why were they at mine? Well, they were flying out to St Lucia on Christmas evening and, at the last minute, their flight had been changed from Heathrow, near them, to Gatwick, near me.

So I was convenient. Which is the best you can ask for sometimes, isn't it?

Let me tell you something else, while it's on my mind. We had goose for Christmas dinner. Goose! I said I had a turkey and I could put it on, but Joanna told me that goose is actually more traditional than turkey, and I said, My foot is goose more traditional than turkey, and she said, Mum, Christmas wasn't invented by Charles Dickens, you know, and I said, I know that very well (I wasn't

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really sure what she meant, but I sensed the argument was slipping away from me, and I needed a foothold), and she said, Well, then, goose it is, and I said, I'll get the crackers, and she said, No crackers, Mum, it's not the eighties. Other than that it was a nice Christmas, and we watched the King's Speech even though I knew Joanna didn't want to. In truth I didn't really want to either, but we both knew I was due a victory. I thought Charles did a good job – I remember my first Christmas without my mum.

Joanna bought me a lovely present: it's a flask they use in space, and it has *Merry Christmas, Mum! Here's to no murders next year* engraved onto it. I wonder what they made of that in the shop? She brought flowers too, and the football chairman bought me a bracelet that I would describe as a nice thought.

It's lovely to open presents though. I bought Joanna the new Kate Atkinson book, and some perfume she had emailed me the name of, and I bought the football chairman some cufflinks, which I suspect he would also describe as a nice thought. I always put the receipts in with things. My mother used to do the same. But I don't imagine he'll be taking them back, as they were from the M & S in Brighton, and he always seems to be either in London or Dubai.

Lunch with the gang today, so I finally managed to have my turkey and crackers. I insisted. You could see Elizabeth beginning to object to both, but she thought better of it, so I must have looked determined. However, I made what I suspected was an error by inviting Mervyn to

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join us. I keep thinking he's going to melt, but I fear I might be barking up the wrong tree with this one. I just hope I can bark up the right tree one of these days. Before I run out of trees. Or before I stop barking altogether.

We retired to Ibrahim's flat afterwards, and Mervyn headed home. He revealed he has an online girlfriend, Tatiana, who he has never met but seems to be funding nonetheless. Ibrahim says Mervyn is a victim of 'romance fraud' and is going to speak to Donna and Chris about it. When do the police start work again after Christmas? Gerry used to go back somewhere around the 4th of January, but the police are probably different to West Sussex County Council.

I will detail the presents we all bought each other.

Elizabeth to Joyce – A foot spa. The one they advertise on TV. I am in it now. My feet anyway.

Joyce to Elizabeth – M & S vouchers.

Elizabeth to Ron – Whisky.

Ibrahim to Ron – An autobiography of a footballer I hadn't heard of. Not David Beckham or Gary Lineker.

Ron to Elizabeth – Whisky.

Joyce to Ron – M & S vouchers.

Ibrahim to Elizabeth – A book called *The Psychopath Test*.

Elizabeth to Ibrahim – A painting of Cairo, which made Ibrahim cry, so they have obviously had a conversation at some point that I wasn't party to.

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Joyce to Ibrahim – M & S vouchers. And this was after Elizabeth's present, so I felt I could have done better.

Ibrahim to Joyce – M & S vouchers. Phew!

Ron to Joyce – *The Kama Sutra*. Very funny, Ron.

Ibrahim to Alan – A telephone that squeaks.

Alan to Ibrahim – A clay tablet with Alan's paw print on it. Ibrahim cried again. Yes!

Ron to Ibrahim – A fake Oscar statue with *My Best Mate* on it. Which set us all off.

We drank, we had a little singalong – Elizabeth doesn't know the words to 'Last Christmas', if you can believe that? But then I suppose I don't know the words to 'In the Bleak Midwinter'. We listened to Ron rail against the monarchy for about twenty-five minutes, and then we went our separate ways.

