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The Black Book

Written by Ian Rankin

Published by Orion Books

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IAN RANKIN

THE BLACK BOOK



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 1993
by Orion
This paperback edition published in 1994
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

40 39 38 37 36 35 34 33 32 31

Reissued 2011

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

ISBN 978-0-7528-8357-1

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 wicked, all things are wicked; but to the just, all things are just and right.’

James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the Chandler-Fulbright Award in the writing of this book.

Prologue

There were two of them in the van that early morning, lights on to combat the haar which blew in from the North Sea. It was thick and white like smoke. They drove carefully, being under strict instructions.

'Why does it have to be us?' said the driver, stifling a yawn. 'What's wrong with the other two?'

The passenger was much larger than his companion. Though in his forties, he kept his hair long, cut in the shape of a German military helmet. He kept pulling at the hair on the left side of his head, straightening it out. At the moment, however, he was gripping the sides of his seat. He didn't like the way the driver screwed shut his eyes for the duration of each too-frequent yawn. The passenger was not a conversationalist, but maybe talk would keep the driver awake.

'It's just temporary,' he said. 'Besides, it's not as if it's a daily chore.'

'Thank God for that.' The driver shut his eyes again and yawned. The van glided in towards the grass verge.

'Do you want me to drive?' asked the passenger. Then he smiled. 'You could always kip in the back.'

'Very funny. That's another thing, Jimmy, the *stink*!'

'Meat always smells after a while.'

'Got an answer for everything, eh?'

'Yes.'

'Are we nearly there?'

'I thought you knew the way.'

'On the main roads I do. But with this mist.'

'If we're hugging the coast it can't be far.' The passenger was also thinking: if we're hugging the coast, then two wheels past the verge and we're over a cliff face. It wasn't just this that made him nervous. They'd never used the east coast before, but there was too much attention on the west coast now. So it was an untried run, and *that* made him nervous.

'Here's a road sign.' They braked to peer through the haar. 'Next right.' The driver jolted forwards again. He signalled and pulled in through a low iron gate which was padlocked open. 'What if it had been locked?' he offered.

'I've got cutters in the back.'

'A bloody answer for everything.'

They drove into a small gravelled car park. Though they could not see them, there were wooden tables and benches to one side, where Sunday families could picnic and do battle with the midges. The spot was popular for its view, an uninterrupted spread of sea and sky. When they opened their doors, they could smell and hear the sea. Gulls were already shrieking overhead.

'Must be later than we thought if the birds are up.' They readied themselves for opening the back of the van, then did so. The smell really was foul. Even the stoical passenger wrinkled his nose and tried hard not to breathe.

'Quicker the better,' he said in a rush. The body had been placed in two thick plastic fertiliser sacks, one pulled over the feet and one over the head, so that they overlapped in the middle. Tape and string had been used to join them. Inside the bags were also a number of breeze blocks, making for a heavy and awkward load. They carried the grotesque parcel low, brushing the wet grass. Their shoes were squelching by the time they passed the sign warning about the cliff face ahead. Even more difficult

was the climb over the fence, though it was rickety enough to start with.

'Wouldn't stop a bloody kid,' the driver commented. He was peching, the saliva like glue in his mouth.

'Ca' canny,' said the passenger. They shuffled forwards two inches at a time, until they could all too clearly make out the edge. There was no more land after that, just a vertical fall to the agitated sea. 'Right,' he said. Without ceremony, they heaved the thing out into space, glad immediately to be rid of it. 'Let's go.'

'Man, but that air smells good.' The driver reached into his pocket for a quarter-bottle of whisky. They were halfway back to the van when they heard a car on the road, and the crunch of tyres on gravel.

'Aw, hell's bells.'

The headlights caught them as they reached the van.

'The fuckin' polis!' choked the driver.

'Keep the heid,' warned the passenger. His voice was quiet, but his eyes burned ahead of him. They heard a handbrake being engaged, and the car door opened. A uniformed officer appeared. He was carrying a torch. The headlights and engine had been left on. There was no one else in the car.

The passenger knew the score. This wasn't a set-up. Probably the copper came here towards the end of his night shift. There'd be a flask or a blanket in the car. Coffee or a snooze before signing off for the day.

