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Written by Ian Rankin

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IAN RANKIN

LET IT BLEED

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One

BRIDGES

1

A winter night, screaming out of Edinburgh.

The front car was being chased by three others. In the chasing cars were police officers. Sleet was falling through the darkness, blowing horizontally. In the second of the police cars, Inspector John Rebus had his teeth bared. He gripped the doorhandle with one hand, and the front edge of his passenger seat with the other. In the driver's seat, Chief Inspector Frank Lauderdale seemed to have shed about thirty years. He was a youth again, enjoying the feeling of power which came from driving fast, driving a wee bit crazy. He sat well forward, peering through the windscreen.

'We'll get them!' he yelled for the umpteenth time. 'We'll get the bastards!'

Rebus couldn't unlock his jaw long enough to form a reply. It wasn't that Lauderdale was a bad driver … Well OK, it wasn't *just* that Lauderdale was a bad driver; the weather bothered Rebus too. When they'd taken the second roundabout at the Barnton Interchange, Rebus had felt the car's back wheels losing all grip on the slick road surface. The tyres weren't brand new to start with; probably retreads at that. The air temperature was near zero, the sleet lying treacherously in wait. They were out of the city now, leaving traffic lights and junctions behind. A car chase here should be safer. But Rebus didn't feel safe.

In the car in front were two young, keen uniforms, with a DS and a DC in the car behind. Rebus looked into the

wing mirror and saw headlights. He looked out of the passenger-side window and saw nothing. Christ, it was dark out there.

Rebus thought: I don't want to die in the dark.

A telephone conversation the previous day.

'Ten grand and we let your daughter go.'

The father licked his lips. 'Ten? That's a lot of money.'

'Not to you.'

'Wait, let me think.' The father looked at the pad, where John Rebus had just scribbled something. 'It's short notice,' he told the caller. Rebus was listening on an earpiece, staring at the tape recorder's silently turning spools.

'That attitude could get her hurt.'

'No … please.'

'Then you'd better get the money.'

'You'll bring her with you?'

'We're not cheats, mister. She'll be there if the money is.'

'Where?'

'We'll phone tonight with details. One last thing, no police, understand? Any sign, even a distant siren, and next time you see her'll be the Co-op funeral parlour.'

'We'll get them!' Lauderdale shouted.

Rebus felt his jaw unlock. 'All right, we'll get them. So why not ease off?'

Lauderdale glanced at him and grinned. 'Lost your bottle, John?' Then he jerked the wheel and pulled out to overtake a transit van.

The phone caller had sounded young, working-class. In his mouth, 'understand' had become *unnerstaun*. He'd spoken of the Co-op. He'd used the word 'mister'. Young working class, maybe a bit naïve. Rebus just wasn't sure.

'Fife Police are waiting the other side of the bridge, right?' he persisted, shouting above the engine whine. Lauderdale had the poor gearbox pounding away in third.

'Right,' Lauderdale agreed.

'Then what's our hurry?'

'Don't be soft, John. They're *ours*.'

Rebus knew what his superior meant. If the front car made it over the Forth Road Bridge, then it was in Fife, and Fife Constabulary were waiting, a roadblock erected. It would be a Fife collar.

Lauderdale was on the radio, talking to the car ahead. His one-handed driving was only a little worse than his two-handed, shaking Rebus from side to side. Lauderdale put the radio down again.

'What do you reckon?' he said. 'Will they come off at Queensferry?'

'I don't know,' Rebus said.

'Well, those two L-plates in front think we'll catch them at the toll booths if they decide to go all the way.'

They probably would go all the way, too, driven by fear and adrenaline. The combination tended to put blinkers on your survival mechanism. You ran straight ahead, without thought or deviation. All you knew was flight.

'You could at least put on your seatbelt,' Rebus said.

'I could,' said Lauderdale. But he didn't. Boy racers didn't wear seatbelts.

The final slip-road was coming up. The front car sped past it. There was nowhere to go now but the bridge. The roadlighting high overhead grew thick again as they neared the toll booths. Rebus had a crazy notion of the fugitives stopping to pay their toll, just like everyone else. Winding down the window, fumbling for the coins …

'They're slowing.'

The road was spreading out, suddenly half a dozen lanes wide. Ahead of them stood the row of toll booths, and

beyond that the bridge itself, curving up towards its mid-point as the steel coils held its carriageway in suspension, so that even on a clear, bright day you couldn't see the far end when you drove on to it.

