

# The Fever of the Bone

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# FEVER OF THE BONE

VAL McDERMID



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## CHAPTER 1

The vaulted ceiling acted as a giant amplifier for the conversation bouncing round the room. A jazz quartet was putting up a filigree fight, but the competition was too strident. The air was thick with a broth of smells; cooked food, alcohol, sweat, testosterone, cologne and the exhaled breath of a hundred or so people. Not so long ago, cigarette smoke would have deadened most of the human tang, but as publicans had discovered since the ban, people were a lot less fragrant en masse than they liked to think.

There were few women in the room and most of them were toting trays of canapés and drink. As would have happened at this stage of any police retirement do, ties had been loosened and faces had reddened. But the hands that might once have wandered were stilled by the presence of so many senior officers. Not for the first time, Dr Tony Hill wondered how on earth he'd ended up where he was. Probably not for the last time, either.

The woman making her way through the throng towards him was probably the only person in the room he actively wanted to spend any time with. It had been murder that had drawn them together, murder that had led them to their

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mutual understanding, murder that had taught them respect for each other's mind and morality. Nevertheless, for years now Detective Chief Inspector Carol Jordan had been the single colleague who had crossed the border into what he supposed he'd have to label friendship. Sometimes he conceded to himself that friendship wasn't an adequate word for the bond that held them fast in spite of their complicated history, but even with his years of experience as a clinical psychologist, he didn't think he could come up with an adequate definition. Especially not now, not here in a place he didn't want to be.

Carol was much better than him at avoiding things she didn't want to do. She was also very good at identifying what those were and acting accordingly. But she had actually chosen to be here tonight. For her, it held a significance that Tony couldn't buy into. Sure, John Brandon had been the first senior cop to take him seriously, to lift him out of the world of treatment and research and put him on the front line of live criminal profiling. But if it hadn't been him, it would have been someone else. Tony appreciated Brandon's championing of the value of profiling. But they'd never progressed further than a professional relationship. He would have avoided this evening if Carol hadn't insisted that people would find it odd if he didn't turn up. Tony knew he was odd. Still, he preferred other people not to realise quite how odd. So here he was, a thin smile in place whenever anyone caught his eye.

Carol, conversely, looked born to the breed, slipping easily through the crowd in a shiny dark blue dress that emphasised all the right curves, from shoulders through breasts to hips and calves. Her blonde hair seemed lighter, though Tony knew this was because of the increasing strands of silver among the gold rather than the ministrations of a hairdresser. As she moved through the room, greetings animated her face, lips smiling, eyebrows rising, eyes widening.

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Finally she made it to his side, passing him a glass of wine. She took a swig from her own. 'You're drinking red,' Tony said.

'The white's unspeakable.'

He took a wary sip. 'And this is better?'

'Trust me.'

Given how much more she drank than him, it was tempting. 'Are there going to be speeches?'

'The Deputy Chief Constable's saying a few words.'

'A few? That'll be a first.'

'Quite. And as if that's not enough, they've exhumed God's Copper to present John with his gold watch.'

Tony reared back in horror that was only partly an act. 'Sir Derek Armthwaite? Isn't he dead?'

'Sadly not. Since he was the Chief Constable who promoted John up the ranks, they thought it would be a nice touch to invite him along.'

Tony shuddered. 'Remind me not to let your colleagues organise my leaving do.'

'You won't get one, you're not one of us,' Carol said, smiling to take any sting out of her words. 'You'll just get me taking you out for the best curry in Bradfield.'

Before Tony could say more, a powerful PA blasted through the conversation, introducing the Deputy Chief Constable of Bradfield Metropolitan Police. Carol emptied her glass and slipped away into the crowd, intent on another drink and, he imagined, a little light networking. She'd been a chief inspector for a few years now, most recently running her own crack major incident team. He knew she was torn between using her skills at the sharp end and the desire to reach a level where she could influence policy. Tony wondered whether the choice would be taken from her now John Brandon was out of the picture.

His religion told him that every life held the same value, but Detective Inspector Stuart Patterson had never been able to

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keep faith with that tenet in his relations with the dead. Some skanky heroin addict knifed in a pointless turf war was never going to move him as much as this dead and mutilated child did. He stood to one side of the sheltering white tent that protected the crime scene from the steady drumbeat of the night's rain. Letting the specialists get on with it, trying to avoid the comparison between this dead girl and his own barely teenage daughter.

