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Written by Ian Rankin

Published by Orion Books

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IAN RANKIN

KNOTS AND CROSSES

An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 1987
by The Bodley Head
This paperback edition published in 1998
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

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Reissued 2011

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

ISBN 978-0-7528-8353-3

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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PROLOGUE

1

The girl screamed once, only the once.

Even that, however, was a minor slip on his part. That might have been the end of everything, almost before it had begun. Neighbours inquisitive, the police called in to investigate. No, that would not do at all. Next time he would tie the gag a little tighter, just a little tighter, just that little bit more secure.

Afterwards, he went to the drawer and took from it a ball of string. He used a pair of sharp nail-scissors, the kind girls always seem to use, to snip off a length of about six inches, then he put the ball of string and the scissors back into the drawer. A car revved up outside, and he went to the window, upsetting a pile of books on the floor as he did so. The car, however, had vanished, and he smiled to himself. He tied a knot in the string, not any special kind of knot, just a knot. There was an envelope lying ready on the sideboard.

2

It was 28th April. Wet, naturally, the grass percolating water as John Rebus walked to the grave of his father, dead five years to the day. He placed a wreath so that it lay, yellow and red, the colours of remembrance, against the still shining marble. He paused for a moment, trying to think of things to say, but there seemed nothing to say, nothing to think. He had been a good enough father and that was that. The old man wouldn't have wanted him to waste his words in any case. So he stood there, hands respectfully behind his back, crows laughing on the walls around him, until the water seeping into his shoes told him that there was a warm car waiting for him at the cemetery gates.

He drove quietly, hating to be back here in Fife, back where the old days had never been 'good old days,' where ghosts rustled in the shells of empty houses and the shutters went up every evening on a handful of desultory shops, those metal shutters that gave the vandals somewhere to write their names. How Rebus hated it all, this singular lack of an environment. It stank the way it had always done: of misuse, of disuse, of the sheer wastage of life.

He drove the eight miles towards the open sea, to where his brother Michael still lived. The rain eased off as he approached the skull-grey coast, the car throwing up splashings of water from a thousand crevasses in the road. Why was it, he wondered, that they never seemed to fix the roads here,

while in Edinburgh they worked on the surfaces so often that things were made even worse? And why, above all, had he made the maniacal decision to come all the way through to Fife, just because it was the anniversary of the old man's death? He tried to focus his mind on something else, and found himself fantasising about his next cigarette.

Through the rain, falling as drizzle now, Rebus saw a girl about his daughter's age walking along the grass verge. He slowed the car, examined her in his mirror as he passed her, and stopped. He motioned for her to come to his window.

Her short breaths were visible in the cool, still air, and her dark hair fell in rats-tails down her forehead. She looked at him apprehensively.

'Where are you going, love?'

'Kirkcaldy.'

'Do you want a lift?'

She shook her head, drops of water flying from her coiled hair.

'My mum said I should never accept lifts from strangers.'

'Well,' said Rebus, smiling, 'your mum is quite right. I've got a daughter about your age and I tell her the same thing. But it is raining, and I *am* a policeman, so you can trust me. You've still got a fair way to go, you know.'

She looked up and down the silent road, then shook her head again.

'Okay,' said Rebus, 'but take care. Your mum was quite right.'

He wound his window up again and drove off, watching her in his mirror as she watched him. Clever kid. It was good to know that parents still had a little sense of responsibility left. If only the same could be said of his ex-wife. The way she had brought up their daughter was a disgrace. Michael, too, had given his daughter too long a leash. Who was to blame?

Rebus's brother owned a respectable house. He had

followed in the old man's footsteps and become a stage hypnotist. He seemed to be quite good at it, too, from all accounts. Rebus had never asked Michael how it was done, just as he had never shown any interest or curiosity in the old man's act. He had observed that this still puzzled Michael, who would drop hints and red herrings as to the authenticity of his own stage act for him to chase up if he so wished.

