

MACMILLAN READERS

UPPER LEVEL

ROBERT HARRIS

The Ghost

Retold by John Escott

 **MACMILLAN**

The Body on the Beach

When I heard how McAra died, I should have said no to Rick. But Rick, who's my agent, is a good storyteller. I often think *he* should be the writer and me the agent. The story he told me over lunch that day went like this:

Two Sundays earlier (12th January) a man called Michael McAra had been on the last ferry of the day from Woods Hole, Massachusetts to Martha's Vineyard. There was a strong wind when the ferry left at 9.45pm and the boat was crowded. McAra parked his car below decks and then went upstairs. No one saw him alive again.

The journey to the island usually takes forty-five minutes. But that night, because of the bad weather, it was nearly eleven o'clock before the ferry reached Vineyard Haven. When the driver of a new Ford Escape SUV⁴ did not come to take it off the boat, some of the crew pushed the car onto the dock⁵ and then began a search for the driver. They did not find anyone.

A police check showed that the brown Ford Escape belonged to Martin S. Rhinehart of New York City, a well-known publisher. However, when the police telephoned Mr Rhinehart, he was safe in California. He said that he kept the car at his holiday home on Martha's Vineyard for himself and his guests to use. He told the police that several people were staying there at the moment. After telephoning the house, Rhinehart said that someone *was* missing – a man called Michael McAra.

The next morning, a woman found McAra's body on a beach about six kilometres to the west at Lambert's Cove. The police took it to the little morgue⁶ in Vineyard Haven and then drove to Rhinehart's house to give the guests the news and to ask someone to come and identify the body. That 'someone' arrived at the

morgue in a police car, followed by a second car with four armed guards. Until eighteen months earlier, he had been the prime minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. He was Adam Lang.

The lunch that day was Rick's idea. He'd phoned me the night before.

'I'm surprised it hasn't been in the newspapers,' I said when we'd finished eating.

'It has,' he said.

Perhaps I *had* seen something, but I'd been busy working fifteen hours a day for a month to finish my new book, the autobiography of a famous footballer.

'Why did an ex-prime minister identify the body?' I asked.

'Michael McAra,' said Rick, looking straight into my eyes, 'was helping him write his memoirs.'

And this is where I should have left him sitting at the table and walked out into the London street, with the rest of my life safely ahead of me. Instead, I said, 'I don't know anything about politics.'

'Adam Lang needs a professional ghostwriter like you, not another politician,' said Rick. 'Rhinehart paid ten million dollars for these memoirs for two reasons. One, he wants the book finished and in the bookshops within two years. Two, he expects Lang to tell everything about the War on Terror. At the moment, he's not getting either. Things got so bad around Christmas that Rhinehart let Lang and McAra use his house in Martha's Vineyard so that they could work without interruptions. But McAra must have been feeling the pressure. They found a lot of alcohol in his body.'

'So was his death an accident?' I asked.

'An accident? Suicide⁷? It doesn't matter,' said Rick. 'He worked with Lang when Lang was prime minister. He did research⁸ and wrote Lang's speeches and when Lang resigned⁹, McAra continued to work with him.' Rick finished his coffee,

then went on. 'Rhinehart's company is worried. They're holding a meeting tomorrow, to choose a new writer. John Maddox, Chief Executive of Rhinehart Publishing, is flying over from New York. Lang's sending Sidney Kroll, his lawyer. There are going to be interviews.'

'I'm not sure about this,' I said.

'I've got other writers that I could suggest, but you're the best for this job,' said Rick.

'Me? But this isn't my usual kind of writing job,' I said.

'The money will be good,' said Rick. 'The kids won't starve.'

'I don't have any kids,' I reminded him.

He smiled. 'I do,' he said.

After leaving Rick, I went into the nearest bookshop and was surprised by how many books there were about Adam Lang. I bought several for research, then left the shop.

The moment I got outside, I realized that a bomb had gone off. People were hurrying from the underground railway station at Tottenham Court Road. In a nearby shop window, televisions were showing a picture of black smoke coming from the underground station at Oxford Circus. Words running along the bottom of the screens said that a suicide bomber was suspected.

It took me two hours to walk home. All the underground stations were closed and no buses or taxis were moving. It was six o'clock when I reached my flat in Notting Hill. Kate had already arrived and was watching the news on TV. I had forgotten that she was coming for the evening. She was my ... girlfriend? Lover? I've never known what to call her.

I kissed the top of her head, dropped the books on the sofa and went into the kitchen to get myself a drink. When I went back into the living room she was removing the books from the bag. 'What are all these?' she said, looking up at me. 'You're not interested in *politics*.' And then she guessed, because she was clever and she knew I had just had a meeting with my agent.

‘They want *you* to ghost his book?’

‘It probably won’t happen,’ I said.

She hated Lang, I knew that. ‘But if they offer you the job, will you do it?’

Before I could answer, there was a picture of Adam Lang on the TV, speaking from New York about the bomb attack in London.

‘What’s he doing in New York?’ Kate asked, her arms tightly folded across her chest.

‘Lecturing¹⁰?’ I said.

‘So he travels abroad and drives around in a bomb-proof¹¹ car with armed bodyguards, making lots of money from lecturing,’ she said, ‘while the rest of us are left here to be attacked by terrorists. And all because of the stupid decisions he made when he was prime minister.’ She looked at me angrily. ‘I don’t understand you. All the things I’ve said about him over the past few years – “war criminal” and the rest of it – and you agreed. Now you’re going to write his book and make him even richer!’

She got up and went into the bedroom to get the bag she brought on the nights she planned to stay. I heard her filling it noisily with her things. I could have gone in and talked to her, but I didn’t. I continued to stare at the TV.

Minutes later, she was gone.