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Mortal Causes

Written by Ian Rankin

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RANKIN
MORTAL
CAUSES



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The best book on the subject of Protestant paramilitaries is Professor Steve Bruce's *The Red Hand* (OUP, 1992). One quote from the book: 'There is no "Northern Ireland problem" for which there is a solution. There is only a conflict in which there must be winners and losers.'

The action of *Mortal Causes* takes place in a fictionalised summer, 1993, before the Shankill Road bombing and its bloody aftermath.

Perhaps Edinburgh's terrible inability to speak out,
Edinburgh's silence with regard to all it should be saying,
Is but the hush that precedes the thunder,
The liberating detonation so oppressively imminent now?

Hugh MacDiarmid

We're all gonna be just dirt in the ground.

Tom Waits

He could scream all he liked.

They were underground, a place he didn't know, a cool ancient place but lit by electricity. And he was being punished. The blood dripped off him onto the earth floor. He could hear sounds like distant voices, something beyond the breathing of the men who stood around him. Ghosts, he thought. Shrieks and laughter, the sounds of a good night out. He must be mistaken: he was having a very bad night in.

His bare toes just touched the ground. His shoes had come off as they'd scraped him down the flights of steps. His socks had followed sometime after. He was in agony, but agony could be cured. Agony wasn't eternal. He wondered if he would walk again. He remembered the barrel of the gun touching the back of his knee, sending waves of energy up and down his leg.

His eyes were closed. If he opened them he knew he would see flecks of his own blood against the whitewashed wall, the wall which seemed to arch towards him. His toes were still moving against the ground, dabbling in warm blood. Whenever he tried to speak, he could feel his face cracking: dried salt tears and sweat.

It was strange, the shape your life could take. You might be loved as a child but still go bad. You might have monsters for parents but grow up pure. His life had been neither one nor the other. Or rather, it had been both, for he'd been cherished and abandoned in equal measure. He was six,

and shaking hands with a large man. There should have been more affection between them, but somehow there wasn't. He was ten, and his mother was looking tired, bowed down, as she leaned over the sink washing dishes. Not knowing he was in the doorway, she paused to rest her hands on the rim of the sink. He was thirteen, and being initiated into his first gang. They took a pack of cards and skinned his knuckles with the edge of the pack. They took it in turns, all eleven of them. It hurt until he belonged.

Now there was a shuffling sound. And the gun barrel was touching the back of his neck, sending out more waves. How could something be so cold? He took a deep breath, feeling the effort in his shoulder-blades. There couldn't be more pain than he already felt. Heavy breathing close to his ear, and then the words again.

'Nemo me impune lacessit.'

He opened his eyes to the ghosts. They were in a smoke-filled tavern, seated around a long rectangular table, their goblets of wine and ale held high. A young woman was slouching from the lap of a one-legged man. The goblets had stems but no bases: you couldn't put them back on the table until they'd been emptied. A toast was being raised. Those in fine dress rubbed shoulders with beggars. There were no divisions, not in the tavern's gloom. Then they looked towards him, and he tried to smile.

He felt but did not hear the final explosion.

1

Probably the worst Saturday night of the year, which was why Inspector John Rebus had landed the shift. God was in his heaven, just making sure. There had been a derby match in the afternoon, Hibs versus Hearts at Easter Road. Fans making their way back to the west end and beyond had stopped in the city centre to drink to excess and take in some of the sights and sounds of the Festival.

The Edinburgh Festival was the bane of Rebus's life. He'd spent years confronting it, trying to avoid it, cursing it, being caught up in it. There were those who said that it was somehow atypical of Edinburgh, a city which for most of the year seemed sleepy, moderate, bridled. But that was nonsense; Edinburgh's history was full of licence and riotous behaviour. But the Festival, especially the Festival Fringe, was different. Tourism was its lifeblood, and where there were tourists there was trouble. Pickpockets and house-breakers came to town as to a convention, while those football supporters who normally steered clear of the city centre suddenly became its passionate defenders, challenging the foreign invaders who could be found at tables outside short-lease cafes up and down the High Street.

Tonight the two might clash in a big way.