'Morning,' the uniform said. He wasn't young, and he wasn't used to trouble. A Saturday night punch-up maybe, or disputes between neighbouring farmers. It had been another long boring night for him, another night nearer his pension.

'Morning,' the passenger said. He knew they could bluff this one, if the driver stayed calm. But then he thought, *I'm* the conspicuous one.

'A right pea-souper, eh?' said the policeman.

The passenger nodded.

'That's why we stopped,' explained the driver. 'Thought we'd wait it out.'

'Very sensible.'

The driver watched as the passenger turned to the van and started inspecting its rear driver-side tyre, giving it a kick. He then walked to the rear passenger-side and did the same, before getting down on his knees to peer beneath the vehicle. The policeman watched the performance too.

'Got a bit of trouble?'

'Not really,' the driver said nervously. 'But it's best to be safe.'

'I see you've come a ways.'

The driver nodded. 'Off up to Dundee.'

The policeman frowned. 'From Edinburgh? Why didn't you just stick to the motorway or the A914?'

The driver thought quickly. 'We've a drop-off in Tayport first.'

'Even so,' the policeman started. The driver watched as the passenger rose from his inspection, now sited behind the policeman. He was holding a rock in his hand. The driver kept his eyes glued to the policeman's as the rock rose, then fell. The monologue finished mid-sentence as the body slumped to the ground.

'That's just beautiful.'

'What else could we do?' The passenger was already making for his door. 'Come on, vamoose!'

'Aye,' said the driver, 'another minute and he'd have spotted your ... er ...'

The passenger glowered at him. 'What you mean is, another minute and he'd've smelt the booze on your breath.' He didn't stop glowering until the driver shrugged his agreement.

They turned the van and drove out of the car park. The gulls were still noisy in the distance. The police car's

engine was turning over. The headlights picked out the prone unconscious figure. But the torch had broken in the fall.

1

It all happened because John Rebus was in his favourite massage parlour reading the Bible.

It all happened because a man walked in through the door in the mistaken belief that any massage parlour sited so close to a brewery and half a dozen good pubs had to be catering to Friday night pay packets and anytime drunks; and therefore had to be bent as a paperclip.

But the Organ Grinder, God-fearing tenant of the set-up, ran a clean shop, a place where tired muscles were beaten mellow. Rebus was tired: tired of arguments with Patience Aitken, tired of the fact that his brother had turned up seeking shelter in a flat filled to the gunwales with students, and most of all tired of his job.

It had been that kind of week.

On the Monday evening, he'd had a call from his Arden Street flat. The students he'd rented to had Patience's number and knew they could reach him there, but this was the first time they'd ever had reason. The reason was Michael Rebus.

'Hello, John.'

Rebus recognised the voice at once. 'Mickey?'

'How are you, John?'

'Christ, Mickey. Where are you? No, scratch that, I know where you are. I mean –' Michael was laughing softly. 'It's just I heard you'd gone south.'

'Didn't work out.' His voice dropped. 'Thing is, John,

can we talk? I've been dreading this, but I really need to talk to you.'

'Okay.'

'Shall I come round there?'

Rebus thought quickly. Patience was picking up her two nieces from Waverley Station, but all the same ... 'No, stay where you are. I'll come over. The students are a good lot, maybe they'll fix you a cup of tea or a joint while you're waiting.'

There was silence on the line, then Michael's voice: 'I could have done without that.' The line went dead.

Michael Rebus had served three years of a five-year sentence for drug dealing. During that time, John Rebus had visited his brother fewer than half a dozen times. He'd felt relief more than anything when, upon release, Michael had taken a bus to London. That was two years ago, and the brothers had not exchanged a word since. But now Michael was back, bringing with him bad memories of a period in John Rebus's life he'd rather not remember.

The Arden Street flat was suspiciously tidy when he arrived. Only two of the student tenants were around, the couple who slept in what had been Rebus's bedroom. He talked to them in the hallway. They were just going out to the pub, but handed over to him another letter from the Inland Revenue. Really, Rebus would have liked them to stay. When they left, there was silence in the flat. Rebus knew that Michael would be in the living room and he was, crouched in front of the stereo and flipping through stacks of records.

'Look at this lot,' Michael said, his back still to Rebus. 'The Beatles and the Stones, same stuff you used to listen to. Remember how you drove dad daft? What was that record player again ...?'

