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Strip Jack

Written by Ian Rankin

Published by Orion Books

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IAN RANKIN

STRIP JACK



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 1992
by Orion
This paperback edition published in 1993
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

30 29 28 27

Reissued 2011

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

ISBN 978-0-7528-8356-4

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.

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To the only Jack I've ever stripped

He knows nothing; and he thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career.

Shaw, *Major Barbara*

The habit of friendship is matured by constant intercourse.

Libianus, 4th century AD, quoted in *Edinburgh*, by Charles McKean

Acknowledgements

The first thing to acknowledge is that the constituency of North and South Esk is the author's creation. However, you don't need to be Mungo Park to work out that there must be some correlation between North and South Esk and the real world, Edinburgh being a real place, and 'south and east of Edinburgh' being a vaguely definable geographical area.

In fact, North and South Esk bears *some* resemblance to the Midlothian parliamentary constituency – prior to 1983's Boundary Commission changes – but also bites a small southernmost chunk out of the present Edinburgh Pentlands constituency and a westerly chunk out of East Lothian constituency.

Gregor Jack, too, is fiction, and bears no resemblance to any MP.

Thanks are due to the following for their inestimable help: Alex Eadie, who was until his retirement the MP for Midlothian; John Home Robertson MP; Professor Busuttil, Regius Professor of Forensic Medicine, University of Edinburgh; Lothian and Borders Police; City of Edinburgh Police; the staff of the Edinburgh Room, Edinburgh Central Library; the staff of the National Library of Scotland; staff and customers of Sandy Bell's, the Oxford Bar, Mather's (West End), Clark's Bar and the Green Tree.

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1
The Milking Shed

The wonder of it was that the neighbours hadn't complained, hadn't even – as many of them later told the newsmen – realized. Not until that night, the night their sleep was disturbed by sudden activity in the street. Cars, vans, policemen, the static chatter of radios. Not that the noise ever got out of hand. The whole operation was directed with such speed and, yes, even good humour that there were those who slept through the excitement.

'I want courtesy,' Chief Superintendent 'Farmer' Watson had explained to his men in the briefing room that evening. 'It may be a hoor-hoose, but it's on the right side of town, if you take my meaning. No telling who might be in there. We might even come across our own dear Chief Constable.'

Watson grinned, to let them know he was joking. But some of the officers in the room, knowing the CC better than Watson himself apparently did, exchanged glances and wry smiles.

'Right,' said Watson, 'let's go through the plan of attack one more time . . .'

Christ, he's loving this, thought Detective Inspector John Rebus. He's loving every minute. And why not? This was Watson's baby after all, and it was to be a home birth. Which was to say, Watson was going to be in charge all the way from immaculate conception to immaculate delivery.

Maybe it was a male menopause thing, this need to flex a bit of muscle. Most of the chief supers Rebus had known in his twenty years on the force had been content to push pens

over paper and wait for retirement day. But not Watson. Watson was like Channel Four: full of independent programmes of minority interest. He didn't make waves exactly, but by Christ he splashed like hell.

And now he even seemed to have an informer, an invisible somebody who had whispered in his ear the word 'brothel'. Sin and debauchery! Watson's hard Presbyterian heart had been stirred to righteous indignation. He was the kind of Highland Christian who found sex within marriage just about acceptable – his son and daughter were proof – but who baulked at anything and everything else. If there was an active brothel in Edinburgh, Watson wanted it shut down with prejudice.

But then the informer had provided an address, and this caused a certain hesitation. The brothel was in one of the better streets of the New Town, quiet Georgian terraces, lined with trees and Saabs and Volvos, the houses filled with professional people: lawyers, surgeons, university professors. This was no seaman's bawdy-house, no series of damp, dark rooms above a dockside pub. This was, as Rebus himself had offered, an Establishment establishment. Watson hadn't seen the joke.

Watch had been kept for several days and nights, courtesy of unmarked cars and unremarkable plainclothes men. Until there could be little doubt: whatever was happening inside the shuttered rooms, it was happening after midnight and it was happening briskly. Interestingly, few of the many men arrived by car. But a watchful detective constable, taking a leak in the dead of night, discovered why. The men were parking their cars in side streets and walking the hundred yards or so to the front door of the four-storey house. Perhaps this was house policy: the slamming of after-hours car doors would arouse suspicion in the street. Or perhaps it was in the visitors' own interests not to leave their cars in broad streetlight, where they might be recognized . . .

