

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Past Mortem

Ben Elton

About the Book

With old friends like these, who needs enemies?

It's a question mild mannered detective Edward Newson is forced to ask himself when, in romantic desperation, he logs on to the Friends Reunited website in search of the girlfriends of his youth. Newson is not the only member of the Class of '88 who has been raking over the ashes of the past. As his old class begins to reassemble in cyberspace, the years slip away and old feuds and passions burn hot once more.

Meanwhile, back in the present, Newson's life is no less complicated. He is secretly in love with Natasha, his lovely but very attached sergeant, and failing comprehensively to solve a series of baffling and peculiarly gruesome murders. A school reunion is planned and as history begins to repeat itself, the past crashes headlong into the present. Neither will ever be the same again.

In *Past Mortem*, Ben Elton - previous winner of The Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger Award for *Popcorn* - delivers both a heart-stopping thriller and a killer comic romance.

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About the Author
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PAST MORTEM

Ben Elton

For my wife and children

1

THE VICTIM DIED as he had lived.

Cruelly.

Except more so.

Seldom in the investigating team's experience had a murder scene howled horror in the manner that this one did. A brute had been slaughtered and the ugliest moment in an ugly life had undoubtedly been its passing.

'Good riddance,' they muttered up and down his street. 'Dying's too good for the bastard.'

The dead man's name was Adam Bishop and before an unknown hand had stripped him naked, taped him to his bed and inflicted upon him the many hundred skewered wounds from which his life had flowed, he had been a fifty-five-year-old builder, a self-made, wealthy man, married with six children, all of whom, like most people, were terrified of him.

It was perhaps the size of the man that made the tableau of his death so peculiarly ugly. The vastness of his surface area had allowed for so many, many punctures. And then there was his face, apparently untouched by the killer's instrument of torture, mean and bloated, cruel even in death. His neck was as wide as his head, and beneath each ear was a tattoo, 'Millwall FC' on one side and a crossed dagger motif on the other. Adam Bishop had the appearance of a man the wary might cross the street to

avoid. His had been an eye that sensible people endeavoured never to meet.

Now his eyes were closed, glued shut by a bloodied yellow crust, which had matted the upper and lower lashes together. Later, on a mortician's slab, when those lids were prised open, it would be discovered that the killer had used his skewer repeatedly on the victim's eyeballs. The last thing that Adam Bishop had seen on earth was the face of his tormentor in the process of blinding him.

'What goes around comes around,' people assured one another over celebratory drinks in the local pubs. 'As ye sow, so shall ye reap.'

Detective Inspector Edward Newson held a handkerchief to his nose and struggled to contain the nausea he felt welling up in his stomach. He must not be sick. He knew that. Puking on vital forensic evidence would not only hinder his investigation, it would inevitably lead to taunting from his colleagues. Newson was aware that he was already something of a figure of fun amongst the rougher element at Scotland Yard, and he dreaded provoking them further. Besides which, Detective Sergeant Wilkie was also present at the murder scene. Detective Sergeant Wilkie was a very attractive woman, or so Inspector Newson thought, and although he harboured no false hope that she could ever be his, he still did not wish to vomit in her company.

Natasha Wilkie had a new hairstyle that day, a short blonded bob which shone prettily beneath a rather rakish trilby hat. Newson thought it looked very nice and said so. Sergeant Wilkie replied that she thought the whole thing made her look like a boy, which was a ridiculous notion. Natasha Wilkie was not a girl who was ever going to look like a boy, no matter what hat she was wearing or how short her hair was.

Inspector Newson had been the last member of the investigation team to arrive at the murder scene, a large

detached house in Willesden. The traffic had been slow and there had been a kerfuffle at the front door when he'd been required to show his warrant card in order to gain access. This was not an uncommon experience for Inspector Newson. He did not look like a policeman, or at least what people think a policeman ought to look like. Particularly one who'd achieved such seniority at a comparatively young age. He was thirty-four years old and already a detective inspector, but at five feet four Newson was not just short for a copper - he was short for anyone. He was also pale and freckly. A ginger, in fact, but not ginger in a fierce Celtic-type manner, more ginger in a 'look at that ginger shortarse' sort of way.

