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A Question of Blood

Written by Ian Rankin

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IAN RANKIN

A QUESTION OF BLOOD



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Day One

Tuesday

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'There's no mystery,' Detective Sergeant Siobhan Clarke said. 'Herdman lost his marbles, that's all.'

She was sitting by a hospital bed in Edinburgh's recently opened Royal Infirmary. The complex was to the south of the city, in an area called Little France. It had been built at considerable expense on a green-field site, but already there were complaints about a lack of useable space inside and car-parking space outside. Siobhan had found a bay eventually, only to discover that she would be charged for the privilege.

This much she had told Detective Inspector John Rebus on her arrival at his bedside. Rebus's hands were bandaged to the wrists. When she'd poured him some tepid water, he'd cupped the plastic beaker to his mouth, drinking carefully as she watched.

'See?' he'd chided her afterwards. 'Didn't spill a drop.'

But then he'd spoilt the act by letting the beaker slip as he tried to manoeuvre it back on to the bedside cabinet. The rim of its base hit the floor, Siobhan snatching it first bounce.

'Good catch,' Rebus had conceded.

'No harm done. It was empty anyway.'

Since then, she'd been making what both of them knew was small-talk, skirting questions she was desperate to ask and instead filling him in on the slaughter in South Queensferry.

Three dead, one wounded. A quiet coastal town just north of the city. A private school, taking boys and girls

from age five to eighteen. Roll of six hundred, now minus two.

The third body belonged to the gunman, who'd turned his weapon on himself. No mystery, as Siobhan had said.

Except for the why.

'He was like you,' she was saying. 'Ex-army, I mean. They reckon that's why he did it: grudge against society.'

Rebus noticed that her hands were now being kept firmly in the pockets of her jacket. He guessed they were clenched and that she didn't know she was doing it.

'The papers say he ran a business,' he said.

'He had a power-boat, used to take out water-skiers.'

'But he had a grudge?'

She shrugged. Rebus knew she was wishing there was a place for her at the scene, anything to take her mind off the other inquiry – internal, this time, and with her at its core.

She was staring at the wall above his head, as if there was something there she was interested in other than the paintwork and an oxygen outlet.

'You haven't asked me how I'm feeling,' he said.

She looked at him. 'How are you feeling?'

'I'm going stir-crazy, thank you for asking.'

'You've only been in one night.'

'Feels like more.'

'What do the doctors say?'

'Nobody's been to see me yet, not today. Whatever they tell me, I'm out of here this afternoon.'

'And then what?'

'How do you mean?'

'You can't go back to work.' Finally, she studied his hands. 'How're you going to drive or type a report? What about taking phone calls?'

'I'll manage.' He looked around him, his turn now to avoid eye contact. Surrounded by men much his age and sporting the same greyish pallor. The Scots diet had taken its toll on this lot, no doubt about it. One guy was coughing for want of a cigarette. Another looked like he had

breathing problems. The overweight, swollen-livered mass of local manhood. Rebus held up one hand so he could rub a forearm over his left cheek, feeling the unshaven rasp. The bristles, he knew, would be the same silvered colour as the walls of his ward.

'I'll manage,' he repeated into the silence, lowering the arm again and wishing he hadn't raised it in the first place. His fingers sparked with pain as the blood pounded through them. 'Have they spoken to you?' he asked.

'About what?'

'Come on, Siobhan . . .'

She looked at him, unblinking. Her hands emerged from their hiding place as she leaned forwards on the chair.

'I've another session this afternoon.'

'Who with?'

'The boss.' Meaning Detective Chief Superintendent Gill Templer. Rebus nodded, satisfied that as yet it wasn't going any higher.

'What will you say to her?' he asked.

'There's nothing to tell. I didn't have anything to do with Fairstone's death.' She paused, another unasked question hanging between them: *Did you?* She seemed to be waiting for Rebus to say something, but he stayed silent. 'She'll want to know about you,' Siobhan added. 'How you ended up in here.'

'I scalded myself,' Rebus said. 'It's stupid, but that's what happened.'

'I know that's what you say happened . . .'

'No, Siobhan, it's what *happened*. Ask the doctors if you don't believe me.' He looked around again. 'Always supposing you can find one.'

'Probably still combing the grounds for a parking space.'

