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Written by Ian Rankin

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IAN RANKIN

HIDE AND SEEK



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To Michael Shaw,
not before time

‘My devil had long been caged, he came out roaring.’
– *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

'Hide!'

He was shrieking now, frantic, his face drained of all colour. She was at the top of the stairs, and he stumbled towards her, grabbing her by the arms, propelling her downstairs with unfocussed force, so that she feared they would both fall. She cried out.

'Ronnie! Hide from who?'

'Hide!' he shrieked again. 'Hide! They're coming! They're coming!'

He had pushed her all the way to the front door now. She'd seen him pretty strung out before, but never this bad. A fix would help him, she knew it would. And she knew, too, that he had the makings upstairs in his bedroom. The sweat trickled from his chilled rat's-tails of hair. Only two minutes ago, the most important decision in her life had been whether or not to dare a trip to the squat's seething lavatory. But now. . . .

'They're coming,' he repeated, his voice a whisper now. 'Hide.'

'Ronnie,' she said, 'you're scaring me.'

He stared at her, his eyes seeming almost to recognise her. Then he looked away again, into a distance all of his own. The word was a snakelike hiss.

'Hide.' And with that he yanked open the door. It was raining outside, and she hesitated. But then fear took her, and she made to cross the threshold. But his hand grabbed at her arm, pulling her back inside. He embraced her, his

sweat sea-salty, his body throbbing. His mouth was close to her ear, his breath hot.

'They've murdered me,' he said. Then with sudden ferocity he pushed her again, and this time she was outside, and the door was slamming shut, leaving him alone in the house. Alone with himself. She stood on the garden path, staring at the door, trying to decide whether to knock or not.

It wouldn't make any difference. She knew that. So instead she started to cry. Her head slipped forward in a rare show of self-pity and she wept for a full minute, before, breathing hard three times, she turned and walked quickly down the garden path (such as it was). Someone would take her in. Someone would comfort her and take away the fear and dry her clothes.

Someone always did.

John Rebus stared hard at the dish in front of him, oblivious to the conversation around the table, the background music, the flickering candles. He didn't really care about house prices in Barnton, or the latest delicatessen to be opened in the Grassmarket. He didn't much want to speak to the other guests – a female lecturer to his right, a male bookseller to his left – about . . . well, whatever they'd just been discussing. Yes, it was the perfect dinner party, the conversation as tangy as the starter course, and he was glad Rian had invited him. Of course he was. But the more he stared at the half lobster on his plate, the more an unfocussed despair grew within him. What had he in common with these people? Would they laugh if he told the story of the police alsatian and the severed head? No, they would not. They would smile politely, then bow their heads towards their plates, acknowledging that he was . . . well, *different* from them.

'Vegetables, John?'

It was Rian's voice, warning him that he was not 'taking part', was not 'conversing' or even looking

interested. He accepted the large oval dish with a smile, but avoided her eyes.

She was a nice girl. Quite a stunner in an individual sort of way. Bright red hair, cut short and pageboyish. Eyes deep, striking green. Lips thin but promising. Oh yes, he liked her. He wouldn't have accepted her invitation otherwise. He fished about in the dish for a piece of broccoli that wouldn't break into a thousand pieces as he tried to manoeuvre it onto his plate.

'Gorgeous food, Rian,' said the bookseller, and Rian smiled, accepting the remark, her face reddening slightly. That was all it took, John. That was all you had to say to make this girl happy. But in his mouth he knew it would come out sounding sarcastic. His tone of voice was not something he could suddenly throw off like a piece of clothing. It was a part of him, nurtured over a course of years. So when the lecturer agreed with the bookseller, all John Rebus did was smile and nod, the smile too fixed, the nod going on a second or two too long, so that they were all looking at him again. The piece of broccoli snapped into two neat halves above his plate and splattered onto the tablecloth.

'Shite!' he said, knowing as the word escaped his lips that it was not quite appropriate, not quite the *right* word for the occasion. Well, what was he, a man or a thesaurus?

'Sorry,' he said.

