

Death on a Dirty Afternoon

By Colin Garrow

Chapter 1

Frank Armstrong had lain down on the dining room table before, but in the past he'd always been either sound asleep or dead drunk. Now he was just dead.

I stared at his half-open mouth and washed-out face, and marvelled at the way his body seemed to barely inhabit the crappy suit he always wore. If I were the sort to feel guilty, I might wonder if it had been my fault, him being dead, I mean. But I wasn't.

Behind me, the blonde coughed like she needed attention.

'Why'd you call me?' I said.

'I just...!' She shrugged. 'Wanted someone here, y'know? And you were his friend. I thought ye'd want to know.' She pouted at me, then seemed to remember she was supposed to be the grieving widow and turned it into a whimper.

'You call an ambulance?'

I expect they'll send one, but what's the point? He's stone cold.' She sniffed. 'Doctor's on his way.'

Her face was conspicuously free of tears, and even though it was only eight in the morning and she'd probably only been home an hour, I could see she'd taken time to tart herself up before receiving visitors. Only the wonky hairdo and excess luggage under her eyes, showed she'd been shagging all night.

'You think it was..?' I hesitated. 'I mean..?'

'I know what ye mean, bonny lad. Ye mean was it natural causes or did I smack him over the head once too often for being a boring shit?' She sniffed again and dabbed her nose with a hanky. 'No. I expect his heart packed in. Bound to, sooner or later.'

I nodded and wondered if she realised there'd be an autopsy.

Lizzy glanced out the window and made a face. 'Tch, look at that nosy cow. I should've left the nets up.'

I turned to look. A woman across the road was standing at her front door, watching. With two pairs of eyes on her, the offender backed inside and shut the door. As we stood watching, I noticed Frank's car wasn't outside. I didn't say anything to his wife. She had enough to deal with just now.

There was a pause while Lizzy brushed unseen fluff from her blouse. She fiddled with the curtains and wiped a finger through the dust on the windowsill. I got the feeling there was something else in the pipeline.

Eventually, in an oh-I've-just-remembered sort of way, she said, 'You wouldn't be goin past Ronnie's, by any chance?'

When I looked her full in the face, she dropped her gaze to the carpet.

'Wondered if ye wouldn't mind callin at the office? Tellin the lads, an that?' She bit

her lower lip the way she always did when she was pushing her luck. 'I made a couple of phone calls, ye know, family an that, but I'm not up to talking to anyone else yet.'

Of course. That's why she'd called me. Not because she felt in need of a friend, bit of moral support, which'd be fair enough, you might think. No, she wanted someone to take the crap that Frank's boss would be dishing up with a hot spoon. Or more to the point, when the brown stuff hit the proverbial and Big Ronnie went ballistic, she didn't want to be in the firing line. The fact of Frank being dead wouldn't get in the way of Ronnie taking back what was his.

'Aye, of course.' I shuffled my feet. 'I should go.'

'I was at Dave's place last night.' She showed me her 'sorry' face. 'I could tell you were wonderin, like.'

'Aye.'

She threw her hands up as if the frustration of it all was truly overwhelming. 'I mean how was I supposed to know? Never told me where he was going or nothin.'

'He was at work, wasn't he? So ye did know where he was, pretty much.'

'I knew he was drivin a bloody taxi. Course I did, but...!' She ran out of steam and excuses at the same time.

Relenting a little, I allowed her a small slice of benefit-of-the-doubt pie. 'So you weren't here when he died. It wouldn't have made any difference.' I glanced at Frank. 'Not to him.' I started for the door.

'I'll let you know when the funeral is.' She touched my hand. 'Ye'll come?'

It was only then, in that few seconds of human contact, that I felt the tears start. Not for her, mind, not that selfish, money-grabbing bitch. I looked back at the body on the table. 'I'll be there, Lizzy,' I said. And I would be - for Frank.

It was a seaside town like any other seaside town: from the non-existent sand dunes and candy-striped deck chairs to the concrete piers and tacky market stalls, we had it all. Whether you wanted to sit on the beach or prop up the nearest bar, there was something for everyone - so long as whatever you were looking for didn't amount to much. I'd like to say the tourists loved it, but they didn't, and the ones that said they did were lying.

Years ago, the place was a Mecca for gamblers, with casinos and gambling dens up and down the seafront and northern gangsters pitting their wits against the sharp suits from the south - Gateshead. I'd lived there all my life, apart from thirty years in London and the odd weekend in Skegness, and I'd been around the block a few times, in both directions. So I knew the score, kind of.

