

# **The Torment of Others**

Val McDermid

Published by HarperCollins

Extract is copyright of the Author

---

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

HarperCollins*Publishers*  
77-85 Fulham Palace Road, London W6 8JB

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2004

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Val McDermid 2004

Val McDermid asserts the moral right to  
be identified as the author of this work

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

ISBN 0 00 714288 9

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

## PART ONE

*Just because you hear voices, it doesn't mean you're mad. You don't have to be well smart to know that. And even though you did all that stuff that made the jury look sick to their stomachs, at least you're clever enough to know that doesn't make you a nutter. All sorts of people have other voices in their heads, everybody knows that. Like on the telly. Even though you can believe it when you're watching it, everybody knows it's not real. And somebody's got to have dreamed it up in the first place without them ending up where you have. Stands to reason.*

*So you're not worried. Well, not very worried. OK, they said you were insane. The judge said your name, Derek Tyler, and he tagged you with the mad label. But even though he's supposed to be a smart bastard, that judge didn't know he was following the plan. The way to avoid the life sentence that they always hand down when somebody does what you did. If you make them believe you were off your head when you did it, then it isn't you that did the crime, it's the madness in you. And if you're mad, not bad, it stands to reason you can be cured. Which is why they lock you up in the nuthouse instead of the nick. That way the doctors can poke around in your head and have a crack at fixing what's broke.*

*Of course, if nothing's broke in the first place, the best thing you can do is keep your mouth zipped. Not let on you're as sane as them. Then, when the time is right, you can start talking. Make it look like they've somehow worked their magic and turned you into somebody they can let out on the street again.*

*It sounded really easy when the Voice explained it. You're pretty sure you got it right, because the Voice went over it so many times you can replay the whole spiel just by closing your eyes and mouthing the words: 'I am the Voice. I am your Voice. Whatever I tell you to do is for the best. I am your Voice. This is the plan. Listen very carefully.' That's the trigger. That's all it takes. The intro that makes the whole tape play in your head. The message is still there, implanted deep inside your brain. And it still makes sense. Or at least, you think it does.*

*Only, it's been a long time now. It's not easy, staying on the wrong side of silence day after day, week after week, month after month. But you're pretty proud of the way you've hung on to it. Because there's all the other stuff interfering with the Voice. Therapy sessions where you have to blank what the real nutters are going on about. Counselling sessions where the doctors try and trick you into words. Not to mention the screaming and shouting when somebody goes off on one. Then there's all the background noise of the day room, the TV and the music rumbling round your head like interference.*

*All you have to fight back with is the Voice and the promise that the word will come when the time is right. And then you'll be back out there, doing what you've discovered you do best.*

*Killing women.*

*Find them in the first six hours or you're looking for a corpse. Find them in the first six hours or you're looking for a corpse.* The missing children mantra mocked Detective Inspector Don Merrick. He was looking at sixteen hours and counting. And counting was just what the parents of Tim Golding were doing. Counting every minute that took them further from their last glimpse of their son. He didn't have to think about what they were feeling; he was a father and he knew the visceral fear lying in wait to assail any parent whose child is suddenly, unaccountably not where they should be. Mostly, it was history in a matter of minutes when the child reappeared unscathed, usually grinning merrily at the panic of its parents. Nevertheless it was history that left its mark bone deep.

And sometimes there was no relief. No sudden access of anger masking the ravages of ill-defined terror when the child reappeared. Sometimes it just went on and on and on. And Merrick knew the dread would continue screaming inside Alastair and Shelley Golding until his team found their son. Alive or dead. He knew because he'd witnessed the same agony in the lives of Gerry and Pam Lefevre, whose son Guy had been missing now for just over fifteen months. They'd

dragged the canal, combed the parks and wasteland within a two-mile radius, but not a trace of Guy had ever surfaced.

Merrick had been the bagman on that inquiry, which was the main reason why he'd been assigned to Tim Golding. He had the knowledge to see whether there were obvious links between the cases. But beyond knowledge, his instincts already nagged that whoever had snatched Guy Lefevre had now claimed his second victim.