But then John Rebus had too many things to chase up, and that had been the position during all of his fifteen years on the force. Fifteen years, and all he had to show were an amount of self-pity and a busted marriage with an innocent daughter hanging between them. It was more disgusting than sad. And meantime Michael was happily married with two kids and a larger house than Rebus could ever afford. He headlined at hotels, clubs, and even theatres as far away as Newcastle and Wick. Occasionally he would make six-hundred quid from a single show. Outrageous. He drove an expensive car, wore good clothes, and would never have been caught dead standing in the pissing rain in a graveyard in Fife on the dullest April day for many a year. No, Michael was too clever for that. And too stupid.

'John! Christ, what's up? I mean, it's great to see you. Why didn't you phone to warn me you were coming? Come on inside.'

It was the welcome Rebus had expected: embarrassed surprise, as though it were painful to be reminded that one still had some family left alive. And Rebus had noted the use of the word 'warn' where 'tell' would have sufficed. He was a policeman. He noticed such things.

Michael Rebus bounded through to the living-room and turned down the wailing stereo.

'Come on in, John,' he called. 'Do you want a drink? Coffee perhaps? Or something stronger? What brings you here?'

Rebus sat down as though he were in a stranger's house, his back straight and professional. He examined the panelled walls of the room – a new feature – and the framed photographs of his niece and nephew.

'I was just in the neighbourhood,' he said.

Michael, turning from the drinks cabinet with the glasses ready, suddenly remembered, or did a good impersonation of just having remembered.

'Oh, John, I forgot all about it. Why didn't you tell me? Shit, I hate forgetting about Dad.'

'Just as well you're a hypnotist then and not Mickey the Memory Man, isn't it? Give me that drink, or are you two getting engaged?'

Michael, smiling, absolved, handed over the glass of whisky.

'Is that your car outside?' asked Rebus, taking the glass. 'I mean the big BMW?'

Michael, still smiling, nodded.

'Christ,' said Rebus. 'You treat yourself well.'

'As well as I treat Chrissie and the kids. We're building an extension onto the back of the house. Somewhere to put a jacuzzi or a sauna. They're the in thing just now, and Chrissie's desperate to keep ahead of the field.'

Rebus took a swallow of whisky. It turned out to be a malt. Nothing in the room was cheap, but none of it was exactly desirable either. Glass ornaments, a crystal decanter on a silver salver, the TV and video, the inscrutably miniature hi-fi system, the onyx lamp. Rebus felt a little guilty about that lamp. Rhona and he had given it to Michael and Chrissie as a wedding present. Chrissie no longer spoke to him. Who could blame her?

'Where is Chrissie, by the way?'

'Oh, she's out doing some shopping. She has her own car

now. The kids will still be at school. She'll pick them up on the way home. Are you staying for something to eat?'

Rebus shrugged his shoulders.

'You'd be welcome to stay,' said Michael, meaning that Rebus wouldn't. 'So how's the cop-shop? Still muddling along?'

'We lose a few, but they don't get the publicity. We catch a few, and they do. It's the same as always, I suppose.'

The room, Rebus was noticing, smelled of toffee-apples, of penny arcades.

Michael was speaking:

'This is a terrible business about those girls being kidnapped.'

Rebus nodded.

'Yes,' he said, 'yes, it is. But we can't strictly call it kidnapping, not yet. There hasn't been a demand note or anything. It's more likely to be a straightforward case of sexual assault.'

Michael started up from his chair.

'Straightforward? What's straightforward about that?'

'It's just the terminology we use, Mickey, that's all.' Rebus shrugged again and finished his drink.

'Well, John,' said Michael, sitting, 'I mean, we've both got daughters, too. You're so casual about the whole thing. I mean, it's frightening to think of it.' He shook his head slowly in the world-wide expression of shared grief, and relief, too, that the horror was someone else's for the moment. 'It's frightening,' he repeated. 'And in Edinburgh of all places. I mean, you never think of that sort of thing happening in Edinburgh, do you?'