When I got back I unwrapped a present that Donna had sent me, which was lovely of her, as I don't really know how much police constables earn. It was a little brass dog, which, if you squint, looks a bit like Alan. She bought it at Kemptown Curios in Brighton. It's run by Stephen's friend Kuldesch, who helped us in our last case. Sounds like my type of place. Perhaps I'll visit, because now I have to buy Donna something in return. I do like having people to buy for.

So, all in all, I've had a lovely Boxing Day, and am going to fall asleep in front of a Judi Dench film. All that's missing is Gerry working his way through a tin of Quality Street and leaving the wrappers in the tin. Irritating at the

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time, but I'd give everything I own to have him back. Gerry liked the Strawberry Delights and Orange Crèmes, and I liked the Toffee Pennies, and if you want to know the recipe for a happy marriage it is that.

Joanna gave me a big hug when she left and told me she loved me. She may be wrong about turkey and crackers, but she still has a few tricks up her sleeve. What is it about Christmas? Everything that's wrong seems worse, and everything that's right seems better.

My lovely friends, my lovely daughter. My husband gone, his silly smile gone.

I feel like I should drink to something, so I suppose let's drink to 'No murders next year'.

Thursday, 27th December, ten a.m.

Kuldesh Sharma is glad that Christmas is over. Glad to be back in his shop. Lots of the other small businesses in the area were shut for the duration, but Kuldesh was opening Kemptown Curios bright and early on December 27th.

He is dressed up for the shop, as always. Purple suit, cream silk shirt. Yellow brogues. Running a shop is theatre. Kuldesh looks at himself in an antique mirror, nods his approval and takes a small bow.

Would anyone come in? Probably not. Who needed an Art Deco porcelain figurine or a silver letter opener two days after Christmas? No one. But Kuldesh could have a little spruce-up, rearrange some bits and bobs, trawl the online auctions. Basically, he could keep himself busy. Christmas Day and Boxing Day pass very slowly when you are by yourself. There is only so much reading you can do, so many cups of tea you can make, before the loneliness crowds in around you. You breathe it in, you cry it out, and the clock ticks slowly, slowly, until you are allowed to sleep. He hadn't even dressed up on Christmas Day. Who was there to dress up for?

The hardware store opposite is open. Big Dave who

runs it lost his wife to cancer in October. The coffee shop further down the hill is also open. It is run by a young widow.

Kuldesch sips his cappuccino in the back office of his shop. He only opened up a matter of minutes ago, and he is taken by surprise when he hears the jingle of the shop bell.

Who has come calling, at such an hour, on such a day?

He pushes himself out of his chair, his arms doing the work his knees used to, walks through the office door into the shop and sees a well-dressed, powerfully built man in his forties. Kuldesch nods, then looks away, finding something he can pretend to be busy with.

You must only ever *glance* at new customers. Some people want eye contact, but most do not. You must treat customers like cats, and wait for them to come to you. Look too needy and you'll scare them off. If you do it right, the customers end up thinking you are doing them some sort of favour, allowing them to buy something in your shop.

Kuldesch doesn't have to worry with this particular customer though. He's not a buyer, he's a seller. Close-cropped hair, expensive tan, teeth too bright for his face, as seems the fashion these days. And in his hand a leather holdall that looks more expensive than anything in the shop.

'You the guy who owns this place?' A Scouse accent. Unafraid. Threatening? A touch perhaps, but nothing that scares Kuldesch. Whatever is in that expensive bag will be interesting, Kuldesch knows that. Illegal, but

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interesting. See what he would have missed if he'd stayed at home?

'Kuldesch,' Kuldesch says. 'I trust you had an enjoyable Christmas?'

'Idyllic,' says the man. 'I'm selling. Got a box for you. Very decorative.'

Kuldesch nods; he knows the score. Not really his racket, this, but perhaps all the regular places are shut until New Year. Still, no need to give in without a fight.

'I'm not buying, I'm afraid,' he says. 'No room for anything – got to clear some stock out first. Perhaps you'd like to buy a Victorian card table?'

