

You loved your last book...but what  
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Lov**ereading** will help you find new  
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# **A Taste of Ashes**

Written by Tony Black

Published by Black and White Publishing

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Lov**ereading**.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

# **A TASTE OF ASHES**

**Tony Black**

**BLACK & WHITE PUBLISHING**

First published 2015  
by Black & White Publishing Ltd  
29 Ocean Drive, Edinburgh EH6 6JL

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2      15 16 17 18

ISBN 978 1 84502 964 7

Copyright © Tony Black 2015

The right of Tony Black to be identified as the author of this work has  
been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and  
Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored  
in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without  
permission in writing from the publisher.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

Typeset by RefineCatch Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk  
Printed and bound by Nørhaven, Denmark

For Cheryl and Conner

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Dr Robert Ghent for his assistance, once again, in helping with the medical research. And to all at Black & White Publishing for making the process run so smoothly.

# 1

Agnes Gilchrist hid behind the open curtain in her front room. She'd seen some of her neighbours rushing by, grimacing, sneering at the window as they passed. When the new bus stop went in and the unruly wee brats from both ends of the street started to treat it like a gang hut, stones were thrown at her window. She called the police then, they knew her name now.

Frank was more cautious, worried about people's opinions. He complained if she spent her time at the window, watching what went on in the street. But now he wasn't there to complain, to tell her to get out in the world, get on with her life and leave others to theirs.

Agnes moved away from the curtain, she folded up Frank's good suit, the brown tweed one, and put it in the carrier bag for the charity shop collection. Someone would get a wear out of it. She peered at the window once more, it was starting up again.

'What a racket,' she said.

Number 23 were a rowdy lot, even for this end of Whitletts. She couldn't decide whether it had been worse with the police cars round every night of the week, before that boy joined the army. It might have been, but then was there a time when it had been truly quiet?

‘What in the name of God?’

Shouts and screams. Another disturbance. Even the mobile butcher didn’t park there now – he said it affected trade because no one wanted to queue up where a full-scale row was likely to break out at any minute. ‘You don’t want to see the chip pan coming through the window when you’re only out for a pound of mince!’ was his comment last week.

‘Animals.’ That’s what Frank called them. Things were better in his day, though. The Millars at 23 had got worse lately.

‘It’ll be herself rowing with the fancy man.’

Agnes reached for the telephone, pulled the chord to her, and when the receiver was within reach she placed her bony hand on it.

Shouting again. Screaming. The woman sounded hysterical now.

Agnes’s heart fluttered as she tightened her grip on the telephone. She lifted the receiver, made sure the line was working, and then lowered it again.

Everything went silent now. This was an unusual turn. Normally the rows went on for hours until there was some final act like a door slamming or a police car pulling up.

‘Oh, here we go.’

The door opened and a figure, pressed against the wall, eased silently into the night. Agnes squinted to see what was going on but there wasn’t enough light. The street lamps, smashed and never replaced, were no help in identifying the figure. She followed its stealthy trail into the

shadows at the end of the road then returned her gaze to the house.

A woman, illuminated by the light from the hallway behind her, was sobbing on the front step. She was shaking; even at this distance that was visible. It was Sandra Millar, her face clearing into view every time she threw back her head.

‘He’ll have left her, that’ll be it.’

Agnes checked herself for sympathy – once she would have reached out, went over and offered to put the kettle on – but times had changed. These days you were more likely to be roared at, told not to interfere, and pointed back to your own door.

But Sandra Millar was truly in distress. The wailing and sobbing growing louder than it ever had before. Was she injured, in pain? The stories you heard these days, the things people did to each other. The old woman’s instincts begged her to get help.

‘Hello, police.’ She told the girl on the emergency line what she had just seen.

The operator recorded the details, was a kind enough sort. ‘There’ll be a patrol car around soon, just sit tight now.’

‘But what about herself? She’s in an awful state.’

‘I’d recommend you sit tight, just stay where you are until the police arrive.’

‘Right, OK.’