Registration numbers were taken and checked, as were photographs of visitors to the house. The owner of the house itself was traced. He owned half a French vineyard as well as

several properties in Edinburgh, and lived in Bordeaux the year through. His solicitor had been responsible for letting the house to a Mrs Croft, a very genteel lady in her fifties. According to the solicitor, she paid her rent promptly and in cash. Was there any problem . . .?

No problem, he was assured, but if he could keep the conversation to himself . . .

Meantime, the car owners had turned out to be businessmen, some local, but the majority visiting the city from south of the border. Heartened by this, Watson had started planning the raid. With his usual blend of wit and acumen, he chose to call it Operation Creeper.

'Brothel creepers, you see, John.'

'Yes sir,' Rebus answered. 'I used to own a pair myself. I've often wondered how they got the name.'

Watson shrugged. He was not a man to be sidetracked. 'Never mind the creepers,' he said. 'Let's just get the creeps.'

The house, it was reckoned, would be doing good business by midnight. One o'clock Saturday morning was chosen as the time of the raid. The warrants were ready. Every man in the team knew his place. And the solicitor had even come up with plans of the house, which had been memorized by the officers.

'It's a bloody warren,' Watson had said.

'No problem, sir, so long as we've got enough ferrets.'

In truth, Rebus wasn't looking forward to this evening's work. Brothels might be illegal, but they fulfilled a need and if they veered towards respectability, as this one certainly did, then what was the problem? He could see some of this doubt reflected in Watson's eyes. But Watson had been enthusiastic from the first, and to pull back now was unthinkable, would seem a sign of weakness. So, with nobody really keen for it, Operation Creeper went ahead. While other, meaner streets went unpatrolled. While domestic violence took its toll. While the Water of Leith drowning still remained to be solved . . .

'Okay, in we go.'

They left their cars and vans and marched towards the

front door. Knocked quietly. The door was opened from within, and then things began to move like a video on double-speed. Other doors were opened . . . how many doors could a house have? Knock first, then open. Yes, they were being courteous.

'If you wouldn't mind getting dressed, please . . .'

'If you could just come downstairs now . . .'

'You can put your trousers on first, sir, if you like . . .'

Then: 'Christ, sir, come and take a look at this.' Rebus followed the flushed, youthful face of the detective constable. 'Here we are, sir. Feast your peepers on this lot.'

Ah yes, the punishment room. Chains and thongs and whips. A couple of full-length mirrors, a wardrobe full of gear.

'There's more leather here than in a bloody milking shed.'

'You seem to know a lot about cows, son,' Rebus said. He was just thankful the room wasn't in use. But there were more surprises to come.

In parts, the house resembled nothing more lewd than a fancy-dress party – nurses and matrons, wimples and high heels. Except that most of the costumes revealed more than they hid. One young woman seemed to be wearing a rubber diving suit with the nipples and crotch cut away. Another looked like a cross between Heidi and Eva Braun. Watson watched the parade, righteous fury filling him. He had no doubts now: it was absolutely proper that this sort of place be closed down. Then he turned back to the conversation he was having with Mrs Croft, while Chief Inspector Lauderdale lingered only a short distance away. He had insisted on coming along, knowing his superior and fearing some almighty cock-up. Well, thought Rebus with a smile, no cock-ups in sight yet.

Mrs Croft spoke in a kind of gentrified Cockney, which became less gentrified as time went on and more couples spilled down the stairs and into the large, sofa-crammed living room. A room smelling of expensive perfume and proprietary whisky. Mrs Croft was denying everything. She was even denying that they were standing in a brothel at all.

I am not my brothel's keeper, thought Rebus. All the same, he had to admire her performance. She was a businesswoman, she kept saying, a taxpayer, she had rights . . . and where was her solicitor?

'I thought it was her that was doing the soliciting,' Lauderdale muttered to Rebus: a rare moment of humour from one of the dourest buggers Rebus had ever worked with. And as such, it deserved a smile.

'What are you grinning at? I didn't know there was an interval. Get back to work.'

'Yes, sir.' Rebus waited till Lauderdale had turned away from him, the better to hear what Watson was saying, and then flicked a quick v-sign at him. Mrs Croft, though, caught the gesture and, perhaps thinking it intended at her, returned it. Lauderdale and Watson both turned towards where Rebus was standing, but by then he was already on his way . . .