Newson had kind eyes, and he always tried to smile when greeting people. He had been smiling when the constable standing guard at the front of the house had curtly asked him where the hell he thought he was going. When the constable realized his mistake he was embarrassed and apologized, but, as he explained, he'd been told to await the arrival of an important officer, and had not expected a man like Inspector Newson.

No one ever did expect a man like Inspector Newson.

When Newson finally gained access to the murder room he was pleased to see that the forensic pathologist in attendance was Alice Clarke, a woman with whom he was well acquainted. Newson always found it easier working with people he knew, people who had had time to get over the fact that they were taking their instructions from a mild-mannered ginger shorty. Besides which, Dr Clarke was attractive in a starchy, efficient sort of way, and the greatest pleasure in Newson's life (and of course the greatest pain) was attractive women.

'Hello, Inspector Newson,' said Dr Clarke. 'I was hoping they'd send you.'

'And vice versa, Dr Clarke, vice versa,' Newson replied. He peered at the purple and black cadaver.

'Nasty,' he said. 'When d'you think he died?'

'Between six and nine hours ago, I'd say. Early to mid morning,' Dr Clarke replied from behind the digital camera, with which she was recording every angle of the position of the corpse. 'As I think I've explained to you before, and contrary to popular myth, it's rarely possible to pinpoint an exact time of death.'

'We've already photographed the scene, Dr Clarke,' Sergeant Wilkie pointed out.

'I'm sure you have, Sergeant,' the doctor replied, 'but like most people these days I find it difficult to entirely trust the police. The mistakes made and the things overlooked, really it's quite astonishing. Sometimes I think there should be a judicial inquiry.'

'Ah, but who could be trusted to collect the evidence?' Newson asked.

'Good point, Inspector. A foreign force, I think. The Germans are good. Anyway, Sergeant, I prefer to collect my own reference materials so I know I've got what I want and can get it when I want it.'

'No need for me to be here at all, then,' Sergeant Wilkie said shortly.

'Certainly not on my account,' Dr Clarke replied.

Newson suspected that a small clash of authority must have occurred between his two colleagues before his arrival on the scene. He decided to ignore it and concentrated on the bloody mound that lay before him.

'His watch stopped at two a.m.'

The chunky imitation Rolex Oyster was still fastened to the dead man's wrist.

'Yes, I noticed that, and I imagine he was still alive when it did,' the doctor replied. 'If that's the cheap copy I think it is then it won't be waterproof. Mr Bishop probably bled into it and it stopped. Dead bodies don't bleed much because the heart isn't pushing the blood around, so he was almost certainly still alive when the watch stopped.'

'This man bled a lot.'

'Yes, he certainly did.'

The mattress on which the corpse lay had been sodden and had now dried almost completely into one enormous posture-sprung scab.

'Strange to lose so much blood from such small wounds,' Newson observed. 'I mean, I know there's a lot of them, but still ...'

'Yes, I thought that. There seems to have been very little coagulation.'

'Perhaps he was a haemophiliac,' Sergeant Wilkie suggested.

The doctor pointed to a small shaving nick on the dead man's chin. 'That cut was healing perfectly normally. He wasn't a haemophiliac.'

'Just a thought,' said Natasha.

'But not a relevant one.'

'Whatever,' Sergeant Wilkie replied.

Newson wished that Dr Clarke would not be so snooty with Natasha. Natasha was a perfectly pleasant girl. In fact, as far as he was concerned, she was pleasantly perfect.

'Let me get this straight, Doctor,' said Newson. 'You're saying that the shaving nick healed but the stab wounds didn't?'

'At first glance it looks that way. It's almost as if the killer used some form of anticoagulant.'

'Ouch.' Newson grimaced. 'You mean he deliberately kept the wounds open?'

'I think it's possible. It's certainly what the evidence seems to suggest.'

'Deliberately bleeding this man to death?'

'Yes, over a considerable number of hours.'

'And Bishop would have been alive all the time that the blood flowed?'

'He would have to have been alive for the blood to flow.'

Newson removed the handkerchief from his nose and sniffed the air. He had thought when he entered the room that he'd smelled an extra element to the usual nauseating stink of death. At the foot of the bed a wastepaper basket had been upturned and its contents had spilt out underneath the bed. Newson lifted the bloody coverlet with a pencil. Scattered on the carpet were half a dozen bottles, which had contained what used to be known as smelling salts.