'Couldn't be helped,' said Rian. My God, her voice was cold.

It was the perfect end to a perfect weekend. He'd gone shopping on Saturday, ostensibly for a suit to wear tonight. But had baulked at the prices, and bought some books instead, one of which was intended as a gift to Rian: *Doctor Zhivago*. But then he'd decided he'd like to read it himself first, and so had brought flowers and chocolates instead, forgetting her aversion to lilies (*had he known in*

the first place?) and the diet she was in the throes of starting. Damn. And to cap it all, he'd tried a new church this morning, another Church of Scotland offering, not too far from his flat. The last one he'd tried had seemed unbearably cold, promising nothing but sin and repentance, but this latest church had been the oppressive opposite: all love and joy and what was there to forgive anyway? So he'd sung the hymns, then buggered off, leaving the minister with a handshake at the door and a promise of future attendance.

'More wine, John?'

This was the bookseller, proffering the bottle he'd brought himself. It wasn't a bad little wine, actually, but the bookseller had talked about it with such unremitting pride that Rebus felt obliged to decline. The man frowned, but then was cheered to find this refusal left all the more for himself. He replenished his glass with vigour.

'Cheers,' he said.

The conversation returned to how busy Edinburgh seemed these days. Here was something with which Rebus could agree. This being the end of May, the tourists were almost in season. But there was more to it than that. If anyone had told him five years ago that in 1989 people would be emigrating north from the south of England to the Lothians, he'd have laughed out loud. Now it was fact, and a fit topic for the dinner table.

Later, much later, the couple having departed, Rebus helped Rian with the dishes.

'What was wrong with you?' she said, but all he could think about was the minister's handshake, that confident grip which bespoke assurances of an afterlife.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Let's leave these till morning.'

Rian stared at the kitchen, counting the used pots, the half-eaten lobster carcasses, the wine glasses smudged with grease.

'Okay,' she said. 'What did you have in mind instead?'

He raised his eyebrows slowly, then brought them down low over his eyes. His lips broadened into a smile which had about it a touch of the leer. She became coy.

'Why, Inspector,' she said. 'Is that supposed to be some kind of a clue?'

'Here's another,' he said, lunging at her, hugging her to him, his face buried in her neck. She squealed, clenched fists beating against his back.

'Police brutality!' she gasped. 'Help! Police, help!'

'Yes, madam?' he inquired, carrying her by the waist out of the kitchen, towards where the bedroom and the end of the weekend waited in shadow.

Late evening at a building site on the outskirts of Edinburgh. The contract was for the construction of an office development. A fifteen-foot-high fence separated the works from the main road. The road, too, was of recent vintage, built to help ease traffic congestion around the city. Built so that commuters could travel easily from their country-side dwellings to jobs in the city centre.

There were no cars on the road tonight. The only sound came from the slow chug-chugging of a cement mixer on the site. A man was feeding it spadefuls of grey sand and remembering the far distant days when he had laboured on a building site. Hard graft it had been, but honest.

Two other men stood above a deep pit, staring down into it.

'Should do it,' one said.

'Yes,' the other agreed. They began walking back to the car, an ageing purple Mercedes.

'He must have some clout. I mean, to get us the keys to this place, to set all this up. Some clout.'

'Ours is not to ask questions, you know that.' The man who spoke was the oldest of the three, and the only Calvinist. He opened the car boot. Inside, the body of a frail teenager lay crumpled, obviously dead. His skin was

the colour of pencil shading, darkest where the bruises lay.

'What a waste,' said the Calvinist.

'Aye,' the other agreed. Together they lifted the body from the boot, and carried it gently towards the hole. It dropped softly to the bottom, one leg wedging up against the sticky clay sides, a trouser leg slipping to show a naked ankle.

'All right,' the Calvinist said to the cement man. 'Cover it, and let's get out of here. I'm starving.'

Monday

For close on a generation, no one had appeared to drive away these random visitors or to repair their ravages

What a start to the working week.