The joke was weak enough, but Rebus smiled anyway. She was letting him know she wouldn't be pressing him any further. His smile was one of gratitude.

'Who's in charge at South Queensferry?' he asked her, signalling a change of subject.

'I think DI Hogan's out there.'

'Bobby's a good guy. If it can be wrapped up fast, he'll do it.'

'Media circus by all accounts. Grant Hood's been drafted in to handle liaison.'

'Leaving us short-changed at St Leonard's?' Rebus was thoughtful. 'All the more reason for me to get back there.'

'Especially if I'm suspended . . .'

'You won't be. You said it yourself, Siobhan – you didn't have anything to do with Fairstone. Way I see it, it was an accident. Now that something bigger's come along, maybe it'll die a natural death, so to speak.'

' "An accident".' She was repeating his words.

He nodded slowly. 'So don't worry about it. Unless, of course, you really did top the bastard.'

'John . . .' There was a warning in her tone. Rebus smiled again and managed a wink.

'Only joking,' he said. 'I know damned fine who Gill's going to want to see in the frame for Fairstone.'

'He died in a fire, John.'

'And that means I killed him?' Rebus held up both hands, turning them this way and that. 'Scalds, Siobhan. That's all, just scalds.'

She rose from the chair. 'If you say so, John.' Then she stood in front of him, while he lowered his hands, biting back the sudden rush of agony. A nurse was approaching, saying something about changing his dressings.

'I'm just going,' Siobhan informed her. Then, to Rebus: 'I'd hate to think you'd do something so stupid and imagine it was on my behalf.'

He started shaking his head slowly, and she turned and walked away. 'Keep the faith, Siobhan!' he called after her.

'That your daughter?' the nurse asked, making conversation.

'Just a friend, someone I work with.'

'You something to do with the Church?'

Rebus winced as she started unpeeling one of his bandages. 'What makes you say that?'

'The way you were talking about faith.'

'Job like mine, you need more than most.' He paused. 'But then, maybe it's the same for you?'

'Me?' She smiled, her eyes on her handiwork. She was short and plain-looking and businesslike. 'Can't hang around waiting for faith to do anything for you. So how did you manage this?' She meant his blistered hands.

'I got into hot water,' he explained, feeling a bead of sweat beginning its slow journey down one temple. Pain I can handle, he thought to himself. The problem was everything else. 'Can we switch to something lighter than bandages?'

'You keen to be on your way?'

'Keen to pick up a cup without dropping it.' Or a phone, he thought. 'Besides, there's got to be someone out there needs the bed more than I do.'

'Very public-minded, I'm sure. We'll have to see what the doctor says.'

'And which doctor would that be?'

'Just have a bit of patience, eh?'

Patience: the one thing he had no time for.

'Maybe you'll have some more visitors,' the nurse added.

He doubted it. No one knew he was here except Siobhan. He'd got one of the staff to call her, so she could tell Templer that he was taking a sick day, maybe two at the most. Thing was, the call had brought Siobhan running. Maybe he'd known it would; maybe that's why he'd phoned her rather than the station.

That had been yesterday afternoon. Yesterday morning, he'd given up the fight and walked into his GP's surgery. The locum doctor had taken one look and told him to get himself to hospital. Rebus had taken a taxi to A&E, embarrassed when the driver had to dig the money for the fare out of his trouser pockets.

'Did you hear the news?' the cabbie had asked. 'A shooting at a school.'

'Probably an air-gun.'

But the man had shaken his head. 'Worse than that, according to the radio . . .'

At A&E, Rebus had waited his turn. Eventually, his hands had been dressed, the injuries not serious enough to merit a trip to the Burns Unit out at Livingston. But he was running a high temperature, so they'd decided to keep him in, an ambulance transferring him from A&E to Little France. He thought they were probably keeping an eye on him in case he went into shock or something. Or it could be they feared he was one of those self-harm people. Nobody'd come to talk to him about that. Maybe that's why they were hanging on to him: waiting for a psychiatrist with a free moment.