He leaned against the roof of his car and swept the long curve of the railway embankment with binoculars. Every available body was down there, combing the scrubby grass for any trace of the eight-year-old boy who had been missing since the previous evening. Tim had been playing with two friends, some complicated game of make-believe involving a superhero that Merrick vaguely remembered his own sons briefly idolizing. The friends had been called in by their mother and Tim had said he was going down the embankment to watch the freight trains that used this spur to bring roadstone from the quarry on the outskirts of the city to the railhead.

Two women heading for the bus stop and bingo thought they'd caught a glimpse of his canary yellow Bradfield Victoria shirt between the trees that lined the top of the steep slope leading down to the tracks. That had been around twenty to eight. Nobody else had come forward to say they'd seen the boy.

His face was already etched on Merrick's mind. The school photograph resembled a million others, but Merrick could have picked out Tim's sandy hair, his open grin and the blue eyes crinkled behind Harry Potter glasses from any line-up. Just as he could have done with Guy Lefevre. Wavy dark brown hair, brown eyes, a scatter of freckles across his nose and cheeks. Seven years old, tall for his age, he'd last been seen heading for an overgrown stand of trees on the edge of Downton Park, about three miles from where Merrick was

standing now. It had been around seven on a damp spring evening. Guy had asked his mother if he could go out for another half-hour's play. He'd been looking for birds' nests, mapping them obsessively on a grid of the scrubby little copse. They'd found the grid two days later, on the far edge of the trees, crumpled into a ball twenty yards from the bank of the disused canal that had once run from the railhead to the long-silent wool mills. That had been the last anyone had seen of anything connected to Guy Lefevre.

And now another boy seemed also to have vanished into thin air. Merrick sighed and lowered the binoculars. They'd had to wait for daylight to complete their search of the area. They'd all clung to a faint hope that Tim had had an accident, that he was lying somewhere injured and unable to make himself heard. That hope was dead now. The frustration of having no leads bit deep. Time to round up the usual suspects. Merrick knew from past experience how unlikely it was to produce results, but he wasn't prepared to leave any avenue unexplored.

He pulled out his mobile and called his sergeant, Kevin Matthews. 'Kev? Don here. Start bringing the nonces in.'

'No sign, then?'

'Not a trace. I've even had a team through the tunnel half a mile up the tracks. No joy. It's time to start rattling some cages.'

'How big a radius?'

Merrick sighed again. Bradfield Metropolitan Police area stretched over an area of forty-four square miles, protecting and serving somewhere in the region of 900,000 people. According to the latest official estimates he'd read, that meant there were probably somewhere in the region of 3,000 active paedophiles in the force area. Fewer than ten per cent of that number was on the register of sex offenders. Rather less than the tip of the iceberg. But that was all they had to go on. 'Let's start with a two-mile radius,' he said. 'They like to

operate in the comfort zone, don't they?' As he spoke, Merrick was painfully aware that these days, with people commuting longer distances to work, with so many employed in jobs that kept them on the road, with local shopping increasingly a thing of the past, the comfort zone was, for most citizens, exponentially bigger than it had ever been even for their parents' generation. 'We've got to start somewhere,' he added, his pessimism darkening his voice.

He ended the call and stared down the bank, shielding his eyes against the sunshine that lent the grass and trees below a blameless glow. The brightness made the search easier, it was true. But it felt inappropriate, as if the weather was insulting the anguish of the Goldings. This was Merrick's first major case since his promotion, and already he suspected he wasn't going to deliver a result that would make anybody happy. Least of all him.

Dr Tony Hill balanced a bundle of files on the arm carrying his battered briefcase and pushed open the door of the faculty office. He had enough time before his seminar group to collect his mail and deal with whatever couldn't be ignored. The psychology department secretary emerged from the inner office at the sound of the door closing. 'Dr Hill,' she said, sounding unreasonably pleased with herself.

'Morning, Mrs Stirrat,' Tony mumbled, dropping files and briefcase to the floor while he reached for the contents of his pigeonhole. Never, he thought, was a woman more aptly named. He wondered if that was why she'd chosen the husband she had.

'The Dean's not very pleased with you,' Janine Stirrat said, folding her arms across her ample chest.