'So our killer quite deliberately kept his victim awake while he killed him?'

'Yes. Adam Bishop was forced to remain conscious as he was bled to death.'

2

DR CLARKE DELIVERED her autopsy report at the case conference the following afternoon. She had probed the wounds, fossicked in the contents of the stomach, sliced the heart, measured the weight of the brain and scraped under the toenails, and now presented charts, graphs, photographs, and a plethora of clinically detached and carefully collated evidence that recorded body temperature, encroaching hypostasis, the processes of rigor mortis and liver mortis, marbling, liquefaction and putrefaction.

'The ophthalmic wounds are pretty unusual,' the doctor observed. 'I don't think there's ever been significant work done on how the globe of the eye reacts to repeated puncturing.'

'What's that?' Newson asked, referring to a photographic printout of the victim's mouth, from which a long orange ribbon of some kind had been carefully teased.

'Toilet paper.'

'I thought it was.'

'The killer stuffed it in his mouth.'

'Nice,' said Sergeant Wilkie.

'But the really fascinating development is that I was right about the killer keeping the wounds open. He used a compound commonly found in snake venom.'

'Snake venom. You're joking.'

'I don't joke about murder, Inspector.'

'But why snake venom?' Newson asked.

'Not actual snake's venom, a compound derived from it. Snake venom contains an ingredient that prevents the blood of its prey from clotting, thus making the wound it delivers more lethal. We know that he wasn't a haemophiliac from the evidence of his shaving cut. I was looking for an anticoagulant and I found one. Our suspect dipped his spike in it before insertion.'

'So he or she wanted Bishop to bleed to death?'

'Well, yes, but if that was all he wanted he could have taken a penknife and opened an artery. It seems to me that the killer wanted Bishop to die from damage inflicted by a *particular* spike, but he knew enough about killing to recognize that that weapon in itself would probably be insufficient for the purpose.'

'Really? You can't kill someone with a short spike?'

'You could, but it'd be difficult and you certainly couldn't do it in the way our suspect chose. I think he wanted Bishop to die slowly from as many cuts as possible and so deliberately avoided running the risk of delivering a knockout blow. Look ...' Dr Clarke clicked on her computer and a diagram of the corpse appeared with coloured and shaded areas marking the intensity of the damage. 'For all the massed density of the wounds, the suspect clearly stabbed much more carefully around the main arteries than he did in the less sensitive areas of muscle and fat. What's more, he didn't puncture the heart or the brain and when he attacked the eyes he was careful to go in only an inch or so. He wanted to kill the man, but he wanted to do it slowly, on his terms and in his time.'

'And Bishop wouldn't have died from these wounds without the use of an anticoagulant?'

'Probably not, but I can't be sure. He *might* have bled to death, or the shock might have done it, I suppose, and also with so fat a man there would have been copious wound seepage. There are many other fluids in the body besides

blood, and some are specifically produced during trauma. It's possible that Bishop might eventually have *oozed* to death, but it's not a given. That's why our killer needed the anticoagulant.'

'And this weapon, which was clearly so special to the perpetrator, what do we know about it?' asked Newson.

'I can't give you a factory and a serial number, I'm afraid. The wounds don't correspond with any stabbings I know. All I can say is it was a short, thin skewer exactly five centimetres long, mounted in a metal handle of some sort, the shoulders of which were approximately four millimetres across.'

'How do you know that?' Sergeant Wilkie enquired.

'Because I have eyes and I use them, Sergeant. The killer rarely pushed his spike all the way into Mr Bishop, but when he did and where the punctures are less densely clustered, it's possible to gain an impression of the hilt of the weapon from the bruising it caused around the wound.'

'Only asking,' Sergeant Wilkie said.

'The only other thing I can tell you is that I don't think this skewer was very sharp. The killer took great care to separate his thrusts but it can't have been easy using the weapon he chose. The edges of each tiny hole are slightly frayed. He had to punch it through the skin.'

'He used a blunt spike.'

'Yes, he did.'

'He didn't make life easy for himself, did he?'

'Certainly, given that this killing was clearly premeditated, the murderer could have chosen a more obviously lethal weapon. No doubt he had his reasons.'

'Or she,' Sergeant Wilkie added.

