



CROSS

AND BURN

Also by Val McDermid

A Place of Execution

Killing the Shadows

The Distant Echo

The Grave Tattoo

A Darker Domain

Trick of the Dark

The Vanishing Point

TONY HILL NOVELS

The Mermaids Singing

The Wire in the Blood

The Last Temptation

The Torment of Others

Beneath the Bleeding

Fever of the Bone

The Retribution

KATE BRANNIGAN NOVELS

Dead Beat

Kick Back

Crack Down

Clean Break

Blue Genes

Star Struck

LINDSAY GORDON NOVELS

Report for Murder

Common Murder

Final Edition

Union Jack

Booked for Murder

Hostage to Murder

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

The Writing on the Wall

Stranded

Christmas is Murder

NON-FICTION

A Suitable Job for a Woman



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VAL McDERMID

Atlantic Monthly Press

New York

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First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Sphere *Printed in the United States of America*

ISBN 978-0-8021-2204-9

Atlantic Monthly Press

an imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.

154 West 14th Street

New York, NY 10011

Distributed by Publishers Group West

www.groveatlantic.com

NOT FOR RESALE

For my friends by the sea – thank you for
taking me in and bringing me home.

Acknowledgements

Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good. I can't think of any other reason why I am so lucky in the support systems that enable me to put this book in your hands. Some of them are experts who give up their time and expertise; some of them are my own backroom team; others go above and beyond the call of professional duty.

So I'd like to say thanks to Professor Dave Barclay for his DNA expertise; to Catherine Tweedy for her fascinating exposition of fingerprints; to Professor Sue Black for her unerring ability to astonish me; and to those who prefer to remain anonymous. Thanks to Marie Mather whose generous donation to the Million for a Morgue campaign is the reason why she appears in these pages.

The character of DCI Alex Fielding was first created by Patrick Harbinson for *Wire in the Blood*, the TV series based on the Tony Hill and Carol Jordan novels. I have appropriated her for my own purposes with the kind permission of Coastal Productions.

Unstinting gratitude to Kiri, who organises my life; to Carolyn, who makes it beautiful; to Tony who keeps me on **VAL McDERMID**

the fiscal straight and narrow; and most of all, to Kelly, Cameron, the cousins and their mums, who save me from myself. Not to mention the dog.

Finally, a big shout out to the professionals: Jane and the team at Gregory & Co, David Shelley and his crew at Little, Brown, my copy editor Anne O'Brien, Amy Hundley and her colleagues at Grove Atlantic, and all the booksellers, librarians and bloggers who have helped my books find their readers.

Lucky me.

The hardest thing in life is to know which bridge to cross and which to burn.

David Russell

But you're not here, now, to lead me back

To bed. None of you are. Look at the snow,

I said, to whoever might be near, I'm cold,

Would you hold me. Hold me. Let me go.

Hammersmith Winter

Robin Robertson

1

Day one

He woke every morning with a prickle of excitement.

Would today be the day? Would he finally meet her, his perfect wife? He knew who she was, of course. He'd been watching her for a couple of weeks now, growing used to her habits, getting to know who her friends were, learning her little ways. How she pushed her hair behind her ears when she settled into the driver's seat of her car. How she turned all the lights on as soon as she came home to her lonely flat.

How she never ever seemed to check in her rear-view mirror.

He reached for the remote controls and raised the blinds on the high skylight windows. Rain fell in a constant drizzle from an unbroken wall of featureless grey cloud. No wind to drive the rain, though. Just a steady gentle downpour. The sort of weather where people hid under umbrellas, heads down, paying no attention to their surroundings, faces invisible to CCTV.

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First box ticked.

And it was a Saturday. So she'd have no appointments booked, no meetings arranged. Nobody to notice an unplanned absence. Nobody to raise an alarm.

Second box ticked.

Saturday also meant the chances were much higher that her plans would take her somewhere suitable for their meeting. Somewhere he could follow the first steps of the carefully worked-out plan to make her his perfect wife.

Whether she wanted that or not. But then, what she wanted was irrelevant.

Third box ticked.

He took a long slow shower, savouring the sensual delight of the warm water on his skin. If she played her cards right, she'd get to share it with him, to make a pleasant experience even more rewarding for him. What could be better than starting the day with a blow job in the shower? That was the sort of thing that a perfect wife would be thrilled to perform for her man. It had never occurred to him before, and he happily added it to his list. It had never occurred to the first one either, which was typical of her many failures to meet his high standards.