'It's hell out there,' one constable had already commented as he paused for rest in the canteen. Rebus believed him all too readily. The cells were filling nicely along with the CID in-trays. A woman had pushed her drunken husband's fingers into the kitchen mincer. Someone was applying

superglue to cashpoint machines then chiselling the flap open later to get at the money. Several bags had been snatched around Princes Street. And the Can Gang were on the go again.

The Can Gang had a simple recipe. They stood at bus stops and offered a drink from their can. They were imposing figures, and the victim would take the proffered drink, not knowing that the beer or cola contained crushed up Mogadon tablets, or similar fast-acting tranquillisers. When the victim passed out, the gang would strip them of cash and valuables. You woke up with a gummy head, or in one severe case with your stomach pumped dry. And you woke up poor.

Meantime, there had been another bomb threat, this time phoned to the newspaper rather than Lowland Radio. Rebus had gone to the newspaper offices to take a statement from the journalist who'd taken the call. The place was a madhouse of Festival and Fringe critics filing their reviews. The journalist read from his notes.

'He just said, if we didn't shut the Festival down, we'd be sorry.'

'Did he sound serious?'

'Oh, yes, definitely.'

'And he had an Irish accent?'

'Sounded like it.'

'Not just a fake?'

The reporter shrugged. He was keen to file his story, so Rebus let him go. That made three calls in the past week, each one threatening to bomb or otherwise disrupt the Festival. The police were taking the threat seriously. How could they afford not to? So far, the tourists hadn't been scared off, but venues were being urged to make security checks before and after each performance.

Back at St Leonard's, Rebus reported to his Chief Superintendent, then tried to finish another piece of paperwork. Masochist that he was, he quite liked the Saturday back-

shift. You saw the city in its many guises. It allowed a salutary peek into Edinburgh's grey soul. Sin and evil weren't black – he'd argued the point with a priest – but were greyly anonymous. You saw them all night long, the grey peering faces of the wrongdoers and malcontents, the wife beaters and the knife boys. Unfocused eyes, drained of all concern save for themselves. And you prayed, if you were John Rebus, prayed that as few people as possible ever had to get as close as this to the massive grey nonentity.

Then you went to the canteen and had a joke with the lads, fixing a smile to your face whether you were listening or not.

'Here, Inspector, have you heard the one about the squid with the moustache? He goes into a restaurant and –'

Rebus turned away from the DC's story towards his ringing phone.

'DI Rebus.'

He listened for a moment, the smile melting from his face. Then he put down the receiver and lifted his jacket from the back of his chair.

'Bad news?' asked the DC.

'You're not joking, son.'

The High Street was packed with people, most of them just browsing. Young people bobbed up and down trying to instil enthusiasm in the Fringe productions they were supporting. Supporting them? They were probably the *leads* in them. They busily thrust flyers into hands already full of similar sheets.

'Only two quid, best value on the Fringe!'

'You won't see another show like it!'

There were jugglers and people with painted faces, and a cacophony of musical disharmonies. Where else in the world would bagpipes, banjos and kazoos meet to join in a busking battle from hell?

Locals said this Festival was quieter than the last. They'd

been saying it for years. Rebus wondered if the thing had ever had a heyday. It was plenty busy enough for him.

Though it was a warm night, he kept his car windows shut. Even so, as he crawled along the setts flyers would be pushed beneath his windscreen wipers, all but blocking his vision. His scowl met impregnable drama student smiles. It was ten o'clock, not long dark; that was the beauty of a Scottish summer. He tried to imagine himself on a deserted beach, or crouched atop a mountain, alone with his thoughts. Who was he trying to kid? John Rebus was *always* alone with his thoughts. And just now he was thinking of drink. Another hour or two and the bars would sluice themselves out, unless they'd applied for (and been granted) the very late licences available at Festival time.

He was heading for the City Chambers, across the street from St Giles' Cathedral. You turned off the High Street and through one of two stone arches into a small parking area in front of the Chambers themselves. A uniformed constable was standing guard beneath one of the arches. He recognised Rebus and nodded, stepping out of the way. Rebus parked his own car beside a marked patrol car, stopped the engine and got out.

'Evening, sir.'

'Where is it?'

The constable nodded towards a door near one of the arches, attached to the side wall of the Chambers. They walked towards it. A young woman was standing next to the door.

'Inspector,' she said.

'Hello, Mairie.'