'Yes, that's true. These wounds could easily have been inflicted by a woman,' the doctor conceded.

'And this person,' Newson asked. 'What do the wounds he inflicted tell us about him or her? Anything?'

'Well, he's a thorough sort of a person, isn't he? Patient and painstaking. Those pricks were not made by somebody who was either careless or in a hurry. He's a cool customer, too. He was in that house for many hours. He must have known he could have been disturbed at any time. But this sort of observation is entirely speculative, Inspector. I'm not a psychological profiler, and if I'm honest I don't have a lot of patience with the practice. I prefer to confine my observations to what I can support with direct evidence. All I can say with any certainty is that the wounds were all made by the same right-handed person. Probably a man, bearing in mind that the victim was restrained, but possibly a woman.'

'Do you think that the victim might have allowed himself to be restrained?'

'Again I'd be reluctant to speculate, but I can tell you that there are no signs of a struggle.'

'What about the toilet paper?'

'Andrex.'

'He had Andrex in his ensuite, I noticed,' said Sergeant Wilkie. 'I'll check if it matches.'

'All I can tell you on that score,' said Dr Clarke, gathering her notes, 'is that the paper was mainly dry and in goodish condition when I retrieved it from the victim's throat, so I'm confident that it was pushed into his mouth after he died.'

3

INSPECTOR NEWSON AND Sergeant Wilkie stood together in the queue of a Starbucks in St John's Wood, shuffling past the muffins and the carrot cake.

'What do you think, then?' asked Sergeant Wilkie.

'Since the moment I walked into the murder room, I've been thinking that whoever killed Adam Bishop is going to kill again.'

'Why's that, then?' Sergeant Wilkie asked, and as she spoke she turned slightly towards him, causing him momentarily to lose his thread. A gap had opened up between the buttons of her blouse and he had inadvertently caught sight of her bra. Newson knew that he had only to shift his head slightly to catch a tiny glimpse of one of her breasts. But she would know, he was certain she would know. His eyes had already flicked downwards once. She was a detective; she was trained to notice things. Besides, all girls were detectives when it came to male weakness. He felt his face glowing hot. He was thirty-four, not fifteen. How *could* he be so pathetic?

Newson had been working with Natasha for nearly three years. He could not recall the point at which their spirited camaraderie and easy friendship had turned for him to this gruelling, secret infatuation. It had been quite quick, he knew that, for it felt as if he had been carrying the burden of it for ever. Looking back (as he often did) to the day when they had first met to discuss Natasha's application to

join his team, Newson did not think that it had been love at first sight. He definitely recalled that friendship had briefly preceded love, but love had come soon enough thereafter, love and with it an aching agony of longing, which had been present at every single meeting that followed.

He struggled to readjust his gaze to focus fiercely on a wicker basket filled with pieces of double-choc muffin that were being offered up for free tasting that day.

'I think he'll kill again because I think the scenario he created indicates that he's psychopathic, and being a psycho is not a part-time thing. Particularly if his problems are sexual, and, let's face it, in the end all problems are sexual.'

'Sexual? What's sexual got to do with anything?'

'I think it's highly possible that this assailant had sexual and ritualistic motivations.'

'Are all rituals sexual as well?'

'Sadly, Natasha, I've come to a rather depressing conclusion that everything is sexual ... Just look at that advert.' Newson pointed to a framed poster on the wall featuring the coffee of the week, which boasted vanilla, coconut syrup and cookies 'n' cream. 'Read it: *hot, smooth, silky, frothy, warming, enveloping* ... Freud would have had a field day.'

'Then Freud was a wanker.'

'I think that fact's well established.'

'A vanilla, coconut syrup, cookies 'n' cream latte is not sexual; it's a substitute for sex,' said Sergeant Wilkie.

'Well, you can't get much more sexual than a substitute for sex, can you?'

'What possible reason do you have for thinking that this was a sex crime?'

'I'm not saying it was. I'm saying it might have been. The killer bled his victim to death in a carefully prepared and highly specific manner. In my experience people who feel the need to do that sort of thing are driven to it by a

very deep-seated urge, and deep-seated urges are, of course—'

'Sexual.'

'Exactly.'

They had by now arrived at the counter. 'One small latte,' said Newson to the arrogantly handsome French youth who was facing him across the counter, impatiently awaiting his order.