‘Would you like me to stay on the line with you?’

‘No, it’s all right.’ Her curiosity lingered.

‘Are you sure? Maybe just till the police get there.’

‘No, it’s fine. I’ll be fine.’

Agnes returned the telephone to its resting place and drew back the curtain once more, but as she saw Sandra holding her head in her hands she was compelled to go to her. She headed for the door and down the front steps, as she approached number 23 she heard low wails like a wounded animal. Agnes’s fluttering heart quickened, started to pound.

‘Hello, is everything all right?’

There was no answer. The sobbing stopped instantly. As the woman saw her neighbour’s approach, her mouth widened and her white face tightened in pain. She tried to scream, but the sound was trapped in her. She jolted upright and dashed into the house, heading for the kitchen. The door battered the wall, swung wildly, then she appeared again and bolted for the garden. She ran for the road and didn’t look back once.

Agnes’s breathing halted, she was cold. A chill breeze blew but that wasn’t the reason her temperature dropped. Beyond the doorway she peered into the fully-lit hallway and gathered her cardigan tight to her shoulders. The place was silent, appeared to be empty. She saw the wall-mounts with their smashed glass lying on the floor, and a smeared line, long and dark, running down the white wall towards the kitchen. She followed the smear-line like a pointer all the way to the next open door, to the sight of the kitchen table where he sat with a large wound above his shoulder blades and blood pooling on the well-worn linoleum beneath.

It took the old woman’s eyes a few moments to decipher



the image in front of her and then the shock sent a shiver through her tensed body. Her knees loosened quickly as she fell into the open door, making a light thud as her delicate frame collapsed on the hard floor.

## 2

As Detective Inspector Bob Valentine left the station the red wash of sky was sinking into a jagged grey horizon. The King Street flats blocked most of the scene and allowed only a dim hum from the swelling traffic beyond. In the early evening, Ayr's atmosphere pulsed with rushing commuters fleeing cramped offices. Previously sluggish limbs bursting with new energy. It was a time of day that never ceased to fascinate the detective, a strange place between the working world and the coming darkness that gave cover to a more sinister night.

Night crimes were always different from the affairs of daylight hours. If it sounded superstitious, supernatural even, then Valentine accepted it without a shrug. By this stage he knew the facts and they couldn't be ignored, it would be a fool who tried. DI Bob Valentine knew he was no fool, at least when it came down to the job. In what remained of his life outside the force, he conceded, the opposite was likely to be true.

The silver Vectra was filthy, muddy arches and a roof covered in thick, mucky dust. The detective ran his finger along the dull wing and frowned. 'Could write my name in that.'

He'd told DS McAlister to take the car for a wash and

wax earlier but obviously he hadn't barked loud enough for the importance of the request to register. 'Bloody hell, Ally,' he shook his head. 'Tonight of all nights.'

Valentine opened the back door of the car and flung his briefcase in the footwell. As he removed his jacket a bead of sweat pricked on his brow, he dabbed at it with the back of his hand, settled behind the wheel and started the engine. The police radio was on, fizzed a little, then spluttered a message for uniform.

'Getting reports of a disturbance on Arthur Street at the Meat Hangers nightclub, anyone available to attend?'

The detective leaned over and turned off the radio. The call was only a short diversion away, but it might as well have been a hundred miles.

'No chance.' He gripped the wheel.

It was a mild night, a slight breeze but nothing serious. One of those evenings where he was glad to be on the west coast; at the tail end of spring the west's worst offence was mugginess blurring the views across the Firth of Clyde to the Isle of Arran. In the summer he'd heard you could grow tomatoes outside because of the warm winds of the Gulf Stream, though he had never tried. The idea of himself as a gardener was enough to make him laugh; days of domesticity, of normalcy, were not for him. He checked his wristwatch – at least he was on time – he might not arrive in a gleaming car but he'd arrive nonetheless. It would be a small victory to weigh against the deepening shame he had come to feel for his position as a family man who spent so little time at home.