'I've told her to move on, sir,' the constable apologised.

Mairie Henderson ignored him. Her eyes were on Rebus's. 'What's going on?'

Rebus winked at her. 'The Lodge, Mairie. We always meet in secret, like.' She scowled. 'Well then, give me a chance. Off to a show, are you?'

'I was till I saw the commotion.'

'Saturday's your day off, isn't it?'

'Journalists don't get days off, Inspector. What's behind the door?'

'It's got glass panels, Mairie. Take a keek for yourself.'

But all you could see through the panels was a narrow landing with doors off. One door was open, allowing a glimpse of stairs leading down. Rebus turned to the constable.

'Let's get a proper cordon set up, son. Something across the arches to fend off the tourists before the show starts. Radio in for assistance if you need it. Excuse me, Mairie.'

'Then there *is* going to be a show?'

Rebus stepped past her and opened the door, closing it again behind him. He made for the stairs down, which were lit by a naked lightbulb. Ahead of him he could hear voices. At the bottom of this first flight he turned a corner and came upon the group. There were two teenage girls and a boy, all of them seated or crouching, the girls shaking and crying. Over them stood a uniformed constable and a man Rebus recognised as a local doctor. They all looked up at his approach.

'This is the Inspector,' the constable told the teenagers. 'Right, we're going back down there. You three stay here.'

Rebus, squeezing past the teenagers, saw the doctor give them a worried glance. He gave the doctor a wink, telling him they'd get over it. The doctor didn't seem so sure.

Together the three men set off down the next flight of stairs. The constable was carrying a torch.

'There's electricity,' he said. 'But a couple of the bulbs have gone.' They walked along a narrow passage, its low ceiling further reduced by air- and heating-ducts and other pipes. Tubes of scaffolding lay on the floor ready for assembly. There were more steps down.

'You know where we are?' the constable asked.

'Mary King's Close,' said Rebus.

Not that he'd ever been down here, not exactly. But he'd been in similar old buried streets beneath the High Street. He knew of Mary King's Close.

'Story goes,' said the constable, 'there was a plague in the 1600s, people died or moved out, never really moved back. Then there was a fire. They blocked off the ends of the street. When they rebuilt, they built over the top of the close.' He shone his torch towards the ceiling, which was now three or four storeys above them. 'See that marble slab? That's the floor of the City Chambers.' He smiled. 'I came on the tour last year.'

'Incredible,' the doctor said. Then to Rebus: 'I'm Dr Galloway.'

'Inspector Rebus. Thanks for getting here so quickly.'

The doctor ignored this. 'You're a friend of Dr Aitken's, aren't you?'

Ah, Patience Aitken. She'd be at home just now, feet tucked under her, a cat and an improving book on her lap, boring classical music in the background. Rebus nodded.

'I used to share a surgery with her,' Dr Galloway explained.

They were in the close proper now, a narrow and fairly steep roadway between stone buildings. A rough drainage channel ran down one side of the road. Passages led off to dark alcoves, one of which, according to the constable, housed a bakery, its ovens intact. The constable was beginning to get on Rebus's nerves.

There were more ducts and pipes, runs of electric cable. The far end of the close had been blocked off by an elevator shaft. Signs of renovation were all around: bags of cement, scaffolding, pails and shovels. Rebus pointed to an arc lamp.

'Can we plug that in?'

The constable thought they could. Rebus looked around. The place wasn't damp or chilled or cobwebbed. The air seemed fresh. Yet they were three or four storeys beneath road level. Rebus took the torch and shone it through a

doorway. At the end of the hallway he could see a wooden toilet, its seat raised. The next door along led into a long vaulted room, its walls whitewashed, the floor earthen.

‘That’s the wine shop,’ the constable said. ‘The butcher’s is next door.’

So it was. It too consisted of a vaulted room, again whitewashed and with a floor of packed earth. But in its ceiling were a great many iron hooks, short and blackened but obviously used at one time for hanging up meat.

Meat still hung from one of them.

