Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

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

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

Opening Extract from...

Dark Room

Written by Steve Mosby

Published by Orion

All text is copyright © of the author

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

DARK ROOM

Steve Mosby



First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Steve Mosby 2012

The moral right of Steve Mosby to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 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 the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 4189 1
ISBN (Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 4190 7
ISBN (Ebook) 978 1 4091 4191 4

Typeset at the Spartan Press Ltd,
Lymington, Hants
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd,
St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.orionbooks.co.uk

One

It started in the grids.

That's what we call the spread of interlocking estates on the northern bank of the Kell, the river that curls through the heart of our city, and the closest we have to a ghetto. The roads here criss-cross each other at right angles, and all of them are lined with identical concrete blocks of flats. At ground level, most are tagged with eastern European graffiti; up above, balconies trail patchwork washing in the breeze like strange flags. Each six-storey block has a small lawn surrounding it, but these token nods to greenery can't hide the blocky anonymity of the buildings behind.

From above, flying into the city by plane, it looks as though someone has laid out odd stone hieroglyphs in endless rows and columns – or perhaps as though the river is pulling back its top lip: baring strange grey teeth at the sky.

I had the sat nav on and the pulsing blue arrow told me I was nearly there, but it would have been obvious enough anyway. If not from the police cordon strung across the road up ahead, then from the woman's screams. I could hear those from the end of the road.

It was half past ten on a Friday morning: a warm day, so I had the car window rolled down and my arm resting casually on the sill, sleeves rolled up, the sun gentle and pleasant on my forearm.

Beyond the cordon, I could see three meat vans and four police cars parked up, the blue light on top of the nearest winking meekly in the sunlight. Grunt-pool uniforms were stationed on both sides of the road, keeping rubbernecking residents from nearby blocks separated and stopping whatever stories they might have to tell us from becoming confused or exaggerated.

I pulled up by the cordon.

The car door echoed as I slammed it. The screams pierced the neighbourhood: an awful noise, drifting down from two floors above. It was the sound of a broken soul: the victim's mother, I presumed. In the warm, butter-coloured sunlight, the cries seemed even more incongruous. It's stupid, but there's always something a little more shocking when bad things happen in the daytime rather than at night.

'Detective Hicks.' I showed my badge to the officer manning the cordon at this end of the street; he nodded once and lifted it for me. I said, 'You doing all right?'

'Yes, sir. Detective Fellowes is over there.'

'Thanks.'

Detective Fellowes – Laura, my partner – was standing outside Block 8 up ahead. She was talking to a handful of the pool officers and pointing here and there, directing them to the hundred different tasks that attend a murder scene.

Under normal circumstances, we'd have arrived on site together, but I'd had the morning off for Rachel's appointment with the midwife. Laura had paged me while we were in the suite upstairs, nearly done: Rachel had been manoeuvring herself awkwardly off the bed while wiping the ultrasound gel off her stomach with bunched tissue paper, and that was when I'd felt the vibration against my hip.

I'd known immediately it had to be something serious for Laura to bother me off-time. But then I was predisposed to feel that way at the moment, especially in those circumstances. Any pregnancy-related activity tended to generate a frisson of dread. Whenever I thought about the baby, the world immediately

became fragile and vulnerable, and it felt very much as though something could go wrong at any time. It seemed pretty reasonable to think that bad things might happen in a pregnancy, and not so much weirder to extrapolate that out to the world in general.

I reached Laura just as the other officers moved away to perform whatever tasks had been allocated to them.

'Mor-ning,' I said casually.

'Hicks.'

Laura was dressed in a dark trouser suit, her light brown hair cut to shoulder length. She ran a hand through it now, harried and stressed on the surface, but the hair fell neatly back in place. It took her a certain amount of time every morning to arrange it in such a way that the inevitable grabbing and clenching wouldn't do the amount of damage you'd usually expect.

We had the same colour hair, and the same speckling of freckles across our nose and cheeks, and since we were both in our mid thirties but looked younger, people often mistook us for brother and sister. That annoyed her a great deal. She knew me too well.

'Sorry to call you out today.'

'No worries. Good excuse to get away.'

That earned me a disapproving look. In the eight months of Rachel's pregnancy, Laura had spent an inordinate amount of time trying to convince me that my becoming a father would be a good thing for anyone. She'd never succeeded, but I'd learned to placate her.

She said, 'You don't mean that.'

'No.'

'How is everything?'

'Everything is fine. Everything is normal.'

'Good.'

I nodded up at the building, from which the woman's screams were still drifting down. 'I take it there's a doctor with her?'

'Yes. Shit, yes. I hope the meds are going to kick in soon.

It's doing everyone's head in. Plus she's very elderly and very distressed. It's understandable, I guess, finding her daughter like that.'