I'd like to say it was My Town. But it wasn't. I just lived there.

Out in the street, I glanced back at Lizzy. She was still standing by the window looking at Frank. No wonder the neighbours were watching - not every day you see a middle-aged bloke in a suit lying dead on his own dining room table. You'd think the silly bitch would have the sense to draw the curtains, but that's Lizzy all round - let the world watch while you squeeze out the big fat turds of your life, or something along those lines.

It was spitting on to rain and I debated whether to walk back to the flat and get the car, but I'd have ended up walking the same distance anyway, so I headed up

Inkerman, into Kitchener and crossed Winston Lane. I did my usual trick of nipping in the back entrance of Boots and out the other side onto the High Street by which time the rain had really got going.

Pulling my collar up, I stood for a minute in the doorway, casting about for a friendly face. Over the road there was a blue Nissan Crappy with its hazards on - not exactly a welcoming visage, but it'd do for now. I came up behind the car and jumped into the passenger seat.

'Jeezas Terry, I nearly filled me pants there.' Fat Barry flicked his cigarette out the window and shoogled round in his seat. 'Not got a job yet?'

I shook my head. 'You know I've not.'

'Oh, aye.'

His happy smiling face told me he hadn't heard the news. Given that the two of them were supposed to be great mates, I thought it best to break it to him gently. 'Frank's dead.'

He laughed, then clocking my own unlaughy face, allowed his guffaws to fade. 'You're fuckin jokin?'

'His wife thinks it was his heart.'

'Heart attack? Christ.' He let out a long sigh, generously sharing a hint of the kebab he'd had for supper the night before. He sighed again. 'Christ. When?'

'Last night by the looks of it. Lizzy came home and found him.'

'Bet she was out shaggin that Davy from the arcade, was she?' He shook his head sadly. 'Poor bugger.'

I wasn't sure if he meant Davy or Frank, but I wasn't going to ask. 'Anyway, I said I'd let Ronnie know.'

Barry's mouth dropped open again. 'You're not, though? Tellin Ronnie?'

'I said I would. Unless you want to do it?' It wasn't a serious question, but Barry thought it was.

'Like shite. He'd tear me a new ringpiece.' He gave me his serious look. 'He'd tear you a new ringpiece.' He dropped his voice. 'You know Frank owed him ten grand?'

I nodded.

'Well?'

'Well what? Not going to give it back now, is he?'

The fat man sucked in his cheeks, reminding me of that old joke about the camel and the bricks. 'He'll not be happy.' He paused, then, 'That's why you're away to tell Ronnie. Suppose ye canna expect her to do it. Not when she's just lost her husband an that. And especially not when she owes him ten big ones.' He gave me a funny look. 'She didn't ring you up to go over there just to ask you to do her dirty work? What a bitch.'

'Hardly dirty work, Barry. Her husband just died. Ye can't blame her for that.' I felt justified saying this, cos even though I did blame her, there was no need for anyone else to do the same. Not just yet anyway.

Barry mused on the solemnity of the occasion for several minutes until I began to wonder if he'd have any eulogising left for the funeral.

'You want a lift?'

I nodded at the meter. 'You've got a fare.'

'Just a wait-and-return for Mrs Arthur and that daft cousin of hers. They'll be

twenty minutes yet.'

'No, you're alright.' I slid a finger into the door handle and pulled. 'And Barry —'
'What?'

'Stay off the radio.' I winked at him and climbed out the car. It wasn't necessary to warn him off, but my fat friend had a nasty habit of dropping bombshells on behalf of others, and I didn't want to walk into the office to find I'd been pre-empted.

It took me ten minutes to walk down to the taxi office on the sea front. Nestled in-between a takeaway and a tattooist, I'd always wondered if there was something alphabetical going on when Ronnie had pooled his dubious resources and rented the place a year or two earlier, but any sense of symmetry would've been lost on the folk round here.

I pushed open the door and went upstairs.

The reception area was a wide room with a counter across the middle and a variety of dining room chairs against the far wall. Two punters were waiting, reading month-old copies of Men's Health.

'Hello Terry, bit early for you, isn't it?' Carol's smile was the best reason for showing my face at Ron's Taxis, though the view of the bay was almost worth the trip, when it wasn't pissing down. At thirty-nine and a bit, she was only a few years younger than me, but she still managed to look amazing first thing in the morning.

'Never too early to see you, pet.'

She slid the headphones off, swivelled her chair round and scooted across the lino to the end of the counter. 'I'll put the kettle on, eh?'

