

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Dark Times in the City

Gene Kerrigan

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About the Book

Danny Callaghan is just out of jail and enjoying a quiet drink in a Dublin pub when two men walk in with guns. On impulse, he intervenes to rescue the intended victim, petty criminal Walter Bennett, and finds himself dragged into Dublin's murky underworld. As the police grope for answers, and Danny struggles to protect those he loves, the rising tensions between the gangs threatens to erupt into a bloody showdown.

Dark Times in the City portrays a society on the edge, where affluence and cocaine fuel a ruthless gang culture, and a man's impulse to do good may cost him the lives of those who matter the most.

About the Author

After seven non-fiction books, veteran journalist Gene Kerrigan received critical acclaim in Ireland, the UK and the USA for his first two novels, *Little Criminals* and *The Midnight Choir*. He lives in Dublin.

ALSO BY GENE KERRIGAN

Novels

Little Criminals

The Midnight Choir

Non-fiction

Round Up the Usual Suspects (with Derek Dunne)

Nothing but the Truth

Goodbye to All That (with Derek Speirs)

Hard Cases

Another Country

This Great Little Nation (with Pat Brennan)

Never Make A Promise You Can't Break

In memory of
Bridget Kerrigan and Eileen Kerrigan
and Larry McDonagh
and Thomas Daly

GENE KERRIGAN

Dark Times in the City

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

*This is the dark time, my love.
It is the season of oppression, dark metal, and tears.
It is the festival of guns.*

– Martin Carter

The frightened man said, 'Please don't do it. He's just a kid.'

The thug said, 'This is the one I'll use.' He held up a small, blunt-nosed bullet, the hallway light reflected in the shiny brass shell.

'It wasn't his fault,' the frightened man said.

The thug was leaning forward, his face inches away. There was resentment in his voice.

'Hey, old man, I'm supposed to take the loss?'

'He hasn't got that kind of money.'

'You give it to him.'

'I haven't got that kind of money.'

'Everyone's got that kind of money. Sell something.'

'Look—'

'Not my problem.' The thug dropped the bullet into the breast pocket of his Hugo Boss jacket and began to turn away.

'Please.'

'Big boys' rules.'

'I'll sell what I can.'

'You do that.'

'But it's not—'

'He's got till the end of the week.'

From up here in the Dublin mountains, the lights of the city glowed like countless grains of luminous sand strewn carelessly in a shallow bowl. There were random patterns in the glitter - silvery lights bunched together, clusters of tall buildings, cranes topped by red hazard lights, curving

lines of orange street lights heading out into the suburbs or marking where the coast road held back the black sea. Above, the lights of airplanes moved along an invisible path towards the airport. The sky was clear, the moon almost full, the air as sharp as broken ice.

The two men, one turned sixty, the other in his early twenties, paused at the edge of thick woods and looked down on their city. A lot of lights, a lot of people. Half a million in the city itself, another half-million in the surrounding area. Every one of them wanting things, needing things. Some of what they wanted couldn't be bought legally – other stuff, they'd rather not pay retail prices. Many of them were wealthy and wealth is detachable. In that shallow, glittering bowl there were a million opportunities.

Some of the cranes were decorated with coloured lights, to celebrate the impending Christmas. It used to be that the chattering classes were never done boasting about how many cranes there were on the Dublin skyline. The cranes were badges of national pride, and they talked about them in the same respectful tones that the old folk used when they remembered the sacred patriot dead.

Not so much boasting these days.

'What do you think?' the younger man said. 'This the place to do it?'

The older man looked away from the city lights. He switched on his small flashlight and led the younger man a couple of dozen yards into the woods, to a small clearing. There he used a heel to probe the ground.

'Hard,' he said.

'Time of year.'

'Doesn't have to be deep.' He gestured around the clearing. 'When it's time, you'll be able find your way back to this place?'

'No bother.' The younger man buried his hands in his armpits. 'Jesus, it's cold up here.'

The older man tapped the ground with his foot. 'It'll have to do.' He grinned. 'Anyway,' he said, 'we won't be doing the digging.'