He wondered about Jean Burchill, the one person who might notice his sudden disappearance from home. But things had cooled there a little. They managed a night together maybe once every ten days. Spoke on the phone more frequently, met for coffee some afternoons. Already it felt like a routine. He recalled that a while ago he'd dated a nurse for a short time. He didn't know if she still worked locally. He could always ask, but her name was escaping him. It was a problem: he had trouble sometimes with names. Forgot the odd appointment. Not a big deal really, just part and parcel of the ageing process. But in court he found himself referring to his notes more and more when giving evidence. Ten years ago he hadn't needed a script or any prompts. He'd acted with more confidence, and that always impressed juries – so lawyers had told him.

'There now.' His nurse was straightening up. She'd put fresh grease and gauze on his hands, wrapped the old bandages back round them. 'Feel more comfortable?'

He nodded. The skin felt a little cooler, but he knew it wouldn't last.

'You due any more painkillers?' The question was

rhetorical. She checked the chart at the bottom of his bed. Earlier, after a visit to the toilet, he'd looked at it himself. It gave his temperature and medication, nothing else. No coded information meant to be understood only by those in the know. No record of the story he'd given when he was being examined.

I'd run a hot bath . . . slipped and fell in.

The doctor had made a kind of noise at the back of his throat, something that said he would accept this without necessarily believing it. Overworked, lacking sleep – not his job to pry. Doctor rather than detective.

'I can give you some paracetamol?' the nurse suggested.

'Any chance of a beer to wash them down?'

She smiled that professional smile again. The years she'd worked in the NHS, she probably didn't hear too many original lines.

'I'll see what I can do.'

'You're an angel,' Rebus said, surprising himself. It was the sort of thing he felt a patient might say, one of those comfortable clichés. She was on her way, and he wasn't sure she'd heard. Maybe it was something in the nature of hospitals. Even if you didn't feel ill, they still had an effect, slowing you down, making you compliant. Institutionalising you. It could be to do with the colour scheme, the background hum. Maybe the heating of the place was complicit, too. Back at St Leonard's, they had a special cell for the 'maddies'. It was bright pink, and was supposed to calm them down. Why think a similar psychology wasn't being employed here? Last thing they wanted was a stroppy patient, shouting the odds and jumping out of bed every five minutes. Hence the suffocating number of blankets, tightly tucked in to further hamper movement. Just lie still . . . propped by pillows . . . bask in the heat and light . . . Don't make a fuss. Any more of this, he felt, and he'd start forgetting his own name. The world outside would cease to matter. No job waiting for him. No

Fairstone. No maniac spraying gunfire through the classrooms . . .

Rebus turned on his side, using his legs to push free the sheets. It was a two-way fight, like Harry Houdini in a straitjacket. The man in the next bed along had opened his eyes and was watching. Rebus winked at him as he levered his feet into fresh air.

'Just you keep tunnelling,' he told the man. 'I'll go for a walk, trickle the earth out of my trouser-leg.'

The reference seemed lost on his fellow prisoner . . .

Siobhan was back at St Leonard's, loitering by the drinks machine. A couple of uniforms were seated at a table in the small canteen, munching on sandwiches and crisps. The drinks machine was in the adjoining hallway, with a view out to the car park. If she were a smoker, she would have an excuse to step outside, where there was less chance of Gill Templer finding her. But she didn't smoke. She knew she could try ducking into the under-ventilated gym further along the corridor, or she could take a walk to the cells. But there was nothing to stop Templer using the station's PA system to hunt down her quarry. Word would get around anyway that she was on the premises. St Leonard's was like that: no hiding place. She yanked on the cola can's ring-pull, knowing what the uniforms at the table would be discussing – same thing as everyone else.

Three dead in school shoot-out.

She'd scanned each of the morning's papers. There were grainy photos of both the teenage victims: boys, seventeen years old. The words 'tragedy', 'waste', 'shock' and 'carnage' had been bandied about by the journalists. Alongside the news story, additional reporting filled page after page: Britain's burgeoning gun culture . . . school security shortfalls . . . a history of suicide killers. She'd studied the photos of the assassin – apparently, only three different snaps had so far been available to the media. One was very blurry indeed, as if capturing a ghost rather than something made

of flesh and blood. Another showed a man in overalls, taking hold of a rope as he made to board a small boat. He was smiling, head turned towards the camera. Siobhan got the feeling it was a publicity shot for his water-skiing business.

The third was a head-and-shoulders portrait from the man's days in military service. Herdman, his name was. Lee Herdman, aged thirty-six. Resident in South Queensferry, owner of a speedboat. There were photos of the yard where his business operated from. 'A scant half-mile from the site of the shocking event', as one paper gushed.