'There's more happening in Edinburgh than anyone knows.'

'Yes.' Michael paused. 'I was across there just last week playing at one of the hotels.'

'You didn't tell me.'

It was Michael's turn to shrug his shoulders.

'Would you have been interested?' he said.

'Maybe not,' said Rebus, smiling, 'but I would have come along anyway.'

Michael laughed. It was the laughter of birthdays, of money found in an old pocket.

'Another whisky, sir?' he said.

'I thought you were never going to ask.'

Rebus returned to his study of the room while Michael went to the cabinet.

'How's the act going?' he asked. 'And I really *am* interested.'

'It's going fine,' said Michael. 'In fact, it's going very well indeed. There's talk of a television spot, but I'll believe that when I see it.'

'Great.'

Another drink reached Rebus's willing hand.

'Yes, and I'm working on a new slot. It's a bit scary though.' An inch of gold flashed on Michael's wrist as he tipped the glass to his lips. The watch was expensive: it had no numbers on its face. It seemed to Rebus that the more expensive something was, the less of it there always seemed to be: tiny little hi-fi systems, watches without numbers, the translucent Dior ankle-socks on Michael's feet.

'Tell me about it,' he said, taking his brother's bait.

'Well,' said Michael, sitting forward in his chair, 'I take members of the audience back into their past lives.'

'Past lives?'

Rebus was staring at the floor as if admiring the design of the dark and light green carpet.

'Yes,' Michael continued, 'Reincarnation, born again, that sort of thing. Well, I shouldn't have to spell it out to you, John. After all, *you're* the Christian.'

'Christians don't believe in past lives, Mickey. Only future ones.'

Michael stared at Rebus, demanding silence.

'Sorry,' said Rebus.

'As I was saying, I tried the act out in public for the first time last week, though I've been practising it for a while with my private consultees.'

'Private consultees?'

'Yes. They pay me money for private hypnotherapy. I stop them smoking, or make them more confident, or stop them from wetting the bed. Some are convinced that they have past lives, and they ask me to put them under so that they can prove it. Don't worry though. Financially, it's all above board. The tax-man gets his cut.'

'And do you prove it? Do they have past lives?'

Michael rubbed a finger around the rim of his glass, now empty.

'You'd be surprised,' he said.

'Give me an example.'

Rebus was following the lines of the carpet with his eyes. Past lives, he thought to himself. Now there was a thing. There was plenty of life in *his* past.

'Well,' said Michael, 'remember I told you about my show in Edinburgh last week? Well,' he leaned further forward in his chair, 'I got this woman up from the audience. She was a small woman, middle-aged. She'd come in with an office-party. She went under pretty easily, probably because she hadn't been drinking as heavily as her friends. Once she was under, I told her that we were going to take a trip into her past, way, way back before she was born. I told her to think back to the earliest memory she had . . .'

Michael's voice had taken on a professional but easy mellifluence. He spread his hands before him as if playing to an audience. Rebus, nursing his glass, felt himself relax a

little. He thought back to a childhood episode, a game of football, one brother pitted against the other. The warm mud of a July shower, and their mother, her sleeves rolled up, stripping them both and putting them, giggling knots of arms and legs, into the bath . . .

'. . . well,' Michael was saying, 'she started to speak, and in a voice not quite her own. It was weird, John. I wish you *had* been there to see it. The audience were silent, and I was feeling all cold and then hot and then cold again, and it had nothing to do with the hotel's heating-system by the way. I'd done it, you see. I'd taken that woman into a past life. She was a nun. Do you believe that? A *nun*. And she said that she was alone in her cell. She described the convent and everything, and then she started to recite something in Latin, and some people in the audience actually *crossed* themselves. I was bloody well petrified. My hair was probably standing on end. I brought her out of it as quickly as I could, and there was a long pause before the crowd started to applaud. Then, maybe out of sheer relief, her friends started to cheer and laugh, and that broke the ice. At the end of the show, I found out that this woman was a staunch Protestant, a Rangers supporter no less, and she swore blind that she knew no Latin at all. Well, *somebody* inside her did. I'll tell you that.'