It was the lifeless body of a young man. His hair was dark and slick, stuck to his forehead and neck. His hands had been tied and the rope slipped over a hook, so that he hung stretched with his knuckles near the ceiling and his toes barely touching the ground. His ankles had been tied together too. There was blood everywhere, a fact made all too plain as the arc lamp suddenly came on, sweeping light and shadows across the walls and roof. There was the faint smell of decay, but no flies, thank God. Dr Galloway swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple seeming to duck for cover, then retreated into the close to be sick. Rebus tried to steady his own heart. He walked around the carcass, keeping his distance initially.

‘Tell me,’ he said.

‘Well, sir,’ the constable began, ‘the three young people upstairs, they decided to come down here. The place had been closed to tours while the building work goes on, but they wanted to come down at night. There are a lot of ghost stories told about this place, headless dogs and –’

‘How did they get a key?’

‘The boy’s great-uncle, he’s one of the tour guides, a retired planner or something.’

‘So they came looking for ghosts and they found this.’

‘That’s right, sir. They ran back up to the High Street and bumped into PC Andrews and me. We thought they were having us on at first, like.’

But Rebus was no longer listening, and when he spoke it wasn't to the constable.

'You poor little bastard, look what they did to you.'

Though it was against regulations, he leaned forward and touched the young man's hair. It was still slightly damp. He'd probably died on Friday night, and was meant to hang here over the weekend, enough time for any trail, any clues, to grow as cold as his bones.

'What do you reckon, sir?'

'Gunshots.' Rebus looked to where blood had sprayed the wall. 'Something high-velocity. Head, elbows, knees, and ankles.' He sucked in breath. 'He's been six-packed.'

There were shuffling noises in the close, and the wavering beam of another torch. Two figures stood in the doorway, their bodies silhouetted by the arc lamp.

'Cheer up, Dr Galloway,' a male voice boomed to the hapless figure still crouched in the close. Recognising the voice, Rebus smiled.

'Ready when you are, Dr Curt,' he said.

The pathologist stepped into the chamber and shook Rebus's hand. 'The hidden city, quite a revelation.' His companion, a woman, stepped forward to join them. 'Have the two of you met?' Dr Curt sounded like the host at a luncheon party. 'Inspector Rebus, this is Ms Rattray from the Procurator Fiscal's office.'

'Caroline Rattray.' She shook Rebus's hand. She was tall, as tall as either man, with long dark hair tied at the back.

'Caroline and I,' Curt was saying, 'were enjoying supper after the ballet when the call came. So I thought I'd drag her along, kill two birds with one stone . . . so to speak.'

Curt exhaled fumes of good food and good wine. Both he and the lawyer were dressed for an evening out, and already some white plaster-dust had smudged Caroline Rattray's black jacket. As Rebus moved to brush off the dust, she caught her first sight of the body, and looked away quickly. Rebus didn't blame her, but Curt was advancing on the

figure as though towards another guest at the party. He paused to put on polythene overshoes.

'I always carry some in my car,' he explained. 'You never know when they'll be needed.'

He got close to the body and examined the head first, before looking back towards Rebus.

'Dr Galloway had a look, has he?'

Rebus shook his head slowly. He knew what was coming. He'd seen Curt examine headless bodies and mangled bodies and bodies that were little more than torsos or melted to the consistency of lard, and the pathologist always said the same thing.

'Poor chap's dead.'

'Thank you.'

'I take it the crew are on their way?'

Rebus nodded. The crew were on their way. A van to start with, loaded with everything they'd need for the initial scene of crime investigation. SOC officers, lights and cameras, strips of tape, evidence bags, and of course a bodybag. Sometimes a forensic team came too, if cause of death looked particularly murky or the scene was a mess.

'I think,' said Curt, 'the Procurator Fiscal's office will agree that foul play is suspected?'

Ratray nodded, still not looking.

'Well, it wasn't suicide,' commented Rebus. Caroline Ratray turned towards the wall, only to find herself facing the sprays of blood. She turned instead to the doorway, where Dr Galloway was dabbing his mouth with a handkerchief.

'We'd better get someone to fetch me my tools.' Curt was studying the ceiling. 'Any idea what this place was?'

'A butcher's shop, sir,' said the constable, only too happy to help. 'There's a wine shop too, and some houses. You can still go into them.' He turned to Rebus. 'Sir, what's a six-pack?'

'A six-pack?' echoed Curt.