On the way back to the car, from somewhere down there in the city the older man listened to the wavering sound of a distant siren. Police, ambulance or fire brigade – someone was in trouble.

Part One

Impulse

Day One

Chapter 1

On that part of the street, at this hour of the evening, only the pub was still open for business. Near the middle of a row of shops, between the flower shop and the hairdressers, it offered the street a welcoming glow on a chilly winter's night. There were two entrance doors, one to the bar and one to the lounge. The windows were small, high on the wall and barred. The pub front had been recently painted off-white. The blue neon decoration high on the wall was a bog-standard outline of a parrot. The pub was called the Blue Parrot. It was owned and managed by a man named Novak.

This was a neighbourhood place and most of the younger set travelled into the city centre or favoured local pubs that featured entertainment. Novak didn't believe in pub quizzes, pub bands, comedy nights or DJs. He just sold drink and provided a venue for companionship.

On the other side of the street, it was all terraced houses with well-tended front gardens. They were of a standard municipal design that was duplicated throughout the Glencara estate and across similar council-built estates throughout Dublin - Finglas, Cabra West, Drimnagh, Crumlin, Ballyfermot. Small and narrow, most of the houses now bristled with extensions. Many had colourful cladding or fanciful embellishments - columns flanking the front door or tiled canopies overhanging the windows.

From the far end of the street a motorbike made its way towards the pub. Traffic was light here, far from the main routes through the estate, but the motorbike was taking its time, easing gently over the speed bumps installed to discourage joyriders.

The passenger was first to dismount at the pub. He took something from a saddlebag. At the entrance to the lounge he paused and gestured to the driver to hurry up.

When the man in the black motorcycle helmet came into the pub, Danny Callaghan slipped down from the bar stool and looked around for anything he might use as a weapon. His hand grasped the only possibility he saw within reach – his half-empty beer glass.

A few feet inside the entrance the assassin paused. The helmet hid most of his face, with just a gap behind which his eyes glanced from table to table. He had a revolver in his right hand, held casually down by his side. Behind him a second man in a matching motorcycle helmet came in, cradling a sawn-off double-barrelled shotgun. Both men wore dark blue boiler suits.

Most of the drinkers were seated at the tables and booths around the edges of the pub, half a dozen of them sitting or standing at the bar.

The first assassin spotted his target and began to move forward.

By now, most of those in the vicinity knew what was happening. The motorcycle helmet indoors, the armed minder watching the killer's back and the quick stride towards the intended victim – in recent years, a routine as recognisable as a Riverdance twirl.

The panic subsided in Danny Callaghan's chest.

Not me.

He relaxed his grip on the beer glass and put his hand in his pocket, to try to stop it shaking. The assassin was

walking towards an alcove over by the large fireplace, where three men were now white-faced and standing up.

The man in the middle – small, middle-aged, grey-haired – was named Walter Bennett. Where his companions' expressions were a mixture of fear and bewilderment, Walter's pinched face was all dread.

Danny Callaghan felt the Swiss Army knife in his pocket. It had a small pliers, with a screwdriver, a bottle opener and a two-inch knife blade. A hopeless weapon, but he held onto it anyway. He used a fingernail to pick at the knife blade.

Just in case.

Less than ten seconds had passed, and by now even the dimmest customer in the Blue Parrot knew the score.

The noise from the fifth-rate soccer game on the sports channel continued, but much of the pub chatter had been replaced by the coarse sounds of startled men releasing gasps and swear words.

Several just turned their faces away, crouched or ducked. Some stared open-mouthed, not wanting to miss a thing.

'Ah, come on, fuck off.'

Novak, the pub owner, was behind the counter, sucking in his gut, holding up an open-fingered hand towards the first gunman. The man, almost at the alcove now, ignored him.

From across the pub floor, Walter made eye contact with Callaghan.

'Help me, Danny!'

Four feet from his victim the gunman raised his arm, aimed the revolver at Walter's forehead, paused a second, then squeezed the trigger.

It didn't even make a clicking noise.

Nothing.

No sound, no recoil, no wisp of gases. Just a gun not working.