But the man isn't listening. He places the bag, carefully, on the counter and half unzips it. 'Ugly box, terracotta, all yours.'

'Travelled a long way, has it?' Kuldesch asks, taking a peek inside at the box. Dark and dull, some carving hidden by a layer of grime.

The man shrugs. 'Haven't we all. Give me fifty quid, and a lad'll be in early tomorrow morning and buy it off you for five hundred.'

Is there a point in discussing it? In arguing with this man? Attempting to send him on his way? There is not. They have chosen Kuldesch's shop, and that is all there is to it. Give the man his fifty, keep the bag under the counter, hand it over in the morning and don't lose any sleep thinking about what's in the box. This is just how things are done sometimes, and it's best to play nice.

Either that or you'll get a petrol bomb through your front window. **Copyrighted Material**

Kuldesch takes three tens and a twenty from the till and hands them to the man, who quickly buries them deep in his overcoat. 'You don't look like you need fifty pounds?'

The man laughs. 'You don't look like you need five hundred, but here we both are.'

'Your overcoat is exquisite,' says Kuldesch.

'Thank you,' says the man. 'It's Thom Sweeney. I'm sure you know this already, but if that bag goes missing someone will kill you.'

'I understand,' says Kuldesch. 'What is in the box, by the way? Between you and me?'

'Nothing,' says the man. 'It's just an old box.'

The man laughs again, and this time Kuldesch joins him.

'God speed, young man,' says Kuldesch. 'There's a homeless woman on the corner of Blaker Street who might appreciate that fifty pounds.'

The man nods, says, 'Don't touch the bag,' and disappears through the door.

'Thank you for calling,' says Kuldesch, noting that the man is heading down the hill in the direction of Blaker Street. A motorcycle courier passes in the opposite direction.

An interesting start to the morning, but many interesting things happen in this business. Kuldesch had recently been involved in tracking down some rare books and catching a murderer with his friend Stephen and Stephen's wife, Elizabeth. Elizabeth runs a 'Murder Club', of all things.

This box will be in my hands tomorrow, and the

whole episode will be forgotten, just one of those things that happen in a trade that is not always beyond reproach.

Trinkets and trouble, that was the antiques business.

Kuldesch lifts the bag onto the counter and unzips it again. The box has a sort of squat charm, but is not the sort of thing he could sell. He shakes it. It is certainly full of something. Cocaine or heroin is his best guess. Kuldesch scrapes some dirt from the lid. What is this worthless box now worth? More than five hundred pounds, that is for certain.

Kuldesch zips the bag up and puts it under his desk in the back room. He will Google the street price of heroin and cocaine. That will make the day go a little quicker. He will then lock the bag in his safe. It would be a very bad day for a burglary.

‘Mervyn, there isn’t an easy way to say this. Tatiana isn’t real.’ Donna holds out a comforting hand for Mervyn to take, but it remains untaken, as Ibrahim could have told her. Mervyn is not one of life’s hand-takers. He lives life at a safe distance.

They have asked Donna to visit Mervyn’s flat, to have a chat about his apparent new love, Tatiana. Joyce felt that a police officer might make more of an impact on him, though something in Mervyn’s eyes at the Boxing Day lunch had told Ibrahim that very little ever had an impact on Mervyn.

Mervyn gives a little smile. ‘I’m afraid I have photographs and emails to suggest otherwise.’

‘I wonder if we might take a look at those photographs, Mervyn?’ Elizabeth asks.

‘I wonder if I might look at your personal emails?’ Mervyn replies.

‘I wouldn’t recommend it,’ says Elizabeth.

‘I know it’s difficult,’ says Donna. ‘And I know it might feel embarrassing —’

‘Not embarrassing in the slightest,’ says Mervyn. ‘You couldn’t be further from the truth there. You’re miles from the truth, my love.’

‘But perhaps a misunderstanding?’ says Joyce.

‘A crossing of wires? Simply that,’ says Ibrahim.