The housing estate, what he could see of it through the rain-lashed windscreen, was slowly turning back into the wilderness that had existed here before the builders had moved in many years ago. He had no doubt that in the 1960s it, like its brethren clustered around Edinburgh, had seemed the perfect solution to future housing needs. And he wondered if the planners ever learned through anything other than hindsight. If not, then perhaps today's 'ideal' solutions were going to turn out the same way.

The landscaped areas comprised long grass and an abundance of weeds, while children's tarmacadamed playgrounds had become bombsites, shrapnel glass awaiting a tripped knee or stumbling hand. Most of the terraces boasted boarded-up windows, ruptured drainpipes pouring out teeming rainwater onto the ground, marshy front gardens with broken fences and missing gates. He had the idea that on a sunny day the place would seem even more depressing.

Yet nearby, a matter of a few hundred yards or so, some developer had started building private apartments. The hoarding above the site proclaimed this a LUXURY DEVELOPMENT, and gave its address as MUIR VILLAGE. Rebus wasn't fooled, but wondered how many young buyers would be. This was Pilmuir, and always would be. This was the dumping ground.

There was no mistaking the house he wanted. Two

police cars and an ambulance were already there, parked next to a burnt-out Ford Cortina. But even if there hadn't been this sideshow, Rebus would have known the house. Yes, it had its boarded-up windows, like its neighbours on either side, but it also had an open door, opening into the darkness of its interior. And on a day like this, would any house have its door flung wide open were it not for the corpse inside, and the superstitious dread of the living who were incarcerated with it?

Unable to park as close to this door as he would have liked, Rebus cursed under his breath and pushed open the car door, throwing his raincoat over his head as he made to dash through the stiletto shower. Something fell from his pocket onto the verge. Scrap paper, but he picked it up anyway, screwing it into his pocket as he ran. The path to the open door was cracked and slick with weeds, and he almost slipped and fell, but reached the threshold intact, shaking the water from him, awaiting the welcoming committee.

A constable put his head around a doorway, frowning.

'Detective Inspector Rebus,' said Rebus by way of introduction.

'In here, sir.'

'I'll be there in a minute.'

The head disappeared again, and Rebus looked around the hall. Tatters of wallpaper were the only mementoes of what had once been a home. There was an overpowering fragrance of damp plaster, rotting wood. And behind all that, a sense of this being more of a cave than a house, a crude form of shelter, temporary, unloved.

As he moved further into the house, passing the bare stairwell, darkness embraced him. Boards had been hammered into all the window-frames, shutting out light. The intention, he supposed, had been to shut out squatters, but Edinburgh's army of homeless was too great and too wise. They had crept in through the fabric of the

place. They had made it their den. And one of their number had died here.

The room he entered was surprisingly large, but with a low ceiling. Two constables held thick rubber torches out to illuminate the scene, casting moving shadows over the plasterboard walls. The effect was of a Caravaggio painting, a centre of light surrounded by degrees of murkiness. Two large candles had burnt down to the shapes of fried eggs against the bare floorboards, and between them lay the body, legs together, arms outstretched. A cross without the nails, naked from the waist up. Near the body stood a glass jar, which had once contained something as innocent as instant coffee, but now held a selection of disposable syringes. Putting the fix into crucifixion, Rebus thought with a guilty smile.

The police doctor, a gaunt and unhappy creature, was kneeling next to the body as though about to offer the last rites. A photographer stood by the far wall, trying to find a reading on his light meter. Rebus moved in towards the corpse, standing over the doctor.

'Give us a torch,' he said, his hand commanding one from the nearest constable. He shone this down across the body, starting at the bare feet, the bedenimed legs, a skinny torso, ribcage showing through the pallid skin. Then up to the neck and face. Mouth open, eyes closed. Sweat looked to have dried on the forehead and in the hair. But wait.... Wasn't that moisture around the mouth, on the lips? A drop of water suddenly fell from nowhere into the open mouth. Rebus, startled, expected the man to swallow, to lick his parched lips and return to life. He did not.