I shook my head. 'No, you're alright, I'm not stoppin.' My face told her more than I'd intended and she stood up, leaning on the desk.

'What's happened? You alright?'

Nodding towards the office, I said, 'Is anyone in?' The question wasn't necessary, since I could see a blurred shape through the frosted glass.

She glanced at the punters and mouthed You okay?

I mouthed back that I was fine. 'Is he in?'

A voice crackled over the radio. Carol pushed a hand through her hair and moved back to the microphone. 'That you, Billy? Do 42 Eldon Street going up to Asda.'

The voice crackled in the affirmative.

She jerked her head and I moved closer. 'Ronnie's on a job,' she said, 'but the old man's in, an he's not shoutin anymore so he must be off the phone.' She waved a hand towards the wood-chipped wall that separated her and the punters from the bosses.

I poked my head around the door. Of the two desks pushed together in the middle of the tiny room, only one was occupied. Glancing at the back door, I was reassured to see it was bolted. If the younger member of the Thompson family decided to come up the back way, I'd at least get a bit of warning.

Ken didn't bother to look up. 'Oh aye? And what do you want?' It wasn't obvious from his expression if he already knew why I was there, so I hesitated, one hand on the door. I watched as he tapped one-fingeredly at his keyboard, as if he'd only recently learned how to spell.

After a moment, he raised his head and made eye contact. 'Come on then, if you're comin in.' He indicated the empty chair.

I made myself comfortable and folded my hands in my lap.

'If you're wantin your job back, ye can go fuck yourself.' There was no malice in his voice, but I knew he wasn't joking.

'Ronnie not in?'

He stopped typing. 'Why d'you want to see Ronnie?'

'I don't.'

He let out a long breath. 'Oh, like that, is it? Go on, then. Give iz the bad news.'

The flat on Otterburn Terrace wasn't anyone's idea of palatial accommodation, but the high ceilings and double-fronted windows, gave it the appearance of one of those dockside shitehouse apartments that folk with less sense than money think is the bee's bollocks.

Allowing the front door to clatter shut like a big clattery thing, I took my time climbing up to the top floor. If Sharon was still there, I didn't want to surprise her, but as it turned out, I needn't have bothered - the front door was locked and the boxes she'd piled up on the landing had gone. No hanging about for her.

Throwing the keys into the papier mâché bowl I'd made when I was ten, I stood for a while in the passage, noting the empty spaces on the coat rack and the missing CD's in the floor-to-ceiling-bookcase that was lovingly squashed into the alcove between the kitchen and living room doors. I let my gaze settle on the middle shelf and without looking too closely, I could see she'd at least left me the Bix Beiderbecke records. Nice.

I put some coffee on and spent an hour getting reacquainted with what was left of my flat. Naturally, she'd taken the lava lamps and vintage travel posters. The spaces where all her stuff had been gave the place a strange sense of insignificance, though not necessarily in a bad way. To make myself feel better, I moved the furniture round, putting it back where it had been originally, before I'd been daft enough to let Sharon loose with all that Feng Shui shite.

If this were a normal Saturday, I'd be still in bed with coffee and toast after a night picking up the dregs of the town til the early hours, but this wasn't a normal Saturday, and not just because of Frank.

I finished off the last of the so-called Mexican blend while reminding myself of the state of my bank account. I've never been good with money so wasn't used to being in anything but the red, but that'd changed a few weeks before when my sister handed over my half of what was left after we'd paid for the funeral. At a little over forty thousand, it wasn't exactly a fortune, but it'd given me the impetus to pack in driving a taxi for a living.

Even so, it would've been useful if the old bugger had died six months ago, when the money could still have made a difference, but Sharon had spent too many nights waiting up, and too many Fridays sitting in the pub on her own, clinging to a dream that eventually things might change. When they finally did, it turned out it was the old straw/camel's back thing and she'd already found somewhere else to live.

I'd've been happy to give her another chance if that sort of thing had appealed to her, however, she'd made her bed and she wanted to lie in it. It was only later I realised she's wasn't going to be lying in it by herself, so there didn't seem much point trying to persuade her otherwise.

When the clock on the mantle had rolled round to my normal getting-up time, I decided to spend the day shopping for all the items Sharon had taken that I couldn't live without.

One of the things she used to complain about was my routines - ever since I'd bumped into one of my dodgy mates on the way out somewhere, I'd got into the habit of looking out the front window before going downstairs. Normally, it wouldn't make any difference, but today was the exception - a dark, lumbering bulk slithered into my field of vision. Big Ronnie was heading my way and I wasn't in the mood for his sort of banter.