New tick box added to the mental list. It was important to be organised.

He believed in organisation, in preparation and in taking precautions. An outsider, looking at how much time had passed since that bitch had thwarted him, might have thought he'd given up on his quest. How wrong that outsider would have been. First, he'd had to deal with the mess she'd made. That had taken a ridiculous amount of time and he begrudged her every second of it. Then he'd had to be clear about his objectives.

He'd considered trying to buy what he wanted, like his father had done. But pliable though the Asian women were, 2

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it sent the wrong message to turn up with one of them on your arm. It screamed inadequacy, perversion, failure. The same went for mail-order brides from the former Soviet empire. Those harsh accents, the chemical blonde hair, the criminal tendencies ingrained like grime – that wasn't for him. You couldn't parade one of them in front of your workmates and expect respect.

Then he'd looked at the possibilities of internet dating.

The trouble with that was you were buying a pig in a poke.

And he didn't want to poke a pig. He sniggered to himself at his cleverness, his skill with language. People admired that about him, he knew. But the even bigger trouble with internet dating was that there were so few options if things went wrong. Because you'd left a trail a mile wide. It took effort, skill and resources to be truly anonymous online. The risk of exposure with one split second of inattention or error was too high for him to take. And that meant if it all went wrong, he had no way to make her pay the proper price for her failure. She'd simply retreat to her old life as if nothing had happened. She'd win.

He couldn't allow that. There had to be another way. And so he'd conceived his plan. And that was why it had taken so long to reach this point. He'd had to develop a strategy, then examine it from every possible angle, then do his research. And only now was he ready to roll.

He dressed anonymously in black chain-store jeans and polo shirt, carefully lacing up the black work boots with their steel toecaps. Just in case. Downstairs, he made himself a cup of green tea and munched an apple. Then he went through to the garage to check again that everything was in order. The freezer was turned off, the lid open, ready to receive its cargo. Pre-cut strips of tape were lined up along the edge of a shelf. On a card table, handcuffs, a taser, picture cord and a roll of duct tape sat in a row. He put on his 3

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waxed jacket and stowed the items in his pockets. Finally, he picked up a metal case

and headed back to the kitchen.

Fourth and fifth boxes ticked.

He gave the garage one final look, saw he'd trailed in some leaf debris last time he'd been in there. With a sigh, he put down the case and fetched a brush and dustpan.

Woman's work, he thought impatiently. But if everything went right today, soon there would be a woman to do it.

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2

Day twenty-four

Dr Tony Hill shifted in his seat and tried to avoid looking at the wreckage of her face. 'When you think of Carol Jor -

dan, what comes into your mind?'

Chris Devine, still formally a detective sergeant with Brad -

field Metropolitan Police, cocked her head towards him, as if to compensate for a degree of deafness. 'When you think of Carol Jordan, what comes into *your* mind?' Her voice had a deliberate teasing quality. He recognised it as a bid to deflect him from his line.

'I try not to think about Carol.' In spite of his best efforts, the sadness seeped to the surface.

'Maybe you should. Maybe you need to go there more than I do.'

The room had grown dim as they'd talked. The day was dying outside but the light seemed to be leaching out of the room at a faster rate. Because she couldn't see him, it was safe for once to let his face betray him. His expression was the opposite of the lightness of his tone. 'You're not my therapist, you know.'

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'And you're not mine. Unless you're here as my mate, I'm not interested. I've told them I'm not wasting my time with a counsellor. But then, you know that, don't you? They'll have told you the score. You're still their go-to guy. The rabbit they pull out of the hat when all the other magic tricks have fallen flat on their arse.'

It was amazing she didn't sound more bitter, he thought.

In her shoes, he'd be raging. Lashing out at anyone who sat still long enough. 'It's true, I do know you've refused to cooperate with the therapy team. But that's not why I've come. I'm not here to try and counsel you by the back door.

I'm here because we've known each other for a long time.'

'That doesn't make us friends.' Her voice was dull, all animation stripped from the words.

'No. I don't really do friendship.' It surprised him how easy it was to be candid with someone who couldn't see his face or his body language. He'd read about the phenomenon but he'd never experienced it at first hand. Maybe he should try wearing dark glasses and feigning blindness with his more intransigent patients.

She gave a dry little laugh. 'You do a decent facsimile when it suits you.'

