

PROLOGUE

The bastard, Frank Massey, doesn't realise it yet but today will be his last day on earth.

Things have not been going all that well for Frank in the last few years. He's suffered various financial misfortunes, and abandoned his wife and kids. It's not the only marriage he's left in tatters. People have suffered at his hands, even died in despair.

Despite all the crap he's been through, and despite all the crap he's put other people through, Massey is the same as he ever was. Unmoved, unrepentant, carrying on as if nothing happened. As if he has nothing to be sorry for ... but he does.

Today – the day that will be Frank Massey's last day on earth – is wet. It's very wet indeed. It's as if God himself might be wringing out the swirling mass of charcoalcoloured clouds. Discarded paper and loosened vegetation is being ushered up and down the streets by the frigid wind. The man who will become Frank's nemesis knows it would be much easier to be doing this in less inclement conditions but it can't wait any longer. If it doesn't happen today, if he doesn't do this today, it will probably never happen and the bastard, Frank Massey, will escape any form of justice. The man cannot let that be the way of it.

Frank drives a very flash sports car – a red Toyota Celica. It's an expensive car and it must be well beyond his means but it suits his vanity. Chances are he thinks the ladies will be impressed while, at the same time, he'll be hoping to make the lads jealous. Of course, it could be that he's up to his eyes in debt, or it could be that he's pulling a fast one somewhere. Given his track record, it's likely to be a little of both.

In contrast to the flamboyance of his vehicle, Frank's house is a modest, two-bedroom, mid-terrace affair in Kincardine. It's not a big street, but he can usually find a parking space for the Celica somewhere close to his front door; a door which opens directly onto the street. His house is a part of a terrace, with no front or back garden, although there is an alleyway running behind it. The rest of the housing in the street is a quirky collection of characterful, odd-shaped abodes, jumbled together. It doesn't look like any planning authority was involved in

sanctioning this arrangement.

Frank has a routine. He arrives home from work, has some dinner, gets changed out of his work clothes, then heads to the pub. Always the same pub – The Forth Arms. Frank always stays in the pub until closing time. From Sunday to Thursday that means midnight, and on Friday and Saturday he gets an extra hour to gradually solidify his liver and annoy the barmaid, Tracey. If it was her place she wouldn't put up with him but, alas, it's not her place. The bar belongs to a friend of Frank's, who tolerates his obnoxious behaviour and fobs off her complaints with platitudes and excuses. Frank is usually the last to be shown the door and Tracey is always delighted to see the back of him. He's always liked a drink, has Frank.

Tonight, Frank's going through his routine as per usual. At ten past midnight he leaves the pub. Well, at ten past midnight, Tracey pushes him out of the door in disgust. The rain has stopped but it's still blowy, and it's not warm. Walking, weaving, and stumbling homeward; like a pissedup racing pigeon, it's as well for him that his instinct to find the dovecote is unerring. Most nights. On this particular night it would have been better for him if his drunken, automatic-pilot had failed him.

A very important habit of Frank's will help expedite things for his nemesis: Frank always uses the back door when he's drunk. The man hides in the shadows, crouched down against the wall that runs along one side of the alleyway behind Frank's terrace, balaclava on, dressed all in black. Even in sobriety, Frank would struggle to notice him. With the alcoholic load onboard the SS Massey tonight, there's no chance.

As soon as Frank reaches the door, he begins to fish about for his keys. It takes him two attempts but the key turns in the lock and opens the door. A hard push in the back sends Frank through the doorway and down onto the kitchen floor in a heap; winded and confused as his hands and feet are tied, Frank's too drunk to put up much of a fight. Duct-tape over his mouth will stop him attracting any attention. The man shuts the back door. It's unlikely this is the first time Frank has fallen over coming in late after a good bevvy. No-one within earshot will bat an eyelid at the noise. Frank just lies there mumbling something through the sticky, silver gag.

Outside, the cool air still carries a hint of moisture. The

alleyway is poorly lit but, even if it wasn't, there's nothing to worry about. The neighbour on one side is an early-tobed type, with lights-out around nine-thirty every night.

On the other side, the home-owners are away somewhere in their caravan; the man saw them leave yesterday, heavily laden and definitely not on a day trip. The man's car is parked in the alley at the back of the house, passenger-side door left ajar.

Frank has passed out. This is a huge bonus and will make the job in hand a lot easier to carry out. Frank is hefted onto a shoulder. It's not too much of a struggle to manoeuvre him into the car and attach the seat belt. House locked, bag thrown into the boot, the man gets into the driver's seat, takes off the balaclava, and removes the tape from Frank's mouth. If the police drew alongside or were travelling behind, they'd not be able to see the ropes and would have no reason to assume anything sinister had occurred. They'd just think Frank had nodded off, which he had, as it happened. In fact, throughout this whole process, Frank doesn't stir.

Where to take Frank had been a puzzle. Nothing too close to home but, at the same time, minimising the amount of time driving around with a trussed-up drunk in the front seat. It took a bit of research. The place the man has chosen will be ideal.

The settling ponds have been out of commission for a while now and the coal processing depot has fallen into disrepair. The only downside of this location is that it's close to a fairly busy main road. The positives include the fact that there's no security watching over it, and the chances of anyone taking a dip in the ponds are negligible – of their own freewill at least. The site attracts a few boy racers and dirt-bikers who've constructed an informal sort of race-track around the grounds. The cops and the landowners fight a losing battle to keep the gates locked. This might also be to his advantage.