I just made the foot of the stairs when his ugly shadow slid across the half-glazed front door. I didn't bother to wait for him to press the buzzer and skipped out the back while my legs were still in working order. It wasn't that Ronnie was dangerous, but since he was here, he'd obviously heard the news of Frank's death, and I guessed he wasn't popping in to pass on his condolences.

The narrow lane that separated the back gardens of Otterburn Terrace and Flodden Road ran left and right across another two streets on either side. I headed left, which took me over Lansdowne Road and into an alley that led to the train station. If this had been tomorrow, there'd be a market on and I could lose myself for an hour, but it wasn't, so I headed onto the platform and over the bridge, hoping the railway track might have a similar effect on Ronnie to whatever it is that a river does to a pack of hounds chasing a wanted man.

Making my way back into town by the pretty route, I did a bit of shopping and managed to replace about half the things Sharon had nicked from my kitchen. Admittedly, some of them were on the pricey side, but as she wouldn't be using them, I reasoned they'd last twice as long.

Thinking I'd give my pursuer a chance to get bored and go home, I passed a pleasant couple of hours in the South Sea Bubble, enjoying the latest 'guest' lager and sharing a plate of garlic potato wedges with a guy I was at school with. While the face was familiar, I couldn't recall his actual name, though as he didn't seem to remember mine either, it hardly mattered. Besides, it was chucking it down outside and I'd no desire to bump into Ronnie with me brandishing only wet hair and a moist demeanour.

So it was late afternoon when I got back to the flat and found the note pinned to the door. Quite what Big Ronnie was doing with a packet of drawing pins about his person, I couldn't imagine, but he'd put one in each corner of the A4 sheet to make sure his message didn't go unseen. His spelling reminded me of something and I wondered if he'd gone to the same school as his dad.

Carefully pulling the pins out, I pushed the note into my coat pocket and went inside.

I knew before I closed the door that something wasn't right. The remaining books and records had been flung across the passageway like someone big and heavy had smashed into the bookcase. The rug in the hall was rucked up and the coat rack lay in two pieces. But it was the size twelve Dr Marten boot protruding from the open living room door that made my guts perform a quick tango while my shoes did a moonwalk back onto the landing. It wasn't necessary to see the rest of him to know who was occupying my floor space and I didn't need to be a fortune teller to predict

he wasn't going to be waking up anytime soon.

I stood for a moment trying to recall if there'd been anything different downstairs: I'd come in through the front and there'd been no sign of forced entry. Mrs Nicholson's plant pots still sat on alternate steps all the way up to the first floor, so apart from Ronnie, whoever else had come up that way had taken care not to disturb anything on the way down.

Of course, that's assuming the intruder had actually left.

I peered back into the passage. The foot was still there, sticking up like it had been nailed in place to stop it falling over. Reaching round, I picked up one of the few items Sharon had left behind and advanced towards the living room. Holding it like an axe, ready to wallop the killer (who was surely standing behind a door waiting in murderous anticipation), I glanced into the bathroom. As Sharon had taken the shower curtain there was no possibility of a Psycho moment. I looked into the bedroom, but the mirror on the opposite wall told me it too was empty. Keeping to the left hand wall and wishing I'd done the sensible thing and called the police, I took another three steps and peered into the kitchen. Like the previous rooms, it was free of murderers, though if I'm honest, I'd already worked out that anyone with a grain of common sense would have realised the only place to hide was behind the living room door.

I took a breath and stepped into the same square of carpet occupied by the boot. Sure enough, the man it belonged to was lying flat out on my floor, his face bashed in with some heavy object. The only good news seemed to be that as the door was pushed back against the wall, whoever had done for him had long since gone.

As I lowered the hockey stick, I realised that not only had I discovered the murder weapon, I'd also just put my fingerprints all over it. A sliver of Big Ronnie's blood slid down the shaft and onto my hand.

Great.

Chapter 2

Charis Brown had been the best-looking girl at my school. She was small and graceful, with an elfin-like smile and eyes that could melt a Mr Whippy at fifty paces. She was the sort of girl who'd have a sly fag behind the bike sheds, then blame someone else when she got caught. She wasn't the sort of girl to go to Hendon and work her way up to Detective Inspector. Or rather, she was. Apparently.

When the shock of seeing her had worn off a little, I stepped back and let her into the flat. The two plods in the living room were still taking notes and the scene of crime bloke was still doing whatever scene of crime blokes do. I backed into the kitchen and offered coffee.

'Didn't know you lived round here,' said Inspector Brown.