Officers who had been posted in the back garden now marched a few pale-faced souls back into the house. One man had leapt from a first-floor window, and was hobbling as a result. But he was insistent, too, that no doctor was necessary, that no ambulance be called. The women seemed to find the whole thing amusing, and appeared especially taken by the looks on their clients' faces, looks ranging from the ashamed and embarrassed to the furious and embarrassed. There was some short-lived bravado of the I-know-my-rights variety. But in the main, everybody did as they were told: that is, they shut up and tried to be patient.

Some of the shame and embarrassment started to lift when one of the men recalled that it wasn't illegal to visit a brothel; it was only illegal to run one or work in one. And this was true, though it didn't mean the men present were going to escape into the anonymous night. Give them a scare first, then send them away. Starve the brothels of clients, and you'd have no brothels. That was the logic. So the officers were prepared with their usual stories, the ones they used with kerb-crawlers and the like.

'Just a quiet word, sir, between you and me, like. If I were you, I'd have myself checked over for AIDS. I'm serious. Most

of these women could well be carrying the disease, even if it doesn't show. Mostly, it doesn't show till it's too late anyway. Are you married, sir? Any girlfriends? Best tell them to have a test, too. Otherwise, you never know, do you . . .?'

It was cruel stuff, but necessary; and as with most cruel words, there was a truth to it. Mrs Croft seemed to use a small back room as an office. A cash-box was found. So was a credit-card machine. A receipt-book was headed Crofter Guest House. As far as Rebus could tell, the cost of a single room was seventy-five pounds. Dear for a B&B, but how many company accountants would take the trouble to check? It wouldn't surprise Rebus if the place was VAT registered to boot . . .

'Sir?' It was Detective Sergeant Brian Holmes, newly promoted and bristling with efficiency. He was halfway up one of the flights of stairs, and calling down to Rebus. 'I think you better come up here . . .'

Rebus wasn't keen. Holmes looked to be a long way up, and Rebus, who lived on the second floor of a tenement, had a natural antipathy to stairs. Edinburgh, of course, was full of them, just as it was full of hills, biting winds, and people who liked to girn about things like hills and stairs and the wind . . .

'Coming.'

Outside a bedroom door, a detective constable stood in quiet discussion with Holmes. When Holmes saw Rebus reaching the landing, he dismissed the DC.

'Well, Sergeant?'

'Take a look, sir.'

'Anything you want to tell me first?'

Holmes shook his head. 'You've seen the male member before, sir, haven't you?'

Rebus opened the bedroom door. What was he expecting to find? A mock-up dungeon, with someone stretched out naked on the rack? A farmyard scene with a few chickens and sheep? The male member. Maybe Mrs Croft had a collection of them displayed on her bedroom wall. *And here's*

one I caught in '73. Put up a tough fight, but I had it in the end . . .

But no, it was worse than that. Much worse. It was an ordinary bedroom, albeit with red lightbulbs in its several lamps. And in an ordinary bed lay an ordinary enough looking woman, her elbow pressed into the pillow, head resting at an angle on her clenched fist. And on that bed, dressed and staring at the floor, sat someone Rebus recognized: the Member of Parliament for North and South Esk.

'Jesus Christ,' said Rebus. Holmes put his head round the door.

'I can't work in front of a fucking audience!' yelled the woman. Her accent, Rebus noted, was English. Holmes ignored her.

'This is a bit of a coincidence,' he said to Gregor Jack MP. 'Only, my girlfriend and me have just moved into your constituency.'

The MP raised his eyes more in sorrow than in anger.

'This is a mistake,' he said. 'A terrible mistake.'

'Just doing a bit of canvassing, eh, sir?'

The woman had begun to laugh, head still resting on her hand. The red lamplight seemed to fill her gaping mouth. Gregor Jack looked for a moment as though he might be about to throw a punch in her general direction. Instead he tried a slap with his open hand, but succeeded only in catching her arm, so that her head fell back on to the pillow. She was still laughing, almost girl-like. She lifted her legs high into the air, the bedcovers falling away. Her hands thumped the mattress with glee. Jack had risen to his feet and was scratching nervously at one finger.

'Jesus Christ,' Rebus said again. Then: 'Come on, let's get you downstairs.'

