

# Over My Dead Body



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Jeffrey Archer is one of the world's bestselling authors, with sales of over 275 million copies in 97 countries.

Famous for his discipline as a writer who works on up to fourteen drafts of each book, Jeffrey also brings a vast amount of insider knowledge to his books. Whether it's his own career in politics, his passionate interest in art, or the wealth of fascinating background detail – inspired by the extraordinary network of friends he has built over a lifetime at the heart of Britain's establishment – his novels provide a fascinating glimpse into a range of closed worlds.

A member of the House of Lords, the author is married to Dame Mary Archer, and they have two sons, two granddaughters and three grandsons. He splits his time between London, Grantchester in Cambridge, and Mallorca, where he writes the first draft of each new novel.

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*To Jack*



# CHAPTER 1

‘ARE YOU A DETECTIVE, SIR?’

William looked up at the young man who’d asked the question. ‘No, I’m the assistant manager of the Midland Bank in Shoreham, Kent.’

‘In that case,’ continued the young man, not looking convinced, ‘you’ll be able to tell me what the exchange rate was between the dollar and the pound when the currency market opened this morning.’

William tried to recall how much he’d received when he changed a hundred pounds into dollars just before he joined the ship the previous evening, but he hesitated for too long.

‘One dollar and fifty-four cents to the pound,’ said the young man, before he could reply. ‘So, forgive me for asking, sir, why aren’t you willing to admit you’re a detective?’

William put the book he was reading on the table in front of him and took a closer look at the earnest young American,

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who seemed desperate not to be thought of as a child, although he hadn't started shaving. The word 'preppy' immediately came to mind.

'Can you keep a secret?' he whispered.

'Yes, of course,' the young man said, sounding offended.

'Then have a seat,' said William, pointing to the comfortable chair opposite him. He waited for the young man to settle. 'I'm on holiday and I promised my wife that for the next ten days, I wouldn't tell anyone I was a detective, because it's always followed by a stream of questions that turn it into a busman's holiday.'

'But why choose a banker as your cover?' asked the young man. 'Because I have a feeling you wouldn't know the difference between a spreadsheet and a balance sheet.'

'My wife and I gave that question some considerable thought before we settled on a banker. I grew up in Shoreham, a small town in England, in the sixties, and the local bank manager was a friend of my father's. So I thought I'd get away with it for a couple of weeks.'

'What else was on the shortlist?'

'Estate agent, car salesman and funeral director, all of which we were fairly confident wouldn't be followed by never-ending questions.'

The young man laughed.

'Which job would you have chosen?' asked William, trying to regain the initiative.

'Hitman. That way no one would have bothered me with any follow-up questions.'

'I would have known that was a cover immediately,' said William with a dismissive wave of his hand, 'because no

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hitman would have asked me if I was a detective. He would have already known. So, what do you really do when you're not a hitman?'

'I'm in my final year at Choate, a prep school in Connecticut.'

'Do you know what you want to do when you leave school? That's assuming you're not still hoping to be a hitman.'

'I shall go to Harvard and study history, before going on to law school.'

'After which, no doubt, you'll join a well-known legal practice, and in no time be made a junior partner.'

'No, sir, I want to be a lawman. After I've spent a year as editor of the *Law Review*, I shall join the FBI.'

'You seem to have your career well mapped out, for one so young.'

The young man frowned, clearly offended, so William quickly added, 'I was just the same at your age. I knew I wanted to be a detective and end up at Scotland Yard when I was eight years old.'

'What took you so long?'

William smiled at the bright young man, who no doubt understood the meaning of the word precocious without realizing it might apply to him. But then William accepted that he'd undoubtedly suffered from the same problem when he was a schoolboy. He leant forward, thrust out his hand and said, 'Detective Chief Inspector William Warwick.'

'James Buchanan,' replied the young man, shaking William's outstretched hand firmly. 'Dare I ask how you reached such a high rank, because if you were at school in the sixties you can't be more than . . .'

'What makes you so sure they'll offer you a place at

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Harvard?’ asked William, trying to parry his thrust. ‘You can’t be more than . . .’