'Didn't know you were interested.' I was aiming for gentle humour but only managed cynicism.

She glanced into the room opposite. 'Friend of yours?'

'Not exactly.'

She crossed to the living room and had a few words with the taller of the plods. They glanced back at me a few times, but as coppers always make me nervous, I couldn't tell if that was a good thing or not.

Charis came back and leaned on the counter. 'You used to work for him, didn't you?' It wasn't really a question.

I nodded. 'For him and his dad, yes.' I poured the coffee and slid the milk carton along the counter. 'Only gave it up a few weeks back.'

'Funny.' She helped herself to a Custard Cream.

'What is?'

'That two stiffs turn up in less than twenty-four hours and you're connected to both of them.'

A bad feeling started to make a name for itself in my stomach. The sort of bad feeling I'd been expecting, but was hoping might've bugged off before the police arrived. 'You talking about Frank?'

'Aye.' Her face had lost its elfin-like charm.

'Hardly the same thing - he didn't get his face bashed in, for a start...'

'Maybe not, but he's still dead.' Her dark eyebrows knitted together and she peered into her mug as if searching for a clue. 'Bit of a coincidence don't you think?'

'What ye sayin, like?' I hoped I sounded more comically-offended than I felt.

She gave me a long, hard look. 'I'm like that Sherlock Holmes - I'm not fond of coincidences. In fact, I'd be willin to bet they don't exist.' She took her coffee through to the other room and stood in the doorway watching the guy in the paper suit, who appeared to be dipping cotton buds into Ronnie's face.

I wanted to ask how she knew about Frank - after all, heart attacks are hardly police business. I had the feeling I wasn't getting the full story and the old-school-pals bit wouldn't be enough to cut a deal.

Sipping my Alta Rica, I looked out of the kitchen window. A few of my neighbours had huddled together in the lane at the end of the gardens, a couple of golf umbrellas keeping them relatively dry. No doubt they'd be venting their spleens on the myriad reasons why half a dozen coppers were trawling through my dustbins, taping off my rear entrance and asking all the usual awkward questions.

Inspector Brown coughed. 'Got somewhere to stay, have ye?'

'Why would I need somewhere to stay?'

She jerked her head to the murder scene. 'They'll be hours yet.'

'That's alright.'

She sighed. 'No, what I'm sayin is, you need to go somewhere else. At least for tonight.' She held out a hand, palm up, wiggling her fingers. I noticed there was no wedding band.

'What?'

'Fuck's sake, Terry, I don't want to play with your bollocks. Give me your keys.'

I coughed and felt myself flush. 'Right.' Detaching the flat keys from the bunch, I handed them over.

'Better let me have your mobile number as well. And the address of where you'll be.'

I rooted around for a piece of paper, scribbled down the information, folded the sheet in half, then half again, aware of the slight tremor in my hand. Passing it over, I

ventured, 'Must've been quick with the autopsy?'

She inclined her head to one side.

I coughed again. 'I mean, with Frank.'

'Hasn't been done yet.'

'So how..?'

She glanced across the passage, then took a step towards me. 'Let's just say we've reason to be interested.'

I posed a couple more exploratory questions, but she wasn't budging, so I got permission to pick up a few things from the bedroom and stuffed them in the bag I'd packed earlier.

At the front of the house, a uniformed constable stood by the door. He gave me a nod as I passed and I was glad to see the rain was slowing up - unlike my neighbours, I didn't play golf.

Jessie's house was on the nicer side of town, where the accountants and wankmanagers lived, in the relative splendour of what the Americans like to call a 'gated community'.

Tudor Grange, with its spotless driveways and manicured hedges, wasn't what I'd call a des res, but the extra bedrooms meant houseguests were easier to accommodate than in the compact and bijou restrictions of Otterburn Terrace.

I parked the car around the side of the house, since Jessie didn't like her neighbours' visual experiences to be marred by the economic limitations of a bog-standard Japanese ex-taxi.

'You're late.'

My sister never said hello. Come to think of it, I couldn't remember a time when she'd said goodbye. This greeting, however, was a new one.

'Late for what?' I walked past her into the wide entrance hall.

'You were coming for lunch. Remember?' She stood, hands on hips, her mouth set in the almost permanent sneer that passed for smiling.

'Ah, sorry. Forgot.'

'I expect you've got a good excuse.' And she moved off into the kitchen, the space she always favoured in my company. I liked to think it was something to do with growing up in a small and claustrophobic mid-terrace in the Seventies, but it was more likely she just didn't want me contaminating her perfect lounge.