Not the Farmer. The Farmer might go to pieces. Lauderdale then. Rebus approached with as much humility as he could muster.

'Sir, we've got a bit of a problem.'

'I know. It must have been that bugger Watson. Wanted

his moment of glory captured. He's always been keen on publicity, you should know that.' Was that a sneer on Lauderdale's face? With his gaunt figure and bloodless face, he reminded Rebus of a painting he'd once seen of some Calvinists or Seceders . . . some grim bunch like that. Ready to burn anyone who came to hand. Rebus kept his distance, all the time shaking his head.

'I'm not sure I – '

'The bloody papers are here,' hissed Lauderdale. 'Quick off the mark, eh? Even for our friends in the press. Bloody Watson must have tipped them off. He's out there now. I tried to stop him.'

Rebus went to one of the windows and peeped out. Sure enough, there were three or four reporters gathered at the bottom of the steps up to the front door. Watson had finished his spiel and was answering a couple of questions, at the same time retreating slowly back up the steps.

'Oh dear,' Rebus said, admiring his own sense of understatement. 'That only makes it worse.'

'Makes what worse?'

So Rebus told him. And was rewarded with the biggest smile he'd ever seen flit across Lauderdale's face.

'Well, well, who's been a naughty boy then? But I still don't see the problem.'

Rebus shrugged. 'Well, sir, it's just that it doesn't do anyone any good.' Outside, the vans were arriving. Two to take the women to the station, two to take the men. The men would be asked a few questions, names and addresses taken, then released. The women . . . well, that was another thing entirely. There would be charges. Rebus's colleague Gill Templer would call it another sign of the phallocentric society, something like that. She'd never been the same since she'd got her hands on those psychology books . . .

'Nonsense,' Lauderdale was saying. 'He's only got himself to blame. What do you want us to do? Sneak him out the back door with a blanket over his head?'

'No, sir, it's just – '

'He gets treated the same as the rest of them, Inspector. You know the score.'

'Yes, sir, but – '

'But what?'

But what? Well, that was the question. What? Why was Rebus feeling so uncomfortable? The answer was complicatedly simple: because it *was* Gregor Jack. Most MPs, Rebus wouldn't have given the time of day. But Gregor Jack was . . . well, he was *Gregor Jack*.

'Vans are here, Inspector. Let's round 'em up and ship 'em out.'

Lauderdale's hand on his back was cold and firm.

'Yes, sir,' said Rebus.

So it was out into the cool dark night, lit by orange sodium lights, the glare of headlamps, and the dimmer light from open doors and twitching windows. The natives were restless. Some had come out on to their doorsteps, wrapped in paisley dressing gowns or wearing hastily found clothes, not quite hanging right.

Police, natives, and of course the reporters. Flash-guns. Christ, there were photographers too, of course. No camera crews, no video machines. That was something: Watson hadn't persuaded the TV companies to attend his little soirée.

'Into the van, quick as you can,' called Brian Holmes. Was that a new firmness, a new authority in his voice? Funny what promotion could do to the young. But by God they *were* quick. Not so much following Holmes' orders, Rebus knew, as keen to escape the cameras. One or two of the women posed, trying a lopsided glamour learned from page three, before being persuaded by WPCs that this was neither the time nor the place.

But the reporters were hanging back. Rebus wondered why. Indeed, he wondered what they were doing here at all. Was it such a big story? Would it provide Watson with useful publicity? One reporter even grabbed at a photographer's arm and seemed to warn him about shooting off too many pictures. But now they were keening, now they were shouting. And the flashbulbs were going off like flak. All because

they'd recognized a face. All because Gregor Jack was being escorted down the steps, across the narrow pavement, and into a van.

'Christ, it's Gregor Jack!'

'Mr Jack! A word!'

'Any comment to make?'

'What were you doing – '

'Any comment?'

The doors were closing. A thump with the constabulary hand on the side of the van, and it moved slowly away, the reporters jogging after it. Well, Rebus had to admit it: Jack had held his head high. No, that wasn't being accurate. He had, rather, held his head just low enough, suggesting penitence but not shame, humility but not embarrassment.

'Seven days he's been my MP,' Holmes was saying by Rebus's side. 'Seven days.'

'You must have been a bad influence on him, Brian.'

'Bit of a shock though, wasn't it?'

