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Cross and Burn

Written by Val McDermid

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CROSS AND BURN

VAL McDERMID

 sphere

SPHERE

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

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

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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

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,

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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 work-mates 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

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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.

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 Jordan, what comes into your mind?'

Chris Devine, still formally a detective sergeant with Bradford 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

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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 boob 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.

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

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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

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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,

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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.