'They're definitely slowing.'

Only yards separated the four cars now, and Rebus could see, for the first time in a while, the back of the car they were chasing. It was a Y-registration Ford Cortina. The overhead lighting allowed him to make out two heads, driver and passenger, both male.

'Maybe she's in the boot,' he said dubiously.

'Maybe,' Lauderdale agreed.

'If she's not in the car with them, they can't harm her.'

Lauderdale nodded, not really listening, then reached for the radio again. There was a lot of interference. 'If they go on to the bridge,' he said, 'that's it, dead end. There's no way off for them, unless the Fifers fuck up.'

'So we stay here?' Rebus suggested. Lauderdale just laughed. 'Thought not,' said Rebus.

But now something was happening. The suspects' car … red tail-lights. Were they braking? No, reversing, and at speed. They hit the front police car with force, sending it shunting into Lauderdale's.

'Bastards!'

Then the front car was off again, veering crazily. It headed for one of the closed booths, hitting the barrier, not snapping it off but bending it enough to squeeze through. The sound of metal sparking against metal, and then they were gone. Rebus couldn't believe it.

'They're on the wrong carriageway!'

And so they were, whether by accident or design. Picking up speed, the car was racing north along the southbound lanes, its headlights switched to full beam. The front police car hesitated, then followed. Lauderdale looked ready to do the same thing, but Rebus reached out a hand

and tugged with all his might on the steering-wheel, bringing them back into the northbound lane.

'Stupid bastard!' Lauderdale spat, slamming the accelerator hard.

It was late night, not much traffic about. Even so, the driver of the front car was taking some risk.

'They'll only have this carriageway blocked, won't they?' Rebus pointed out. 'If those lunatics make it to the other side, they could get away.'

Lauderdale didn't say anything. He was looking across the central reservation, keeping the other two cars in sight. When he reached out for the radio, he all but lost control. The car jolted right, then harder to the left, slamming the metal side-rails. Rebus didn't want to think about the Firth of Forth, hundreds of feet below. But he thought of it anyway. He'd walked across the bridge a couple of times, using the footpaths either side of the roadways. That had been scary enough, the ever-present wind threatening to gust you over the side. He felt a charge in his toes: a fear of heights.

On the other carriageway, the inevitable was happening, the incredible just about to begin. An articulated lorry, up to speed after a crawl to the top of the rise, saw headlights ahead of it where no headlights should be. The suspects' car had already squeezed past two oncoming cars, and would have slipped into the outside lane to pass the artic, but the artic's driver panicked. He pulled into the outside lane and his hands froze, foot still hard on the accelerator. The truck hit metal and started to rise. It went up into the air, hanging over the central reservation, which was itself a network of steel lines. The trailer snagged and the cab snapped forward, breaking free of its container and sailing into the northbound lanes, sliding on sparks and a spray of water, directly into the path of the car in which Lauderdale and Rebus were travelling.

Lauderdale did his best to hit the brakes, but there was nowhere to go. The cab was sliding diagonally, taking up both lanes. Nowhere to go. Rebus had a couple of seconds to take it in. He felt his whole being contract, everything trying to be where his scrotum was. He pulled his knees up, feet and hands against the dashboard, tucking his head against his legs …

Whump.

With his eyes screwed shut, all Rebus had to go on were noises and feeling. Something punched him in the cheekbone, then was gone. There was a shattering of glass, like ice cracking, and the sound of metal being tortured. His gut told him the car was travelling backwards. There were other sounds too, further away. More metal, more glass.

The artic cab had lost a lot of its momentum, and contact with the car stopped it dead. Rebus thought his spine would crack. Whiplash, did they call it? More like brick-lash, slab-lash. The car stopped, and the first thing he realised was that his jaw hurt. He looked over to the driver's seat, reckoning Lauderdale had landed one on him for some unspecified reason, and saw that his superior wasn't there any more.

Well, his arse was there, staring Rebus in the face from its unpromising position where the windscreen used to be. Lauderdale's feet were tucked beneath the steering-wheel. One of his shoes had come off. His legs were draped over the steering-wheel itself. As for the rest of him, that was lying on what was left of the bonnet.