Rebus stared at the hanging body. 'It's a punishment,' he said quietly. 'Only you're not supposed to die. What's that on the floor?' He was pointing to the dead man's feet, to the spot where they grazed the dark-stained ground.

'Looks like rats have been nibbling his toes,' said Curt.

'No, not that.' There were shallow grooves in the earth, so wide they must have been made with a big toe. Four crude capital letters were discernible.

'Is that Neno or Nemo?'

'Could even be Memo,' offered Dr Curt.

'Captain Nemo,' said the constable. 'He's the guy in *2,000 Leagues Beneath the Sea*.'

'Jules Verne,' said Curt, nodding.

The constable shook his head. 'No, sir, Walt Disney,' he said.

2

On Sunday morning Rebus and Dr Patience Aitken decided to get away from it all by staying in bed. He nipped out early for croissants and papers from the local corner shop, and they ate breakfast from a tray on top of the bedcovers, sharing sections of the newspapers, discarding more than they read.

There was no mention of the previous night's grisly find in Mary King's Close. The news had seeped out too late for publication. But Rebus knew there would be something about it on the local radio news, so he was quite content for once when Patience tuned the bedside radio to a classical station.

He should have come off his shift at midnight, but murder tended to disrupt the system of shifts. On a murder inquiry, you stopped working when you reasonably could. Rebus had hung around till two in the morning, consulting with the night shift about the corpse in Mary King's Close. He'd contacted his Chief Inspector and Chief Super, and kept in touch with Fettes HQ, where the forensic stuff had gone. DI Flower kept telling him to go home. Finally he'd taken the advice.

The real problem with back shifts was that Rebus couldn't sleep well after them anyway. He'd managed four hours since arriving home, and four hours would suffice. But there was a warm pleasure in slipping into bed as dawn neared, curling against the body already asleep there. And even more pleasure in pushing the cat off the bed as you did so.

Before retiring, he'd swallowed four measures of whisky. He told himself it was purely medicinal, but rinsed the glass and put it away, hoping Patience wouldn't notice. She complained often of his drinking, among other things.

'We're eating out,' she said now.

'When?'

'Lunch today.'

'Where?'

'That place out at Carlops.'

Rebus nodded. 'Witch's Leap,' he said.

'What?'

'That's what Carlops means. There's a big rock there. They used to throw suspected witches from it. If you didn't fly, you were innocent.'

'But also dead?'

'Their judicial system wasn't perfect, witness the ducking-stool. Same principle.'

'How do you know all this?'

'It's amazing what these young constables know nowadays.' He paused. 'About lunch ... I should go into work.'

'Oh no, you don't.'

'Patience, there's been a -'

'John, there'll be a murder *here* if we don't start spending some time together. Phone in sick.'

'I can't do that.'

'Then *I'll* do it. I'm a doctor, they'll believe me.'

They believed her.

They walked off lunch by taking a look at Carlops Rock, and then braving a climb onto the Pentlands, despite the fierce horizontal winds. Back in Oxford Terrace, Patience eventually said she had some 'office things' to do, which meant filing or tax or flicking through the latest medical journals. So Rebus drove out along Queensferry Road and parked outside the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Hell,

noting with guilty pleasure that no one had yet corrected the mischievous graffiti on the noticeboard which turned 'Help' into 'Hell'.

Inside, the church was empty, cool and quiet and flooded with coloured light from the stained glass. Hoping his timing was good, he slipped into the confessional. There was someone on the other side of the grille.

'Forgive me, father,' said Rebus, 'I'm not even a Catholic.'

'Ah good, it's you, you heathen. I was hoping you'd come. I want your help.'

'Shouldn't that be my line?'

'Don't be bloody cheeky. Come on, let's have a drink.'

Father Conor Leary was between fifty-five and seventy and had told Rebus that he couldn't remember which he was nearer. He was a bulky barrelling figure with thick silver hair which sprouted not only from his head but also from ears, nose and the back of his neck. In civvies, Rebus guessed he would pass for a retired dockworker or skilled labourer of some kind who had also been handy as a boxer, and Father Leary had photos and trophies to prove that this last was incontrovertible truth. He often jabbed the air to make a point, finishing with an uppercut to show that there could be no comeback. In conversation between the two men, Rebus had often wished for a referee.