‘Seventeen,’ said James. ‘I’m top of my class with a grade point average of 4.8, and I’m confident I’ll do well in my SATs.’ He paused before adding, ‘Should I presume you made it to Scotland Yard, Chief Inspector?’

‘Yes,’ William came back. He was used to being interrogated by leading counsel, not teenagers, although he was enjoying the encounter. ‘But if you’re that bright, why haven’t you considered becoming a lawyer, or going into politics?’

‘There are far too many lawyers in America,’ said James with a shrug of the shoulders, ‘and most of them end up chasing ambulances.’

‘And politics?’

‘I wouldn’t be any good at suffering fools gladly, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life at the whim of the electorate or allowing focus groups to dictate my opinions.’

‘Whereas, if you were to become the Director of the FBI . . .’

‘I would be my own master, answering only to the President, and I wouldn’t always let him know what I was up to.’

William laughed at the young man, who clearly didn’t suffer from self-doubt.

‘And you, sir,’ said James, sounding more relaxed, ‘are you destined to become the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police?’ William hesitated again. ‘Clearly, you think it’s a possibility,’ James continued before he could reply. ‘May I ask you another question?’

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‘I can’t imagine what would stop you.’

‘What do you consider are the most important qualities needed to be a first-class detective?’

William gave the question some thought before he responded. ‘A natural curiosity,’ he eventually said. ‘So you immediately spot something that doesn’t feel quite right.’

James took a pen from an inside pocket and began writing William’s words down on the back of the *Alden Daily News*.

‘You must also be able to ask the relevant questions of suspects, witnesses and colleagues. Avoid making assumptions. And above all, you have to be patient. Which is why women often make better police officers than men. Finally, you must be able to use all your senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.’

‘I’m not sure I fully understand,’ said James.

‘That must be a first,’ William replied, immediately regretting his words, although the young man laughed for the first time. ‘Close your eyes,’ said William. He waited for a moment before saying, ‘Describe me.’

The young man took his time before replying. ‘You’re thirty, thirty-five at most, a shade over six foot, fair hair, blue eyes, around a hundred and seventy pounds, fit, but not as fit as you used to be, and you’ve suffered a serious shoulder injury at some time in the past.’

‘What makes you think I’m not as fit as I used to be?’ said William defensively.

‘You’re about six or seven pounds overweight, and, as this is the first day of the voyage, you can’t blame the never-ending meals they serve on board ships.’

William frowned. ‘And the injury?’

‘The top two buttons of your shirt are undone, and when you leant forward to shake hands, I noticed a faded scar just below your left shoulder.’

William thought as he so often did, about his mentor, Constable Fred Yates, who had saved his life only to sacrifice his own. Police work wasn’t always as romantic as some authors would have you believe. He moved quickly on. ‘What book am I reading?’

‘*Watership Down* by Richard Adams. And before you ask, you’re on page hundred and forty-three.’

‘And my clothes, what do they tell you?’

‘I admit,’ said James, ‘I found that a bit of a mystery. It would take me several subtle questions before I came up with an answer, and then only if you told the truth.’

‘Let’s assume I’m a criminal who won’t answer your questions until I’ve phoned my legal representative.’

James hesitated for a moment before he said, ‘That in itself would be a clue.’

‘Why?’

‘It would suggest you’ve been in trouble with the law before, and if you know the telephone number of your lawyer, you certainly have.’

‘OK. Let’s assume I don’t have a lawyer, but I’ve watched enough TV programmes to know I needn’t answer any of your questions. What have you been able to work out without asking me any questions?’

‘Your clothes aren’t expensive, probably bought off the rack, yet you’re travelling first class.’

‘What do you deduce from that?’

‘You’re wearing a wedding ring, so you could have a rich wife. Or perhaps you’re on a special assignment.’

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‘Neither,’ said William. ‘That’s where observation ends, and detection begins. But not bad.’

The young man opened his eyes and smiled. ‘My turn, I think, sir. Please close your eyes.’

William looked surprised, but continued with the game.