The gunman ducked when Novak threw a bottle of gin. And Walter moved, one foot stepping up and backwards onto the seat behind him, his other foot up and forward onto the table, the table lurching, drinks falling over. He hit the floor running.

The gunman turned, crouched, arm extended, revolver pointing at the moving figure. A clamour of shouts and screams from the customers was followed by the loud, flat sound of the gun going off.

Walter, unhurt, was coming Callaghan's way.

'Help me, Danny!'

One hand clutching at the lapels of Callaghan's jacket, Walter paused a moment and then he was past, head twisting from side to side as he sought a way out.

'Danny!'

The fuck does he think I can do?

Callaghan released his grip on the Swiss Army knife and took his hand out of his pocket.

Walter turned towards the toilets, but even in his panic he knew they offered only an enclosed place to die. No time to get across the counter, through the archway and out into the bar. He turned to the approaching gunman, then twisted and crouched sideways, as though he could shrink his body beyond harm's way.

Grunting a warning as he passed Callaghan, the gunman pointed his revolver at Walter and Callaghan hit him square across the back with the bar stool. The gunman went down, landing heavily on his side. As the gun flew from his hand, Callaghan dropped, one knee pinning the gunman to the floor.

Walter ran forward and kicked the gunman hard, connecting with his ribs. He bent and snatched the gun, a small grey pistol, and before he could do anything with it Callaghan's left hand gripped both Walter's hand and the revolver itself. With his other hand he unpeeled Walter's fingers from the gun and looked around.

There wasn't a customer above table level.

Novak was out from behind the counter, standing with his back to Callaghan, one hand held up, palm towards the gunman at the front door, the other hand holding a hammer. The gunman waved the shotgun and shifted from one foot to the other.

'Anybody hurt?' Novak shouted.

Silence.

Then the man with the shotgun let out a hoarse roar. 'Let him go!'

Novak lowered the hammer, his voice unnaturally calm. 'It's over, okay, just take it easy.'

Callaghan bent down, bunched the prone gunman's boiler suit under his chin and pulled him up. The gunman was heavy, but Callaghan took him easily. He heard a satisfying gasp as he twisted the man's arm up behind his back, a squeal as he pushed him past the bend in the bar and around towards the front door. The gunman's movements were awkward, his vision limited by the helmet.

Novak's voice was strained. 'Take it easy, no harm done.'

Holding the gunman in front of him, Callaghan moved alongside Novak. The one with the shotgun was a dozen feet away. Callaghan said, 'Don't be stupid, okay? You piss off, and we let him go.'

The one with the shotgun hesitated. Callaghan pointed the pistol at him and said, 'Leave that and go.'

The would-be killer put the shotgun down on the floor and backed away, pushing the door open. He called back, 'Come on, Karl, come *on*!' Then he was gone.

Callaghan reached around and pulled the helmet off the gunman. Karl was about twenty, bulky little guy with hair cut tight to his skull and the shadow of a moustache above his quivering lip. Callaghan's hold on his arm was solid, but he could feel the strength there.

'Toddle along, Karl - you come back here, you'll get your pimply arse kicked.'

Callaghan jerked the gunman forward, leaned him against the front door and pushed. Outside, the second gunman was astride the motorbike, the exhaust already belching. His partner jumped onto the pillion and the harsh revving noise the motorbike made as it carried them away was maybe meant to be aggressive but it came off like a petulant bark.

Novak was standing beside Callaghan, watching the motorbike accelerate towards the far end of the street. 'Jesus, Danny', he said.

Callaghan nodded. 'Jesus.'

In the distance, the motorbike passed through an orange beam from a street light, then jumped and wobbled as the driver forgot to slow for a speed bump. The tyres screeched as the motorbike turned sharply into a side street. In seconds even the noise of the engine had disappeared.

Novak was breathing as though he'd done a couple of laps around the block. 'This bloody city.'

Callaghan said, 'Recognise anyone?'

Novak shook his head. 'Someone'll tell the cops - I'll have to call it in.' He raised an eyebrow. 'Were you in tonight?'

Callaghan just looked at him.

Novak said, 'You better go, so.' He nodded towards the shotgun down by his side. 'What should I do with this?'

