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Splinter the Silence

Written by Val McDermid

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SPLINTER THE SILENCE

VAL McDERMID



Little, Brown

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This one's for Leslie Hills for all the
years of friendship – and because you, my dear,
like so many of my female friends,
refuse to be silenced.

1

Weekends were best. It was easy to avoid working then. So it was easier to watch the women he was interested in. Mostly they didn't go to work then either, so he had a chance to observe their routines and work out the best way to kill them.

He was good at watching. His teachers and later his employers had always commented on his attention to detail. How he would never attempt a project until he'd weighed up the risks and the possibilities. The first time he'd killed, he reckoned he'd still been in a state of shock, but even then he'd been able to make a plan and stick to it. Afterwards, he'd understood that act had opened a door to a mission. Now, his mission had assumed central importance in his life.

Like today. He hadn't quite made his mind up who was going to be next. He had a couple of names on his mental list and he knew how he wanted to kill the chosen one. It was mostly a matter of figuring out whether the logistics would work. When you were planning on hanging someone, you had to be sure there was something to hang them from. And he was in no hurry. The latest one remained

fresh in his mind, a source of deep satisfaction. Perfectly executed.

This one, though . . . she ticked all the boxes. But he wasn't going to be rushed into making a final decision. Not like the first time he'd gone out into the wild, as he liked to think of it. Sitting here now, watching a house where nothing was happening, it was thrilling to summon up the memory. Exciting but unnerving too. So many ways it could have gone wrong.

She'd been alone. It was so unexpected, he'd forgotten how to walk and tripped over his feet. He grazed his knuckles against the brick wall, a rash of blood spotting the skin. He couldn't quite believe it, but she really was alone. No minder, no driver, no PA, none of the chattering bitches she used to get her validation from. Just her, jogging down the five steps from her front door to the narrow sweep of gravel that divided her unfairly lovely home from the street where the likes of him were exiled. He half-expected the door to open again, one or more of her retinue to come blundering after her, running to catch up before she reached the gate.

But no. There was nobody. Only her.

He looked around wildly, his usual determination to blend in with the streetscape torn into confetti and scattered on the diesel breeze stirring the city air. But nobody was paying a blind bit of attention. Late afternoon in North London; nobody was paying any heed to anyone or anything outside their own tight little knot of concern, least of all to her. It wasn't as if she was recognisable beyond the Twitterati. To the average person in the street, she was simply another North London thirtysomething. Designer jeans and a fashion hoodie hugging her unexceptional frame rather than hiding it, that year's must-have leather satchel slung across one hip, multi-shaded blonde dye job caught back in a loose ponytail. Hardly

worth a first glance, never mind a second one. Hard to believe anybody had ever taken any notice of anything she'd said or done.

Oblivious to his confusion, she opened the heavy iron gate with the gothic creak he'd grown familiar with lately. She closed it carefully behind herself and started walking.

He couldn't quite believe it was happening. For three weeks, he'd been keeping tabs on her whenever he could manage it. And she never ever ventured out alone. Running scared, he'd decided. Not scared enough to shut up, but scared enough to make sure there was always somebody around to watch her back.

After the things they'd said to her the night before, she should have been hiding under the duvet, cowed into submission. Not striding along the pavement acting like she was the one with the moral high ground instead of acknowledging the truth – that she was a destructive, disruptive, dangerous bitch who deserved everything that was coming to her.

He'd not planned on dealing with her today. He hadn't been expecting so golden an opportunity. But he wasn't going to let it slip away. Who knew when he'd get another chance like that? And it wasn't like he hadn't worked it all out in his head a hundred times, testing every element of the plan for weak points and figuring out how to overcome them.

'Get a grip,' he chided himself under his breath, falling into step behind her, a few metres and a couple of teenage girls between them. He knew it could be a long while till he got her alone again. 'Get a grip.'

Taking her off the street had been a lot easier than he'd expected. Women like her – middle class, secure in their status, used to the world running the way they wanted – had a false sense of safety. They trusted people until someone gave them good reason not to. She'd trusted him, because he made himself look and sound like all the other pathetic guys who

let their women run the show – whipped into line and made into some bitch's gutless slave.