'Leak in the roof,' the doctor explained, without looking up from his work. Rebus shone the torch against the ceiling, and saw the damp patch which was the source of the drip. Unnerving all the same.

'Sorry I took so long to get here,' he said, trying to keep his voice level. 'So what's the verdict?'

'Overdose,' the doctor said blandly. 'Heroin.' He shook a tiny polythene envelope at Rebus. 'The contents of this sachet, if I'm not mistaken. There's another full one in his right hand.' Rebus shone his torch towards where a lifeless hand was half clutching a small packet of white powder.

'Fair enough,' he said. 'I thought everyone chased the dragon these days instead of injecting.'

The doctor looked up at him at last.

'That's a very naive view, Inspector. Go talk to the Royal Infirmary. They'll tell you how many intravenous abusers there are in Edinburgh. It probably runs into hundreds. That's why we're the AIDS capital of Britain.'

'Aye, we take pride in our records, don't we? Heart disease, false teeth, and now AIDS.'

The doctor smiled. 'Something you might be interested in,' he said. 'There's bruising on the body. Not very distinct in this light, but it's there.'

Rebus squatted down and shone the torch over the torso again. Yes, there was bruising all right. A lot of bruising.

'Mainly to the ribs,' the doctor continued. 'But also some to the face.'

'Maybe he fell,' Rebus suggested.

'Maybe,' said the doctor.

'Sir?' This from one of the constables, his eyes and voice keen. Rebus turned to him.

'Yes, son?'

'Come and look at this.'

Rebus was only too glad of the excuse to move away from the doctor and his patient. The constable was leading him to the far wall, shining his torch against it as he went. Suddenly, Rebus saw why.

On the wall was a drawing. A five-pointed star,

encompassed by two concentric circles, the largest of them some five feet in diameter. The whole had been well drawn, the lines of the star straight, the circles almost exact. The rest of the wall was bare.

'What do you think, sir?' asked the constable.

'Well, it's not just your usual graffiti, that's for sure.'

'Witchcraft?'

'Or astrology. A lot of druggies go in for all sorts of mysticism and hoodoo. It goes with the territory.'

'The candles. . . .'

'Let's not jump to conclusions, son. You'll never make CID that way. Tell me, why are we all carrying torches?'

'Because the electric's been cut off.'

'Right. Ergo, the need for candles.'

'If you say so, sir.'

'I do say so, son. Who found the body?'

'I did, sir. There was a telephone call, female, anonymous, probably one of the other squatters. They seem to have cleared out in a hurry.'

'So there was nobody else here when you arrived?'

'No, sir.'

'Any idea yet who he is?' Rebus nodded the torch towards the corpse.

'No, sir. And the other houses are all squats, too, so I doubt we'll get anything out of them.'

'On the contrary. If anyone knows the identity of the deceased, they're the very people. Take your friend and knock on a few doors. But be casual, make sure they don't think you're about to evict them or anything.'

'Yes, sir.' The constable seemed dubious about the whole venture. For one thing, he was sure to get an amount of hassle. For another, it was still raining hard.

'On you go,' Rebus chided, but gently. The constable shuffled off, collecting his companion on the way.

Rebus approached the photographer.

'You're taking a lot of snaps,' he said.

'I need to in this light, to make sure at least a few come out.'

'Bit quick off the mark in getting here, weren't you?'

'Superintendent Watson's orders. He wants pictures of any drugs-related incidents. Part of his campaign.'

'That's a bit gruesome, isn't it?' Rebus knew the new Chief Superintendent, had met him. Full of social awareness and community involvement. Full of good ideas, and lacking only the manpower to implement them. Rebus had an idea.

'Listen, while you're here, take one or two of that far wall, will you?'

'No problem.'

'Thanks.' Rebus turned to the doctor. 'How soon will we know what's in that full packet?'

'Later on today, maybe tomorrow morning at the latest.'

Rebus nodded to himself. What was his interest? Maybe it was the dreariness of the day, or the atmosphere in this house, or the positioning of the body. All he knew was that he felt something. And if it turned out to be just a damp ache in his bones, well, fair enough. He left the room and made a tour of the rest of the house.