I dished up the potted version of recent events and to her credit, she managed to look suitably aghast.

'Christ, Terry man, what've ye got yerself into?'

I noticed she'd slipped out of her 'posh Geordie' voice and into the working class version she so deplored in others, but on this occasion I didn't bother pointing it out.

'I haven't got meself into anythin, Jess, it's just a misunderstandin.' I watched her spoon Italian beans into the grinder and pondered on the wisdom of pouring another jug of caffeine down my throat, but it was either that or alcohol and I wanted to keep a clear head.

She gave me the usual lecture on mixing with 'that load of tossers' at Ron's Taxis, then wanted to know why I hadn't found another job yet. It was a fair point - forty grand wouldn't last long and as I wasn't known for my ability to talk myself into

work, eventually I'd need to get back to the treadmill. Though not for a few weeks.

I changed the subject. 'Where's his lordship?'

She sniffed and pressed the button on the grinder, making conversation impossible. Watching the beans banging around in the hopper, I realised Jessie had a gadget for everything. I wouldn't be surprised if she found a replacement for David one of these days.

'He's at church.'

'Gone to repent his sins?' It was meant as a joke, but she didn't smile.

'He's supervisin work at St. Johns. They're puttin a new roof on and ripping the insides out.'

I wasn't a fan of David any more than he was a fan of mine, but he always made the effort to pretend he liked me - a talent I envied a little too much. We spent an hour or so watching a bit of unreality TV, then when David came home, Jess produced a spontaneous three-course meal.

We moved through to the dining room and I wondered if they always ate in there, sitting in silence, staring at each other from opposite ends of the table. The conversation was sporadic and I felt obliged to entertain, but the effort of relating my tale yet again got the better of me and I gave in to the lure of alcohol. To his credit, David did his best to make enthusiastic replies and relevant comments. After Jessie sloped off to bed, the two of us sat for a while in the living room listening to Mozart.

I was onto my second bottle of Pinot Grigio, so probably wasn't being terribly attentive. However, I did listen to David's woeful tales of building contracts and the difficulties of keeping things going through the winter months. Apart from the shit-load of money he made, it sounded like a difficult life and I was pleased I'd never taken up his offers of labouring work.

'You see, Terry, what ordinary mortals like yourself don't understand, is that the building game isn't about bricks and mortar any more.'

'It isn't?'

'No, it's about politics. Pure and simple. You should come down to the site some time - I'll show ye round.' He was pissed now and I felt my brain closing down as he chuntered on about his latest contract on the Farmway estate on the other side of town. I might have been interested if he'd refrained from quoting hourly rates and tax initiatives at me, but when he changed the subject and started on about how Jess wasn't doing her bit in the bedroom and he was having to look elsewhere for a decent shag, I thought it was time to go.

I drained the last of the Pinot and went to bed.

The next morning it took me a few seconds to remember where I was and several more to recall my reasons for being there. I checked my mobile: I'd missed three calls from an unknown number, though the necessity of relieving myself of a full bladder took precedence over listening to my voicemails.

It was a long walk to the toilet at the other end of the landing, but the room gave me a view of the front garden and, as it turned out, a hint of what was to come. I assumed the position and unfilled myself while peering through the unfrosted half of the bathroom window. I could see Jessie sweeping leaves into a pile. She was

talking to someone across the driveway. As my sister turned and headed back to the house, the newcomer came into view. It was Inspector Brown and she had a child with her. That'd be the missed calls, then.

I'd forgotten to bring a complete set of toiletries, so using one of Jessie's supply of spare toothbrushes, I brushed my teeth twice in a bid to vanquish the taste of excess alcohol from my breath. I looked at myself in the faux art deco mirror that sat on the wall above an art nouveau washbasin. The clash of artistic styles was testament to Jessie's abundance of money and unfortunate lack of taste. Nevertheless, the mirror worked fine and my face looked better than it felt, which was about as good as I was going to get. Back in the bedroom, I grabbed a few items from my bag, pushed it back under the bed and got dressed.

'The police are here.' Jessie was half way up the stairs and glaring at me like I'd dropped a clanger. Which I suppose I had, if you assumed a visit from the fuzz counted as bringing disrepute upon the neighbourhood. Oh, well.

The visitors had been ushered into the conservatory, presumably so the neighbours would think we were simply entertaining guests. I migrated towards the armchair in the corner - the only comfortable seat in the room.

Charis introduced me to her child: 'This is Detective Constable Paul Ramshaw.' The youngster nodded at me without making eye contact. His boss continued. 'We've a few more questions to ask you Mr Bell.' She gestured to the obligatory rattan sofa. 'Okay if we sit down?' I wondered if the formal approach was for my benefit or Constable Child's.