But today Father Leary sat comfortably and sedately enough in the deckchair in his garden. It was a beautiful early evening, warm and clear with the trace of a cool sea-borne breeze.

'A great day to go hot-air ballooning,' said Father Leary, taking a swig from his glass of Guinness. 'Or bungee jumping. I believe they've set up something of the sort on The Meadows, just for the duration of the Festival. Man, I'd like to try that.'

Rebus blinked but said nothing. His Guinness was cold

enough to double as dental anaesthetic. He shifted in his own deckchair, which was by far the older of the two. Before sitting, he'd noticed how threadbare the canvas was, how it had been rubbed away where it met the horizontal wooden spars. He hoped it would hold.

'Do you like my garden?'

Rebus looked at the bright blooms, the trim grass. 'I don't know much about gardens,' he admitted.

'Me neither. It's not a sin. But there's an old chap I know who does know about them, and he looks after this one for a few bob.' He raised his glass towards his lips. 'So how are you keeping?'

'I'm fine.'

'And Dr Aitken?'

'She's fine.'

'And the two of you are still...?'

'Just about.'

Father Leary nodded. Rebus's tone was warning him off. 'Another bomb threat, eh? I heard on the radio.'

'It could be a crank.'

'But you're not sure?'

'The IRA usually use codewords, just so we know they're serious.'

Father Leary nodded to himself. 'And a murder too?'

Rebus gulped his drink. 'I was there.'

'They don't even stop for the Festival, do they? Whatever must the tourists think?' Father Leary's eyes were sparkling.

'It's about time the tourists learned the truth,' Rebus said, a bit too quickly. He sighed. 'It was pretty gruesome.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. I shouldn't have been so flippant.'

'That's all right. It's a defence.'

'You're right, it is.'

Rebus knew this. It was the reason behind his many little jokes with Dr Curt. It was their way of avoiding the obvious, the undeniable. Even so, since last night Rebus had held in his mind the picture of that sad strung-up

figure, a young man they hadn't even identified yet. The picture would stay there forever. Everybody had a photographic memory for horror. He'd climbed back out of Mary King's Close to find the High Street aglow with a firework display, the streets thronged with people staring up open-mouthed at the blues and greens in the night sky. The fireworks were coming from the Castle; the night's Tattoo display was ending. He hadn't felt much like talking to Mairie Henderson. In fact, he had snubbed her.

'This isn't very nice,' she'd said, standing her ground.

'This is very nice,' Father Leary said now, relaxing back further into his seat.

The whisky Rebus had drunk hadn't rubbed out the picture. If anything, it had smeared the corners and edges, which only served to highlight the central fact. More whisky would have made this image sharper still.

'We're not here for very long, are we?' he said now.

Father Leary frowned. 'You mean here on earth?'

'That's what I mean. We're not around long enough to make any difference.'

'Tell that to the man with a bomb in his pocket. Every one of us makes a difference just by being here.'

'I'm not talking about the man with the bomb, I'm talking about stopping him.'

'You're talking about being a policeman.'

'Ach, maybe I'm not talking about anything.'

Father Leary allowed a short-lived smile, his eyes never leaving Rebus's. 'A bit morbid for a Sunday, John?'

'Isn't that what Sundays are for?'

'Maybe for you sons of Calvin. You tell yourselves you're doomed, then spend all week trying to make a joke of it. Others of us give thanks for *this* day and its meaning.'

Rebus shifted in his chair. Lately, he didn't enjoy Father Leary's conversations so much. There was something proselytising about them. 'So when do we get down to business?' he said.

Father Leary smiled. 'The Protestant work ethic.'

'You haven't brought me here to convert me.'

'We wouldn't want a dour bugger like you. Besides, I'd more easily convert a fifty-yard penalty in a Murrayfield cross-wind.' He took a swipe at the air. 'Ach, it's not really your problem. Maybe it isn't a problem at all.' He ran a finger down the crease in his trouser-leg.

'You can still tell me about it.'

'A reversal of roles, eh? Well, I suppose that's what I had in mind all along.' He sat further forward in the deckchair, the material stretching and sounding a sharp note of complaint. 'Here it is then. You know Pilmuir?'

'Don't be daft.'

'Yes, stupid question. And Pilmuir's Garibaldi Estate?'