The real horror was in the bathroom.

The toilet must have blocked up weeks before. A plunger lay on the floor, so some cursory attempt had been made to unblock it, but to no avail. Instead, the small, splattered sink had become a urinal, while the bath had become a dumping ground for solids, upon which crawled a dozen large and jet-black flies. The bath had also become a skip, filled with bags of refuse, bits of wood. . . . Rebus didn't stick around, pulling the door tight shut behind him. He didn't envy the council workmen who would eventually have to come and fight the good fight against all this decay.

One bedroom was completely empty, but the other

boasted a sleeping bag, damp from the drips coming through the roof. Some kind of identity had been imposed upon the room by the pinning of pictures to its walls. Up close, he noticed that these were original photographs, and that they comprised a sort of portfolio. Certainly they were well taken, even to Rebus's untrained eye. A few were of Edinburgh Castle on damp, misty days. It looked particularly bleak. Others showed it in bright sunshine. It still looked bleak. One or two were of a girl, age indeterminate. She was posing, but grinning broadly, not taking the event seriously.

Next to the sleeping bag was a bin-liner half filled with clothes, and next to this a small pile of dog-eared paperbacks: Harlan Ellison, Clive Barker, Ramsey Campbell. Science fiction and horror. Rebus left the books where they were and went back downstairs.

'All finished,' the photographer said. 'I'll get those photos to you tomorrow.'

'Thanks.'

'I also do portrait work, by the way. A nice family group for the grandparents? Sons and daughters? Here, I'll give you my card.'

Rebus accepted the card and pulled his raincoat back on, heading out to the car. He didn't like photographs, especially of himself. It wasn't just that he photographed badly. No, there was more to it than that.

The sneaking suspicion that photographs really could steal your soul.

On his way back to the station, travelling through the slow midday traffic, Rebus thought about how a group photograph of his wife, his daughter and him might look. But no, he couldn't visualise it. They had grown so far apart, ever since Rhona had taken Samantha to live in London. Sammy still wrote, but Rebus himself was slow at responding, and she seemed to take umbrage at this,

writing less and less herself. In her last letter she had hoped Gill and he were happy.

He hadn't the courage to tell her that Gill Templer had left him several months ago. Telling Samantha would have been fine: it was the idea of Rhona's getting to hear of it that he couldn't stand. Another notch in his bow of failed relationships. Gill had taken up with a disc jockey on a local radio station, a man whose enthusing voice Rebus seemed to hear whenever he entered a shop or a filling station, or passed the open window of a tenement block.

He still saw Gill once or twice a week of course, at meetings and in the station-house, as well as at scenes of crimes. Especially now that he had been elevated to her rank.

Detective Inspector John Rebus.

Well, it had taken long enough, hadn't it? And it was a long, hard case, full of personal suffering, which had brought the promotion. He was sure of that.

He was sure, too, that he wouldn't be seeing Rian again. Not after last night's dinner party, not after the fairly unsuccessful bout of lovemaking. *Yet another* unsuccessful bout. It had struck him, lying next to Rian, that her eyes were almost identical to Inspector Gill Templer's. A surrogate? Surely he was too old for that.

'Getting old, John,' he said to himself.

Certainly he was getting hungry, and there was a pub just past the next set of traffic lights. What the hell, he was entitled to a lunch break.

The Sutherland Bar was quiet, Monday lunchtime being one of the lowest points of the week. All money spent, and nothing to look forward to. And of course, as Rebus was quickly reminded by the barman, the Sutherland did not exactly cater for a lunchtime clientele.

'No hot meals,' he said, 'and no sandwiches.'

'A pie then,' begged Rebus, '*any*thing. Just to wash down the beer.'

'If it's food you want, there's plenty of cafes around here. This particular pub happens to sell beers, lagers and spirits. We're not a chippie.'

'What about crisps?'

The barman eyed him for a moment. 'What flavour?'

'Cheese and onion.'

'We've run out.'

'Well, ready salted then.'