'Oh? And why might that be?' Tony asked.

'The cocktail party with SJP yesterday evening – you were supposed to be there.'

With his back to her, Tony rolled his eyes. ‘I was engrossed in some work. The time just ran away from me.’

‘They’re a major donor to the behavioural psychology research programme,’ Mrs Stirrat scolded. ‘They wanted to meet you.’

Tony grabbed his mail in an unruly pile and stuffed it into the front pocket of his briefcase. ‘I’m sure they had a wonderful time without me,’ he said, scooping up his files and backing towards the door.

‘The Dean expects all academic staff to support fundraising, Dr Hill. It’s not much to ask, that you give up a couple of hours of your time –’

‘To satisfy the prurient curiosity of the executives of a pharmaceutical company?’ Tony snapped. ‘To be honest, Mrs Stirrat, I’d rather set my hair on fire and beat the flames out with a hammer.’ Using his elbow to manipulate the handle, he escaped into the corridor without waiting to check the affronted look he knew would be plastered across her face.

Temporarily safe in the haven of his own office, Tony slumped in the chair behind his computer. What the hell was he doing here? He’d managed to bury his unease about the academic life for long enough to accept the Reader’s job at St Andrews, but ever since his brief and traumatic excursion back into the field in Germany, he’d been unable to settle. The growing realization that the university had hired him principally because his was a sexy name on the prospectus hadn’t helped. Students enrolled to be close to the man whose profiles had nailed some of the country’s most notorious serial killers. And donors wanted the vicarious, voyeuristic thrill of the war stories they tried to cajole from him. If he’d learned nothing else from his sojourn in the university, he’d come to understand that he wasn’t cut out to be a performing seal. Whatever talents he possessed, pointless diplomacy had never been among them.

This morning’s encounter with Janine Stirrat felt like the

last straw. Tony pulled his keyboard closer and began to compose a letter.

Three hours later, he was struggling to recover his breath. He'd set off far too fast and now he was paying the price. He crouched down and felt the rough grass at his feet. Dry enough to sit on, he decided. He sank to the ground and lay spread-eagled till the thumping in his chest eased off. Then he wriggled into a sitting position and savoured the view. From the top of Largo Law, the Firth of Forth lay before him, glittering in the late spring sunshine. He could see right across to Berwick Law, its volcanic cone the prehistoric twin to his own vantage point, separated now by miles of petrol blue sea. He checked off the landmarks: the blunt thumb of the Bass Rock, the May Island like a basking humpback whale, the distant blur of Edinburgh. They had a saying in this corner of Fife: 'If you can see the May Island, it's going to rain. If you can't see the May Island, it's already raining.' It didn't look like rain today. Only the odd smudge of cloud broke the blue, like soft streamers of aerated dough pulled from the middle of a morning roll. He was going to miss this when he moved on.

But spectacular views were no justification for turning his back on the true north of his talent. He wasn't an academic. He was a clinician first and foremost, then a profiler. His resignation would take effect at the end of term, which gave him a couple of months to figure out what he was going to do next.

He wasn't short of offers. Although his past exploits hadn't always endeared him to the Home Office establishment, the recent case he'd worked on in Germany and Holland had helped him leapfrog the British bureaucracy. Now the Germans, the Dutch and the Austrians wanted him to work for them as a consultant. Not just on serial murder, but on other criminal activity that treated international frontiers as if they didn't exist. It was a tempting offer, with a guaranteed minimum that

would be just about enough to live on. And it would give him the chance to return to clinical practice, even if it was only part-time.

Then, there was Carol Jordan to consider. As always when she came into his thoughts, his mind veered away from direct confrontation. Somehow, he had to find a way to atone for what had happened to her, without her ever knowing that was what he was trying to do.

And so far, he had no idea how he could achieve that.

Day Two. And still no trace of Tim Golding. In his heavy heart, Merrick knew they were no longer searching for a living child. He'd visited Alastair and Shelley Golding that morning, cut to the bone by the momentary flash of optimism that lit their eyes when he walked into their neat Victorian terraced cottage. As soon as they'd comprehended that he had nothing to offer them, their eyes had glazed over. Fear had gnawed at them till there was nothing left inside but barren hope.