'A Dansette.'

'That's it. Dad got it saving cigarette coupons.' Michael stood up and turned towards his brother. 'Hello, John.'

'Hello, Michael.'

They didn't hug or shake hands. They just sat down, Rebus on the chair, Michael on the sofa.

'This place has changed,' Michael said.

'I had to buy a few sticks of furniture before I could rent it out.' Already Rebus had noticed a few things – cigarette burns on the carpet, posters (against his explicit instructions) sellotaped to the wallpaper. He opened the taxman's letter.

'You should have seen them leap into action when I told them you were coming round. Hoovering and washing dishes. Who says students are lazy?'

'They're okay.'

'So when did this all happen?'

'A few months ago.'

'They told me you're living with a doctor.'

'Her name's Patience.'

Michael nodded. He looked pale and ill. Rebus tried not to be interested, but he was. The letter from the tax office hinted strongly that they knew he was renting his flat, and didn't he want to declare the income? The back of his head was tingling. It did that when he was fractious, ever since it had been burned in the fire. The doctors said there was nothing he or they could do about it.

Except, of course, not get fractious.

He stuffed the letter into his pocket. 'What do you want, Mickey?'

'Bottom line, John, I need a place to stay. Just for a week or two, till I can get on my feet.' Rebus stared stonily at the posters on the walls as Michael ran on. He wanted to find work ... money was tight ... he'd take any job ... he just needed a chance.

'That's all, John, just one chance.'

Rebus was thinking. Patience had room in her flat, of course. There was space enough there even with the nieces staying. But no way was Rebus going to take his

brother back to Oxford Terrace. Things weren't going that well as it was. His late hours and her late hours, his exhaustion and hers, his job involvement and hers. Rebus couldn't see Michael improving things. He thought: I am not my brother's keeper. But all the same.

'We might squeeze you into the box room. I'd have to talk to the students about it.' He couldn't see them saying no, but it seemed polite to ask. How *could* they say no? He was their landlord and flats were hard to find. Especially good flats, especially in Marchmont.

'That would be great.' Michael sounded relieved. He got up from the sofa and walked over to the door of the box room. This was a large ventilated cupboard off the living room. Just big enough for a single bed and a chest of drawers, if you took all the boxes and the rubbish out of it.

'We could probably store all that stuff in the cellar,' said Rebus, standing just behind his brother.

'John,' said Michael, 'the way I feel, I'd be happy enough sleeping in the cellar myself.' And when he turned towards his brother, there were tears in Michael Rebus's eyes.

On Wednesday, Rebus began to realise that his world was a black comedy.

Michael had been moved into the Arden Street flat without any fuss. Rebus had informed Patience of his brother's return, but had said little more than that. She was spending a lot of time with her sister's girls anyway. She'd taken a few days off work to show them Edinburgh. It looked like hard going. Susan at fifteen wanted to do all the things which Jenny, aged eight, didn't or couldn't. Rebus felt almost totally excluded from this female triumvirate, though he would sneak into Jenny's room at night just to re-live the magic and innocence of a child asleep. He also spent time trying to avoid Susan, who seemed only too aware of the differences between women and men.

He was kept busy at work, which meant he didn't think about Michael more than a few dozen times each day. Ah, work, now there was a thing. When Great London Road police station had burnt down, Rebus had been moved to St Leonard's, which was Central District's divisional HQ.

With him had come Detective Sergeant Brian Holmes and, to both their dismays, Chief Superintendent 'Farmer' Watson and Chief Inspector 'Fart' Lauderdale. There had been compensations – newer offices and furniture, better amenities and equipment – but not enough. Rebus was still trying to come to terms with his new workplace. Everything was so tidy, he could never find anything, as a result of which he was always keen to get out of the office and onto the street.

Which was why he ended up at a butcher's shop on South Clerk Street, staring down at a stabbed man.

The man had already been tended to by a local doctor, who'd been standing in line waiting for some pork chops and gammon steaks when the man staggered into the shop. The wound had been dressed initially with a clean butcher's apron, and now everyone was waiting for a stretcher to be unloaded from the ambulance outside.

A constable was filling Rebus in.

'I was only just up the road, so he couldn't have been here more than five minutes when somebody told me, and I came straight here. That's when I radioed in.'