'Frank!' Rebus cried. 'Frank!' He knew better than to pull Lauderdale back into the car; knew better than to touch him at all. He tried opening his door, but it wasn't a door any more. So he undid his seatbelt and squeezed out through the windscreen. His hand touched metal, and he felt a sizzling sensation. Cursing and drawing his hand

away, he saw he'd placed it on a section of uncovered engine-block.

Cars were pulling to a stop behind him. The DS and DC were running forwards.

'Frank,' Rebus said quietly. He looked at Lauderdale's face, bloody but still alive. Yes, he was sure Lauderdale was alive. There was just something … He wasn't moving, you couldn't even be sure he was breathing. But there was *some*thing, some unseen energy which hadn't departed. Not yet at any rate.

'You all right?' someone asked.

'Help him,' Rebus ordered. 'Get an ambulance. And check the lorry-cab, see how the driver is.'

Then he looked across to the other carriageway, and what he saw froze him. He couldn't be sure at first, not totally. So he climbed up on to the metal spars separating the two carriageways. And then he was sure.

The suspects' car had left the carriageway. Left it altogether. They'd somehow vaulted the crash-barrier, slid across the pedestrian walkway, and had enough velocity left to send them through the final set of railings, the ones separating the walkway from that drop to the Firth of Forth. A wind was whipping around Rebus, blowing the sleet into his eyes. He narrowed them and looked again. The Cortina was still there, hanging out into space, its front wheels through the rails but its back wheels and boot still on the walkway. He thought of what might be in the boot.

'Oh my God,' he said. Then he started to clamber over the thick metal tines.

'What are you doing?' someone yelled. 'Come back!'

But Rebus kept moving, only barely aware of the drop beneath him, the amounts of space between each metal bar and its neighbour. More space than metal. The cold metal felt good against his stinging palm. He passed the back of the lorry. It had come to rest on its side, half on the

roadway, half resting on the central gap. There was a sign on its side: Byars Haulage. Jesus, it was cold. That wind, that damned eternal wind. Yet he could feel he was sweating. I should be wearing a coat, he thought. I'll catch my death.

Then he was on the carriageway, where a line of cars had come to an untidy stop. There was a proper gap between carriageway and walkway; a short distance, but all of it fresh air. Where the Cortina had made contact it had buckled the rails. Rebus stepped on to them, then made the short leap on to the walkway.

The two teenagers had stumbled from their car.

They'd had to climb over their seats and into the back in order to get out. The front doors led only to a fall. They were looking to left and right, seized by fright. There were sirens to the north. Fife Police were on their way.

Rebus held up his hands. The two uniformed officers were behind him. The youths weren't looking at Rebus; all they could see were uniforms. They understood simple things. They understood what uniforms meant. They looked around again, looking for an escape that wasn't there, then one of them – fair-haired, tall, slightly older-looking – gripped the younger one's hand and started leading him backwards.

'Don't do anything daft, sons,' said one of the uniforms. But they were just words. Nobody was listening. The two teenagers were against the rails now, only ten feet or so from the crashed car. Rebus walked slowly forwards, pointing with his finger, making it clear to them that he was going to the car. The impact had caused the boot to spring open an inch. Rebus carefully lifted it and looked in.

There was nobody inside.

As he closed the boot, the car rocked on its fulcrum then came to rest again. He looked towards the older of the boys.

'It's freezing out here,' he said. 'Let's get you into a car.'

Then things happened in slow motion. The fair-haired boy shook his head, almost smiling, and placed his arms around his friend in what looked like nothing less than an embrace. Then he leaned back against the rail and just kept leaning, taking his friend with him. There was no resistance. Their cheap trainers held against the road surface for a second, then slipped, legs flicking up and over as they fell into the darkness.

Maybe it was suicide, maybe flight, Rebus thought later. Whatever it was meant to be, it was death for sure. When you hit water from that height, it was like hitting concrete. A fall like that, through the dark, and they didn't scream, didn't utter a sound, and couldn't see the water rising to meet them.

Only they didn't hit water.

A Royal Navy frigate had just left Rosyth Dockyard and was gliding out towards the sea, and that's what they hit, embedding themselves in the metal deck.

Which, as everyone said back at the station, saved the police frogmen from a thankless sub-zero dip.

2

They took Rebus to the Royal Infirmary.

He travelled in the back of a police car. Frank Lauderdale was being brought by ambulance. Nobody knew yet how bad his injuries were. The frigate had been contacted by radio from Rosyth, but the crew had already found the bodies. Some had heard them hitting the deck. The frigate was returning to base. It would take a while to hammer the deck back into shape.