'No, they're out too.' The barman had cheered up again.

'Well,' said Rebus in growing frustration, 'what in the name of God *have* you got?'

'Two flavours. Curry, or egg, bacon and tomato.'

'*Egg?*' Rebus sighed. 'All right, give me a packet of each.'

The barman stooped beneath the counter to find the smallest possible bags, past their sell-by dates if possible.

'Any nuts?' It was a last desperate hope. The barman looked up.

'Dry roasted, salt and vinegar, chilli flavour,' he said.

'One of each then,' said Rebus, resigned to an early death. 'And another half of eighty-shillings.'

He was finishing this second drink when the bar door shuddered open and an instantly recognisable figure entered, his hand signalling for refreshment before he was even halfway through the door. He saw Rebus, smiled, and came to join him on one of the high stools.

'Hello, John.'

'Afternoon, Tony.'

Inspector Anthony McCall tried to balance his prodigious bulk on the tiny circumference of the bar stool, thought better of it, and stood instead, one shoe on the foot-rail, and both elbows on the freshly wiped surface of the bar. He stared hungrily at Rebus.

'Give us one of your crisps.'

When the packet was offered, he pulled out a handful and stuffed them into his mouth.

'Where were you this morning then?' said Rebus. 'I'd to take one of your calls.'

'The one at Pilmuir? Ach, sorry about that, John. Heavy night last night. I had a bit of a hangover this morning.' A pint of murky beer was placed in front of him. 'Hair of the dog,' he said, and took four slow gulps, reducing it to a quarter of its former size.

'Well, I'd nothing better to do anyway,' said Rebus, sipping at his own beer. 'Christ, those houses down there are a mess though.'

McCall nodded thoughtfully. 'It wasn't always like that, John. I was born there.'

'Really?'

'Well, to be exact, I was born on the estate that was there before this one. It was so bad, so they said, that they levelled it and built Pilmuir instead. Bloody hell on earth it is now.'

'Funny you should say that,' said Rebus. 'One of the young uniformed kids thought there might be some kind of occult tie-in.' McCall looked up from his drink. 'There was a black-magic painting on the wall,' Rebus explained. 'And candles on the floor.'

'Like a sacrifice?' McCall offered, chuckling. 'My wife's dead keen on all those horror films. Gets them out of the video library. I think she sits watching them all day when I'm out.'

'I suppose it must go on, devil worship, witchcraft. It can't *all* be in the imagination of the Sunday newspaper editors.'

'I know how you might find out.'

'How?'

'The university,' said McCall. Rebus frowned, disbelieving. 'I'm serious. They've got some kind of department

that studies ghosts and all that sort of thing. Set up with money from some dead writer.' McCall shook his head. 'Incredible what people will do.'

Rebus was nodding. 'I *did* read about that, now you mention it. Arthur Koestler's money, wasn't it?'

McCall shrugged.

'Arthur Daley's more my style,' he said, emptying his glass.

Rebus was studying the pile of paperwork on his desk when the telephone rang.

'DI Rebus.'

'They said you were the man to talk to.' The voice was young, female, full of unfocussed suspicion.

'They were probably right. What can I do for you, miss . . .?'

'Tracy. . . .' The voice fell to a whisper on the last syllable of the name. She had already been tricked into revealing herself. 'Never mind who I am!' She had become immediately hysterical, but calmed just as quickly. 'I'm phoning about that squat in Pilmuir, the one where they found. . . .' The voice trailed off again.

'Oh yes.' Rebus sat up and began to take notice. 'Was it you who phoned the first time?'

'What?'

'To tell us that someone had died there.'

'Yes, it was me. Poor Ronnie. . . .'

'Ronnie being the deceased?' Rebus scribbled the name onto the back of one of the files from his in-tray. Beside it he wrote 'Tracy – caller'.

'Yes.' Her voice had broken again, near to tears this time.

'Can you give me a surname for Ronnie?'

'No.' She paused. 'I never knew it. I'm not sure Ronnie was even his real name. Hardly anyone uses their real name.'