'Kind of you to say so. A long time ago, someone called it

"passing for human." I liked the sound of that. I've been using it ever since.'

'That's pitching it a bit high, mate. What does the length of time we've known each other have to do with the price of fish?'

'We're what's left, I suppose.' He shifted in his chair, uncomfortable at the way the conversation was going. He'd come because he wanted to reach out, to help her. But the longer he sat here, the more he felt like he was the one who needed help. 'After the dust has settled.'

'I think you're here because you hoped that talking to me 6

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would help you understand whatever it is you're feeling,'

she pointed out with a note of sharpness. 'Because I took the hit for her, didn't I? That's a closer bond than we ever had in all those years of working together.'

'I thought I was the psychologist here.' It was a weak response, barely a parry to her thrust.

'Doesn't mean you can figure out what's going on in your own head. Your own heart, come to that. It's complicated, right, Doc? I mean, if it was only guilt, it would be easy, right?'

That'd make sense. But it's more than that, isn't it? Because there's a dark side to guilt. The rage. The feeling that it's just not fair, that you're the one left carrying the weight. The outrage because you're left with a sense of responsibility. That sense of injustice, it's like heartburn, like acid burning into you.' She stopped abruptly, shocked

by her own figure of speech.

‘I’m sorry.’

Her hand moved towards her face, stopping millimetres from the shiny red skin left by the acid boobey trap that had been targeted at someone else. ‘So, what does come into your mind when you think about Carol Jordan,’ she persisted, her voice harsh now.

Tony shook his head. ‘I can’t say.’ Not because he didn’t know the answer. But because he did.

7

3

Even from behind, Paula McIntyre recognised the boy.

She was a detective, after all. It was the kind of thing she was supposed to be capable of. All the more so when the person in question was out of context. That was where civilians fell down. Without context, they generally failed. But detectives were meant to make the most of their natural talents and hone their skills to the point where people were once seen, never forgotten. *Yeah, right*, she thought. Another one of those myths perpetuated by the double-takes of TV

cops confronted by the familiar in unexpected circumstances.

But still, she did recognise the boy, even from the quarter-profile of her angle of approach. If she’d entered the station via the tradesmen’s entrance – the back door from the car park – she’d have missed him. But this was her first day at Skenfrith Street and she didn’t know the door codes. So she’d taken the easy way out and parked in the multi-storey opposite and walked in the front door, coming up behind 8

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the teenager

shifting from foot to foot before the front

counter. There was something about the set of his shoulders and the angle of his head that suggested defensiveness and tension. But not guilt.

She paused and tried to get the measure of what was going on. ‘I understand what you’re saying. I’m not stupid.’

The boy’s voice was miserable rather than aggressive. ‘But I’m asking you to understand that this is different.’ He lifted his shoulders in a small shrug. ‘Not everybody’s the same, man. You can’t just go with one size fits all.’ His accent was local but, in spite of his best attempts, unmistakably middle-class.

The civilian staffing the counter muttered something she couldn't make out. The boy started bouncing on the balls of his feet, all wound up and nowhere to go. He wasn't the sort of lad who would kick off, she thought she knew that. But that was no reason not to try and placate him. Keeping a lid on things wasn't the only point of getting to the bottom of what was bothering the punters.

Paula stepped forward and put a hand on the boy's arm.

'It's Torin, isn't it?'

He swivelled round, his face startled and anxious. A thick mop of dark hair framed the pale skin of a teenage boy-cave dweller. Wide blue eyes with dark smudges beneath, a prominent wedge of nose, a narrow mouth with incongruous rosebud lips under the faintest shadow of what might one day become a moustache. Paula cross-checked the mental catalogue against her memory and ticked all the boxes. No mistake here.

The tightness round his eyes relaxed a little. 'I know you.

You've been to our house. With the doctor.' He frowned, struggling for a memory. 'Elinor. From casualty.'

Paula nodded. 'That's right. We came round for dinner.

Your mum and Elinor are mates from work. I'm Paula.' She 9

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smiled at the small grey man behind the counter as she produced her ID from her jacket pocket. 'Detective Sergeant McIntyre, CID – DCI Fielding's team.'

The man nodded. 'I'm telling this lad, there's nothing we can do for him till his mum's been missing for twenty-four hours.'

'Missing?' Paula's question was drowned by Torin McAndrew's frustrated riposte.

'And I'm telling this . . . ' He breathed heavily through his nose. ' . . . this man that you can't treat every case the same because everybody's different and my mum doesn't stay out all night.'