Mervyn shakes his head in amusement. ‘It might be unfashionable, but I have a little thing called faith, which, I venture, is undervalued these days. In the police force, and elsewhere.’

Mervyn looks at the whole gang as he says this.

‘I know that the four of you are very much the “cool kids” around here, I get that . . .’

Ibrahim notes that Joyce looks thrilled.

‘. . . but you don’t always know everything.’

‘I keep telling them that, Merv,’ says Ron.

‘You’re the worst of them,’ says Mervyn. ‘If it wasn’t for Joyce, I wouldn’t put up with any of you. I gave up Boxing Day lunch to keep you lot company, don’t forget that.’

‘It was greatly appreciated, Mervyn,’ says Elizabeth. ‘And, I agree, we are flawed, as individuals, and as a group, and, in my view, you are probably right to single out Ron as the worst of us. But I believe Donna would like to show you a few things that might sway you.’

‘I will not sway,’ says Mervyn.

Donna turns on a laptop and starts the business of opening some windows.

‘It is very kind of you to visit us on your day off,’ says Joyce.

‘Not at all,’ says Donna.

‘Do you know Donna arrested someone on Christmas Day?’ Joyce tells Mervyn. ‘I didn’t know you could do that.’

‘What was it?’ says Ron. ‘A minor dustling?’

‘Soliciting a sexual act,’ says Donna.

‘At Christmas,’ says Joyce, shaking her head. ‘You’d think people would be too full.’

Donna has found what she is looking for, and she angles the screen towards Mervyn. ‘Now, Mervyn, Joyce forwarded me a photograph of Tatiana that you sent her —’

‘Did she indeed?’

‘I did,’ says Joyce. ‘Don’t act irked. You only sent it to me to show off.’

‘Male vanity,’ agrees Ibrahim, glad to have something to add.

‘She’s a cracker,’ says Ron. ‘Whoever she is.’

‘She is Tatiana,’ says Mervyn. ‘And your opinions are unwelcome.’

‘Well, that’s just it,’ says Donna. She shows Mervyn his photograph on her computer screen, next to another identical photograph. Same woman, same photograph. ‘You can do a reverse-image search of any photograph on the internet, so I did that with your photograph of Tatiana, and you’ll see that, far from being a photograph of somebody named Tatiana, the photograph is actually of a woman named Larissa Bleidelis, a Lithuanian singer.’

‘So Tatiana is a singer?’ says Mervyn.

‘No, Tatiana isn’t real,’ says Donna.

They can all see that this is as clear as day, but Mervyn is having none of it.

As Ibrahim listens, he thinks this is like trying to talk to Ron about football. Or about politics. Or about anything else. Mervyn says, ‘This is new material,’ preposterous’.

He even calls it ‘poppycock’, which, Ibrahim judges, is as close to swearing as Mervyn would ever go. Mervyn fights, says he has plenty more photographs, private messages, proclamations of love. The lot. He even keeps them in a file, which makes Ibrahim warm to him slightly more.

Joyce takes the baton now. ‘Have you ever heard of something called “romance fraud”?’

‘No, but I’ve heard of love,’ says Mervyn.

‘There’s a television programme all about it,’ continues Joyce. ‘It’s on after *BBC Breakfast*.’

‘I don’t watch television,’ says Mervyn. ‘I call it the gogglebox.’

‘Yes, I think lots of people do,’ says Elizabeth. ‘You didn’t invent that expression.’

‘This is a tangent,’ says Ibrahim. ‘And I mean nothing by it, but a surprising number of serial killers don’t own a television.’

Joyce’s dog, Alan, is licking Ibrahim’s hand, a favourite hobby of his. The others see it as a bond between the two of them, without realizing that Ibrahim always keeps a Polo mint in his pocket, after discovering Alan has a fondness for them.

Donna opens another window on the laptop, and more photos appear. ‘The fraudsters use the same photos over and over again. There’s a Canadian pilot, there’s a lawyer from New York, there’s Larissa, and plenty of others like her. The romance-fraud gangs just pass them around. The look they like is beautiful but unthreatening.’