Rebus was smiling.

'It's a nice story, Mickey,' he said.

'It's the truth.' Michael opened his arms wide in supplication. 'Don't you believe me?'

'Maybe.'

Michael shook his head.

'You must make a pretty bad copper, John. I had around a hundred and fifty witnesses. Iron-clad.'

Rebus could not pull his attention away from the design in the carpet.

'Plenty of people believe in past lives, John.'

Past lives . . . Yes, he believed in some things . . . In God, certainly . . . But past lives . . . Without warning, a face screamed up at him from the carpet, trapped in its cell.

He dropped his glass.

'John? Is anything wrong? Christ, you look as if you've seen . . .'

'No, no, nothing's the matter.' Rebus retrieved the glass and stood up. 'I just . . . I'm fine. It's just that,' he checked his watch, a watch with numbers, 'well, I'd better be going. I'm on duty this evening.'

Michael was smiling weakly, glad that his brother was not going to stay, but embarrassed at his relief.

'We'll have to meet again soon,' he said, 'on neutral territory.'

'Yes,' said Rebus, tasting once again the tang of toffee-apples. He felt a little pale, a little shaky, as though he were too far out of his territory. 'Let's do that.'

Once or twice or three times a year, at weddings, funerals, or over the telephone at Christmas, they promised themselves this get-together. The mere promise now was a ritual in itself, and so could be safely proffered and just as safely ignored.

'Let's do that.'

Rebus shook hands with Michael at the door. Escaping past the BMW to his own car, he wondered how alike they were, his brother and him. Uncles and aunts in their funeral-cold rooms occasionally commented, 'Ah, you're both the spitting image of your mother.' That was as far as it went. John Rebus knew that his own hair was a shade of brown lighter than Michael's, and that his eyes were a shade of green darker. He knew also, however, that the differences between them were such that any similarities were made to look unutterably superficial. They were brothers without any sense of brotherhood. Brotherhood belonged to the past.

He waved once from the car and was gone. He would be back in Edinburgh within the hour, and on duty another half-hour after that. He knew that the reason he could never feel comfortable in Michael's house was Chrissie's hatred of him, her unshakeable belief that he alone had been responsible for the break-up of his marriage. Maybe she was right at that. He tried ticking off in his mind the definite chores of the next seven or eight hours. He had to tidy up a case of burglary and serious assault. A nasty one that. The CID was undermanned as it was, and now these abductions would stretch them even more. Those two young girls, girls his own daughter's age. It was best not to think about it. By now they would be dead, or would wish that they were dead. God have mercy on them. In Edinburgh of all places, in his own dear city.

A maniac was on the loose.

People were staying in their homes.

And a screaming in his memory.

Rebus shrugged, feeling a slight sensation of attrition in one of his shoulders. It was not his business after all. Not yet.

Back in his living-room, Michael Rebus poured himself another whisky. He went to the stereo and turned it all the way up, then reached underneath his chair and, after a little fumbling, pulled out an ashtray that was hidden there.

Part One

‘THERE ARE CLUES EVERYWHERE’

1

On the steps of the Great London Road police station in Edinburgh, John Rebus lit his last legitimate cigarette of the day before pushing open the imposing door and stepping inside.

The station was old, its floor dark and marbled. It had about it the fading grandeur of a dead aristocracy. It had character.

Rebus waved to the duty sergeant, who was tearing old pictures from the notice-board and pinning up new ones in their place. He climbed the great curving staircase to his office. Campbell was just leaving.

'Hello, John.'

McGregor Campbell, a Detective Sergeant like Rebus, was donning coat and hat.

'What's the word, Mac? Is it going to be a busy night?' Rebus began checking the messages on his desk.

'I don't know about that, John, but I can tell you that it's been pandemonium in here today. There's a letter there for you from the man himself.'