Paula didn't know Bev McAndrew well, but she'd heard plenty about the chief pharmacist from Elinor Blessing, her partner and the senior registrar in A&E at Bradfield Cross Hospital. And nothing she'd heard tended to contradict Bev's son's adamant certainty. None of which would cut any ice with the civilian behind the counter.

'I'm going to have a chat with Torin here,' she said firmly.

'Have you got an interview room?' The man nodded towards a door on the other side

of the barren waiting area.

‘Thanks. Please call up to CID and let DCI Fielding know I’m on the premises and I’ll be up shortly.’

He didn’t look thrilled, but he did pick up the phone.

Paula gestured with her thumb towards the interview room.

‘Let’s have a sit down and you can tell me what’s going on,’

she said, leading the way.

‘Kay.’ Torin followed her, shuffling his oversized trainers across the floor in the typical slouch of an adolescent who’s still not quite accustomed to the margins of his body.

Paula opened the door on a tiny boxroom with barely enough space for a table and three steel-framed chairs upholstered in a zingy blue-and-black pattern. *Seen worse*, she thought, ushering Torin to a seat. She sat opposite him, 10

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pulling from her shoulder bag a spiral notebook with a pen rammed down its metal spine.

‘Right then, Torin. Why don’t you start at the beginning?’

Being stalled at the rank of Detective Constable had been the price Paula had willingly paid for membership of DCI Carol Jordan’s Major Incident Team. So when that squad had been wound up, she’d applied for the first three-stripe job that had come up with Bradfield Metropolitan Police. It had been so long since she’d passed her sergeant’s exams, she was afraid they’d make her resit.

This wasn’t how she’d imagined her initiation into the rank of Detective Sergeant. She’d thought doing preliminary interviews would be someone else’s scut work now. But then, that was the thing about being a cop. Not much ever turned out the way you imagined.

11

4

The blackout blinds did exactly what they were supposed to. And that was good, because pitch-black meant you didn’t get shadow tricks setting your imagination on fire.

The one thing Carol Jordan didn’t need was anything to stimulate her imagination. She

could manage quite enough on her own without any extra provocation.

It wasn't as if she was a stranger to bloody crime scenes.

Most of her adult life had been punctuated by images of sud -

den violent death. She'd been confronted by victims of torture; banal domestic violence gone overboard; sexual sadism that was nothing to do with middle-aged, middle-class fantasy; pick your brutality of choice and Carol had seen its end result.

Sometimes they'd kept sleep at bay, driven her to the vodka bottle to blur the outlines. But never for more than a few nights. Her need for justice had always stepped in, transforming horror into a spur to action. Those images became the engine that drove her investigations, the motivation for bringing killers to face the consequences of their crimes.

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This time was different, though. This time, nothing diminished the power of what she'd seen. Not time, not drink, not distance. These days, there seemed to be a film running on a perpetual loop in her head. It wasn't a long film, but its impact wasn't dulled by repetition. The weird thing was that it wasn't simply a rerun of what she'd seen. Because she was in the film. It was as if someone had been right behind her with a hand-held camera, making a jerky home movie of the worst moment of her life, the colours slightly off, the angles somehow wrong.

It began with her walking into the barn, the view over her shoulder the familiar interior with its inglenook fireplace, exposed stone walls and hammer beams. Sofas she'd once lounged on; tables where she'd discarded newspapers, eaten meals, set wine glasses down; hand-stitched wall hangings she'd marvelled at; and a sweater she'd seen her brother wear a dozen times, casually thrown over the back of a chair. There was a crumpled T-shirt on the floor near the dining table, where the remains of lunch still sat. And at the foot of the gallery stairs, two uniformed bobbies in their high-vis jackets, one looking appalled, the other embarrassed. Between them, a concertina of fabric that might have been a skirt. Disconcerting, but not terrifying. Because film couldn't convey the stink of spilt blood.

But as Carol approached the wooden stairs, the camera panned back to reveal the ceiling above the sleeping gallery.

It was like a Jackson Pollock painting whose sole palette was red. Blood; sprayed, slashed and streaked across the stark white plaster. She'd known then that it was going to be very, very bad.

The camera followed her up the steps, recording every stumbling step. The first thing

she saw was their legs and feet, marbled with blood, drips and smears on the bed and the floor. She climbed higher and saw Michael and Lucy's 13

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bloodless bodies marooned like pale islands in a sea of scarlet.