Rebus had picked up the constable's radio message in his car, and had decided to stop by. He kind of wished he hadn't. There was blood smeared across the floor, colouring the sawdust which lay there. Why some butchers still scattered sawdust on their floors he couldn't say. There was also a palm-shaped daub of blood on the white-tiled wall, and another less conclusive splash of the stuff below this.

The wounded man had also left a trail of gleaming drips

outside, all the way along and halfway up Lutton Place (insultingly close to St Leonard's), where they suddenly stopped kerbside.

The man's name was Rory Kintoul, and he had been stabbed in the abdomen. This much they knew. They didn't know much more, because Rory Kintoul was refusing to speak about the incident. This was not an attitude shared by those who had been in the butcher's at the time. They were outside now, passing on news of the excitement to the crowd who had stopped to gawp through the shop window. It reminded Rebus of Saturday afternoon in the St James Centre, when pockets of men would gather outside the TV rental shops, hoping to catch the football scores.

Rebus crouched over Kintoul, just a little intimidatingly.

'And where do you live, Mr Kintoul?'

But the man was not about to answer. A voice came from the other side of the glass display case.

'Duncton Terrace.' The speaker was wearing a bloodied butcher's apron and cleaning a heavy knife on a towel. 'That's in Dalkeith.'

Rebus looked at the butcher. 'And you are . . .?'

'Jim Bone. This is my shop.'

'And you know Mr Kintoul?'

Kintoul had turned his head awkwardly, seeking the butcher's face, as if trying to influence his answer. But, slouched as he was against the display case, he would have required demonic possession to effect such a move.

'I ought to,' said the butcher. 'He's my cousin.'

Rebus was about to say something, but at that moment the stretcher was trolleyed in by two ambulancemen, one of whom almost skited on the slippery floor. It was as they positioned the stretcher in front of Kintoul that Rebus saw something which would stay with him. There were two signs in the display cabinet, one pinned into a side of corned beef, the other into a slab of red sirloin.

Cold Cuts, one said. The other stated simply, Fleshing. A large fresh patch of blood was left on the floor as they lifted the butcher's cousin. Cold Cuts and Fleshing. Rebus shivered and made for the door.

On the Friday after work, Rebus decided on a massage. He had promised Patience he'd be in by eight, and it was only six now. Besides, a brutal pummelling always seemed to set him up for the weekend.

But first he wandered into the Broadsword for a pint of the local brew. They didn't come more local than Gibson's Dark, a heavy beer made only six hundred yards away at the Gibson Brewery. A brewery, a pub and a massage parlour: Rebus reckoned if you threw in a good Indian restaurant and a corner shop open till midnight he could live happily here for ever and a day.

Not that he didn't like living with Patience in her Oxford Terrace garden flat. It represented the other side of the tracks, so to speak. Certainly, it seemed a world away from this disreputable corner of Edinburgh, one of many such corners. Rebus wondered why he was so drawn to them.

The air outside was filled with the yeasty smell of beer-making, vying with the even stronger aromas from the city's other much larger breweries. The Broadsword was a popular watering hole, and like most of Edinburgh's popular pubs, it boasted a mixed clientele: students and low lifes with the occasional businessman. The bar had few pretensions; all it had in its favour were good beer and a good cellar. The weekend had already started, and Rebus was squeezed in at the bar, next to a man whose immense alsatian dog was sleeping on the floor behind the barstools. It took up the standing room of at least two adult men, but nobody was asking it to shift. Further along the bar, someone was drinking with one hand and keeping another proprietorial hand on a coatstand which

Rebus assumed they'd just bought at one of the nearby secondhand shops. Everyone at the bar was drinking the same dark brew.

Though there were half a dozen pubs within a five-minute walk of here, only the Broadsword stocked draught Gibson's, the other pubs being tied to one or other of the big breweries. Rebus started to wonder, as the beer slipped down, what effect it would have on his metabolism once the Organ Grinder got to work. He decided against a refill, and instead made for O-Gee's, which was what the Organ Grinder had called his shop. Rebus liked the name; it made the same sound customers made once the Grinder himself got to work – 'Oh Jeez!' But they were always careful not to say anything out loud. The Organ Grinder didn't like to hear blasphemy on the massage table. It upset him, and nobody wanted to be in the hands of an upset Organ Grinder. Nobody wanted to be his monkey.