'Oh yes?' Rebus seemed preoccupied with another letter which he had just opened.

'Yes, John. Brace yourself. I think you're going to be transferred to that abduction case. Good luck to you. Well, I'm off to the pub. I want to catch the boxing on the BBC. I

should be in time.' Campbell checked his watch. 'Yes, plenty of time. Is anything wrong, John?'

Rebus waved the now empty envelope at him.

'Who brought this in, Mac?'

'I haven't the faintest, John. What is it?'

'Another crank letter.'

'Oh yes?' Campbell sidled over to Rebus's shoulder. He examined the typed note. 'Looks like the same bloke, doesn't it?'

'Clever of you to notice that, Mac, seeing as it's the exact same message.'

'What about the string?'

'Oh, it's here too.' Rebus lifted a small piece of string from his desk. There was a simple knot tied in its middle.

'Queer bloody business.' Campbell walked to the doorway. 'See you tomorrow, John.'

'Yes, yes, see you, Mac.' Rebus paused until his friend had made his exit. 'Oh, Mac!' Campbell came back into the doorway.

'Yes?'

'Maxwell won the big fight,' said Rebus, smiling.

'God, you're a bastard, Rebus.' Gritting his teeth, Campbell stalked out of the station.

'One of the old school,' Rebus said to himself. 'Now, what possible enemies could I have?'

He studied the letter again, then checked the envelope. It was blank, save for his own name, unevenly typed. The note had been handed in, just like the other one. It was a queer bloody business right enough.

He walked back downstairs and headed for the desk.

'Jimmy?'

'Yes, John.'

'Have you seen this?' He showed the envelope to the desk sergeant.

'That?' The sergeant wrinkled not only his brow but, it seemed to Rebus, his whole face. Only forty years in the force could do that to a man, forty years of questions and puzzles and crosses to bear. 'It must have been put through the door, John. I found it myself on the floor just there.' He pointed vaguely in the direction of the station's front door. 'Is anything up?'

'Oh no, it's nothing really. Thanks, Jimmy.'

But Rebus knew that he would be niggled all night by the arrival of this note, only days after he had received the first anonymous message. He studied the two letters at his desk. The work of an old typewriter, probably portable. The letter S about a millimetre higher than the other letters. The paper cheap, no water-mark. The piece of string, tied in the middle, cut with a sharp knife or scissors. The message. The same typewritten message:

THERE ARE CLUES EVERYWHERE.

Fair enough; perhaps there were. It was the work of a crank, a kind of practical joke. But why him? It made no sense. Then the phone rang.

'Detective Sergeant Rebus?'

'Speaking.'

'Rebus, it's Chief Inspector Anderson here. Have you received my note?'

Anderson. Bloody Anderson. That was all he needed. From one crank to another.

'Yes, sir,' said Rebus, holding the receiver under his chin and tearing open the letter on his desk.

'Good. Can you be here in twenty minutes? The briefing will be in the Waverley Road Incident Room.'

'I'll be there, sir.'

The phone went dead on Rebus as he read. It was true then, it was official. He was being transferred to the abduction case. God, what a life. He pushed the messages, envelopes and

string into his jacket pocket, looking around the office in frustration. Who was kidding who? It would take an act of God to get him to Waverley Road inside of half an hour. And when was he supposed to get round to finishing all his work? He had three cases coming to court and another dozen or so crying out for some paperwork before his memory of them faded entirely. That would be nice, actually, nice to just erase the lot of them. Wipe-out. He closed his eyes. He opened them again. The paperwork was still there, large as life. Useless. Always incomplete. No sooner had he finished with a case than another two or three appeared in its place. What was the name of that creature? The Hydra, was it? That was what he was fighting. Every time he cut off a head, more popped into his in-tray. Coming back from a holiday was a nightmare.

And now they were giving him rocks to push up hills as well.

He looked to the ceiling.

'With God's grace,' he whispered. Then he headed out to his car.