That was where the film froze, locked on that single terrible frame. But her brain didn't stop running just because the film had. The blame circled and rattled in her head like a hamster on a wheel. If she'd been a better cop. If she'd taken matters into her own hands instead of relying on Tony to come up with answers. If she'd forewarned Michael that a man on the loose had his own twisted reasons to wreak vengeance on her. If, if, if.

But none of those things had happened. And so her brother and the woman he loved had been butchered in the barn they'd restored with their own labour. A place with walls three feet thick, where they had every right to feel safe. And nothing in her life was untainted by that single terrible event.

She'd always found much of her self-definition in her work. It was, she had thought, the best of her. A clear channel for her intelligence, it offered a place where her dogged determination was valued. Her ability to recall verbatim any -

thing she'd heard had a practical application. And she'd discovered she had the knack of inspiring loyalty in the officers she worked with. Carol had taken pride in being a cop.

And now she had cut herself adrift from all that.

She'd already handed in her notice with Bradfield Metro -

politan Police when Michael and Lucy had been murdered.

She'd been about to take up a new post as a Detective Chief Inspector with West Mercia. She'd burned her bridges there and she didn't care. She'd also been planning to take a deep breath and share the sprawling Edwardian house in Wor -

cester that Tony had unexpectedly inherited. But that dream was over too, her personal life as much a victim of a brutal killer as her professional life.

Homeless and jobless, Carol had returned to her parents'

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house. Home, according to popular mythology, was where they were supposed to take you in when all else failed. It seemed her judgement had missed the mark there too.

Her parents hadn't turned her away, that much was true. Nor had they openly blamed her brother's death on her choices.

But her father's silent misery and her mother's sharpness had been perpetual reproaches. She'd stuck it out for a couple of weeks, then she'd repacked her bags and left.

All she'd left behind was her beloved cat Nelson. Tony had once joked that her relationship with the black cat was the only functional one in her life. The trouble was, that was too close to the bone to be funny. But Nelson was old now. Too old to be stuffed in a cat carrier and traipsed round the country from pillar to post. And her mother was better able to be kind to the cat than she was to Carol. So Nelson stayed and she went.

She still owned a flat in London but it had been so long since she'd lived there, it no longer felt like home. Besides, the difference between her mortgage payments and the rent from her long-term tenant was all she had to live on until the lawyers were done picking over the remnants of Michael's life. Which left her with a single option.

According to Michael's will, in the absence of Lucy, Carol inherited his estate. The barn was in his sole name; their house in France had belonged to Lucy. So once probate had been granted, the barn would be hers, blood and ghosts and all. Most people would have hired industrial cleaners, redecorated what couldn't be cleaned, and sold the place to some off-comer ignorant of the barn's recent history.

Carol Jordan wasn't most people. Fractured and fragile as she was, she held fast to the determination that had dragged her through disasters before. And so she'd made a plan. This was her attempt at carrying it out.

She would remove every trace of what had happened 15

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here and refashion the barn into a place where she could live. A kind of reconciliation, that's what she was aiming for.

Deep down, she didn't think it was a likely outcome. But she couldn't come up with anything else to aim for and it was a project that would keep her occupied. Hard physical work during the days to make her sleep at night. And if that didn't work, there was always the vodka bottle.

Some days, she felt like the writer in residence at the DIY

warehouse, her shopping list a liturgy of items newly discovered, laid out on the page like a sequence of haikus. But she made sense of the dense poetry of home improvement and mastered unfamiliar tools and new techniques. Slowly but inevitably, she was erasing the physical history of the place. She didn't know whether

that would bring her soul any ease. Once upon a time she would have been able to ask Tony Hill's opinion. But that wasn't an option now. She'd just have to learn to be her own therapist.

Carol snapped on the bedside lamp and pulled on her new working uniform – ripped and filthy jeans, steel-toed work boots over thick socks, a fresh T-shirt and a heavy plaid shirt.

'Construction Barbie', according to one of the middle-aged men who frequented the trade counter at the DIY warehouse. It had made her smile, if only because nothing could have been less appropriate.

While she was waiting for the coffee machine to produce a brew, she headed through the main body of the barn and stepped out into the morning, seeing the promise of rain in the low cloud that shrouded the distant hills. The colour was leaching out of the coarse moorland grass now autumn was creeping up on winter. The copse of trees on the shoulder of the hill was changing colour, its palette shifting from green to brown. A couple of tiny patches of sky were visible through the branches for the first time since spring. Soon there would be nothing but a tracery of naked branches, 16

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stripping the only cover from the hillside. Carol leaned on the wall and stared up at the trees. She breathed deeply, trying for serenity.

