

CHAPTER 1

Death Threats

LET'S SEE. Friday 10th July, 11.30am. Not a good time for me, and not a good day either, so far. Not if you were me. The best thing about my situation was that I'd escaped the wind. And the rain. The cold was still with me, but I was forgetting it fast. I'd delegated. A third coffee was dealing with it. The worst thing about my situation you don't want to know. Yeah, well. I didn't know the worst thing about my situation either. Not yet, anyway.

July. The coldest and wettest ever, I thought. Okay. But I thought that every year. Maybe it was getting worse, every year. The

sky squatted above the city, snagging on the chimneys and aerials, sagging into the streets like a wet military blanket. I lit my fourth cigarette since escaping the downpour and tried to focus on the newspaper I had propped in front of me. The usual. Imminent terrors, tawdry killings, economic gloom. I wasn't feeling too good.

I put my coffee cup down and stared out at the rain. I had enough available overdraft to pay this month's rent, but apart from that I was looking at a series of humiliating, embarrassing and finally futile phone calls to my bank manager. Brown envelopes through the door en route to the wastepaper basket. Reminders, ditto. Final demands. Bailiffs. Then what?

I still hadn't been paid for my last job. Or the one before that. My first couple of years as a private investigator had gone okay. Dull, but okay. But this year had been dead. Three cases, all of them very boring. Identify, tail, photograph, deliver prints. And my last two clients had defaulted. Hadn't returned my increasingly frequent phone calls. I'd started considering employing a debt collector. Not my favourite kind of people, having been on

the receiving end of their kind more than once. It wasn't a global crisis, I thought, looking briefly at the headlines. But it wasn't any kind of fun. It was enough. And Barry Eliot? He was more than enough. The guy was not necessary.

Well, okay. Maybe the Barry Eliot problem was my fault. Partly my fault. About one third my fault, I reckoned. Half my fault would be pushing it... maybe. Alright. I'd met Karen Eliot the night before. Again. I had been on my way home after a busy day watching the telephone, fiddling with paperclips, reading a magazine. A quick drink? Sure, why not. A bite to eat? Well, I had nothing much to look forward to in my fridge back at the flat, so, hey, why not. Well, okay. Barry's away. You're lonely. Sure. And then I'd woken up in the morning, Friday 10th July, in her bed. Groggy, hung over, and with the horribly dawning realisation that I'd done it again. I'd spent the night with Karen. Again.

It had been only two weeks since Barry had caught us in bed, one stupid afternoon when he was supposed to be playing golf with some of those high fliers he likes so much. He'd probably suspected something was going

on. Karen and me – we really got on well. And I mean it. She hated Barry. She liked me. And maybe more than liked. I felt – well, I felt that we could have had some kind of life together. In another world. Another life. Some other dimension. Anyway. Barry had walked in. It wasn't a good moment, not compared with the moment just before. He threatened to kill me – yawn – and then threatened to have my licence revoked. Okay. Death threats from Barry, with his squeaking voice and appalling taste in golfing slacks I could handle, but losing my licence...

The trouble was that Barry was extremely well connected. I didn't know why, but he was. He knew people in the Council. He knew people in the Police Force. I mean, the guy played *golf*. He put on those revolting slacks, those sickening pullovers, those laughable shoes – and schmoozed in the nineteenth hole with magistrates, judges, superintendents and commissioners. He had his gig sewn up. If Barry wanted, Barry usually got. He was, you could be forgiven for thinking, not a guy to cross. And I was screwing his wife. Maybe I was in love with her. I didn't know. I couldn't tell.

CATACOMBS *of* TERROR!

You see? That was the worst thing about my situation. As I thought then, as I shouldered my way out of the cafe and into the weather. Yeah. As I thought then.