‘Describe me.’

‘Bright, self-assured, but insecure.’

‘Insecure?’

‘You may be top of the class, but you’re still desperate to impress.’

‘What am I wearing?’ asked James.

‘A white button-down cotton shirt, possibly Brooks Brothers. Dark blue shorts, white cotton socks and Puma trainers, though you rarely, if ever, visit a gym.’

‘How can you be sure of that?’

‘I noticed when you walked towards me that your feet were splayed. If you were an athlete, they’d be in a straight line. If you doubt me, check the footprints of an Olympic runner on a cinder track.’

‘Any distinguishing marks?’

‘You have a tiny birthmark just below your left ear that you’ve tried to hide by growing your hair, although that will have to be cut short when you join the FBI.’

‘Describe the picture behind me.’

‘A black and white photo of this ship, the *Alden*, sailing out of New York harbour on May twenty-third, 1977. It’s being accompanied by a flotilla, which suggests it was on its maiden voyage.’

‘Why’s it named the *Alden*?’

‘That isn’t a test of observation,’ said William, ‘but of knowledge. If I needed to know the answer to that question,

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I could always find out later. First impressions are often misleading, so assume nothing. But if I had to guess, and you shouldn't as a detective, as this ship is part of the Pilgrim Line, I'd say that Alden was the name of one of the original pilgrims who set sail from Plymouth to America on the *Mayflower* in 1620.'

'How tall am I?'

'You're an inch shorter than me, but you'll end up an inch taller. You weigh around a hundred and forty pounds, and you've only just started to shave.'

'How many people have passed us while your eyes have been closed?'

'A mother with two children, one a little boy called Bobby, both American, and a moment later one of the ship's officers.'

'How do you know he was an officer?'

'A deckhand passing the other way called him sir. There was also an elderly gentleman.'

'How could you tell he was old?'

'He was using a walking stick, and it was some time before the sound of tapping faded.'

'I'm half blind,' said James, as William opened his eyes.

'Far from it,' said William. 'Now it's my turn to ask the suspect some questions.' James sat bolt upright, a look of concentration on his face. 'A good detective should always rely on facts and never take anything for granted, so first I have to find out if Fraser Buchanan, the chairman of the Pilgrim Line, is your grandfather?'

'Yes, he is. And my father, Angus, is deputy chairman.'

'Fraser, Angus and James. Rather suggests a Scottish heritage.' James nodded.

‘No doubt they both assume that in the fullness of time you’ll become chairman.’

‘I’ve already made it clear that’s not going to happen,’ said James without hesitation.

‘From everything I’ve read or heard about your grandfather, he’s used to getting his own way.’

‘True,’ James replied. ‘But sometimes he forgets we come from the same stock,’ he added with a smirk.

‘I had the same problem with my father,’ admitted William. ‘He’s a criminal barrister, a QC, and he always assumed I’d follow him in chambers and later join him at the bar, despite my telling him from an early age that I wanted to lock up criminals, not be paid extortionate fees to keep them out of jail.’

‘George Bernard Shaw was right,’ declared James. ‘We are separated by a common language. For you, the bar means courts and lawyers. For an American it means high stools and drinks.’

‘A sharp criminal will always try to change the subject,’ said William. ‘But a thorough detective won’t allow himself to lose the thread. You didn’t answer my question about your grandfather’s feelings about you not wanting to be chairman of the company.’

‘My grandfather, I suspect, is worse than your father,’ said James. ‘He’s already threatening to cut me out of his will if I don’t join the company after leaving Harvard. But he’ll never be allowed to do that as long as my grandmother’s alive.’

William chuckled.

‘Would it be too much of an imposition, sir, to ask if I might be allowed to spend an hour or so a day with you

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during the voyage?’ James asked, without displaying his previous confidence.

‘I’d enjoy that. Around this time of the morning would suit me, because that’s when my wife will be at her yoga class. But there’s one proviso: should you ever meet her, you won’t tell her what we’ve been talking about.’

‘And what have you been talking about?’ asked Beth, as she appeared by their side.