Valentine drove to the edge of Barns Street and parked

the car. The crimson sky was retreating behind a widening grey smear now, but it didn't seem to bother the runners and dog walkers descending on the Low Green. In a few months the grass would be dotted with day-trippers clutching disposable barbecue sets and – the scourge of uniform – teenagers with two-litre bottles of cider. The detective drew a deep breath; his own daughter was just about old enough to be one of them. The thought that Chloe was of an age to experiment with drink, and more besides, made his insides tense.

The Vectra's side-lights blinked as Valentine locked up and headed for the Gaiety Theatre. He checked his watch again, he was still on time, the idea that he wouldn't be – after Chloe's months of pestering – was unthinkable. Clare had already warned him about missing their daughter's stage debut and Valentine regarded his daughter as too precious to disappoint. He made for the theatre, brushing the shoulders of his jacket with his fingertips as he went. Something like pride – he remembered it now – was sneaking back into his consciousness.

In the foyer, Valentine collected his ticket and made for the stairs. The atmosphere unnerved the detective, he wasn't used to mahogany panelling – even the slightly worn variety of the Gaiety's – it was an industrial shade of grey that covered the walls of King Street station. Perhaps more concerning than the setting, however, was that he would have to spend the next hour and a half with his phone switched off; he could never fully outrun the job.

Clare spotted him first, leaning out from her seat in the middle of the row and beckoning him to her.

‘Hello,’ he muttered under heavy breath.

As Valentine entered the narrow seating channel he was forced to dislodge some sneering early birds.

Clare stepped in front of him when he drew near. ‘You’re here. I had wondered.’

‘I said I was coming.’

‘Yes, but you say lots of things, Bob.’

His father rose beside her, coughing loudly as if to distract Clare. She turned. ‘I know, I know – we’re here to enjoy ourselves.’

‘Hello, Dad.’ He watched the old man sway a little, stooped where he stood. ‘Sit down, I’m here now.’

His father had scraped back his thinning hair and wore a dark suit, the same one he wore to Bob’s mother’s funeral. ‘You scrub up not too bad, Dad.’

‘It’s not every night your own take to the stage.’

Clare brightened beside him; Valentine took a moment to share in their pride. ‘Where’s Fiona?’

‘Buying sweets, there’s a queue.’

There was an awkward silence when the three stared ahead at the empty stage, and then the old man spoke. ‘I think I’ll go and find some mints myself, they used to have a wee girl that sold peanuts and cigarettes but I suppose they’ve long done away with her.’

‘She’ll be pensioned off now, Dad.’

‘Cheeky bugger, it wasn’t that long ago.’ He paused as he stood. ‘Actually maybe it was, can I get you pair anything?’

They shook their heads and watched until he was out of sight. As the old man left them, Clare jerked herself to face Valentine. ‘I swear, if you do anything to ruin tonight for

our daughter your murder squad won't have to look far for their next victim.'

'Harsh, Clare.' He returned her gaze. 'I'm here aren't I? Like I said I would be.'

'I hope that phone's off.'

The standard response sat on his lips – a desire to defend himself – but it wasn't the place. 'It's switched off, yes.' Valentine treated his wife to a wide smile. He turned away, started to remove his jacket and use it to fashion a buffer between himself and any more strife.

'You look nice, dear.'

Clare peered over her nose. 'Yes, it's a new dress if that's what you're getting at!'

'No, I never said a thing.' He took in the dress. 'It's very nice though, you suit it.'

She crossed her legs, there was a sharp edge to her voice. 'And the shoes are new too, before you ask.'

'I wasn't about to.' Clare's unease was down to the fact that there were too many previous occasions he hadn't been there for his daughters. He couldn't blame her for the reaction, it was justified. Clare was the homebuilder, his contributions were minimal.

The chatter in the auditorium started to subside, a new hush spreading. As Valentine peered along the row his father and daughter appeared clutching bags of sweets, their hands were full.

'Fiona, you'll make yourself sick if you eat that lot,' said Clare.