Once upon a time, the highly evolved sixth sense that keeps talented cops out of trouble would have raised the hairs on the back of her neck. It was a measure of how far she'd come from the old Carol Jordan that she was completely oblivious to the patient eyes watching her every move.

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5

Rob Morrison glanced at his watch again, then pulled out his phone to double-check the time. 6:58. The new boss was cutting it fine if she wanted to make a good impression on her first day. But before he could settle into his smugness, the clatter of heels on floor tiles alerted him to an arrival from the street door rather than the underground car park.

He swung round and there she was, mac shimmering with raindrops, shoes splashed with dirt. Marie Mather, his new opposite number. Director of Marketing to his Director of Operations.

'Morning, Rob.' She shifted her laptop bag to join her handbag over her shoulder so she could free up a hand to shake his. 'Thanks for taking the time to get me settled in.'

‘Might as well start off on the right foot.’ He squeezed out a half-smile that took the sourness from his face. ‘Since we’ll be yoked together like horses in the traces, pulling the mighty chariot that is Tellit Communications.’ He enjoyed the flash of surprise as the extravagance of his sardonic comment sank 18

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in. He liked to upset people’s general assumption that a man who ran the operations side of a mobile phone company must be a stranger to culture. ‘You didn’t drive in?’

She shook the sparkle of rain from her thick blonde bob and gestured with her head towards the street outside.

‘We’re only five minutes’ walk from the tram terminus so I always get a seat. It’s a better start to the day than fighting the rush-hour traffic.’ When she smiled, her nose wrinkled, as if she’d smelled something delicious. In terms of aesthetics, Rob reckoned she was a distinct improvement on Jared Kamal, her predecessor. ‘So. What’s the drill?’

‘We’ll sort you out with security passes. Then I’ll take you up to the main floor and give you the guided tour.’ As he spoke, Rob steered her over to the security desk, a hand on her elbow, aware of a spicy floral aroma that clung to her in spite of the tram and the Bradfield rain. If she was as good at her job as she was at brightening the place up, Rob’s working life was set to improve exponentially.

Minutes later, they emerged from the lift straight on to the main sales floor. At this time of day, the lighting was dim.

‘Staff operate the lighting levels at their own pods. It gives them the illusion of control and it gives us a quick and easy way to spot who’s actually working.’ Rob led the way across the room.

‘Somebody’s early.’ Marie nodded towards a pool of light in the far corner.

Rob rubbed his hand over his chin. ‘That’s Gareth Taylor.’

He arranged his features in a standard expression of sorrow.

‘Lost his family recently.’ Personally, he was over Gareth’s grief. Time to move on, get a life. But Rob knew he was in the minority on that one so he kept quiet around the water cooler, content to grunt supportively when colleagues went into one of their ‘Poor Gareth’ spasms.

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Marie’s expression softened. ‘Poor bloke. What happened?’

‘Car crash. Wife and two kids, died at the scene.’ Rob forged onwards, not a backward glance at his bereaved colleague.

Marie broke stride momentarily then caught up. ‘And he’s in here at this time of the morning?’

Rob shrugged. ‘He says he’d rather be here than staring at the walls at home. Fine by me. I mean, it’s been three or four months now.’ He turned and gave her a dark smile.

‘We’re fucked if he starts claiming his TOIL though.’

Marie made a noncommittal noise and followed him into a generous cubicle at the end of the room. A desk, two chairs. A couple of whiteboards and a paper recycling bin.

Rob gave a cynical little bow. ‘Home sweet home.’

‘It’s a decent size, at least.’ Marie put her laptop on the desk, tucked her bag in a drawer and hung her coat on a hook on the back of the door. ‘Now, first things first.

Where’s the coffee and what’s the system?’

Rob smiled. ‘Follow me.’ He led her back into the main office. ‘You buy tokens from Charyn on the front desk. Five for a pound.’ As they grew closer to his workspace, the light from Gareth Taylor’s pod revealed a door tucked away in a nearby alcove. It led to a small room furnished with a pair of coffee machines. Rob gestured at a series of bins that contained little plastic pods. ‘You choose your poison, slot the pod in the machine and pay for it with a token.’ He rummaged in the pocket of his chinos and produced a red disc.