James leapt up. ‘The price of gold, Mrs Warwick,’ he said, looking earnest.

‘Then you will have quickly discovered it’s a subject about which my husband knows very little,’ said Beth, giving the young man a warm smile.

‘I was about to tell you, James,’ said William, ‘that my wife is far brighter than I am, which is why she’s the keeper of pictures at the Fitzmolean Museum and I’m a mere Detective Chief Inspector.’

‘The youngest in the Met’s history,’ said Beth.

‘Although should you ever mention the Met to my wife, she’ll assume you’re talking about one of the finest museums on earth, rather than London’s police force.’

‘I was so glad you managed to get the Vermeer back,’ said James, turning to Mrs Warwick.

It was Beth’s turn to look surprised. ‘Yes,’ she eventually managed, ‘and fortunately it can’t be stolen again because the thief is dead.’

‘Miles Faulkner,’ said James, ‘who died in Switzerland, after suffering a heart attack.’

William and Beth looked at each other but said nothing.

‘You even attended the funeral, Chief Inspector, presumably to convince yourself he was dead.’

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‘How can you possibly know that?’ said William, once again on the back foot.

‘I read *The Spectator* and the *New Statesman* every week, which keeps me up to date on what’s happening in Britain, and then try to form my own opinion.’

‘Of course you do,’ said William.

‘I look forward to seeing you again tomorrow, sir,’ said James, ‘when I’ll be interested to find out if you think it’s possible Miles Faulkner is still alive.’



## CHAPTER 2

MILES FAULKNER STROLLED ACROSS THE dining room of the Savoy just after eight o'clock the following morning, to see his lawyer already seated at his usual place. No one gave him a second look as he weaved in and out of the tables.

'Good morning,' Booth Watson said, looking up at his only client, a man he neither liked nor trusted. However, Faulkner was the one person who made it possible for him to enjoy a lifestyle few of his colleagues at the bar could hope to emulate.

'Good morning, BW,' Miles replied, as he sat down in the seat opposite him.

A waiter quickly appeared, notebook open, pen poised. 'What will you have this morning, gentlemen?' he asked.

'The full English,' said Miles, without looking at the menu.

'And will you be having your usual, sir?'

'Yes,' confirmed Booth Watson, as he peered more closely

at his client. He had to admit the Swiss plastic surgeon had done a first-class job. No one would have recognized him as the man who had escaped from prison, attended his own funeral, and recently risen from the dead. The man seated opposite him bore no resemblance to the successful entrepreneur who had once owned one of the great art collections in private hands, but now looked every bit the retired naval captain and veteran of the Falklands campaign, who answered to the name of Captain Ralph Neville. But if William Warwick were to discover that his old nemesis was still alive, he wouldn't rest until he was back behind bars. For Warwick it would be personal, the man who escaped from his clutches, the man who made fools of the Metropolitan Police, the man who'd—

'Why did you need to see me so urgently?' Miles asked once the waiter had left.

'A journalist from *The Sunday Times* insight team called yesterday and asked me if I knew anything about a Raphael that had recently been sold by Christie's and turned out to be a fake.'

'What did you tell him?' asked Miles, nervously.

'I assured her that the original was part of the late Miles Faulkner's private collection, and is still hanging in his widow's villa in Monte Carlo.'

'Not for much longer,' confided Miles. 'Once Christina found out she wasn't a widow after all, I had no choice but to move the entire collection to a safer location before she could get her hands on it.'

'And where might that be?' asked Booth Watson, wondering if he would get an honest reply.

'I've found somewhere that doesn't have any locals to spy

on me, and only the passing seagulls can shit on me,' was all Miles offered.

'I'm glad to hear that, because I think it might be wise to leave England for a few weeks before you once again reappear as Captain Neville, and no better time than while Chief Inspector Warwick and his wife are enjoying a holiday in New York.'

'A holiday that was arranged for them by Christina to make sure they're both well out of harm's way when my wife and I get married for the second time.'

'But I thought Beth Warwick was going to be Christina's maid of honour?'