Merrick had left the house feeling bleak and empty. He glanced down the street, thinking ironically that Tim Golding had, in a way, been a victim of gentrification. Harriestown, where the Goldings lived, had been a working-class enclave until enterprising young couples in search of affordable housing had begun buying up decaying properties and restoring them, creating a trendy new suburb. What had been lost was a sense of community. The avid followers of *Changing Rooms* and *Home Front* were interested in their own lives, not those of their neighbours. Ten years before, Tim Golding would have known most of the people on his street and they would have known him. On a summer evening, people would have been out and about, walking to allotments or from the pub, standing in their doorways chatting as they soaked up the last rays of the sun. Their very presence would have protected

the boy. And they would have noticed a stranger, would have clocked his passage and kept an eye on his destination. But these days, those residents of Harriestown not whipping up some exotic recipe from a TV chef in their exquisitely designed new kitchens would have been in their back yards, cut off from neighbours by high walls, designing their Mediterranean courtyard gardens or arranging the Greek urns that held their fresh herbs. Merrick had scowled at the blank doors and windows of the street and longed for a simpler time. He'd headed back to the incident room, feeling ill at ease and jaded.

His team had worked through the night, interviewing the known paedophiles on their patch. Not a single pointer had emerged to move the inquiry forward. A couple of punters had phoned in, reporting a white Transit van cruising slowly round the narrow streets at about the time Tim had disappeared. By chance, one of them had remembered enough of the index number to make it worth checking out on the Police National Computer. They'd identified half a dozen possibles in the local area, which had given the incident room a fresh surge of energy.

But that lead had died on its knees within a matter of hours. The third van on the list belonged to a company who made home deliveries of organic vegetables. The driver had been going slowly because he was new to the round and wasn't sure of the layout of the local streets. That alone wouldn't have been enough to get him off the hook. But the clincher was that he'd been accompanied by his fifteen-year-old daughter, augmenting her pocket money by helping him out.

Back to square one. Merrick shoved his hands in his trouser pockets and glared at the pinboard in the incident room. It was pitifully bare. Usually by this stage in a missing-child inquiry, information was pouring in. It certainly had in the Guy Lefevre case, although it had all proved fruitless in the long run. But for some reason all they were getting was a pathetic trickle. Of course there were the time-wasters, calling

to say they'd seen Tim on the Eurostar train with an Asian woman; in a McDonald's in Taunton with a grey-haired man; or shopping for computer games in Inverness. Merrick knew these so-called sightings were worthless. Whoever had taken Tim certainly wouldn't be parading him round the streets for everyone to see.

Merrick sighed. The images in his head now were not of a small boy playing with his friends. What he saw when he closed his eyes was a shallow woodland grave. A flash of yellow football shirt in the long grass of a field margin. A tangle of limbs in a drainage ditch. Christ, but he felt inadequate to the task.

He racked his brains for some other avenue of approach, summoning up the images of previous bosses, wondering how they would have handled things differently. Popeye Cross would have been convinced their abductor was someone they already had on the books. He'd be sweating the nonces, determined to get a confession out of someone. Merrick was confident he'd covered that already, even though his team knew better than to exert the kind of pressure Popeye had been famous for. These days, you leaned too heavily at your peril. Courts had no patience with police officers who bullied vulnerable suspects.

He thought of Carol Jordan and reached for his cigarettes. She'd have come up with some tangential line of attack, he had no doubt of that. Her mind worked in ways he'd never managed to fathom. His brain was wired differently from hers, and he'd never in a million years arrive at one of her inspired angles. But there was one thing Carol would have done that he could pursue.

Merrick inhaled and reached for the phone. 'Is the boss in?' he asked the woman who answered. 'I'd like to talk to him about Tony Hill.'

\* \* \*

John Brandon climbed the steps up from the Barbican station. The dirty yellow bricks seemed to sweat and even the concrete underfoot felt hot and sticky. The air was stuffy with the thick, mingled smells of humanity. It wasn't the best preparation for what he suspected was going to be a difficult conversation.