Ex-forces, probably easy enough for him to get a gun. Drove into the school grounds, parked next to all the staff cars. Left his driver's-side door open, obviously in a hurry. Witnesses saw him barge into the school. His first and only stop, the common room. Three people inside. Two now dead, one wounded. Then a shot to his own temple, and that was that. Criticisms were already flying – how was it possible, post-Dunblane, for Christ's sake, for someone just to walk into a school? Had Herdman shown any signs that he might be about to crack? Could doctors or social workers be blamed? The government? Somebody, anybody. It had to be someone's fault. No point just blaming Herdman: he was dead. There had to be a scapegoat out there. Siobhan suspected that by tomorrow they'd be wheeling out the usual suspects: violence in modern culture . . . films and TV . . . pressures of life . . . Then it would quieten down again. One statistic she *had* taken notice of – since the laws on gun ownership had been tightened after the Dunblane massacre, gun offences in the UK had actually risen. She knew what the gun lobby would make of that . . .

One reason everyone at St Leonard's was talking about the murders was that the survivor's father was a Member of the Scottish Parliament – and not just any MSP. Jack Bell had found himself in trouble six months back, apprehended by police during a trawl of the kerb-crawling

district down in Leith. Residents had been holding demonstrations, petitioning the constabulary to take action against the problem. The constabulary had reacted by swooping down one night, netting Jack Bell MSP amongst others.

But Bell had protested his innocence, putting his appearance in the area down to 'fact-finding'. His wife had backed him up, as had most of his party, with the result that Police HQ had decided to let the matter drop. But not before the media had had their fun at Bell's expense, leading the MSP to accuse the police of being in cahoots with the 'gutter press', of hounding him because of who he was.

The resentment had festered, leading Bell to make several speeches in parliament, usually remarking on inefficiency within the force and the need for change. All of which, it was agreed, might lead to a problem.

Because Bell had been arrested by a team from Leith, the very station now in charge of the shooting at Port Edgar Academy.

And South Queensferry just happened to be his constituency . . .

As if this wasn't enough to get tongues wagging, one of the murder victims happened to be the son of a judge.

All of which led to the second reason why everyone at St Leonard's was talking. They felt left out. Being a Leith call rather than St Leonard's, there was nothing to do but sit and watch, hoping there might be a need to draft officers in. But Siobhan doubted it. The case was cut and dried, the gunman's body laid out in the mortuary, his two victims somewhere nearby. It wouldn't be enough to deflect Gill Templer from—

'DS Clarke to the Chief Super's office!' The squawked imperative came from a loudspeaker attached to the ceiling above her head. The uniforms in the canteen turned to look at her. She tried to appear calm, sipping from her can. Her insides suddenly felt cold – nothing to do with the chilled drink.

'DS Clarke to the Chief Super!'

The glass door was ahead of her. Beyond it, her car sat obediently in its bay. What would Rebus do, run or hide? She had to smile as the answer came to her. He'd do neither. He'd probably take the stairs two at a time on his way to the boss's office, knowing *he* was right, and she, whatever she had to say to him, was wrong.

Siobhan dumped her can and headed for the stairs.

'You know why I wanted you?' Detective Chief Superintendent Gill Templer asked. She was seated behind the desk in her office, surrounded by the day's paperwork. As DCS, Templer was responsible for the whole of B Division, comprising three stations on the city's south side, with St Leonard's as Divisional HQ. It wasn't as hefty a workload as some, though things would change when the Scottish Parliament finally moved into its purpose-built complex at the foot of Holyrood Road. Templer already seemed to spend a disproportionate amount of time in meetings focused on the needs of the parliament. Siobhan knew that she hated this. No police officer joined the force because of a fondness for paperwork. Yet more and more, budgeting and finances were the topics of the day. Officers who could run their cases or their stations on-budget were prized specimens; those who could actually underspend were seen as altogether rarer and more rarefied beings.

Siobhan could see that it was taking its toll on Gill Templer. She always had a slightly harried look about her. Glints of grey were showing in her hair. Either she hadn't noticed, or couldn't find time these days to get them done. Time was defeating her. It made Siobhan wonder what price *she* would be asked to pay for climbing the career ladder. Always supposing that ladder was still visible after today.