Rebus shrugged noncommitally. The woman from the bedroom was being brought out now, having pulled on jeans and a t-shirt. She saw the reporters and suddenly lifted the t-shirt high over her naked breasts.

'Get a load of this then!'

But the reporters were busy comparing notes, the photographers loading new film. They'd be off to the station next, ready to catch Gregor Jack as he left. Nobody paid her any attention, and eventually she let her t-shirt fall back down and climbed into the waiting van.

'He's not choosy, is he?' said Holmes.

'But then again, Brian,' answered Rebus, 'maybe he is.'

Watson was rubbing at his gleaming forehead. It was a lot of work for only one hand, since the forehead seemed to extend as far as Watson's crown.

'Mission accomplished,' he said. 'Well done.'

'Thank you, sir,' Holmes said smartly.

'No problems then?'

'Not at all, sir,' said Rebus casually. 'Unless you count Gregor Jack.'

Watson nodded, then frowned. 'Who?' he asked.

'Brian here can tell you all about him, sir,' said Rebus, patting Holmes' back. 'Brian's your man for anything smacking of politics.'

Watson, hovering now somewhere between elation and dread, turned to Holmes.

'Politics?' he asked. He was smiling. *Please be gentle with me.*

Holmes watched Rebus moving back inside the house. He felt like sobbing. Because, after all, that's what John Rebus was – an s.o.b.

2
Scratching the Surface

It is a truth universally acknowledged that some Members of Parliament have trouble keeping their trousers on. But Gregor Jack was not thought to be one of these. Indeed, he often eschewed troose altogether, opting for the kilt on election nights and at many a public function. In London, he took the jibes in good part, his responses matching the old questions with the accuracy of catechism.

'Tell us now, Gregor, what's worn beneath the kilt?'

'Oh nothing, nothing at all. It's all in perfect working order.'

Gregor Jack was not a member of the SNP, though he had flirted with the party in his youth. He *had* joined the Labour Party, but had resigned for never specified reasons. He was not a Liberal Democrat, nor was he that rare breed – a Scots Tory MP. Gregor Jack was an Independent, and as an Independent had held the seat of North and South Esk, south and east of Edinburgh, since his mildly surprising by-election win of 1985. 'Mild' was an adjective often used about Jack. So were 'honest', 'legal' and 'decent'.

All this John Rebus knew from memory, from old newspapers, magazines and radio interviews. There had to be something wrong with the man, some chink in his shining armour. Trust Operation Creeper to find the flaw. Rebus scanned the Saturday newsprint, seeking a story. He didn't find it. Curious that; the press had seemed keen enough last night. A story breaking at one thirty ... plenty of time, surely, to see it into print by the final morning edition. Unless,

of course, the reporters hadn't been local. But they must have been, mustn't they? Having said which, he hadn't recognized any faces. Did Watson really have the front to get the London papers involved? Rebus smiled. The man had plenty of 'front' all right: his wife saw to that. Three meals a day, three courses each.

'Feed the body,' Watson was fond of saying, 'and you feed the spirit.' Something like that. Which was another thing: bible-basher or no, Watson was starting to put away a fair amount of spirits. A rosy glow to the cheeks and chins, and the unmistakable scent of extra-strong mints. When Lauderdale walked into his superior's room these days, he sniffed and sniffed, like a bloodhound. Only it wasn't blood he was sniffing, it was promotion.

Lose a Farmer, gain a Fart.

The nickname had perhaps been unavoidable. Word association. Lauderdale became Fort Lauderdale, and Fort quickly turned into Fart. Oh, but it was an apt name, too. For wherever Chief Inspector Lauderdale went, he left a bad smell. Take the Case of the Lifted Literature. Rebus had known the minute Lauderdale walked into his office that there would soon be a need to open the windows.

'I want you to stick close to this one, John. Professor Costello is highly thought of, an international figure in this field . . .'

'And?'

'And,' Lauderdale tried to look as though his next utterance meant nothing to him, 'he's a close personal friend of Chief Superintendent Watson.'

'Ah.'

'What is this – Monosyllable Week?'

'Monosyllable?' Rebus frowned. 'Sorry, sir, I'll have to ask DS Holmes what that means.'

'Don't try to be funny – '

'I'm not, sir, honest. It's just that DS Holmes has had the benefit of a university education. Well . . . five months' worth or thereabouts. He'd be the very man to coordinate the officers working on this highly sensitive case.'