No matter how much he'd tried to prepare himself for his meeting with Carol Jordan, he knew he didn't really have a clue what he'd find. He was certain of only two things: he had no idea how she felt about what had happened to her; and work would be her salvation.

He'd been appalled when he'd heard about the botched undercover mission that had ended with the violent assault on Carol. His informant had tried to stress the significance of what her operation had achieved, as if that were somehow a counterbalance to what had been done to her. But Brandon had cut impatiently across the rationale. He understood the demands of command. He'd given his adult life to the police service and he'd reached the top of the tree with most of his principles intact. One of those was that no officer should ever be exposed to unnecessary risk. Of course danger was part of the job, particularly these days, with guns as much a fashion accessory in some social groups as iPods were in others. But there was acceptable risk and unacceptable risk. And in Brandon's view, Carol Jordan had been placed in a position of intolerable, improper risk. He simply did not believe there was any end that could have justified such means.

But it was pointless to rage against what had happened. Those responsible were too well insulated for even a Chief Constable to make much of a dent in their lives. The only thing John Brandon could do now for Carol was to offer her a lifeline back into the profession she loved. She'd been probably the best detective he'd ever had under his command, and all his instincts told him she needed to be back in harness.

He'd discussed it with his wife Maggie, laying out his plans before her. 'What do you think?' he asked. 'You know Carol. Do you think she'll go for it?'

Maggie had frowned, stirring her coffee thoughtfully. 'It's not me you should be asking, it's Tony Hill. He's the psychologist.'

Brandon shook his head. 'Tony is the last person I'd ask about Carol. Besides, he's a man, he can't understand the implications of rape the way a woman can.'

Maggie's mouth twisted in acknowledgement. 'The old Carol Jordan would have bitten your hand off. But it's hard to imagine what being raped will have done to her. Some women fall to pieces. For some, it becomes the defining moment of their lives. Others lock it away and pretend it never happened. It sits there like a time bomb waiting to blow a hole in their lives. And some find a way to deal with it and move forward. If I had to guess, I'd say Carol would either bury it or else work through it. If she's burying it, she'll probably be gung ho to get back to serious work, to prove to herself and the rest of the world that she's sorted. But she'll be a loose cannon if that's what she's trying to do, and that's not what you need in this job. However . . .' She paused, 'if she's looking for a way through, you might be able to persuade her.'

'Do you think she'd be up to the job?' Brandon's bloodhound eyes looked troubled.

'It's like what they say about politicians, isn't it? The very people who volunteer for the job are the last ones who should be doing it. I don't know, John. You're going to have to make your mind up when you see her.'

It wasn't a comforting thought. But he'd since had support from a surprising quarter. The previous afternoon, DI Merrick had sat in his office asking Brandon's sanction to bring Tony Hill in to profile the disappearance of Tim Golding. As they'd discussed the case, Merrick had said almost wistfully, 'I can't

help feeling we'd be doing better if we still had DCI Jordan on the team.'

Brandon's eyebrows had shot up. 'I hope you're not having a crisis of confidence, Inspector,' he said.

Merrick shook his head. 'No, sir. I know we're doing everything we can. It's just that DCI Jordan looks at things differently from anybody else I've ever worked with. And with cases like this . . . well, sometimes it feels like it's not enough to cover all the bases.'

Brandon knew Merrick had been right. All the more reason why he should do everything in his power to bring Carol Jordan back into the world again. He squared his shoulders and headed for the concrete labyrinth where Carol Jordan waited at the epicentre.

John Brandon was shaken to see the change in Carol Jordan. The woman who waited in the doorway for him to emerge from the lift bore almost no resemblance to his memory of her. He might well have passed her in the street. Her hair was radically different, cut short at the sides, the heavy fringe swept to one side, changing the shape of her face. But she had altered in more fundamental ways. The flesh seemed to have melted from her face, giving it a new arrangement of planes and hollows. Where there had been an expression of intelligent interest in her eyes, now there was a blank wariness. She radiated tension rather than the familiar confidence. In spite of the warmth of the early summer day, she was dressed in a shapeless polo-neck sweater and baggy trousers instead of the sharply tailored suits Brandon was used to seeing her in.