'One tall latte,' the youth replied.

'No, a *small* latte,' Newson corrected.

'Tall eez small,' the boy told him. 'Eet dozen get any smaller zan tall.'

'What do you mean, it doesn't get any smaller than tall?'

'Eet jus' dozen.'

'But that's a contradiction in terms.'

The boy shrugged. 'Maybe you should tell eet to somebody 'oo geeves a ferk.'

'Am I tall, then?' Newson asked.

'Eef you wan'. One pound seventy-five, please,' the youth said and turned to Natasha, who ordered a grande caramel-and-chocolate latte with mallows, for which Newson insisted on paying.

'Grande's medium,' she informed him as they collected their drinks.

'I know, I know, and medium is enormous. I have been in a Starbucks before, you know. I just think it's important to confront these things. I mean, since when did the British start drinking coffee in pints?' They found a table in the corner. 'For centuries you either had a cup of coffee or a cup of tea and cups were cups. Now everybody's walking round clutching a bucket of chocolate-flavoured froth with Smarties on top.'

'I think it's great,' Natasha said.

They sat down. Natasha dug in her briefcase and produced a sheaf of interview notes, which she placed on the table between them. The statements had been taken by

ten constables, and the pile was a thick one. As Natasha leant forward to read the index her breasts touched the top of the pile. Newson stared at the ceiling and made a mental note to get a grip.

'Over two hundred people spoken to so far,' Natasha said. 'In the street, in the pubs, the local shops and at Bishop's yard. They divide into two groups: people who were terrified of Adam Bishop and people who hadn't met him.'

'Family?'

'Huge. All still connected and totally loyal.'

'Terrified of him too, no doubt.'

'Probably, but of course we haven't talked to them properly yet. The doctor says we can interview the wife tomorrow. She's all right, but a bit shocked.'

'Well, you would be, wouldn't you? Tied up in the kitchen all night listening to your husband being murdered.'

'Yes, and from what I can gather so far it seems like the Bishops had a strong marriage. They took family very seriously and if Adam Bishop loved anything at all I think he loved his wife.'

'And she reciprocated?'

'We've heard no reason to presume otherwise.'

'I suppose we should look into it.'

'If you're wondering whether she was involved, I think we're going to turn up about a million more obvious suspects than her. I have a profile from the local police. They knew Adam Bishop well and he sounds like an absolute bastard. He ran a petty fiefdom in and around the Kilburn High Road. Neighbours, colleagues, business associates - all either danced to his tune or paid the price. The Willesden Bill don't think this is a psycho thing at all, sexual or otherwise, and I don't either. It's a builder thing. Adam Bishop pushed his power too far and got done in by some angry rival or other.'

'I don't think angry rivals in the building trade do their killing with blunt five-centimetre-long spikes.'

'Look, Ed, I know you're very clever and all that, but don't you think you're being a bit *too* clever here? I mean, why don't we just pursue the obvious?'

'That's what I'm doing, and it's obvious to me that this is no ordinary revenge killing.'

'And it's obvious to me that it was. Adam Bishop was a disgusting, ugly pig of a man. I refuse to believe that anybody seeking psychopathic sexual gratification would choose a lump like that to stick his prick into, or anything else for that matter.'

'Well, that's a very blinkered thing to say,' said Newson. 'You've been a policewoman long enough to know that it takes all sorts to make a world. Just because a person is ostensibly unattractive doesn't preclude them from sexual activity or from being sexually appealing. Otherwise where the hell would that leave me?'

If Newson had hoped that Natasha would instantly assure him that he was not remotely ostensibly unattractive he was disappointed.

'Look at the bloke, Ed,' Natasha said, producing 'before' and 'after' pictures of Adam Bishop from her bag. 'Tell me this killing is sexual.'

'You're being subjective. Go into Google and do a search on "torturing fat ugly men". I bet you score twenty hits straight off. In fact it's occurred to me that we may not be dealing with a murder here at all but a consensual sadomasochistic liaison that just went too far. Bishop may have *wanted* to be stabbed and milked of his blood.'

'Stabbed in the eyes?' Natasha asked rather too loudly, causing people around the café to look up from their frothy cups.