Jess hovered in the doorway miming, Shall I make coffee? I gave her a Yes please! sign and she scurried off.

'Right then,' said the inspector. 'How about you tell us exactly what you were doing the evening before last?' She took out a small black notebook. Her sidekick copied her actions. I wondered if they'd compare notes later.

'Friday, you mean?

'That would be the evening before last, yes.'

Going to be like that, then. I sniffed and made on I was thinking about it.

Charis raised an eyebrow, her pen at the ready.

'Well, normally I'd have been on the rank from about 4.00pm, but —'

'But you weren't?'

'No. I weren't.' She didn't smile. 'I was working on the car.'

'All night?'

I nodded. 'Til about nine o'clock, half-nine. Car needed a service, ye know, so...brakes, filters. That sort of thing.' I glanced at the child, then for good measure added, 'I had take the meter and radio out as well, and remove the plates.'

The teenage constable leant forwards. 'That's the taxi meter and the two-way radio you rented from Ron's Taxis in your service as a Hackney carriage driver?' He inclined his head and for a moment I thought he was going to smile winsomely.

'That's right.'

Inspector Brown glanced at her colleague and I sensed some pre-planned strategy. She looked at me. 'That's strange, because the hackney plates are quite clearly still on your car. So you didn't take them back to the taxi company, did you? In fact, as you'd resigned your position as a driver with the firm three weeks ago, you should

have returned all the equipment then.'

I swallowed hard. 'I should have, yes.'

'But you didn't.'

This was getting a little repetitive. 'No, I didn't. What's your point?'

'My point, Mr Bell, is that maybe you wanted a reason to visit Ronnie's Taxis yesterday morning?'

'I already had a reason - to tell Ken about Frank.' I glanced at the sidekick. He was scribbling away furiously on his pad, as if he couldn't fill the pages quick enough.

'Am I missing somethin here?'

'Why did you go to see Ronnie Thompson?'

'You know why - I've just told you. Anyway, Ronnie wasn't there.'

'So you knew Ronnie wasn't around?'

'How could I know Ronnie wasn't around? As you pointed out, I don't work for him anymore.'

She leaned back and let out a long sigh. 'You and Ronnie didn't get on.'

'Not so's you'd notice.'

'But you still went out of your way, knowing he might be there yesterday morning?'

There was a polite cough from the doorway and Jessie was hovering again, this time carrying a tray.

'That's very kind of you,' said the constable, taking it from her. He stood for a moment unsure what to do with it. Eventually he opted for lowering it to the ground then made a dick of himself trying to fill three cups from his crouched position.

Jess caught my eye and half-smiled in a rare example of familial concern. She left the door open and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Charis took her cup and leaned forward, balancing it between her knees. 'In the statement you gave to Constable Riley yesterday you said you'd gone to the taxi office on Saturday morning at the behest of Mrs Armstrong.'

I nodded and sipped my coffee. 'That's right. To tell them about Frank.'

'You said Mrs Armstrong called you.'

I nodded.

'And what time was that?'

Not having a naturally suspicious mind, I didn't see where this was going. 'I dunno. About seven-thirty, maybe.'

Charis glanced at her colleague again, and I saw that same look pass between them.

'So you went round to Rothesay Terrace and Mrs Armstrong let you in?'

'Yes. Well, no, not exactly. The door was open.'

The constable shuffled forward, sweat glistening on his brow. 'So you found the body?' The gleam in his eye told me what I'd been missing.

'No, Lizzy was there. She found him and called me.'

'Why would she call you, Mr Bell?'

'Have you asked her?'

'I have, and now I'm asking you.'

I took a breath and felt it catch in my throat as I struggled for an explanation.

'Well, she just...I mean, she wanted, you know, someone there...'

The youngster persisted. 'Someone there?'

'Yes. I mean, for God's sake, if someone close to you had just died, you wouldn't want to be on your own, would you?'

He leaned back as if his job was done.

'So you're saying Mrs Armstrong was already in the house when you arrived?' Charis's mouth went into a kink at one side, in a sort of pretend smile.

I dropped my head, like I was getting bored. 'Yes.'

The chair creaked as she sat back and I could feel her eyes burning into me. Then, 'Did you notice anything unusual when you entered the house?'

'You mean apart from the fact that Frank was lying dead on his dining room table?' I tried to remember my first impression of the room when I'd seen him laid out, but all I could think was that it looked exactly like it had every other time I'd been in the house, except for the body.