'She's fine, it's a one-off.' Valentine reached over to help his daughter into her seat. 'Hello, love.'

Clare whispered as he stretched passed her, ‘Good cop, bad cop is it?’

He let the comment go, turned back to face the stage. ‘Must be starting.’

‘It’s a bit early.’ Clare checked her watch, curtains seemed to be moving on the stage. ‘Hang on, what’s this?’

Valentine followed the line of his wife’s fingernail as she pointed to the side of the stage. A broad man in a white shirt and black tie was peering from the edge of the curtain, he was theatre staff, but the man with him wasn’t.

‘Oh, Christ.’

‘What?’ Clare turned towards her husband. ‘What is it?’

As the detective stared out he recognised the figure beside the theatre usher, there was no mistaking the gangly frame beneath the well-worn wax jacket.

‘It’s Ally.’

Clare’s face drooped. ‘Who?’ She jerked her gaze back towards the stage. The usher was pointing to their row now, the man in the wax jacket easing himself down the stage and jogging towards the middle aisle.

‘Tell me this isn’t happening,’ said Clare.

Valentine searched for a response but found none. He turned towards his wife and garbled, ‘Something’s up. I don’t know what. Look, I’m sorry.’

Ally appeared out of breath before them. He nodded first to Clare, then to Valentine. ‘Hello, boss, we’ve got a live one, I’m afraid.’

‘A live what, Ally?’

The DS leaned over, lowered his voice. ‘Erm, maybe what I should have said was we’ve got a dead one.’

### 3

As Valentine rose from his chair, retrieved his coat, Clare sat with her arms folded tight across her chest. If there was a glimmer of sympathy lurking in her for the fact that he was going to miss their daughter's big night, Valentine couldn't find it. He'd angered her by doing the one thing he promised that he wouldn't do – put the job first, again.

The detective stood for a moment, fastening his coat, and trying to locate a crack in the stonewall Clare had built around herself, but it was useless. Her anger was one thing, merely the outward projection of her inner hurt, it was the upset he'd caused that dug at his conscience and made him want to plead forgiveness.

'Look, Clare . . .'

She cut in. 'Leave it.'

'I'm sorry, I have to . . .'

'Just go, will you.'

Valentine looked at DS McAlister – who had the good grace to avert his gaze and remove himself from the scene – he stood biting the inside of his cheek and tapping his foot. He was attracting the attention of the theatre goers, who were turning and staring, whispering to each other in wonder at the strange break in proceedings.



‘Right, I’ll call, Clare.’ She didn’t move. As he left Valentine caught a glimpse from his father that indicated he might try and talk to his wife; it wasn’t an optimistic look.

Valentine followed the DS to the car park, there were too many people milling about inside the theatre for him to ask why he was being dragged away from his family. As the cooler air outside worked on his temperament the detective breathed deeply and tried to compose himself – it would have been too easy to get mad with Ally, too familiar a routine as well; whether it was age or experience keeping him composed, however, he didn’t know.

‘OK, son, tell me what’s what. Not the nightclub on Arthur Street is it? I heard it on the radio on the way in.’

Ally kept walking towards his car. As he pointed the keys the sidelights flashed. ‘No, that’s a hold-up, would you believe? DI Eddy Harris is all over it.’

‘Flash Harris, that fits . . . It was a jeweller’s last week, Ayr’s turning into bloody Dodge City. OK, so what have we got, then?’

‘Hard to say what the situation is at present, boss. All we know is it’s a bloke who’s taken a blade in the back and his claret’s all over the kitchen floor. We taking my car, yeah?’

Ally’s casual tone was customary among the squad but didn’t fool Valentine. He knew if they had a murder on their patch then every one of his team would be focused – it didn’t stop him teasing the DS. ‘You make it sound like one for that *Kitchen Nightmares* show.’