'Yes, very possibly in the eyes,' Newson hissed. 'Remember the case in Germany where some nutter agreed to have his penis cut off and then watched as his assailant

cooked and ate it? It must have been total agony, mentally and physically, yet it was his choice and you've got to suppose he enjoyed it.'

'All right, it happens, but it doesn't happen very often.'

'Who knows how often it happens when it's consensual? That man in Germany answered an internet search appealing for a person who would consent to be murdered and eaten. The internet has opened the door for loads of activities that in the past would probably never have found physical expression. I mean, who would ever have thought that anyone would dream of such a thing as eating people, let alone advertise for it. But someone did, someone wanted a *hot, smooth, silky, frothy, warming, enveloping* human corpse to eat and he went looking for it. The only thing more astonishing is that he found a volunteer. The cannibal got an email from his lunch and in due course they met up. They both got their wish. The penis was merely an hors d'oeuvre.'

'All right, all right,' conceded Natasha. 'It could be sexual. It could be a black-magic ritual. Who knows? In a previous life Adam Bishop might have been a pincushion. There could be any number of motives, but surely the most obvious one is that this is a builders' tiff.'

'Tiff? He was stabbed three hundred and forty-seven times.'

'I *knew* Doctor Clarke would count them.'

'She's very thorough.'

'She's a very thorough pain in the arse. Look, those stabs were a warning. Bishop undercut someone, pinched one too many jobs, sold on a truckload of dodgy cement and offended the gyppos. Whatever. Someone needed to make him an example. That's what this is about. Hard men doing each other in.'

'You can't say gyppos,' Newson admonished.

'Tinkers, travellers, boys from the black stuff, call them what you like. There's a lot of very tough people in the

building and associated trades. Bishop made the wrong enemies and they stabbed him to death to warn off others.'

'Stabbed him to death three hundred and forty-seven times with a five-centimetre-long skewer?'

'It would warn me off.'

'I just think it seems like a very mean-spirited little weapon to use to kill so big and violent a man. Not the weapon I'd imagine avenging navvies or double-crossed Tarmac cowboys would choose.'

'Perhaps they wanted to belittle him. You know, a little prick for a little prick, and we all know he did *have* a little prick.'

'We don't know any such thing,' said Newson. 'No six-hour corpse which has been systematically milked of nearly every drop of blood is going to appear well hung. Honestly, you girls, any opportunity to belittle the penis.'

'It's our job.'

'Look how many times the attacker stabbed the scrotum. You can't deny that the pricking is more intense there than on the limbs or back. And there's also a thick cluster of stabs in the anus. Bishop must have been face down for hours. Look at the photos.'

'Thanks, I've seen them,' said Natasha. 'I took them, and Mr Bishop's lacerated arse is something I'm trying not to remind myself of.'

Newson looked at the photos and was once again sickened to his stomach. These wounds were peculiarly horrible even to someone of Newson's considerable experience. The killer seemed to have taken such care with his pricks; this was no frenzied attack, it was *considered*.

'The killer *took aim*. He took aim *three hundred and forty-seven times*. He chose each new target carefully, took aim and drove in his spike.'

'That doesn't make it sexual.'

'No, but it makes it very, very weird, and in my experience of police work, weird rarely happens only once.'

4

INSPECTOR NEWSON AND Sergeant Wilkie drove to Willesden in Natasha's Renault Clio, and stood once more before the house in which the horror had occurred.

'I don't think I've ever seen stone cladding on a house as big as this,' Newson observed. 'I'm amazed they got permission.'

'The Bishops did exactly what they liked and got permission for exactly what they wanted. Guaranteed there's a bloke on the council planning committee who was given the choice between a handful of wedge or a handful of broken fingers. One thing's for certain, none of the neighbours were going to object.'

The master bedroom was at the front of the house, with large bay windows overlooking the drive.

'Bishop must have been in agony for the best part of twenty-four hours. Did nobody hear his screams?'

'No, because of the music.' Natasha referred to her notebook. 'The Bishops played music most of the time, and they liked it loud. Early seventies middle of the road, mostly, Brotherhood of Man, New Seekers, Tony Orlando and Dawn with "Tie A Yellow Ribbon". Demis Roussos. "Una Paloma Blanca" was a big favourite. Imagine that at full volume.'

'All night?'