So, there he was sitting with the Bible in his lap, waiting for his six-thirty appointment. The Bible was the only reading matter on the premises, courtesy of the Organ Grinder himself. Rebus had read it before, but didn't mind reading it again.

Then the front door burst open.

'Where's the girls, eh?' This new client was not only misinformed, but also considerably drunk. There was no way the Grinder would handle drunks.

'Wrong place, pal.' Rebus was about to make mention of a couple of nearby parlours which would be certain to offer the necessary Thai assisted sauna and rub-down, but the man stopped him with a thick pointed finger.

'John bloody Rebus, you son of a shite-breeks!'

Rebus frowned, trying to place the face. His mind flipped through two decades of mug shots. The man saw Rebus's confusion, and spread his hands wide. 'Deek Torrance, you don't remember?'

Rebus shook his head. Torrance was walking deter-

minedly forward. Rebus clenched his fists, ready for anything.

'We went through parachute training together,' said Torrance. 'Christ, you must remember!'

And suddenly Rebus did remember. He remembered everything, the whole black comedy of his past.

They drank in the Broadsword, swopping stories. Deek hadn't lasted in the Parachute Regiment. After a year he'd had enough, and not too long after that he'd bought his way out of the Army altogether.

'Too restless, John, that was my problem. What was yours?'

Rebus shook his head and drank some more beer. 'My problem, Deek? You couldn't put a name to it.' But a name *had* been put to it, first by Mickey's sudden appearance, and now by Deek Torrance. Ghosts, both of them, but Rebus didn't want to be their Scrooge. He bought another round.

'You always said you were going to try for the SAS,' Torrance said.

Rebus shrugged. 'It didn't work out.'

The bar was busier than ever, and at one point Torrance was jostled by a young man trying to manoeuvre a double bass through the mêlée.

'Could you no' leave that outside?'

'Not around here.'

Torrance turned back to Rebus. 'Did you see thon?'

Rebus merely smiled. He felt good after the massage. 'No one brings anything small into a bar around here.' He watched Deek Torrance grunt. Yes, he remembered him now, all right. He'd gotten fatter and balder, his face was roughened and much fleshier than it had been. He didn't even sound the same, not exactly. But there was that one characteristic: the Torrance grunt. A man of few words, Deek Torrance had been. Not now, though, now he had plenty to say.

'So what do you do, Deek?'

Torrance grinned. 'Seeing you're a copper I better not say.' Rebus bided his time. Torrance was drunk to the point of slavering. Sure enough, he couldn't resist. 'I'm in buying and selling, mostly selling.'

'And what do you sell?'

Torrance leaned closer. 'Am I talking to the polis or an old pal?'

'A pal,' said Rebus. 'Strictly off-duty. So what do you sell?'

Torrance grunted. 'Anything you like, John. I'm sort of like Jenners department store ... only I can get things they can't.'

'Such as?' Rebus was looking at the clock above the bar. It couldn't be that late, surely. They always ran the clock ten minutes fast here, but even so.

'Anything at all,' said Torrance. 'Anything from a shag to a shooter. You name it.'

'How about a watch?' Rebus started winding his own. 'Mine only seems to go for a couple of hours at a stretch.'

Torrance looked at it. 'Longines,' he said, pronouncing the word correctly, 'you don't want to chuck that. Get it cleaned, it'll be fine. Mind you, I could probably part-ex it against a Rolex ...?'

'So you sell dodgy watches.'

'Did I say that? I don't recall saying that. *Anything*, John. Whatever the client wants, I'll fetch it for him.' Torrance winked.

'Listen, what time do you make it?'

Torrance shrugged and pulled up the sleeve of his jacket. He wasn't wearing a watch. Rebus was thinking. He'd kept his appointment with the Grinder, Deek happy to wait for him in the anteroom. And afterwards they'd still had time for a pint or two before he had to make his way home. They'd had two ... no, three drinks so far.

Maybe he was running a bit late. He caught the barman's attention and tapped at his wrist.

'Twenty past eight,' called the barman.

'I'd better phone Patience,' said Rebus.