'She was, but that was before Christina discovered why I couldn't afford to be seen on board the SS *Alden*.'

'You have to admit your ex has her uses,' said Booth Watson, 'and one of them is to take advantage of the close relationship she's formed with Mrs Warwick.'

'Frankly, BW, I would have been better off if Christina had never discovered I was still alive. So please explain to me why I have to marry the damn woman a second time?'

'Because, in the end, it solves all your problems,' said Booth Watson. 'Don't forget she's the one person who can keep an eye on Detective Inspector Warwick without him ever becoming suspicious.'

'But if she were to switch sides?' said Faulkner.

'That's unlikely while you still hold the purse strings.'

Faulkner didn't look convinced. 'That wouldn't be the case if they discovered who Captain Ralph Neville was, and I ended up back in prison.'

'She'd still have to get past me, when Christina would quickly discover which side I'm on.'

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‘But you also don’t have a choice,’ said Miles, ‘because you’d have to explain to the Bar Council why you’ve been representing an escaped criminal for the past couple of years, when you were well aware he was your former client.’

‘All the more reason,’ suggested Booth Watson, ‘to make sure Christina signs a binding agreement that if she were to break she’d have just as much to lose as either of us.’

‘And be sure she signs it before she marries Captain Neville, and certainly before the Warwicks return to Blighty.’

‘Blighty?’ said BW.

‘That’s Captain Neville-speak, old chap,’ said Miles, sounding rather pleased with himself. ‘So when are you seeing Christina?’

‘I have a meeting with her in chambers tomorrow morning, when I intend to take her through the agreement clause by clause, stressing the consequences of her failing to sign it.’

‘Good, because if she ever thought she could get her hands on my art collection simply by telling her friend Beth that Miles Faulkner is still alive and kicking . . .’

‘You’d end up having breakfast in Pentonville and not the Savoy.’

‘If that were to happen,’ said Miles, ‘I wouldn’t hesitate to kill her.’

‘I’ve already made that painfully clear,’ said Booth Watson as the waiter returned with their breakfast. ‘Though I confess, I haven’t spelt it out quite that explicitly in the final agreement.’

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‘The full English breakfast, madam?’

‘Certainly not, Franco,’ said Beth, looking up at the name badge on his jacket. ‘We’ll both have cornflakes with melon and a slice of brown toast.’

‘We can offer three types of melon, madam: cantaloupe, honeydew or water.’

‘Water, thank you,’ said William.

‘A wise choice,’ said Beth. ‘I read somewhere that the average person puts on a pound a day during a sea voyage.’

‘Then let’s be thankful,’ said William, ‘that we’re going to New York and not Sydney.’

‘I’d be quite happy to go to Sydney on this floating palace,’ admitted Beth as she glanced around the room. ‘Have you noticed the little touches they’ve done so exquisitely? Fresh sheets, tablecloths and napkins every day. And when you return to your cabin, the bed has already been made with yesterday’s clothes hung up and tidied away. I also love the way our laundry is returned each evening in those little wicker baskets. They must have dozens of people slaving away to make it all run so smoothly.’

‘Eight hundred and thirty Filipinos are hidden below, madam,’ chuckled their waiter, ‘who serve our one thousand two hundred guests. However, nowadays we have an engine room, so the galley slaves no longer have to row.’

‘And is that the slave master seated at the top of the table in the centre of the room?’ asked Beth.

‘Yes, that’s Captain Buchanan,’ said Franco, ‘who, when he’s not whipping the slaves, is chairman of the Pilgrim Line.’

‘Captain Buchanan?’ queried William.

‘Yes, the chairman served as a naval officer during the

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Second World War. It may also interest you to know he was a friend of the late Miles Faulkner and his wife Christina, who, incidentally, called to tell us you would be taking their place and asked us to take special care of you.'

'Did she indeed?' said William.

'Is that the chairman's wife sitting at the other end of the table?' said Beth.

'Yes, madam,' replied Franco. 'Mr and Mrs Buchanan are almost always the first to arrive for breakfast,' he commented, before leaving to fulfil their order.