Lauderdale stared at the seated figure for what seemed – to Rebus at least – a very long time. God, was the man really that stupid? Did no one appreciate irony these days?

'Look,' Lauderdale said at last, 'I need someone a bit more senior than a recently promoted DS. And I'm sorry to say that you, Inspector, God help us all, are that bit more senior.'

'You're flattering me, sir.'

A file landed with a dull thud on Rebus's desk. The chief inspector turned and left. Rebus rose from his chair and turned to his sash window, tugging at it with all his might. But the thing was stuck tight. There was no escape. With a sigh, he turned back and sat down at his desk. Then he opened the folder.

It was a straightforward case of theft. Professor James Aloysius Costello was Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. One day someone had walked into his office, then walked out again taking with them several rare books. Priceless, according to the Professor, though not to the city's various booksellers and auction rooms. The list seemed eclectic: an early edition of Knox's *Treatise on Predestination*, a couple of Sir Walter Scott first editions, Swedenborg's *Wisdom of Angels*, a signed early edition of *Tristram Shandy*, and editions of Montaigne and Voltaire.

None of which meant much to Rebus until he saw the estimates at auction, provided by one of the George Street auction houses. The question then was: what were they doing in an unlocked office in the first place?

'To be read,' answered Professor Costello blithely. 'To be enjoyed, admired. What good would they be locked up in a safe or in some old library display case?'

'Did anyone else know about them? I mean, about how valuable they are?'

The Professor shrugged. 'I had thought, Inspector, that I was amongst friends.'

He had a voice like a peat bog and eyes that gleamed like crystal. A Dublin education, but a life spent, as he put it, 'cloistered' in the likes of Cambridge, Oxford, St Andrews, and now Edinburgh. A life spent collecting books, too. Those

left in his office – still kept unlocked – were worth at least as much as the stolen volumes, perhaps more.

'They say lightning never strikes twice,' he assured Rebus.

'Maybe not, but villains do. Try to lock your door when you step out, eh, sir? If nothing else.'

The Professor had shrugged. Was this, Rebus wondered, a kind of stoicism? He felt nervous sitting there in the office in Buccleuch Place. For one thing, he was a kind of Christian himself, and would have liked to be able to talk the subject through with this wise-seeming man. *Wise?* Well, perhaps not worldly-wise, not wise enough to know how snib locks and human minds worked, but wise in other ways. But Rebus was nervous, too, because he knew himself for a clever man who could have been cleverer, given the breaks. He had never gone to university, and never would. He wondered how different he would be if he had or could . . .

The Professor was staring out of his window, down on to the cobblestoned street. On one side of Buccleuch Place sat a row of neat tenements, owned by the university and used by various departments. The Professor called it Botany Bay. And across the road uglier shapes reared up, the modern stone mausoleums of the main university complex. If this side of the road was Botany Bay, Rebus was all for transportation.

He left the Professor to his muses and musings. Had the books been filched at random? Or was this designer theft, the thief stealing to order? There might well be unscrupulous collectors who would pay – no questions asked – for an early *Tristram Shandy*. Though the authors' names had rung bells, only that particular title had meant anything to Rebus. He owned a paperback copy of the book, bought at a car-boot sale on The Meadows for tenpence. Maybe the Professor would like to borrow it . . .

And so the Case of the Lifted Literature had, for Inspector John Rebus, begun. The ground had been covered before, as the case-notes showed, but it could be covered again. There were the auction houses, the bookshops, the private collectors . . . all to be talked to. And all to satisfy an unlikely friendship between a police chief superintendent and a professor of

Divinity. A waste of time, of course. The books had disappeared the previous Tuesday. It was now Saturday, and they would doubtless be under lock and key in some dark and secret corner.

What a way to spend a Saturday. Actually, if the time had been his own, this would have been a nice afternoon, which was perhaps why he hadn't balked at the task. Rebus collected books. Well, that was putting it strongly. He *bought* books. Bought more of them than he had time to read, attracted by this cover or that title or the fact that he'd heard good things about the author. No, on second thoughts it was just as well these were business calls he was making, otherwise he'd be bankrupting himself in record time.