'Not normally all night, but late. On the night in question it was on all day and then all night, but nobody

had the guts to complain. Nobody ever crossed the Bishops, or at least if they did they only did it once. Last year a family that lived two houses down actually moved out without selling.'

Newson felt for these poor terrorized people. The possibility of noisy neighbours horrified him. He'd once lived next door to a family whose teenage sons tuned motorbikes all weekend and it had made him feel suicidal. 'Perhaps the neighbours did it,' he mused, looking up and down the quiet street.

'Well, I can assure you that not one of them's sorry he's dead.'

'It'd certainly explain why nobody seems to have seen anything.'

Newson took out his mobile phone and scrolled down to 'Clarke'.

'Sorry to disturb you, Doctor, but I just wanted to make sure that there's no chance that Bishop's wounds could have been delivered by different hands. You know - left and right, weak and strong, that sort of thing.' He had a vague memory of reading a novel or seeing a film in which the murder had been solved along these lines. 'It's just we've been wondering about the neighbours. They all hated Bishop with a vengeance. Thought they might have made a party of it.'

'I said to you at the time, Detective Inspector, it's my considered opinion that the wounds were delivered by a single suspect and I'm not in the habit of altering my conclusions to fit vague, arbitrary police theories.'

'What did she say?' Natasha asked after Newson had put away his phone.

'She said she thought it was a brilliant idea, but she still feels we're dealing with a lone suspect. Come on, let's go and talk to Lady Macbeth.'

Mrs Bishop was clearly a proud woman and despite the horror of what she'd been through it was obvious to Newson that she had no intention of allowing herself to appear vulnerable, particularly to the police. Her eyes were still red and swollen but her gaze was steady, as was the hand with which she lifted her teacup and lit her long white Kool cigarette. She'd taken trouble to have her great cloud of dyed blond hair redone and she'd applied heavy make-up to the marks left around her mouth by the duct tape. The Bishops must have been a formidable couple.

'Ad let him in, that's all there is to it. There's no way he could have forced his way through. Our house is Fort effing Knox. The only way in is the front door and no one gets through that 'less Ad or me wants 'em to. Ad's a very big bloke, you know. Or he was.'

Mrs Bishop's voice cracked very slightly as she made this last comment, and briefly she looked away.

'We can do this later if you'd prefer, Mrs Bishop,' Newson said gently, but his only reward was an angry snarl.

'There's never a nice time to talk to the police, is there?' she snapped back. 'Just get on with it.'

'You were saying that you don't believe it would have been possible for an assailant to force their way past your husband.'

'No effing way. Don't be fooled by the fact that Ad was out of shape. He was fat, but he was hard.'

'So you think that Mr Bishop might have known his assailant?'

'I just know he let him in, that's all. We've got a video-entry monitor. Nobody gets near us 'less we want 'em to.'

Newson seized upon the point. 'And yet this man got very close indeed to your husband. Mrs Bishop, forgive me for asking, but are you aware of Mr Bishop's ever taking any interest in ... um ... alternative sexual practices?'

'What?'

‘To your knowledge, did your husband harbour any sadomasochistic or homoerotic instincts?’

For a moment Mrs Bishop’s brittle confidence deserted her. She was genuinely shocked. ‘Are you saying my husband was a poof?’

‘I have to be open to all possibilities. You just said that nobody got close to Mr Bishop unless he wanted them to, but, as we know, his assailant got into his bedroom and tied him to a bed—’

‘Take that back!’ Mrs Bishop snarled, eyes flashing. ‘Take that back, you little ginger wanker!’

‘It would not be the first time that a death has resulted from sexual experimentation gone wrong, and the families in such instances are rarely aware of—’

‘Now you listen here, you cunt—’

Natasha, who was standing behind Mrs Bishop, stepped forward. ‘Mrs Bishop, will you please address the inspector as Detective Inspector Newson, Mr Newson, or nothing at all. If you carry on effing and blinding like that I’ll caution you.’

‘Caution me! I’m the fucking *widow*, love! You can’t caution the fucking widow! Particularly seein’ as how your little shortarse mate here just called my poor dead husband who ain’t ‘ere to defend himself a poof!’

‘I shall take it, then, Mrs Bishop, that you do not believe your husband deviated from what might be called the sexual norm,’ Newson said. ‘Let’s move on.’ He smiled pleasantly but underneath he was angry. This woman did not have a solitary ounce of respect for him and why? Because he was five foot four and freckly. And Natasha, gorgeous Natasha, had felt the need to defend him.