'He looks every bit as formidable as Miles Faulkner,' said Beth, taking a closer look at the chairman, 'although he's obviously deployed his talents to achieve something far more worthwhile than robbing his fellow man.'

'Fraser Buchanan was born in Glasgow in 1921,' said William. 'He left school at the age of fourteen, and joined the merchant navy as a deckhand. When the war broke out, he transferred to the Royal Navy as a rating, but ended up as a lieutenant on HMS *Nelson*. Despite being made up to captain in 1945, he resigned his commission a few days after the armistice was signed. He returned to Scotland and bought a small passenger and car ferry company that operated from the mainland to the island of Iona. He now owns a fleet of twenty-six vessels, and the Pilgrim Line is second only to Cunard in size and reputation.'

'Information no doubt picked up from young James while I was at my yoga class?' suggested Beth.

'No, you can read the history of the company in the *Ship's Log*, which I found on my bedside table,' said William, as Franco placed two bowls of cornflakes and a slice of watermelon in front of them.

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‘Who’s that who’s just sat down next to Mrs Buchanan?’ whispered William.

‘Forgive my husband, Franco,’ said Beth, ‘he’s a detective and for him life is one endless investigation.’

‘That’s Hamish Buchanan,’ said Franco, ‘the chairman’s eldest son. Until recently he was the deputy chairman of the company.’

‘Until recently?’ prompted William. ‘But he can’t be a day over forty.’

‘Behave yourself,’ said Beth.

‘If the press are to be believed,’ confided Franco, ‘he was replaced at the last annual general meeting by his brother Angus, who’s just walked in with his wife Alice and their son . . .’

‘James,’ said William.

‘Ah!’ said Franco. ‘You’ve already come across the boy wonder.’

‘And the lady who’s just sat down on Mr Buchanan’s left? I notice she didn’t even bother to say good morning to the chairman.’

‘That’s Mr Hamish’s wife, Sara.’

‘Why would she agree to come on this trip if her husband has just been sacked?’ asked Beth.

‘Replaced by his brother Angus, is the official line,’ said Franco, as he poured her a steaming cup of black coffee. ‘And as Mr Hamish is still a director of the company, he’ll be expected to attend the board meeting that is always held on the last day of the voyage.’

‘You seem remarkably well-informed, Franco,’ said William.

Franco made no comment before moving on to the next table.

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‘What a fun trip this is turning out to be,’ said Beth, stifling a yawn while still looking across at the chairman’s table. ‘I wonder who the woman is who’s just joined them.’

‘You’re worse than I am,’ said William, as he watched James and Hamish stand as an older woman took her place at the table. ‘She looks about the same age as the chairman and, as they both have red hair, I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s his sister.’ William continued to study the seating plan, noting that every place had been carefully allocated by the chairman to make sure he was always in control.

‘You can always ask James who she is while I’m at my yoga class. But let’s forget about the Buchanan family for a few moments, while I tell you what I’ve got planned for us during our week in New York.’

‘The Met, I presume, will be at the top of your list,’ said William, ‘and I’ve no doubt it will require more than one visit.’

‘Three,’ said Beth. ‘Everything before 1850 on Saturday, Indigenous Art on Monday, and on Wednesday I want to see the Impressionist collection, which Tim Knox assures me is second only to the Musée d’Orsay.’

‘Phew . . . do we get pit stops on Tuesday and Thursday?’ asked William after taking a sip of coffee.

‘Certainly not. We’ll visit the Frick on Tuesday, where . . .’

‘. . . we’ll see a remarkable Holbein of Thomas Cromwell, and Bellini’s *St Francis in Ecstasy*.’

‘I sometimes forget that you’re a semi-educated caveman.’

‘By my wife since leaving university,’ responded William. ‘And on Thursday?’

‘On to the MoMA. A chance to see the finest examples

of the Cubist period: Picasso and Braque, when we'll find out if you can tell the difference.'

'Won't their names be on the bottom of the pictures?' teased William.

'That's for tourists, who won't be joining us in the evenings.'

'Then who will be?'