'Raffle it.'

Holding the revolver with the hem of his brown suede jacket, Callaghan used the front of his black T-shirt to wipe it. He offered it to Novak. 'Raffle this too.'

Novak said, 'This is going to screw the place up for a couple of days, with the coppers making a fuss.'

Walter Bennett came out of the pub in a hurry, brushed past Novak, and began the jerky stop-and-start lope of a man unused to such exercise.

Novak and Callaghan watched him go. Novak snorted and said, 'You're welcome, Walter.'

Chapter 2

In the ten minutes it took Danny Callaghan to walk to his apartment he sought to keep thought at bay by repeatedly cursing his own stupidity.

Fucking idiot.

That's how it happens - one moment—

He cursed himself again and realised he'd said it aloud.

'Fucking idiot.'

There was no one to hear him. The air was cold enough to show his breath and the street was deserted. Callaghan was tall, with the build of someone capable of making a living with his hands. He had an unfinished look about him. His hairstyle was an old-fashioned short-back-and-sides that might have been done by a third-rate barber in a hurry. The peppered grey of his hair aged him beyond his 32 years.

The roar of a boy racer announced the arrival of a young man in his early twenties, in a light blue Ford Fiesta. The car came to a too-abrupt stop at the T-junction just ahead. Windows darkened, decorative blue lights reflected from the road underneath the chassis, the entire body of the car seemed to throb with the hip-hop beat of the pulsing music. The night was cold but the driver's window was rolled all the way down. Nothing to do with ventilation, all about youth and image and the insistence that everyone should listen to his chosen music. Callaghan remembered the feeling.

The kid might well be on his way home from a job that paid under the minimum wage, in some kip where the manager didn't bother to ask his surname. In his head, though, he was motoring through the 'hood on his way to score a couple of keys of blow, ready to get down and dirty with a bitch or two and waste any muthafucka that got in the way. The kid gunned the engine, leaning forward as he glanced to his left, then turned right and kicked off, the

screech of the tyres almost as loud as the scream of the engine.

The first time Callaghan had got that buzz he was fifteen, and behind the wheel of a stolen Lexus. Fifteen and immortal, fifteen and in no doubt he was a natural-born driver who could fishtail his way out of the tightest corner. And so it was, until two years later, lost in the wagon-wheel layout of Marino, with a squad car somewhere behind, he cut a corner too close and ended up clipping a lamp-post. When the ambulance crew took him out of the wreck he was smiling, his head still full of that buzz.

Callaghan felt a shiver now, remembering. There was no cure except time for that mixture of testosterone, arrogance, courage and stupidity.

He walked through a narrow passageway and out into a wide and overgrown area of green stretching across a dozen acres. With a bit of work it might make a nice little park, but that wasn't in anyone's budget, so it wouldn't get done. The landscape was uneven, full of hillocks and hollows. The tarred surface of the pathway that cut through it was encrusted here and there with sprinklings of broken glass.

Who'd want to kill Walter Bennett?

One man with a gun could be a personal grudge. Two – main man and backup – that had the smell of a drugs gang solving a problem.

Hard to believe, though, that Walter Bennett had graduated to that level of action. They'd met in prison during the final year of Callaghan's sentence, when Walter came in to do five months for breaking and entering a car showroom. Since Callaghan got out, they'd bumped into each other a couple of times, had a drink once. Walter's life had been repeatedly interrupted by prison terms, leaving his ageing face with the perpetually resentful look of a loser. Callaghan couldn't imagine how such a small-timer

fitted into the quarrels of young men with serious weapons, and he didn't care.

Fucking idiot.

Whatever he'd got himself into, Walter couldn't help being a fool, but Callaghan ought to have known better. If heavies with guns wanted Walter dead, for whatever reason, he was going to die. Interfering in that kind of squabble was pointless.

That was the logic of it, but logic didn't allow for impulse. It was impulse that made Novak get involved, defending his pub and one of his customers. It was impulse, fuelled by his friendship with Novak, that drew in Callaghan.