‘Please tell us what happened on the morning your husband was attacked,’ he continued.

Mrs Bishop obviously felt that she’d made her point and calmed down. ‘I’d been out at the shops and Ad was at home because he’d been on the piss the night before. Well,

we all had. England-Turkey. Lovely night, it was. Ad hired the whole pub. Private function. Lock-in till three. Paid for the lot, food and all. Full buffet collation. Drink what you like, even champagne for the girls. Ad was like that.'

'England won that game, didn't they?'

'Of course we did.'

Newson wasn't interested in football, but everyone knew about England's famous victory.

'Anyway, Ad slept in the next morning and I went out at about nine while he was still asleep. I went down to Knightsbridge because Prada and Gucci were both having sales. I was gone about two hours. I took the Bentley because my little Merc was getting valeted. I let myself back in and was just shouting for Juanita to get my shopping in out of the boot when the bastard jumped me.'

'From behind?'

'Of course from behind. Otherwise 'e'd 'ave 'ad me fucking Jimmy Choos in his bollocks, an' mark my words, one day he will.'

'So you were unable to struggle?'

'He drugged me. Effing coward. Got a swab straight on me face. Next thing I know I'm all taped up in the kitchen staring at Juanita.'

'Who was also restrained?'

'Yes, not that you'd need to restrain her. Like a lapdog, that woman.'

'You didn't see your assailant?'

'I felt his arm around me neck, that's all. I can still feel it now. I reckon he was a fit sort of bloke, not big, but wiry. That's what I think, anyway.'

'And you're certain it was a man?'

'Yeah, I think so. Of course, these days you don't know, do you? There's some women down at my gym, muscles like navvies. Lezzers, I reckon, I mean it's the fashion, innit? Madonna an' all that, looks like a bloke these days. Turns your bleeding stomach.'

'And what happened after you came to?'

'Nothing. Me an' Juanita just had to sit there staring at each other all day an' all night listening to my own stereo which the bloke had put on in the lounge. Full bleeding bore, Everly Brothers and "Move It" and Del Shannon and the Platters over and over again. And whenever there was a gap between tracks or a quiet song we'd hear Ad screamin' in the bedroom upstairs. All night ...'

Once more Mrs Bishop's impressive composure threatened briefly to desert her, but she recovered quickly, finding strength this time in the weakness of her maid. 'Juanita pissed 'erself an' all, on *my floor*. Dirty cow. She ain't staying, I can assure you of that. Anyway, in the morning Ad stopped screaming an' we could hear the bloke leaving and I was thinking that if I ever caught him I'd castrate him, and after that we just kept sitting till my Lisa Marie let herself in, bringing her kiddies round, and that was when we called you lot.'

The Bishops' maid was no more help. She testified that Mr Bishop had let the man in and shown him into the lounge. She'd gone in to ask if they required anything and had been dismissed. She recalled that Mr Bishop was serving drinks himself and, even though it was early, was offering whisky. The intruder had been sitting with his back to the door, and Juanita had only seen the top of his head. She could not recall the colour of the person's hair.

Newson noted that Juanita was in the habit of avoiding eye contact and focused her gaze instead on the ground in front of her. He imagined that the Bishops would not have been the kindest or most considerate of employers.

At the end of the interviews Mrs Bishop conducted Newson and Natasha to the front door, the same door through which she claimed no hostile intruder could have forced their way. Perhaps it was that that reminded her of Newson's speculative questioning.

'And I ain't forgetting what you said either, mate,' she snarled. 'Don't you worry about that. Adam woulda killed a bloke for less, and let me tell you there's an awful lot of family left who'd feel the same way if I was to tell them.'

'Are you threatening the inspector, Mrs Bishop?' said Natasha, and once more Newson wished she would not feel the need to fight his battles for him.

'Threaten *'im?*' Mrs Bishop sneered. 'What? Inspector Shortarse here? Bit beneath me, love. Maybe I'll get one of my little grandkids to do it. The eldest is only nine so that'd be about fair, wouldn't it?'

'I think I won her over in the end, don't you?' Newson remarked as he closed the garden gate behind him.