'Could end up with two for the price of one,' I said.

Another disapproving look. 'This is a bad one, Hicks.'

Sometimes Laura was at least tolerant of my flippancy, if never quite a willing participant, but today was clearly not one of those times.

'Sorry,' I said. 'What have we got?'

'Victim is – or appears to be – a thirty-two-year-old woman named Vicki Gibson.'

She pointed down the road to the front of the block. A hedge ran along the pavement, dividing it off from a small lawn and the block of flats beyond. The SOCOs had erected their white tent between the hedge and the building.

'Appears to be?' I said.

'No formal ID as yet. The mother – Carla Gibson – she recognised the clothes her daughter was wearing, but beyond that it's a little difficult to say.'

A bad one.

'Right. That's Carla Gibson I can hear?'

'Uh-huh. They share the flat on the third floor. Just the two of them. Carla tends to go to bed early, get up early. Wakes with the birds – four every morning. So she notices her daughter hasn't come home, looks out from the patio up there, more by chance than anything else, and sees the body.'

I glanced up at the third floor, to the concrete balcony where the screaming was now falling silent. It was pretty rough: the balcony would have offered Carla Gibson a clear view down to where her daughter had been lying – was still lying, in fact.

Had the body been left there deliberately?

'Where had she been?'

Laura led me down the street, talking it through as she went.

'Vicki Gibson worked two jobs, as and when she could. Last night she was doing a shift at Butler's launderette. It's a few blocks over yonder.' She gestured vaguely behind us. 'The shift

finished at two in the morning, so she was killed sometime between two and four, probably closer to two.'

'CCTV?' I said. 'The launderette, I mean.'

'You're joking, right? But there was another girl on shift, and she says Gibson did the full rota. She might be lying, but it fits. Gibson couldn't afford a car – she walked home every night. And it looks like the attacker got her here.'

We stopped on the pavement, level with the tent. The hedge was about five feet tall, and there was a clear break in it where the foliage had been damaged.

I said, 'So he grabs her here on the pavement, and forces her through. Or else he's waiting behind the hedge and pulls her.'

'Either. Too early to tell.'

Laura emphasised the latter, knowing I was a little too fond of jumping to conclusions – relying on statistics and probabilities and forming judgements on the basis of them. She considered it one of my greater failings, but we both knew it wasn't much of one really, considering I generally ended up being right.

And I couldn't help myself. As we walked down the street to the main footpath, I was thinking it over: putting together what I already knew; preparing a few ideas subconsciously.

The grids are a concentration of poverty. At their heart – in the bullseye – it's mostly immigrants, many of them illegal. The streets there are a hotchpotch of languages and cultures: insular communities; smaller cities beneath the skin of the main. You look up and can't tell how many people might be clustered inside the blocks. The graffiti is mostly second-generation kids daubing flags and staking territory, manufacturing meaning from the environment. A lot of the people who live there never leave even their own grid, never mind the estate as a whole.

But we weren't in the heart now. The builds might look the same, but here at the edge, close to the river, they cost a bit more. It isn't uncommon to find students living here, as the accommodation is rougher but considerably cheaper than

they'd find south of the river, closer to campus. And someone like Vicki Gibson, working two jobs in order to keep herself and her mother indoors and alive – in grids terms, she was practically a respectable professional.

Why would someone want to kill her? Robbery was a possibility. A sexual motive? Slightly less likely, given the probability of being seen, but not impossible.

Too early to tell . . .

Across the small lawn, the grass still felt spongy with dew, glistening slightly in the mid-morning sun. It was surprisingly well tended: trimmed down neat, so you could imagine spreading out a picnic in front of a tent very different to the one we were approaching now.

I lifted the flap on the side in time to see the flash of a camera: a SOCO was bent double inside, photographing the victim where she was lying in the shade.

I hesitated. Just slightly.

Vicki Gibson was lying on her back, one leg bent so that the right foot rested under the other knee. Both her red heels had come off and were stuck twisted in the grass; she was still wearing a red skirt and a black blouse, and a fluffy brown coat the gloom rendered as rust. Both arms were splayed out to her sides. Her hair was long: swirling black tendrils in the grass, like she was lying in an inch of water.

She had no face left to speak of.

A bad one.

'Well,' I told Laura. 'You were right.'

I was still noting the details, though – a discarded red handbag rested beside her, the cord lying curled in the grass. Not robbery, then. And the clothes didn't appear to have been disturbed. That left one obvious possibility.

'Andy.' Simon Duncan, the forensic liaison for our department, was standing by the body. He nodded at me. 'Glad you could make it.'

'Wouldn't miss it for the world.'

Simon was tall and mostly bald, with a climber's build.