Near the centre of the green there was a mound covered with bushes, behind which stood some kind of municipal storage shed. As Callaghan approached, three teenagers, wearing the hoodies of their tribe, emerged from the bushes. One of them saw Callaghan and gave him a nod, which Callaghan returned. The kid – his name was Oliver – shared a flat with his grandfather two floors above the apartment that Callaghan rented. They'd met on the first floor landing, on the day Callaghan moved in. Shuffling up the stairs with a suitcase in each hand, Callaghan had cursed as an uncooperative travel bag slipped from one shoulder. It wasn't the kind of area where you could leave a case on the street for a couple of minutes while you carried the rest up. Oliver, coming down the stairs, paused, then nodded and reached for one of the suitcases. 'Fucking lift,' he said, 'it goes dead every second week. And it takes them a couple of days to get it going.'

He carried the suitcase up to Callaghan's floor. He said he lived two floors up, then he nodded at Callaghan's thanks and set off down the stairs, whistling. He didn't seem to have regular work and spent a lot of time hanging around the area. Danny saw him a couple of times in Novak's pub. The kid was right about the lift.

Oliver was one of a group of local kids who regularly used the bushes in the centre of the green to store their booze, bought earlier in the day from a supermarket. The bushes were visible from the apartment block and apparently no one had ever been stupid enough to risk stealing the drink. Later in the evening, the kids would come back and cluster in some hollow with their bottles of cider and cans of beer and build a fire to keep warm while they drank.

In his apartment, Callaghan poured himself a Scotch. The five-floor apartment block was known to its tenants as the Hive. There were bars on the windows of all the ground-level flats. Callaghan's third-floor bedroom was just about big enough for a bed and storage for his clothes. It was slightly smaller than the space that served as combined living room, dining room and kitchen.

Having sipped at the whisky for a while, Callaghan decided he wasn't enjoying it. He poured what was left in the glass down the sink.

Fucking idiot.

He'd switched on the boiler but it would be a long time before the radiators had an effect on the icy air. He put his hands in his jacket pockets and hunched his shoulders against the cold. Finding the Swiss Army knife in his pocket he took it out and opened the blade. He used it almost daily for one chore or another, but in a fight it might as well be a toy.

What kind of fool goes up against a handgun and a shotgun with no weapon to hand except a bar stool?

Dumb.

Maybe it was a mistake coming home so early. He didn't want to be with anyone, but the apartment had few distractions and he could feel the thoughts he'd so far kept at bay, fluttering around his mind, making only occasionally painful raids but aware of their power to dominate.

One moment you're alive. The next - and Callaghan knew the arctic chill that seized his scalp had nothing to do with the temperature of the apartment.

The policeman knew Novak was lying and Novak didn't care.

'No way you don't know him.'

'I'd tell you if I knew.'

'According to two of your customers, the intended victim is a regular. Name of Walter something.'

'No, sorry, doesn't ring a bell.'

The few customers still there when the police arrived had already been interviewed. After the police questioned the two bar staff and allowed them to take off, Novak cashed up and put the money in the safe.

The policeman said, 'Shut that thing off.'

On the television screen high on the wall, a bald man with a lined face was leaning forward, his eyebrows agitated. One hand hammered into his other palm to emphasise every third or fourth word as he warned that too drastic an approach to tackling global warming would have adverse effects on competitiveness. Novak told the policeman, 'I like to keep up with what's happening.'

There were three other policemen in the pub, two of them examining the bullet hole in the wooden panel on the back wall. The third had bagged the shotgun and the pistol and was now sitting at a table, phone to his ear, having an animated conversation with his wife.

Novak said, 'How long is this going to take?'

'That depends.'

This policeman had introduced himself as Sergeant Wyndham. A big man, taller than Novak, big as Callaghan. Where Callaghan was lean, though, the sergeant's 36-inch belt strained to hold an overhanging 40-inch belly. The

page of the notebook he'd opened when he approached Novak was still blank.

'It's a neighbourhood pub. This Walter guy drinks here two or three times a week and you don't know him?'

'Like I say, first I heard of his name was when you mentioned it.'