'I feel like I've been hit with a hammer myself,' Rebus told the nurse at the infirmary. He knew her; she'd treated him for burns a while back, rubbed lotion on and changed the dressings. She smiled as she left the little booth where he lay on an examining table. When she'd gone, Rebus took another account of himself. His jaw hurt where Lauderdale's fist had connected prior to flying through the windscreen. The pain seemed to be burrowing deep, like it was getting into the nerves of his teeth. Otherwise he didn't feel too bad; just shaken. He lifted his hands and held them in front of him. Yes, he could always blame the trembling on the crash, even if he knew he trembled a lot these days, smash or no smash. His palm was blistering nicely. Before putting on a dressing, the nurse had asked how he got the burn.

'Put my hand on a hot engine,' he'd explained.

'Figures.'

Rebus looked and saw what she meant: part of the engine's serial number had been branded on his flesh.

The doctor finally put in an appearance. It was a busy night. Rebus knew the doctor. His name was George Klasser and he was Polish or something, or at least his parents were. Rebus had always assumed Klasser was a bit too senior to do the night shift, yet here he was.

'Bitter outside, isn't it?' Dr Klasser said.

'Is that supposed to be funny?'

'Just making conversation, John. How do you feel?'

'I think I'm getting toothache.'

'Anything else?' Dr Klasser was fussing with the tools of his trade: penlight and stethoscope, a clipboard and non-working Biro. Eventually he was ready to examine the patient. Rebus didn't put up much of a fight. He was thinking of drinking: the creamy, almost gas-free head on a pint of eighty-bob. The warming aroma from a glass of malt.

'How's my chief inspector?' Rebus asked when the nurse returned.

'They're taking X-rays,' she told him.

'Car chases at your age,' Dr Klasser muttered. 'I blame television.'

Rebus took a good look at him, and realised he hadn't ever really looked at the man before, not properly. Klasser was in his early forties, steel-haired with a tanned and prematurely ageing face. If you only had head and shoulders to go on, you'd guess he was taller than was actually the case. He looked quite distinguished, which was why Rebus had pegged him for a senior consultant, something like that.

'I thought only lackeys and L-plates worked nights,' Rebus commented, while Klasser shone a light in his eyes.

Klasser put down the light and started to squeeze Rebus's back, prodding it like he was plumping up a cushion.

'Any pain there?'

'No.'

'What about there?'

'No more than usual.'

'Hmm … In answer to your question, John, I notice *you're* working nights. Does that make you lackey or L-plate?'

'That hurts.'

Dr Klasser smiled.

'So,' Rebus said, easing his shirt back on, 'what've I got?'

Klasser found a pen that worked and scribbled something on his clipboard. 'By my estimate, the way you're going, you've got a year, maybe two.'

The two men stared at one another. Rebus knew precisely what the doctor was talking about.

'I'm serious, John. You smoke, you drink like a fish, and you don't exercise. Since Patience stopped feeding you, your diet's gone to hell. Starch and carbohydrate, saturated fat …'

Rebus tried to stop listening. He knew his drinking was a problem these days precisely because he'd learned self-control. As a result, few people noticed that he *had* a problem. He was well dressed at work, alert when the occasion demanded, and even visited the gym some lunchtimes. He ate lazily, and maybe too much, and yes, he was back on the cigs. But then nobody was perfect.

'An uncanny prognosis, Doctor.' He finished buttoning his shirt, started tucking it into his waistband, then thought better of it. He felt more comfortable with the shirt outside his trousers. He knew he'd feel even more comfortable with his trouser button undone. 'And you can tell that just by prodding my back?'

Dr Klasser smiled again. He was folding up his stethoscope. 'You can't hide that sort of thing from a doctor, John.'

Rebus eased into his jacket. 'So,' he said, 'see you in the pub later?'

'I'll be there around six.'

'Fine.'

Rebus walked out of the hospital and took a deep breath.

It was two-thirty in the morning, about as cold and dark as the night could get. He thought about checking on Lauderdale, but knew it could wait till morning. His flat was just across The Meadows, but he didn't fancy the walk. The sleet was still falling, beginning to turn to snow, and there was that stabbing wind, like a thug you meet in a narrow lane, one who won't let you go.