Templer seemed preoccupied with a search of her desk drawer. Eventually she gave up and closed it, focusing her attention on Siobhan. As she did so, she lowered her chin.

This had the effect of hardening her gaze, but also, Siobhan couldn't help noticing, of accentuating the folds of skin around the throat and mouth. When Templer moved in her chair, her suit jacket creased below the breasts, showing that she'd gained some weight. Either too much fast food, or too many dinners at evening functions with the brass. Siobhan, who'd been in the gym at six o'clock that morning, sat a little more upright in her own chair, and lifted her head a little higher.

'I'm assuming it's about Martin Fairstone,' she said, beating Templer to the opening jab of the bout. When Templer stayed quiet, she went in again. 'I had nothing to do with—'

'Where's John?' Templer interrupted sharply.

Siobhan just swallowed.

'He's not at his flat,' Templer continued. 'I sent someone round there to check. Yet according to you he's taken a couple of days' sick leave. Where is he, Siobhan?'

'I . . .'

'The thing is, two nights ago Martin Fairstone was seen in a bar. Nothing unusual in that, except that his companion bore a striking resemblance to Detective Inspector John Rebus. Couple of hours later, Fairstone's being fried alive in the kitchen of his semi.' She paused. 'Always supposing he *was* alive when the fire started.'

'Ma'am, I really don't—'

'John likes to look out for you, doesn't he, Siobhan? Nothing wrong in that. John's got this knight-in-tarnished-armour thing, hasn't he? Always has to be looking for another dragon to fight.'

'This doesn't have anything to do with DI Rebus, ma'am.'

'Then what's he hiding from?'

'I'm not aware that he's hiding at all.'

'But you've seen him?' It was a question, but only just. Templer allowed herself a winning smile. 'I'd put money on it.'

'He's really not well enough to come in,' Siobhan parried, aware that her punches were losing much of their previous force.

'If he can't come here, I'm quite willing for you to take me to him.'

Siobhan felt her shoulders sag. 'I need to talk to him first.'

Templer was shaking her head. 'This isn't something you can negotiate, Siobhan. According to you, Fairstone was stalking you. He gave you that black eye.' Siobhan raised an involuntary hand towards her left cheekbone. The marks were fading; she knew they were more like shadows now. They could be hidden with make-up, or explained by tiredness. But she still saw them when she looked in the mirror.

'Now he's dead,' Templer was continuing. 'In a house fire, possibly suspicious. So you can see that I have to talk to anyone who saw him that night.' Another pause. 'When was the last time *you* saw him, Siobhan?'

'Which one – Fairstone or DI Rebus?'

'Both, if you like.'

Siobhan didn't say anything. Her hands went to clasp the metal arms of her chair, but she realised it had no arms. A new chair, less comfortable than the old one. Then she saw that Templer's chair was new, too, and set an inch or two higher than before. A little trick to give her an edge over any visitor . . . which meant the Chief Super felt the need of such props.

'I don't think I'm prepared to answer, ma'am.' Siobhan paused. 'With respect.' She got to her feet, wondering whether she'd sit down again if told to.

'That's very disappointing, DS Clarke.' Templer's voice was cold; no more first names. 'You'll tell John we've had a word?'

'If you want me to.'

'I expect you'll want to get your stories straight, prior to any inquiry.'

Siobhan acknowledged the threat with a nod. All it needed was a request from the Chief Super, and the Complaints would come shuffling into view, bringing with them their briefcases full of questions and scepticism. The Complaints: full title, the Complaints and Conduct Department.

'Thank you, ma'am,' was all Siobhan said, opening the door and closing it again behind her. There was a toilet cubicle along the hall, and she went and sat there for a while, taking a small paper bag from her pocket and breathing into it. The first time she'd suffered a panic attack, she'd felt as if she was going into cardiac arrest: heart pounding, lungs giving out, her whole body surging with electricity. Her doctor had said she should take some time off. She'd entered his surgery thinking he would recommend her to the hospital for tests, but instead he'd told her to buy a book about her condition. She'd found one in a pharmacy. It listed every single one of her symptoms in its first chapter, and made a few suggestions. Cut down on caffeine and alcohol. Eat less salt and fat. Try breathing into a paper bag if an attack seems imminent.