It didn't really matter. Once they had Walter's name they'd find him. They'd get Danny Callaghan's name and find him, too. But Novak had principles about this kind of thing. A man in his position, if he started talking to the bluebottles they'd keep coming back. Soon they'd start thinking of him as a source of tips about the less socially committed of his customers. And every time some local put a dent in the law the police would call around and Novak would get the kind of reputation that wasn't good for his kneecaps.

'The man who stepped in, the one who prevented the killing - I'm told you and he were talking, before this thing happened?'

'I'm friendly with all my customers. That guy - I never got around to asking his name.'

Novak's tone was flat, his jowly face expressionless, the greying stubble a contrast to the shaven head. His face made no attempt to corroborate his lies.

'And the gunmen - recognise anyone, hear any names?'

One of the pub customers, under questioning, had said that one of the gunmen had used the other's name, but he'd told the police it had all happened so quickly that he didn't register it.

Novak said, 'I was kind of busy, trying to keep everyone calm.'

'The guns.' The policeman pointed to the shotgun and the pistol, on the counter in separate evidence bags. 'I suppose you got your fingerprints all over them? Anyone else touch them?'

'It got a bit hectic. I wasn't taking notes.'

‘Only stupid people make an enemy of the police.’

Novak stood up straight and looked the policeman in the eye. ‘I’m just about to make a fresh pot of coffee. You and your mates, would you like to join me?’

Wyndham said nothing for a moment, like he very much wanted to remain aggressive. Then he sighed and said, ‘Why not?’

Chapter 3

The way the receptionist at the shabby little hotel smiled, Karl Prowse knew she wanted him. She was in her late thirties, almost twenty years older than Karl, but he felt the hunger surge. It wasn’t the dyed blonde hair or the tight purple dress, it was the frank look-over she gave him, like she was mentally assessing how his weight would feel against her braced thighs. He savoured the thought while the receptionist nodded to the whore by Karl’s side. The whore had an account with the hotel and the cost of the room was included in the price she’d quoted Karl. As they went up the stairs, arms linked, Karl looked back. The receptionist had returned to her magazine.

Karl remembered something from a television movie, about how a brush with death stokes the sex drive. He understood that. Once the fear and the tension goes, the juices all flow back and you need to connect with life and that means you need to fuck something. He could still feel the adrenalin.

Back in that shitty pub, when the job went sour, there was just one moment when Karl Prowse felt fear. The rest of the time, he was on top of things. Even after that fool butted in, even when Karl felt something hard smash into his back and he went down, the gun jolting from his hand, he was in control. His confidence assured him that within seconds he would hit the floor, roll over and come up, the gun in his hand again. Even when the interfering bastard

came down heavily, his knee pinning Karl to the floor, that was something he could deal with. His mind was instantly assessing weights and angles and forces, his muscles tensing – then, from the corner of his eye he saw a hand reach down and take the gun and he felt something lurch inside his body. It was Walter, the piece of crap that he'd gone there to flush, it was his fingers taking control of the gun. Karl knew there was nothing he could do in those next few seconds that could stop that gun punching a hole in his head. And for those seconds, even as his body heaved against the weight of the bastard who butted in, he accepted that he was about to die and it drained his mind of thought. Then he saw the interfering bastard's hand take the gun away from Walter, easily pulling the weapon from his fingers, and his fear gave way to rage.

Where the fuck are you?

By now, Robbie's shotgun should have sorted this out. The interfering bastard should be jam on the floor. And Walter – soon as Walter reached for the gun, his blood should have been decorating the walls.

Where the fuck?

Pulling Karl to his feet, the interfering bastard jerking his arm up behind his back. Unsteady on his feet, the pain didn't matter – the humiliation fuelled Karl's rage.

'Let him go!'

Robbie, goddamn retard, holding the shotgun like he was afraid it was going to explode in his hands.

'It's over, okay, just take it easy!'

Guy from behind the bar, he was trying to make it all go away.

Fucked up. It's done. Over.

For now.

Then the one who was holding Karl, the interfering bastard, was telling Robbie not to be stupid and the interfering bastard took Karl's helmet off and he was pushing him towards the door and the whole thing was

almost finished, and Robbie the retard went so far down the stupidity scale they didn't have a number for it.