He paused a couple of feet from her. 'Carol,' he said. 'It's good to see you.'

There was no smile of welcome, just a faint twitch of muscle at the corners of her mouth. 'Come in, sir,' she said, stepping back to allow him to enter.

‘No need for formality,’ Brandon said, taking care to keep as much physical distance as possible between them as he walked into the flat. ‘I’ve not been your boss for quite a while now.’

Carol said nothing, leading the way to the pair of sofas that sat at right angles to each other with a view through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the old church at the heart of the Barbican complex. She waited till he sat down, then offered him a drink. ‘Coffee, tea?’

‘Something cold. It’s warm out there today,’ Brandon said, unfastening the jacket of his charcoal suit. Catching her sudden stillness, he stopped awkwardly at the third button and cleared his throat.

‘Mineral water or orange juice?’

‘Water’s fine.’

When she returned with two glasses of water still hissing their effervescence into the air, Carol set Brandon’s in front of him then retreated with her own to the furthest point from him. ‘How are you?’ Brandon asked.

Carol shrugged. ‘Better than I was.’

‘I was shocked when I heard what had happened. And upset too. Maggie and I . . . well, I know how I’d feel if her, or my daughters . . . Carol, I can’t imagine how you begin to deal with something like that.’

‘There isn’t anything like that,’ Carol said sharply, her eyes on his. ‘I was raped, John. No other violation comes close except death, and nobody’s reported back on that yet.’

Brandon took the rebuke on the chin. ‘It should never have happened.’

Carol let out a deep breath. ‘I made mistakes, it’s true. But the real damage was caused by people who set up the operation and never levelled with me about what was really going on. Sadly, not everyone is as scrupulous as you.’ She turned away and crossed her legs tightly. ‘You said there was something you wanted to discuss with me?’ she continued, changing the subject irrevocably.

‘That’s right. I don’t know how current you are with recent changes in the service in the north?’

Carol shook her head. ‘It’s not what I’ve been paying attention to.’

‘No reason why you should,’ he said gently. ‘But the Home Office in their wisdom have decided East Yorkshire is too small a force and it should be amalgamated. And since my force is the smaller of the two involved in the merger, I’m the one who’s had to give up the top job.’

Carol showed the first sign of animation. ‘I’m sorry to hear that, John. You were a good Chief Constable.’

‘Thank you. And I hope I will be again. I’m back on my old stamping grounds.’

‘Bradfield?’

Brandon noticed Carol’s body relaxing slightly. He had, he thought, penetrated the hard outer shell. ‘That’s right. They’ve offered me Bradfield Metropolitan Police.’ His lugubrious face creased in a smile. ‘And I’ve said yes.’

‘I’m very pleased for you, John.’ Carol sipped her drink. ‘You’ll do a good job there.’

Brandon shook his head. ‘I didn’t come here for flattery, Carol. I came here because I need you.’

Carol looked away, her eyes fixed on the marled grey stone of the church. ‘I don’t think so, John.’

‘Hear me out. I’m not asking you to come and fly a desk in CID. I want to do something different in Bradfield. I want to set up an operation like the Met has for dealing with serious crime. A couple of elite major incident squads on permanent standby to catch the tough ones. All they do is the big cases, the really bad lads. And if there’s a lull in the action, the squad can pick up cold cases and work them.’

She turned her head towards him and gave him a shrewd, considering look. ‘And you think I’m what you need?’

‘I want you to be in charge of the unit and to have hands-

on leadership of one squad. This is the sort of stuff you do best, Carol. The combination of intelligence and instinct and solid police work.'

She rubbed the back of her neck with a hand chill from her water glass. 'Maybe once,' she said. 'I don't think that's who I am any more.'

Brandon shook his head. 'These things don't go away. You're the best detective I ever had working for me, even if there were times when you came close to overstepping the mark. But you were always right when you pushed it that far. And I need that level of skill and guts on my team.'

Carol stared down at the brightly coloured gabbeh on the floor as if it held the answer. 'I don't think so, John. I come with rather too much baggage these days.'