And then I remembered something, but as Charis hadn't mentioned it, I thought I'd keep it for later. Looking up, I saw from her expression that, as usual, I'd given too much away.

She craned her neck. 'Anything else?'

I shook my head and looked out the window, hoping she'd think I was searching the caverns of my mind for some elusive detail. 'No, nothing I can think of.'

'Right.' And she was on her feet, heading for the door. 'I'll most likely want to see you again,' she said over her shoulder.

The constable followed her, then stopped at the front door, turned and delved into his coat pocket. 'Here.' Throwing the keys across the hall, he waved a finger at me. 'Don't leave town.'

Jess appeared and stood in the doorway, no doubt making sure they were definitely leaving. I headed for the kitchen and opened the fridge.

'What was all that about?' Jess had her arms folded, which was never a good sign.

I grabbed a pack of bacon. 'Fucked if I know. Can I make a buttie?'

She made a huffing noise. 'How can ye not know - you're the one that's been sitting there talkin to them?' She snatched the bacon off me and switched on the George Foreman grill.

I shook my head. 'There's obviously summat they're not saying.'

'Like what?'

I stared at her. 'I don't know like what, cos they're not saying, are they?'

'Well, ye've got your keys back so you can bugger off home when ye've eaten this.'

'Thanks.'

Back at Otterburn Terrace, I was happy to see the police presence had disappeared, though another, unexpected individual had replaced him. Ken Thompson was sitting on my communal doorstep, elbows on knees, head in hands. He looked about as pleased to see me as Jessie had.

'Ken.'

He rubbed the back of one hand across his face. 'Terry.' As he squinted up at me, the hard line of his mouth told me he wasn't looking to catch up on old times.

I waited while he got to his feet, then opened the front door and waved him inside. Watching his size tens clomping up the stairs to my flat, I couldn't help

wonder if this was the first time he'd paid a visit.

Unsurprisingly, the cops hadn't bothered to clear up, so the broken coat stand still lay on the hall carpet. I threw my coat onto the bed and watched Ken stop at the end of the passage. He stood gazing down at the dark stain on the carpet that marked the spot where his son's head had been caved in.

'Through here, mate.' I took his arm and led him into the kitchen. He leaned against one of the units as if he needed the support.

'The cops don't think ye killed him.' His eyes avoided mine and he looked like he might cry.

'No, I didn't.' It was a little early in the day for alcohol, but I couldn't face making yet more coffee while struggling to conjure up small talk, so I reached into the fridge and handed him a beer.

Ken knocked back half the contents then balanced the can on his ample belly, leaving a wet patch on his shirt. He was wearing the same clothes as the day before and I wondered if he'd been to bed. Raising his eyes to my shoulder, he said, 'I dunno where else to go.'

Though I'd picked him up from his house several times over the previous year, I couldn't quite recall where he lived. I did a mental journey up from the office, through town and over the bridge, then left into one of the Council estates. Second or third on the right and there it was - Sebastopol Street. Nice house, shitty area. There was something else too, something I should have remembered.

'Can't go home,' he muttered. 'It was bad enough living in that house without Beryl, but now...'

Oh yes - the dead wife.

I struggled for supportive phrases, positive, reassuring, but all I could manage was, 'You can always stay here if you like?'

He looked right at me and I waited for the onslaught, the tirade of abuse at the mere thought that his emotions could stand to spend a night in the place where his son was murdered. I felt moderately relieved when he shook his head.

I waited, but he continued to stare at the floor, so ditching the positive and reassuring crap, I went for inoffensive. 'Expect Carol's got things in hand down the road, has she?'

He nodded. 'Aye.'

'Good thing she's there, eh? What with...one thing and another.'

He looked at me. 'Ronnie hated her, you know?'

'Did he?'

He didn't reply and gazed off into the distance. We stood there for ages, avoiding eye contact. The silence was agony and I wondered how long I could stand it without screaming out for conversation. Any normal person would've shut the fuck up, given him space to talk, the chance to get it off his chest etc. If he'd wanted to. And if he didn't, that same regular individual would've just 'been there' for him. But not me. After a couple of minutes, it was too much and I heard myself stammer, 'If there's...you know...anything I can do?'

And there it was - a simple meaningless phrase, a platitude, intended to do nothing more than imply, 'It's alright, mate, I'm here for you.' Not - definitely not - a phrase to be taken literally.

Ken's face brightened, or at least, took on the appearance of a slightly less recently-bereaved taxi driver. 'Well, now you mention it, we are two drivers down.'