'Come on, Karl, come *on*!'

No names.

First principles in a job like this - no matter what happens you don't use names.

Stupid bastard.

Karl was pounding the whore, her face pushed hard into the pillow, his fingers gripping her hips, his thrusts making the bed shake. She made gasping, moaning noises, as though she was contractually obligated, and after a while Karl remembered he'd had her before. He closed his eyes. He was thinking of the receptionist.

When they'd got clear of this evening's operation, Karl didn't say anything to Robbie about the fuck-up. No point.

'Karl, I'm sorry—'

Robbie Nugent was a good kid - they'd known each other since primary school, and it was Karl who'd recommended him to Lar Mackendrick. Maybe a mistake. This was Karl's big chance - maybe, when Lar Mackendrick asked if he knew another guy who could handle himself, maybe he should have nominated someone harder. But Robbie was a pal - a goddamn retard, but a pal.

Karl swore at the whore, told her to shut up, then he bent forward and made small grunting noises as he came, his lips pressed against her back, her scent filling his lungs.

Once they'd got away from the pub, and Karl had changed clothes at a safe apartment and told Robbie to stay there, he'd taken a taxi the couple of miles into the city centre. There, in a pub dominated by grey and chrome surfaces, with a huge neon flower decorating the wall behind the bar, he found a phone.

'It didn't happen.'

'Why?'

'A civilian stepped in, threw his weight about.'

'And?'

'We cut our losses. The way it went, it was the right thing to do.'

'And?'

Karl felt his face flush. Something in his voice had told Lar Mackendrick there was more. Screwing up a job was bad enough. Leaving behind the revolver and the shotgun – *Jesus*. Karl hated the timidity in his voice but he couldn't do anything about it. 'We lost the tools.'

Silence from Lar.

Karl said, 'I'll explain when we meet.'

Lar said nothing, just clicked off.

Now, in the shabby little hotel, Karl found his jeans on the floor and paid the whore, then told her to fuck off. After dozing for an hour or so he felt hungry, so he got up and got dressed and went downstairs. There was a buck-toothed young Chinky boy behind the counter in reception. Karl found a pub, had a beer and a sandwich and when he was done he went home.

*

Sergeant Wyndham could hear laughter in the background. It sounded like there was a dinner party at the Chief Superintendent's home. The Chief Super said, 'You don't think it's connected, then?'

Four gang members dead in less than two weeks, all public executions. Tit gets his head punctured, so Tat gets his balls blown off. None of the murders happened in the Glencara area. If this thing at Novak's pub was connected, it could mean the feud was spreading out from the inner city.

'Doesn't look like it. We have a first name – Walter – we'll trace him. Middle-aged man, local, doesn't sound like any kind of a major player.'

'Personal, then?'

‘We’ll probably find out he groped someone’s kid, or maybe he took someone’s parking space.’

The Chief Super sounded relieved. ‘Maybe it’s over, then. Two dead on each side. Could be they’re getting war-weary.’

‘Could be.’

‘You don’t think so?’

‘Hope for the best, expect the worst.’

‘Say a prayer.’

When Danny Callaghan slipped between the cold sheets and lay down he smelled his own sweat from the pillow. He hadn’t taken anything to the launderette for a couple of weeks. He hadn’t had a woman back here for over a month. It took a moment to cast the pillow aside and find a spare blanket to roll up to serve as a pillow.

That’s how it happens – one moment—

When he decided the thoughts were too strong to suppress, he turned on his back and stared at the ceiling.

One slip.

Maybe, instead of taking him down, the bar stool glances off the gunman’s shoulder and the guy – Karl – he stays on his feet, holds onto the gun and Callaghan takes a bullet in the chest, then one in the head as he lies on the floor of Novak’s pub.

Or the gunman’s minder wasn’t so sluggish, he moves in quickly, pulls the trigger when the shotgun is a foot from Callaghan’s head.

All over.

And since Callaghan is 32, that’s maybe fifty years of life flushed down the pan in an instant.

Fucking idiot.

It should be a big thing, dying. It should come with some warning, a little time to take a breath, to recognise the