The girl who was the centre of attention here could have been one of his Lily's classmates but for the different school uniform. Despite the scatter of leaf mould the wind and rain had plastered over the clear polythene bag covering her face and hair, she looked clean and well cared-for. Her mother had reported her missing just after nine, which spoke of a daughter more disciplined about time than Lily and a family that ran to a more regular timetable. It was theoretically possible that this wasn't Jennifer Maidment, since the body had been found before the missing person report had been filed and they didn't have a photograph of the missing girl at the crime scene yet. But DI Patterson didn't think it was likely that two girls from the same city-centre school would go missing on the same night. Not unless one was implicated in the death of the other. These days, you couldn't rule anything out.

The opening of the tent flapped wildly and a slab of a man shouldered his way inside. His shoulders were so broad he couldn't actually fasten the largest protective suit the West Mercia force provided for its officers. Drops of rain clung to a shaven skull the colour of strong tea and drizzled down a face that looked as if much of its misspent youth had happened inside a boxing ring. He clutched a sheet of paper enclosed in a transparent plastic envelope.

'I'm over here, Alvin,' Patterson said, his voice betraying a depth of melancholy hopelessness.

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Detective Sergeant Alvin Ambrose picked his way across the prescribed path to his boss. 'Jennifer Maidment,' he said, holding up the envelope to reveal a digital photo printed out on plain paper. 'That her?'

Patterson studied the oval face framed by long brown hair and gave a glum nod. 'That's her.'

'Pretty,' Ambrose said.

'Not any more.' The killer had stolen her beauty as well as her life. Although he was always careful not to jump to conclusions, Patterson thought it was safe to assume that the congested skin, the engorged tongue, the pop-eyes and the close cling of the polythene bag added up to death by asphyxiation. 'The bag was taped tight round her neck. Bloody awful way to go.'

'She must have been restrained somehow,' Ambrose said. 'Otherwise she'd have tried to claw her way free.'

'No sign of any restraints. We'll know more when they've got her back to the morgue.'

'Was she sexually assaulted?'

Patterson couldn't restrain a shiver. 'He took a knife to her. We didn't see it at first. Her skirt covered it up. Then the doc took a look.' He closed his eyes, giving in to the urge for a swift, silent prayer. 'Bastard butchered her. I don't know that I'd call it sexual assault, as such. Sexual obliteration, more like.' He turned away and moved towards the exit. He chose his words carefully, weighing Jennifer Maidment's body against others whose deaths he had investigated. 'Worst I've ever seen.'

Outside the tent, the weather was atrocious. What had started that afternoon as a flurry of stinging rain driven by blusters of wind had whipped itself up into a full-scale storm. On nights like this, the citizens of Worcester had learned to fear the rising swell of the Severn. Flooding was what they expected, not murder.

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The body had been found on the verge of a pull-in that had been created when the main road had been straightened a few years before. The old, tight bend had assumed a new role as a stopping-off point for truckers and van drivers, attracted by the greasy-spoon van that supplied snacks during daylight hours. At night, it served as an unofficial lorry park, usually hosting four or five rigs whose drivers didn't mind roughing it to save a few quid. The Dutch trucker who had climbed out of his cab for a piss that evening had got a lot more than he'd bargained for.

The pull-in was hidden from passing vehicles by a thick copse of mature trees and heavy undergrowth. The gale howled through the trees, soaking Ambrose and Patterson as they jogged back to the Volvo. Once inside, Patterson ticked items off on his fingers as he spoke. 'Get on to Traffic. They've got a couple of number-plate recognition cameras on this road, but I'm not sure where. We need a full run-down on every vehicle that's been down this stretch of road tonight. Get on to Family Liaison. I need one of their officers to meet me at the family home. Get on to the school head. I want to know who her friends are, who her teachers are, and I want interviews set up with them first thing in the morning. Get whoever took the initial report to email me the details. Get on to the press office and brief them. We'll sit down with the hacks tomorrow morning, ten o'clock. OK? Anything I've forgotten?

Ambrose shook his head. 'I'll get on to it. I'll get one of the traffic boys to run me back. You going to the house yourself?'

Patterson sighed. 'I don't relish it. But their daughter's dead. They deserve an SIO. I'll see you back at the ranch.'

Ambrose climbed out and headed towards the police vehicles ranged across the entrance and exit to the pull-in. His boss watched him go. Nothing seemed to daunt Ambrose. He took



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the weight on his stolid shoulders and ploughed on through whatever their investigations threw at him. Whatever the price of that apparent imperviousness, Patterson would happily have paid it that night.