Then a car horn sounded. Rebus saw a cherry-red Renault 5, and inside it DC Siobhan Clarke, waving towards him. He almost danced to the car.

'What are you doing here?'

'I heard,' she said.

'How come?' He opened the passenger-side door.

'I was curious. I wasn't on shift, but I kept in touch with the station, just to find out what happened at the meet. When I heard about the crash, I got dressed and came down here.'

'Well, you're a sight for sore teeth.'

'Teeth?'

Rebus rubbed his jaw. 'Sounds crazy, but I think that dunt has given me toothache.'

She started the car. It was lovely and warm. Rebus could feel himself drifting off.

'Bit of a disaster then?' she said.

'A bit.' They turned out of the gates, heading left towards Tollcross.

'How's the CI?'

'I don't know. They're X-raying him. Where are we going?'

'I'm taking you home.'

'I should go back to the station.'

She shook her head. 'I called in. They don't want you till morning.'

Rebus relaxed a little more. Maybe the painkillers were kicking in. 'When's the post-mortem?'

'Nine-thirty.' They were on Lauriston Place.

'There was a shortcut you could have taken back there,' Rebus told her.

'It was a one-way street.'

'Yes, but nobody uses it this time of night.' He realised what he'd said. 'Jesus,' he whispered, rubbing his eyes.

'So what was it?' Siobhan Clarke asked. 'I mean, was it an accident, or were they looking to escape?'

'Neither,' Rebus said quietly. 'If I'd to put money on it, I'd say suicide.'

She looked at him. 'Both of them?'

He shrugged, then shivered.

At the Tollcross lights they waited in silence until red turned to green. A couple of drunks were walking home, bodies tilted into the wind.

'Horrible night,' Clarke said, moving off. Rebus nodded, saying nothing. 'Will you attend the post-mortem?'

'Yes.'

'Can't say I'd fancy it.'

'Do we know who they were yet?'

'Not that I know of.'

'I keep forgetting, you're off-duty.'

'That's right, I'm off-duty.'

'What about the car, have we traced that?'

She turned towards him and laughed. It sounded odd to him, there in that stuffy overheated car, that time of night, with all that had gone before. Sudden laughter, as strange a sound as you'd ever hear. He rubbed his jaw and pushed an

exploratory finger into his mouth. The teeth he touched seemed solid enough.

Then he saw feet suddenly sweeping out from under two young bodies, the bodies leaning back into space and disappearing. They hadn't made a sound. No accident, no escape attempt; something fatalistic, something agreed between them.

'Cold?'

'No,' he said, 'I'm not cold.'

She signalled to turn off Melville Drive. To the left, what he could see of The Meadows was covered in a fresh glaze of slow. To the right was Marchmont, and Rebus's flat.

'She wasn't in the car,' he said flatly.

'There was always that possibility,' Siobhan Clarke said. 'We don't even know she's missing, not for a fact.'

'No,' he agreed, 'we don't.'

'Just two daft laddies.' She'd picked up the expression, but it sounded awkward given her English accent. Rebus smiled in the dark.

And then he was home.

She dropped him outside his tenement door, and refused a half-hearted offer of coffee. Rebus didn't want her to see the dump he called home. The students had moved out in October, leaving the place not quite his. There were things not quite right, not quite the way he remembered. Cutlery was missing, and had been replaced with stuff he hadn't seen before. It was the same with the crockery. When he'd moved back here from Patience's, he'd brought his stuff back in boxes. Most of the boxes were in the hall, still waiting to be unpacked.

Exhausted, he climbed the stairs, opened his door, and walked past the boxes, making straight for the living room and his chair.

His chair was much the same as ever. It had remoulded

itself quickly to his shape. He sat down, then got up again and checked the radiator. The thing was barely warm, and there was a racking noise from within. He needed a special key, some tool that would open the valve and let it bleed. The other radiators were the same.

He made himself a hot drink, put a tape into the cassette deck, and got the duvet off his bed. Back at his chair he took off some of his clothes and covered himself with the duvet. He reached down, unscrewed the top from a bottle of Macallan, and poured some into his coffee. He drank the first half of the mug, then added more whisky.

He could hear car engines, and metal twisting, and the wind whistling all around. He could see feet, the soles of cheap trainers, something close to a smile on the lips of a fair-haired teenager. But then the smile became darkness, and everything disappeared.

Slowly, he hugged himself to sleep.