'We have tickets for the Lincoln Center. The New York Symphony Orchestra, playing Brahms.'

'It has to be the second piano concerto in B Major,' said William, 'one of your favourites.'

'And I haven't forgotten one of your favourites,' retorted Beth, 'because on Friday evening, the night before we fly home, we have tickets to see Ella Fitzgerald at Carnegie Hall.'

'How did you manage that? It must have been sold out for months!'

'Christina fixed it. Seems she knows someone on the board.' Beth paused for a moment before adding, 'I'm beginning to feel guilty about her.'

'Why? The reason she couldn't make the trip to New York is because she's getting married to Ralph, and she was only too delighted to find someone to take her place at the last moment.'

'It's the marriage I'm feeling guilty about. Don't forget she originally asked me to be her maid of honour. But because we took up her generous offer, I'll miss the wedding.'

'Didn't you find that a bit of a coincidence?'

'Not really. August fifteenth was the only Saturday before the end of September when they could get married at her

parish church in Limpton-in-the-Marsh, which left her stuck with the tickets. We shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.'

William decided this wasn't the time to tell Beth it had taken him only one phone call to discover that Christina's parish church had been available a fortnight before, after which she and Captain Ralph Neville could easily have taken their honeymoon on the ship. However, if he'd refused to join Beth on the voyage so he could keep a closer eye on Christina and her new husband, his own wife might well have sailed off into the sunset without him.

'Have you noticed that Sara Buchanan hasn't spoken one word to the chairman since she sat down?' said Beth, still staring at the captain's table.

'Possibly because he sacked her husband as deputy chairman,' suggested William, as he buttered a second piece of toast.

'What else have you spotted while you pretended to be listening to me?'

'Hamish Buchanan has been deep in conversation with his mother, while James is feigning not to be interested, although he's taking in every word.'

'Which he'll no doubt report back to you, now you've recruited him as your undercover agent for the trip.'

'James appointed himself. And as he's the chairman's grandson, he's well-placed to supply endless pieces of inside information.'

'For a man, it's information,' commented Beth. 'For a woman, it's gossip.'

'James has already warned me that he wouldn't be surprised if an all-out row broke out at some time during the voyage,' added William, ignoring Beth's comment.

'I'd like to be a salt cellar on that table,' admitted Beth.

'Behave yourself, or I'll take a closer look at the young man who's in charge of your yoga class.'

'His name's Stefan. All the other middle-aged women in the class fancy him,' she sighed, 'so I'm not in with much of a chance.'

'You are not middle-aged,' said William, taking her hand.

'Thank you, caveman, but I've already had two thirtieth birthdays, just in case you hadn't noticed, and the children will soon be off to nursery school.'

'I wonder how our parents are coping with them.'

'Your father will have Artemisia doing torts . . .'

'. . . while your mother will be teaching Peter to draw.'

'Lucky children,' they both said simultaneously.

'Still, back to the present,' said Beth, picking up a copy of the daily cruise programme. 'There's a talk in the lecture theatre this morning that I'd like to go to.'

William raised an eyebrow.

'Lady Catherine Whittaker on the operas of Puccini.'

'I just might give it a miss. Mind you, if she's the wife of Mr Justice Whittaker,' said William, looking around the room, 'it would be fascinating to have a chat with him.'

'And there's a different show in the theatre every evening,' continued Beth. 'Tonight it's Lazaro, a magician, who will apparently shock and surprise as he makes objects and even passengers disappear before our eyes. We can go to either the seven o'clock or the nine o'clock performance.'

'Which sitting would you prefer for dinner?' asked Franco, when he returned to their table and began to pour them a second coffee.

JEFFREY ARCHER

‘What time do the chairman and his family come down in the evening?’ asked William.

‘Around eight thirty, sir, when they have cocktails before dining.’

‘Then we’ll take the second sitting.’

‘What are you up to?’ asked Beth, looking closely at her husband.

‘I have a feeling that if we attend the second sitting, we’ll have more shocks and surprises, and possibly see more people disappearing before our eyes, than Lazaro will manage in the theatre.’