But someone was using the public phone to cement some romance. What's more, they'd dragged the receiver into the ladies' toilet so that they could hear above the noise from the bar. The telephone cord was stretched taut, ready to garotte anyone trying to use the toilets. Rebus bided his time, then began staring at the wall-mounted telephone cradle. What the hell. He pushed his finger down on the cradle, released it, then moved back into the throng of drinkers. A young man appeared from inside the ladies' toilet and slammed the receiver hard back into its cradle. He checked for change in his pocket, had none, and started to make for the bar.

Rebus moved in on the phone. He picked it up, but could hear no tone. He tried again, then tried dialling. Nothing. Something had obviously come loose when the man had slammed the receiver home. Shite on a stick. It was nearly half past eight now, and it would take fifteen minutes to drive back to Oxford Terrace. He was going to pay dearly for this.

'You look like you could use a drink,' said Deek Torrance when Rebus joined him at the bar.

'Know what, Deek?' said Rebus. 'My life's a black comedy.'

'Oh well, better than a tragedy, eh?'

Rebus was beginning to wonder what the difference was.

He got back to the flat at twenty past nine. Probably Patience had cooked a meal for the four of them. Probably she'd waited fifteen minutes or so before eating. She'd have kept his meal warm for another fifteen minutes, then dumped it. If it was fish, the cat would have eaten it. Otherwise its destination would be the compost heap in the

garden. This had happened before, too many times, really. Yet it kept on happening, and Rebus wasn't sure the excuses of an old friend or a broken watch would work any kind of spell.

The steps down to the garden flat were worn and slippery. Rebus took them carefully, and so was slow to notice the large sports holdall which, illuminated by the orange street-lamp, was sitting on the rattan mat outside the front door of the flat. It was his bag. He unzipped it and looked in. On top of some clothes and a pair of shoes there was a note. He read it through twice.

> Don't bother trying the door, I've bolted it. I've also disconnected the doorbell, and the phone is off the hook for the weekend. I'll leave another load of your stuff on the front step Monday morning.

The note needed no signature. Rebus whistled a long breathy note, then tried his key in the lock. It didn't budge. He pressed the doorbell. No sound. As a last resort, he crouched down and peered in through the letterbox. The hall was in darkness, no sign of light from any of the rooms.

'Something came up,' he called. No response. 'I tried phoning, I couldn't get through.' Still nothing. He waited a few more moments, half-expecting Jenny at least to break the silence. Or Susan, she was a right stirrer of trouble. And a heartbreaker too, by the look of her. 'Bye, Patience,' he called. 'Bye, Susan. Bye, Jenny.' Still silence. 'I'm sorry.'

He truly was.

'Just one of those weeks,' he said to himself, picking up the bag.

On Sunday morning, in weak sunshine and a snell wind, Andrew McPhail sneaked back into Edinburgh. He'd been

away a long time, and the city had changed. Everywhere and everything had changed. He was still jetlagged from several days ago, and poorer than he should have been due to London's inflated prices. He walked from the bus station to the Broughton area of town, just off Leith Walk. It wasn't a long walk, but every step seemed heavy, though his bags were light. He'd slept badly on the bus, but that was nothing new: he couldn't remember when he'd last had a good night's sleep, sleep without dreams.

The sun looked as though it might disappear at any minute. Thick clouds were pushing in over Leith. McPhail tried to walk faster. He had an address in his pocket, the address of a boarding house. He'd phoned last night, and his landlady was expecting him. She sounded nice on the phone, but it was difficult to tell. He wouldn't mind, no matter what she was like, so long as she kept quiet. He knew that his leaving Canada had been in the Canadian newspapers, and even in some of the American ones, and he supposed that journalists here would be after him for a story. He'd been surprised at slipping so quietly into Heathrow. No one seemed to know who he was, and that was good.

He wanted nothing but a quiet life, though perhaps not as quiet as a few of the past years.

He'd phoned his sister from London and asked her to check directory enquiries for a Mrs MacKenzie in the Bellevue area. (Directory enquiries in London hadn't gone out of their way to help.) Melanie and her mother had lodged with Mrs MacKenzie when he'd first met them, before they moved in together. Alexis was a single parent, a DSS case. Mrs MacKenzie had been a more sympathetic landlady than most. Not that he'd ever visited Melanie and her mum there – Mrs MacKenzie wouldn't have liked it.

She didn't take lodgers much these days, but she was a good Christian and McPhail was persuasive.