The doctor had said her blood pressure was a bit high, suggested exercise. So she'd started coming into work an hour early, spending that time in the gym. The Commonwealth Pool was just down the road, and she'd promised herself she'd start swimming there.

'I eat fine,' she'd told her doctor.

'Try making a list over the course of a week,' he'd said. So far, she hadn't bothered. And she kept forgetting her swimsuit, too.

All too easy to blame Martin Fairstone.

Fairstone: in court on two charges – housebreaking and assault. One of the neighbours challenging him as he left the flat he'd just looted; Fairstone smashing the woman's head into a wall, stamping on her face so hard the sole of one trainer left its impression. Siobhan giving evidence, doing her best. But they hadn't recovered the shoe, and

none of the haul from the flat had turned up in Fairstone's home. The neighbour had given a description of her attacker, then had picked out Fairstone's mug-shot, later on choosing him again at the ID parade.

There were problems, which the Procurator Fiscal's office had been quick to identify. No evidence at the scene. Nothing to link Fairstone to the crimes except an ID and the fact that he was a known housebreaker with several convictions for assault.

'The shoe would have been nice.' The Fiscal Depute had scratched at his beard and asked if they might try dropping either of the charges, maybe do a deal.

'And he gets a cuff round the ear and heads back home?' Siobhan had argued.

In court it was pointed out to Siobhan by the defence that the neighbour's original description of her attacker bore little resemblance to the figure in the dock. The victim herself fared little better, admitting to a margin of uncertainty which the defence exploited to the full. When giving her own evidence, Siobhan used as many hints as she could to let everyone know that the defendant had a history. Eventually, the judge couldn't ignore the remonstrations by the defence counsel.

'You're on a final warning, Detective Sergeant Clarke,' he had said. 'So unless you have some reason why you wish to scupper the Crown's chances in this case, I suggest you choose your answers more carefully from now on.'

Fairstone had just glared at her, knowing full well what she was trying to do. And afterwards, the not guilty verdict delivered, he'd bounded out of the court building as if there were springs in the heels of his brand-new trainers. He'd grabbed Siobhan by the shoulder to stop her walking away.

'That's assault,' she'd told him, trying not to show how furious and frustrated she felt.

'Thanks for helping me get off in there,' he'd said.

'Maybe I can return the favour some day. I'm off to the pub to celebrate. What's your poison?'

'Drop down the nearest sewer, will you?'

'I think I'm in love.' A grin spreading to cover his narrow face. Someone called to him: his girlfriend. Bottle-blonde hair, black tracksuit. Pack of cigs in one hand, mobile phone to her ear. She'd provided his alibi for the time of the attack. So had two of his friends.

'Looks like you're wanted.'

'It's *you* I want, Shiv.'

'You want me?' She waited till he nodded. 'Then invite me along next time you're going to beat up a complete stranger.'

'Give me your phone number.'

'I'm in the book – under "Police".'

'Marty!' His girlfriend's snarl.

'Be seeing you, Shiv.' Still grinning, he walked backwards for a few paces, then turned away. Siobhan had headed straight back over to St Leonard's to reacquaint herself with his file. An hour later, the switchboard had put through a call. It was him, phoning from a bar. She'd put the receiver down. Ten minutes later, he'd called again . . . and then another ten after that.

And the next day.

And the whole of the following week.

Unsure at first how to play it. She didn't know if her silences were working. They just seemed to make him laugh, made him try all the harder. She prayed he would tire, find something else to occupy him. Then he turned up at St Leonard's, tried following her home. She'd spotted him that time, led him a dance while summoning help on her mobile. A patrol car had pulled him up. Next day, he was kerbside again, just outside the car park at the back of St Leonard's. She'd left him there, exiting on foot instead by the front door, taking a bus home.

Still he wouldn't give up, and she realised that what had started – presumably – as a joke had turned into a more

serious form of game. So she'd decided to bring one of her stronger pieces into play. Rebus had noticed anyway: the calls she wasn't taking; the time she spent by the office window; the way she kept glancing around her when they were out on a call. So eventually she'd told him, and the pair of them had paid a visit to Fairstone's council semi in Gracemount.