In any case, he didn't have books on his mind. He kept thinking about a certain MP. Was Gregor Jack married? Rebus thought so. Hadn't there been some big society wedding several years previous? Well, married men were bread and butter to prostitutes. They just gobbled them up. Shame though, about Jack. Rebus had always respected the man – which was to say, now that he thought about it, that he'd been taken in by Jack's public image. But it wasn't all image, was it? Jack really had come from a working-class background, had clawed his way upwards, and *was* a good MP. North and South Esk was difficult territory, part mining villages, part country homes. Jack seemed to glide easily between the two hemispheres. He'd managed to get an ugly new road rerouted well away from his well-heeled constituents, but had also fought hard to bring new high-tech industry to the area, retraining the miners so that they could do the jobs.

Too good to be true. Too bloody good to be true . . .

Bookshops. He had to keep his mind on bookshops. There were only a few to check, the ones that had not been open earlier in the week. Footwork really, the stuff he should have been doling out to more junior men. But all that meant was that he'd feel bound to come round after them, double checking what they'd done. This way, he saved himself some grief.

Buccleuch Street was an odd mixture of grimy junk shops and bright vegetarian takeaways. Student turf. Not far from Rebus's own flat, yet he seldom ventured into this part of town. Only on business. Only ever on business.

Ah, this was it. Suey Books. And for once the shop looked to be open. Even in the spring sunshine there was a need for a light inside. It was a tiny shop, boasting an unenthusiastic window display of old hardbacks, mostly with a Scottish theme. An enormous black cat had made a home for itself in the centre of the display, and blinked slowly if malignly up at Rebus. The window itself needed washing. You couldn't make out the titles of the books without pressing your nose to the glass, and this was made difficult by the presence of an old black bicycle resting against the front of the shop. Rebus pushed open the door. If anything, the shop's interior was less pristine than its exterior. There was a bristle-mat just inside the door. Rebus made a note to wipe his feet before he went back into the street . . .

The shelves, a few of them glass-fronted, were crammed, and the smell was of old relatives' houses, of attics and the insides of school desks. The aisles were narrow. Hardly enough room to swing a . . . There was a thump somewhere behind him, and he feared one of the books had fallen, but when he turned he saw that it was the cat. It swerved past him and made for the desk situated to the rear of the shop, the desk with a bare lightbulb dangling above it.

'Anything in particular you're looking for?'

She was seated at the desk, a pile of books in front of her. She held a pencil in one hand and appeared to be writing prices on the inside leaves of the books. From a distance, it was a scene out of Dickens. Close up was a different story. Still in her teens, she had hennaed her short spiked hair. The eyes behind the circular tinted glasses were themselves round and dark, and she sported three earrings in either ear, with another curling from her left nostril. Rebus didn't doubt she'd have a pale boyfriend with lank dreadlocks and a whippet on a length of clothes-rope.

'I'm looking for the manager,' he said.

'He's not here. Can I help?'

Rebus shrugged, his eyes on the cat. It had leapt silently on to the desk and was now rubbing itself against the books. The girl held her pencil out towards it, and the cat brushed the tip with its jaw.

'Inspector Rebus,' said Rebus. 'I'm interested in some stolen books. I was wondering if anyone had been in trying to sell them.'

'Do you have a list?'

Rebus did. He drew it out of his pocket and handed it over. 'You can keep it,' he said. 'Just in case.'

She glanced down the typed list of titles and editions, her lips pursed.

'I don't think Ronald could afford them, even if he was tempted.'

'Ronald being the manager?'

'That's right. Where were they stolen from?'

'Round the corner in Buccleuch Place.'

'Round the corner? They'd hardly be likely to bring them here then, would they?'

Rebus smiled. 'True,' he said, 'but we have to check.'

'Well, I'll hang on to this anyway,' she said, folding the list. As she pushed it into a desk drawer, Rebus reached out a hand and stroked the cat. Like lightning, a paw flicked up and caught his wrist. He drew back his hand with a sharp intake of breath.

'Oh dear,' said the girl. 'Rasputin's not very good with strangers.'

'So I see.' Rebus studied his wrist. There were inch-long claw marks there, three of them. Whitened scratches, they were already rising, the skin swelling and breaking. Beads of blood appeared. 'Jesus,' he said, sucking on the damaged wrist. He glared at the cat. It glared back, then dropped from the desk and was gone.

'Are you all right?'

'Just about. You should keep that thing on a chain.'

She smiled. 'Do you know anything about that raid last night?'