Beside him, the pathologist, Chris Dale, who looked short and serious at the best of times, appeared even more so now, squatting down by his victim. He glanced up to acknowledge my presence, but only briefly.

'I know it's early days,' I said, 'but do we have anything concrete yet?'

Simon arched an eyebrow.

'You've not got it figured out yet? You surprise me, Andrew. I thought that might explain the delay in your arrival – that you were already off arresting the perpetrator.'

'I do have an idea,' I said. 'Why don't you see if you can throw me off course, eh?'

Simon moved to one side, to allow the SOCO with the camera around to the head end of the body. In doing so, he gave us a better view as well. It couldn't really be called the 'head end' any more.

'There's one very obvious injury,' Simon said, just as the camera flashed across it. 'Or rather, numerous injuries to one specific part of the victim. As far as we can tell, there are no other serious injuries. I think we can probably run with the damage to the head being the cause of death rather than post-mortem.'

I nodded.

Whoever had attacked Vicki Gibson had beaten her about the head and face so severely that it was impossible to recognise her. Even dental records would be unlikely, I thought, trying to examine the injuries professionally. The front of her skull had been caved in. There was her neck, pristine and unblemished, and that hair swirled above, but everything in between was gone.

'No defensive injuries?'

Simon shook his head. 'Looks like the first blow was enough to incapacitate her. He either dragged her through the hedge or else the blow knocked her that way.'

'Too early to tell,' I said.

'Yes. Regardless, he hit her many times, and continued to do

so long after her death. As you can see, the entire front of her skull has been seriously damaged.'

Yes, I could see that all too clearly.

I squatted down and peered at the hands.

'No sexual assault?'

'Nothing obvious at this stage.'

'And no robbery.'

'Her credit cards and money are still in the handbag.' He arched his eyebrow again.' I'm not throwing you so far, am I?'

'I'm not telling you yet. Weapon?'

Simon shook his head. 'Impossible to say for sure right now, or possibly at all. But since we've not found it, I imagine it would be something small and hard: a hammer or a pipe. A rock perhaps. Something hand-held anyway.'

I nodded. The weapon would need to be hard enough to inflict this level of damage, but light enough for the killer to be able to carry it away with him afterwards: something that could deliver the force of a boulder but not the weight. That was an awful thought, of course. A heavy boulder might cause this level of damage with only one or two blows. With something like a hammer, it would have taken much more time and effort; many, many more blows.

But it also meant this probably wasn't a spur-of-the-moment crime. The attacker had most likely brought the weapon with him and taken it away again. And that degree of ferocity tended to indicate a personal motive. Not always, but usually.

'Come on then, Sherlock Hicks. Let's have it.'

I stood up.

'Ex-husband.' Then I corrected myself: 'Well, ex-partner. She used to wear a ring, but doesn't any more. It might have been an engagement ring.'

'Never married.' Laura inclined her head. 'The IT guys are pulling her files now, though, so if there's any previous complaints or restraining orders there, we'll know shortly.'

'There will be,' I said.

Bizarre as it sounds, I felt a little brighter. As bad as this murder was – and it was bad – I knew it would also be explicable. Because, ultimately, they all are. I'm not saying the explanation is ever satisfactory or reasonable – I'm not saying it's ever *enough* – but the reason is always there, and it always makes sense to the person who did it.

The fact is, most crimes conform to mundane statistical patterns. The vast majority of female murder victims, for example, are killed by somebody they know, and it's usually a partner or recent partner. Countrywide, two women die every week at the hands of men who are supposed to love them, or once claimed to, or imagine in their heads they did. So – especially having ruled out robbery and sexual assault – an ex-partner was the obvious guess. Most DV murders happen indoors, but this was close enough: someone had known where and when to find her. And now that I thought about it, the fact that Vicki Gibson, at the age of thirty-two, lived with her mother also indicated an ex rather than current partner.

I was sure that the IT guys – if not Carla Gibson herself – would very shortly give us a man's name. At some point in the past, either Vicki or her mother was likely to have called the police before, because these things rarely just explode out of nowhere. Gibson's ex-boyfriend would have a string of reports against his name, and probably some charges. At some point, she would have dared to leave him. And because of the type of man he was, the resentment and hurt everyone feels in such circumstances would have been much blacker and more aggressive than most.

From some of the other domestic homicides I'd dealt with, I could almost picture the pathetic bastard. When we picked him up, he'd probably still be blaming Vicki Gibson for what had happened – even now. Still convinced she'd pushed his buttons, and that it was somehow her fault.

'We'll see,' Laura said.

'We will.'

I was confident. This was a textbook bedroom crime, in my

own personal architecture of murder. Hideous and awful, but comprehensible and quickly tied shut.

It had to be that.

What else could it be?