'You'd be reporting directly to me. No petty bureaucrats between us. You'd be working with some of your old colleagues, Carol. People who know who you are and what you've achieved. Not people who are going to make snap judgements about you based on rumour and half-truth. The likes of Don Merrick and Kevin Matthews. Men who respect you.' The unspoken hung in the air. There was nowhere else she could expect that sort of reception and they both knew it.

'It's a very generous offer, John.' Carol met his gaze, a world of weariness in her eyes. 'But I think you deserve an easier ride than hiring me will get you.'

'Let me be the judge of that,' Brandon said, his natural air of authority suddenly emerging from the mildness he'd shown so far. 'Carol, your work was always a large part of who you were. I understand why you don't want to go back into intelligence and, in your shoes, I wouldn't touch those bastards with a ten-foot pole. But policing is in your blood. Forgive me if this sounds presumptuous, but I don't think you're going to get over this until you get back on the horse.'

Carol's eyes widened. Brandon wondered if he'd gone too

far and waited for the whip of irony that he'd once have earned, regardless of rank.

'Have you been talking to Tony Hill?' she demanded.

Brandon couldn't hide his surprise. 'Tony? No, I haven't spoken to him in . . . oh, it must be more than a year. Why do you say that?'

'He says the same thing,' she said flatly. 'I wondered if I was being ganged up on.'

'No, this was all my own idea. But you know, Tony's not a bad judge.'

'Maybe so. But neither of you can know much about what it's like to be me these days. I'm not sure the old rules apply any more. John, I can't make a decision about this now. I need time to think.'

Brandon drained his glass. 'Take all the time you need.' He got to his feet. 'Call me if you want to talk in more detail.' He took a business card from his pocket and placed it on the table. She looked at it as if it might suddenly burst into flames. 'Let me know what you decide.'

Carol nodded wearily. 'I will. But don't build your plans around me, John.'

*It's never silent inside Bradfield Moor Secure Hospital. Well, not anywhere they've ever let you go. All the films and TV shows you've seen make you think there are probably padded cells somewhere no sound can reach, but you'd probably have to go completely tonto to end up there. Scream, foam at the mouth, deck one of the staff – that sort of thing. And while the idea of being somewhere quiet is appealing, you reckon it won't do your chances of release much good if you fake a full-on madhead attack just to get enough peace to hear the Voice properly.*

*When you first arrived at Bradfield Moor, you tried to get to sleep as soon as the lock's click signalled you were*

*shut in for the night. But all you could hear were muffled conversations, occasional screams and sobs, feet slapping down corridors. You pulled the thin pillow over your head and tried to blank it. It didn't often work. The anonymous noises scared you, left you wondering if your door would suddenly burst open and front you up with who the fuck knew what. Instead of sleep, you'd get edgy and wired. Morning would come and you'd be exhausted, your eyes gritty and sore, your hands shaking like some fucked-up alkie. Worst of all, in that state, you couldn't tune in to the Voice. You were too wound up to find the technique to beat the background.*

*It took a few weeks, a few hellish, terrifying weeks, but eventually your slow brain worked out that it might be worth trying to go with the flow. Now, when the lights go out, you lie on your back, breathing deeply, telling yourself the noises outside are meaningless background chatter that you don't have to pay attention to. And sooner or later they fade like radio static, leaving you alone with the Voice. Your lips move silently as you relive the message, and you're gone somewhere else. Somewhere good.*

*It's a beautiful thing. You can replay the slow build-up to your greatest achievements. It's all there, spread before you. The choosing of a sacrifice. The negotiation. Following her to the place that you're going to transform with blood. The stupid trust they had that Dozy Derek wasn't going to hurt them. And the look in their eyes when you turned to face them with their worst nightmare in your hand.*

*The rerun never quite makes it to the finale. It's the eyes that do it, every time. You relive the moment when it dawns on them, the terror that turns them the colour of milk and your hand tightens on your cock. Your back arches, your hips thrust upwards, your lips stretch back over your teeth as you come. And then you hear the Voice, triumphant and rich, praising you for your role in the cleansing.*

*It's the best moment in your cramped little world. Other people might think differently, but you know how lucky you are. All you want now is to get out of here, to get back to the Voice. Nothing else will do.*