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‘That’s the look *I* like,’ says Joyce.

Donna shows Ibrahim the pilot and Ibrahim could see the appeal. Very steadfast.

Mervyn is still unmoved, and protests that he has been speaking to Tatiana for five or six months. Many times a day.

‘Speaking?’

‘You know, writing, same thing,’ says Mervyn.

Ibrahim can imagine the lonely man filling his hours. No one calling, no one needing him.

Joyce then points out to Mervyn that he has also sent Tatiana five thousand pounds, and he blusters that of course he has, and that if someone you love needs a new car, say, or a visa, you help out. That this is simply manners.

‘You’ll all see,’ he adds. ‘She’s coming over on January the 19th, and, when she does, there will be plenty of humble pie eaten in Coopers Chase. Apologies will be expected.’

Everyone feels it is best to leave it there for now, and they gather up their things and start the walk back to Joyce’s with a quandary to consider. Elizabeth heads home to Stephen, so Joyce takes the opportunity to ask Donna about her Christmas with Bogdan.

‘And is he tattooed everywhere?’

‘Pretty much, yes,’ confirms Donna.

‘Even . . . ?’

‘No, not there,’ says Donna. ‘Joyce, has anyone ever called you a pervert?’

‘Don’t be such a pervert,’ says Joyce.

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Ibrahim wonders what they should do about Mervyn. He was a difficult man, that much was certain, and he had come into their orbit only because Joyce couldn't resist a deep voice and a sense of mystery. But he was a lonely man, and he was being taken advantage of. And, besides, it might be nice for the Thursday Murder Club to have a new project that moved at a gentler pace than usual. Something a bit less *murder*y would be quite a novelty.

Samantha Barnes is drinking a late-night gin and tonic and adding Picasso's signature and an edition number to some pencil drawings of a dove. Samantha has signed Picasso's name so often over the years that once, by accident, she signed it instead of her own on a mortgage-application form.

Her mind is wandering. This is the fun part of the job. This, and the money.

Forging a Picasso is a lot easier than you'd think. Not the big paintings, sure, that takes a skill Samantha doesn't have, but the sketches, the lithographs, the stuff people will buy online without looking too closely – that's a breeze.

There is money in real antiques, of course there is, but there is a lot more money in fake antiques. In fake furniture, in fake coins, in fake sketches.

Let's say Samantha buys a mid-century Arne Vodder desk for £3,200, and sells it for £7,000; her profit is £3,800, very nice thank you.

However, if Samantha pays £500 to a man called Norman, who works out of an old dairy shed in Singleton, to knock up an exact replica of an Arne Vodder desk, and then sells it for £7,000, her profit is £6,500. You, as her Garth insists on saying, do the maths.

Equally, if Samantha spends her evening forging

limited-edition Picasso lithographs, as she has been doing this evening, after coming home from Bridge Club, her cost of materials might be £200 or so, but, by the time she's sold them all online to people from London who like the idea of having Picasso's signature on their wall, and aren't too fussy about the provenance, her profit will be about £16,000.

All of which goes to explain why Samantha Barnes no longer has a mortgage.

She starts taking photographs of the Picassos for her online store. She'll advertise them for £2,500, and she'll happily take £1,800.

Samantha used to be legit, she really did. Back when it was her and William. Their little shop in Petworth, their trips around the country building their stock, their loyal customers, the haggling, all good fun, all mildly profitable. But, as they got older, the shop grew too familiar, it closed in on them. What was once cosy and safe became constraining, like a childhood home. The trips around the country became chores, the same faces selling the same porcelain cats.

So they started to play little games, Samantha and William. Sam and Billy. Purely for fun, nothing else. One must get through the day, mustn't one? And one particular game led her to exactly where she is now. And where is she now? Pretending to be Picasso while listening to the *Shipping Forecast*, in the finest house in West Sussex.

She often thinks back to how it all started.

William brought home an Minkid, a duff, dull runt

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