It had started badly, Siobhan soon realising that her 'piece' played to his own set of rules rather than anyone else's. A struggle, the leg snapping from a coffee-table, pine veneer yielding to the MDF within. Siobhan feeling worse than ever afterwards – weak, because she had brought Rebus in rather than deal with it herself; trembling, because at the back of her mind lurked the thought that she'd known what would happen, and had wanted it to happen. Instigator and coward.

They'd stopped for a drink on the way back into town.

'Think he'll do anything?' Siobhan had asked.

'He started it,' Rebus told her. 'If he keeps on hassling you, he knows now what he's in for.'

'A hiding, you mean?'

'All I did was defend myself, Siobhan. You were there. You saw.' His eyes fixing hers until she nodded. And he was right. Fairstone had lunged at him. Rebus had pushed him down on to the coffee-table, trying to hold him there. Then the leg snapped and both men slid to the floor, rolling and struggling. It had all been over in a matter of seconds, Fairstone's voice shaking with rage as he told them to get out. Rebus pointing a warning finger, repeating his order to 'back off from DS Clarke'.

'Just clear out, the pair of you!'

Her hand touching Rebus's arm. 'It's finished. Let's go.'

'You think it's finished?' Flecks of white saliva spitting from the corners of Fairstone's mouth.

Rebus's final words: 'It better be, pal, unless you really want to start seeing some fireworks.'

She'd wanted to ask him what he'd meant, but instead

had bought a final round of drinks. In bed that night, she'd stared at the dark ceiling before falling into a doze, waking with a sudden feeling of terror, leaping to her feet, adrenalin surging through her. She'd crawled on hands and knees from her bedroom, believing that if she got to her feet, she would die. Eventually it passed, and she used her hands on the hallway wall as she rose up from the floor. She walked slowly back to bed and lay down on her side, curled into a ball.

More common than you might think, her doctor would eventually tell her, after the second attack.

Between times, Martin Fairstone made a complaint of harassment, dropping it eventually. And he'd also kept on calling. She'd tried to keep it from Rebus, didn't want to know what he meant by 'fireworks' . . .

The CID office was dead. People were out on calls, or busy at court. It seemed you could spend half your life waiting to give evidence, only for the case to collapse or the accused to make a change of plea. Sometimes a juror went AWOL, or someone crucial was sick. Time seeped away, and at the end of it all the verdict was not guilty. Even when found guilty, it might be a question of a fine or suspended sentence. The prisons were full, and seen more than ever as a last resort. Siobhan didn't think she was growing cynical, just realistic. There'd been criticism recently that Edinburgh had more traffic wardens than cops. When something like South Queensferry came up, it stretched things tighter. Holidays, sick leave, paperwork and court . . . and not nearly enough hours in any given day. Siobhan was aware that there was a backlog on her desk. Due to Fairstone, her work had been suffering. She could still feel his presence. If a phone rang, she would freeze, and a couple of times she caught herself heading for the window, to check if his car was out there. She knew she was being irrational, but couldn't help it. Knew, too,

that it wasn't the kind of thing she could talk to someone about . . . not without seeming weak.

The phone was ringing now. Not on her own desk, but on Rebus's. If no one answered, the switchboard might try another extension. She crossed the floor, willing the sound to stop. It did so only when she picked up the receiver.

'Hello?'

'Who's that?' A male voice. Brisk, businesslike.

'DS Clarke.'

'Hiya, Shiv. It's Bobby Hogan here.' Detective Inspector Bobby Hogan. She'd asked him before not to call her Shiv. A lot of people tried it. Siobhan, pronounced Shi-vawn, shortened to Shiv. When people wrote her name down, it turned into all sorts of erroneous spellings. She remembered that Fairstone had called her 'Shiv' a few times, attempting familiarity. She hated it, and knew she should correct Hogan, but she didn't.

'Keeping busy?' she asked instead.

'You know I'm handling Port Edgar?' He broke off. 'Course you do, stupid question.'

'You come over well on TV, Bobby.'

'I'm always open to flattery, Shiv, and the answer is "no".'

She couldn't help smiling. 'I'm not exactly snowed under here,' she lied, glancing across at the folders on her desk.

'If I need an extra pair of hands, I'll let you know. Is John around?'

'Mr Popular? He's taken a sickie. What do you want him for?'

'Is he at home?'

'I can probably get a message to him.' She was intrigued now. There was some urgency in Hogan's voice.

'You know where he is?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'