'The Gar-B, it's the roughest scheme in the city, maybe in the country.'

'There are good people there, but you're right. That's why the Church sent an outreach worker.'

'And now he's in trouble?'

'Maybe.' Father Leary finished his drink. 'It was my idea. There's a community hall on the estate, only it had been locked up for months. I thought we could reopen it as a youth club.'

'For Catholics?'

'For both faiths.' He sat back in his chair. 'Even for the faithless. The Garibaldi is predominantly Protestant, but there are Catholics there too. We got agreement, and set up some funds. I knew we needed someone special, someone really dynamic in charge.' He punched the air. 'Someone who might just draw the two sides together.'

Mission impossible, thought Rebus. This scheme will self-destruct in ten seconds.

Not least of the Gar-B's problems was the sectarian divide, or the lack of one, depending on how you looked at it. Protestants and Catholics lived in the same streets, the same tower blocks. Mostly, they lived in relative harmony

and shared poverty. But, there being little to do on the estate, the youth of the place tended to organise into opposing gangs and wage warfare. Every year there was at least one pitched battle for police to contend with, usually in July, usually around the Protestant holy day of the 12th.

‘So you brought in the SAS?’ Rebus suggested. Father Leary was slow to get the joke.

‘Not at all,’ he said, ‘just a young man, a very ordinary young man but with inner strength.’ His fist cut the air. ‘Spiritual strength. And for a while it looked like a disaster. Nobody came to the club, the windows were smashed as soon as we’d replaced them, the graffiti got worse and more personal. But then he started to break through. *That* seemed the miracle. Attendance at the club increased, and both sides were joining.’

‘So what’s gone wrong?’

Father Leary loosened his shoulders. ‘It just wasn’t quite right. I thought there’d be sports, maybe a football team or something. We bought the strips and applied to join a local league. But the lads weren’t interested. All they wanted to do was hang around the hall itself. And the balance isn’t there either, the Catholics have stopped joining. Most of them have even stopped attending.’ He looked at Rebus. ‘That’s not just sour grapes, you understand.’

Rebus nodded. ‘The Prod gangs have annexed it?’

‘I’m not saying that exactly.’

‘Sounds like it to me. And your . . . outreach worker?’

‘His name’s Peter Cave. Oh, he’s still there. Too often for my liking.’

‘I still don’t see the problem.’ Actually he could, but he wanted it spelling out.

‘John, I’ve talked to people on the estate, and all over Pilmuir. The gangs are as bad as ever, only now they seem to be working together, divvying the place up between them. All that’s happened is that they’ve become more

organised. They have meetings in the club and carve up the surrounding territory.'

'It keeps them off the street.' Father Leary didn't smile. 'So close the youth club.'

'That's not so easy. It would look bad for a start. And would it solve anything?'

'Have you talked with Mr Cave?'

'He doesn't listen. He's changed. That's what troubles me most of all.'

'You could kick him out.'

Father Leary shook his head. 'He's lay, John. I can't *order* him to do anything. We've cut the club's funding, but the money to keep it going comes from somewhere nevertheless.'

'Where from?'

'I don't know.'

'How much?'

'It doesn't take much.'

'So what do you want me to do?' The question Rebus had been trying not to ask.

Father Leary gave his weary smile again. 'To be honest, I don't know. Perhaps I just needed to tell someone.'

'Don't give me that. You want me to go out there.'

'Not if you don't want to.'

It was Rebus's turn to smile. 'I've been in safer places.'

'And a few worse ones, too.'

'I haven't told you about half of them, Father.' Rebus finished his drink.

'Another?'

He shook his head. 'It's nice and quiet here, isn't it?'

Father Leary nodded. 'That's the beauty of Edinburgh, you're never far from a peaceful spot.'

'And never far from a hellish one either. Thanks for the drink, Father.' Rebus got up.

'I see your team won yesterday.'

'What makes you think I support Hearts?'

'They're Prods, aren't they? And you're a Protestant yourself.'

'Away to hell, Father,' said John Rebus, laughing.

Father Leary pulled himself to his feet. He straightened his back with a grimace. He was acting purposely aged. Just an old man. 'About the Gar-B, John,' he said, opening his arms wide, 'I'm in your hands.'

Like nails, thought Rebus, like carpentry nails.