‘Have your first one on me.’ He handed it over as if confer-ring a great honour. ‘I’ll let you get settled in.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘One or two things I need to deal with before the hordes arrive. I’ve arranged a meeting with key personnel at half eight in the small conference room. Ask anybody, they’ll direct you.’

And that was it. He was gone, leaving Marie with an array 20

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of beverage choices. She opted for a cappuccino and was pleasantly surprised by the result. She stepped back into the main office, where there were now three or four illuminated work stations. She decided to start getting to know her staff and moved towards Gareth Taylor, consciously applying a warm smile.

He glanced up as she approached, his expression startled.

His fingers flew over the keyboard and as she rounded the corner of his partition, she had the impression of a computer screen quickly refreshing. It looked like Tellit resembled everywhere Marie had worked, with employees who liked to feel they were

scoring points by doing their own thing in company time with company resources. Human nature, the same all over. It was a tendency that didn't bother Marie, so long as productivity was acceptable and nobody took the piss.

'Hi. I'm Marie Mather. The new marketing director.' She held out a hand.

Gareth accepted the handshake with no enthusiasm. His hand was cool and dry, the pressure firm but not aggressive.

'I figured that's who you must be. I'm Gareth Taylor, one of the screen and phone grunts.'

'I prefer to think of you as frontline staff.'

Gareth raised his eyebrows. 'Doesn't change the reality.'

'You're in early.'

He shook his head, sighing. 'Look, I know Rob will have given you the bullet points. Coming to work is the only consistent thing in my life right now. I don't want sympathy. I'm not like him with his "pity me, my wife left me, schtick". I just want to be left alone to get on with things, all right?' His voice was tight with frustration. She could only imagine how hard it was to deal with other people's well-meaning interference on top of such a devastating loss.

Marie leaned forward and peered at his screen. 'Message received and understood. So what are you working on?'

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She'd hoped he might at least smile. Instead, he scowled.

'It won't mean anything to you till you've got your feet under the table. I'm implementing a strategy to switch silver surfer customers to long-term contracts. And I think we're doing it wrong, so maybe you might want to come back and talk to me about it when you're up to speed.'

There were two ways of taking Gareth's brusque response.

For now, Marie elected to avoid confrontation. 'I'll look forward to that.' She sipped her cappuccino. 'I'm always happy to hear from my team.'

Tonight, when she relaxed with a glass of white wine while Marco cooked dinner, she'd enjoy telling him about this encounter. As they'd often did, they'd set up some light-hearted wagers about how it would go with her new colleagues. Would she win Gareth over or would he be determined to remain alienated? Would Rob's obvious

desire to flirt cross the line to the point where she'd have to bring HR into the picture? She and Marco loved to play their little game of speculation, sometimes even using their fantasy workplace lives to spice up their own bedroom games.

It was harmless fun, Marie thought. Completely harmless.

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Torin's adolescent inability to disguise his anxiety was immediately obvious to Paula. Luckily for her, maintaining a cool façade under pressure took more skill and effort than he had at his command. Normally she'd have offered him a drink to settle him down, but Skenfrith Street was alien territory for her and she didn't know how long it would take her to rustle something up. The last thing she wanted was to keep her new boss waiting any longer than absolutely necessary.

Technically, she should probably have sorted out a so-called appropriate adult before she questioned Torin. But she reckoned she was more than appropriate enough. And it wasn't as if he was being interviewed about a crime. Paula gave Torin an expectant look. 'When did you start to worry there might be something wrong?'

'I don't know exactly.' He frowned.

'What time does she usually get in from work?'

He raised one shoulder in a shrug. 'About half past five, 23

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but sometimes she'll do the shopping on the way home, so then it's more like quarter to seven.'

'So it's fair to say that by seven, you were beginning to worry?'

'Not worry, exactly. More like, wonder. It's not like she's not got a life. Sometimes she goes out with one of her mates for a pizza or a movie or whatever. But if she's doing that, she usually tells me in advance, in the morning. Or she texts me if it's more, like, spontaneous.'

Paula wasn't surprised. Bev McAndrew had struck her as a sensible woman. 'So did you text her?'

Torin nodded, chewing the corner of his lower lip. 'Yeah.

Just, you know, what's for my tea, will you be back soon, kind of thing.'

Standard teenage boy stuff. 'And she didn't respond?'