Tonight, as the air dries out and the wind drops to a whisper, luck is co-operating. The gates are open, locks already plundered, and there will be no need for the crowbar or bolt cutters he'd brought, just in case. Caution is required all the same; the man needs to be sure none of the unauthorised racegoers are still hanging about; but it's after one in the morning and it looks like they've all gone. There's probably no such a thing as the perfect murder.

So many things can go wrong, so much luck is required, but the man has decided he needs to take his chances, roll his dice and, so far, his luck is holding. Even to a sceptic like him, it's hard not to imagine that maybe there's some greater force at work: someone or something else at large in the universe, agreeing that it's time for Frank to pay his piper.

The clouds have rolled back to reveal the full majesty of the night sky. At least one planet burns fiercely; its unblinking stare like an alpha male's challenge to the vacillating stars all around it. The damp ground glistens with a silver wash from the full moon. A car goes past, which is unnerving, despite the certain fact they can't see this place from the road in daylight, never mind in the dark. The man has checked.

Frank is showing signs of returning to consciousness. Duct-tape goes back across his mouth and the rest is used to replace the ropes around his wrists and ankles. One of these ropes is re-tied around Frank's chest, to hold him in place in the car's passenger seat, the other is pocketed, for now.

It's getting stuffy inside the car so, before taking up position in the back seat, the man cracks both front windows a small amount. Frank's eyelids flutter and then open. It's almost as if the buttons controlling the movement of the glass were somehow also wired into his brain. The man gets into the back, leans forward, and adjusts the rearview mirror so Frank can see. It takes Frank a few seconds to work out who's sitting behind him but, once the fog of alcohol has been penetrated by this realisation, the fear and panic cause him to buck and thrash. Spittle and tears fly. There's garbled pleading, too. The tape and the rope hold.

After a minute or two, Frank's futile protests grind to a halt. He takes to shuddering and moaning instead. Frank won't look in the mirror, now. Frank can't look in the mirror now.

"Hello, Frank," the man says, "I don't suppose you were expecting this, were you?"

Massey shakes his head but still doesn't use the glass to take the eye of his unanticipated companion.

"No, I bet you weren't. You thought you'd gotten away wi' it. You thought there was nothing I could do about it. Well, I'm afraid you were wrong, Frank. You're no' going

to get away wi' it, and I am going to do something about it. I'm going to make you pay for what you did.”

The bucking and thrashing resume for a few more seconds, followed by another bout of pleading and moaning. The man is relieved that the tape and the rope hold.

“I'm no' interested in your apologies or excuses, Frank. I'm no' here to debate what happened, listen to your bullshit, or change my mind. This has to happen and you've got nobody to blame but yourself. All of this is your fault.”

Massey recoils, trying to move away to a safe distance, even though there's nowhere to go. His breathing is rapid and, even through the gag, the man can smell the alcohol ... and the fear.

“Big, brave, Frank Massey. Bully, woman beater, adulterer, destroyer of families ... killer. No' so brave now, are we, Frank?”

Frank starts to sob.

“Aye, you should be crying, you bastard. Now you know how it feels.”

The man winds the other rope around each of his hands and pulls it tight against Frank's neck. The bucking and thrashing resume. It takes a few minutes of desperate struggle before Frank stills and the fight is over.

Sitting back, fire burning through his muscles from the effort of applying the ligature, the man's breathing is deep, his skin flushed. A few beads of sweat trickle across his skin, but he can't delay. This is not finished. He has more to do.

The ex-settling ponds have small piers jutting out into them. At some point, somebody must have been using the ponds for recreational purposes; it might even have been some kind of business or teaching facility. There are a few upturned rowing boats on the shore; neglected and careworn, pale blue paint flaking off, but at least a couple are still seaworthy. Or pondworthy in this case. Part of the preparation involved moving one of the better ones into the water earlier and tying it to a pier. Luckily, none of the racing fraternity noticed it and took it for a joy ride, or cut it adrift.

There are three ponds on the site. The biggest of them was the man's choice; he had to hope it was as deep as the warning signs suggested – that was one thing that couldn't

be easily tested in advance. Frank is laid down in the bottom of the boat, and his pockets filled with the bricks the man had left there earlier. Despite searching the site beforehand, there are no oars, so a makeshift set have been made from a dismantled pallet. They're not easy to use, or all that effective, and it's a bit of a chore to get out into the middle.

Bobbing gently in the darkness, moonlight glinting on the surface of the inky water, reticence to complete his mission suddenly grips hold of the man. Guilt begins to tug at him, like a small child pulling on his sleeve, trying to get his attention. Fear of the consequences and all that might bring joins the throng in his head, but he shoos them all away. It's too late for all that. It's time. It's happening. He will finish what he started. He'll finish what Frank Massey started.

The man grabs the bastard, Frank Massey, by the shoulder and the hip, and rolls him out of the boat. It's quite an effort and he almost topples out of the boat when it corrects itself. His heart is racing and sweat trickles down his temples.

The splash as he enters the water is the last sound Frank Massey will ever make. It's a huge comfort to the man to see the body sink out of view into the black. The bricks have done their job, and so has he.

Back on the shore, the boat is dragged out of the water and scuppered. The rest of the beached boats follow suit. Reducing the odds of discovery – even if only by a slight amount – seems like a sensible thing to do. Back in the car, relief dominates all the other emotions vying for the man's attention.

It's done.

It's over.

The bastard, Frank Massey, is dead.