Ally allowed himself a grin, by the time they got inside

the car he had upgraded to a laugh. ‘Those celebrity chefs are a joke, think they’d try on that hard-man patter in real life? Wouldn’t be five minutes before some psycho was tenderising the Botox out their face.’ The car’s engine spluttered, the wheels turned on the tarmac.

Valentine spoke: ‘Am I going to have to batter the details of this case out of you, Ally?’ They were at the bus garage, turning onto the Sandgate. ‘Where are we going for a start, son?’

‘Whitletts, boss.’

The DI nodded. ‘It just doesn’t get any better does it?’

‘No, sir. It’s the junkies isn’t it? I heard some statistic the other day that nearly forty per cent of the houses up there have a drug dependent.’

‘Is this a drugs killing, or are you just trying to make me think you actually read the background reports that cross your desk?’

‘I don’t know much more than I’ve told you.’ The King Street station came into view, lights glowing inside creating the appearance of industry. ‘Looks busy, boss. Think we’ll be burning the midnight oil tonight?’

Having to pull a late shift at the station on the night his eldest daughter had made her stage debut, as the rest of the family were celebrating, crushed Valentine. The feeling passed quickly, though, as his sense of duty was renewed by the situation. There had been a murder in his hometown, and that was something he could never ignore. Whatever was stacking up at home, none of it compared to the need for justice. That would never change because it was the other side of his devotion to his family:

if anything happened to them, he would expect no less than the kind of retribution only someone like him could deliver.

‘Ally, when’s the most important part of an investigation?’

The DS glanced in Valentine’s direction. ‘Have I said something wrong?’

‘The first twenty-four hours, son. Forty-eight hours at a push. After that we’re onto extrapolating the known facts and, not a favourite of mine, guesswork.’

‘I think I see what you’re getting at.’

‘You do? Good.’ Valentine pointed to a gap in the road where a row of police cars had parked up, he had the car door open before the vehicle stopped. As the brakes halted the wheels, he pushed himself from the car and motioned with a curled index finger for DS McAlister to follow promptly. On the pavement he was met by a crowd of noisy residents. The noisiest – a woman in sweatpants and a housecoat who was shadowed by two hyperactive youngsters – fronted up to him, blocking the path. ‘You going to tell us what’s going on?’

Valentine sidestepped the woman without an answer and one of the children, a young boy in football colours, started up the path after him. ‘Get those children inside, please. This is a police investigation.’

As Valentine halted his stride, turned, DS McAlister directed the woman back towards the crowd on the side of the road. She wrested her arm from his grip. ‘Get your mitts off me, it’s a free country, you pig.’

‘It won’t be free for you if I arrest you,’ McAlister snapped back.

‘Arrest me for what?’ Her mouth drooped open, a gap-toothed glower that said she might just be stupid enough to test the officer.

‘How about disrupting a police investigation?’ His tone was flat, fully controlled. ‘Or maybe I’ll just do you for civil disobedience. Now get indoors, all of you.’

Valentine provided backup. ‘I’ll have officers round to speak to you all as soon as possible. But in the meantime please go home and let us get on with our work. There’s nothing to be gained from hanging about on the street, and it’s cold! Come on, take the kiddies indoors.’

The woman sunk back from the officers, pushed open the gate at the end of her garden. The crowd started to disperse. DS McAlister approached Valentine as he lengthened his stride towards the property. ‘That was a close one,’ he said.

‘They’re just scared. They know something’s happened, and on their own doorstep, I wouldn’t want that any more than them.’

‘Aren’t you worried about contamination of the crime scene? About kids running all over the evidence.’

The DI fought back an urge to ridicule McAlister for swatting him with the textbook. ‘Ally, you have to treat people like people. That’s your first and foremost. But it’s a fair point, why don’t you get uniform to put up a cordon?’

‘I’ll do that and if anyone crosses it, I’ll make sure they’re thrown in the divvy van, in full view of their pals.’

Valentine stamped towards the murder scene. ‘And when you’re done building community relations, come and join

the rest of the squad in there,' he pointed to the front door of the house, 'slight matter of a murder investigation to get under way.'