He'd done his research. He knew the names that would make his bullshit credible. She'd believed the tale he'd spun about her radio station needing her in the studio to cover for a sick colleague. She'd got in the car without a murmur. And then he'd shown her the photos on his phone.

He'd been proud of that. He knew how to plot, how to plan, how to prepare. Her daughter, doing a foundation course at film school, had been laughably easy. He'd pretended to be a photographer doing a project about hostages and protest. He'd got three of them involved, so he didn't look like a pervert singling out one girl in particular. Then he'd mocked up a series of shots of them apparently being held prisoner and tortured. And now he had a series of carefully edited shots on his phone that provided perfect leverage.

As soon as he showed her the first shot, she had frozen to stillness. A whimper from behind her closed lips. She'd pulled herself together and said, voice wobbling through an octave or more, 'What do you want?'

'It's more about what you want. You want your daughter to come out of this alive, don't you?'

'That's a stupid question,' she said, a flare of anger lighting up her face.

He wasn't having any of that. He took his left hand off the gearstick and backhanded her hard across the face. She cried out and shrank away from him. 'Don't make me call her babysitter. You won't like what happens to Madison if I have to do that.' He snorted. 'Madison. What kind of fucking name is that? We don't have any limits. We'll cut her, we'll rape her, we'll leave her so nobody will ever want to touch her again. Except out of pity. So do what the fuck you're told.'

Her eyes widened and her mouth formed an anguished O. He had to admit, there was real pleasure in seeing her pay the

price for her bitching and whining and moaning. She'd called men like him misogynists. That was the opposite of what they were. Men like him, they loved women. They understood the kind of life that suited women best. They knew what women really wanted. Proper women didn't want to be out there in the world, having to shout the odds all the time. They wanted to build homes, take care of families, make their mark and exercise their power inside the home. Being women, not fake men.

After that, it had been easy. Back to hers after the staff had gone home. Into the garage. Wrist cuffed to the armrest to make it look like she was determined not to change her mind. Hose from the exhaust into the car. The book on the seat beside her, a reminder to himself of the roots of what he was doing. He could have changed his mind at any time, could have pardoned her. But what would have been the use of that? Even if she'd changed her ways, it wouldn't change anything. He took one last look and closed the garage door.

In the morning, they found her.

2

Carol Jordan swirled the last half-inch of port around her glass and thought almost wistfully of murder. To the casual observer, she hoped it looked as if she was fiddling with the stem of her glass. In fact, her grip was so tight she feared it might snap in her fingers. The man on her left, who didn't *look* like someone you'd want to punch, leaned forward to make his point more forcefully.

'It's absolutely not hard to find high net worth individuals if you target your efforts carefully,' he said.

And once again, like clockwork, she wanted to punch his narrow complacent face, to feel that sharp nose crunch against her fist, to see the look of utter shock widen his little piggy eyes.

Instead, she knocked back the last of her drink and pushed her empty glass towards her generous host, who casually poured another liberal slug of Dow's 2007. The man on her left had already pronounced it 'probably the best port Dow has ever produced', as he'd washed down another chunk of Stilton. She didn't know enough about port to argue but she'd desperately wanted to.

'I'm sure you're right,' Carol muttered again, trying not to sound ungraciously mutinous. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been at a dinner party of this formality but she hadn't forgotten the obligations imposed by accepting an invitation to break bread. They'd been drilled into her at her mother's table. Smile, nod, agree, stay away from politics and never ever start a row.

Fortunately for the rest of the company, years of serving as a senior police officer had reinforced her mother's injunctions against politics at the dinner table. When your budget and the very existence of your team was dependent on the largesse of politicians, you soon learned not to express an opinion that might come back to bite you in the neck with all the philanthropy of a vampire. Over the years, Carol had carefully cultivated the art of not holding controversial views lest she let something slip at the wrong moment. She left that to the junior members of her team, who more than made up for her reticence.

Not that there had been many occasions like this during her career as the boss of an elite murder squad. The demands of the job had consumed her, eating up far more than the forty hours a week she was contracted to provide. Carol hoarded the leftover time for things she wanted to do. Like sleep. Not spend endless hours at somebody else's table listening to obnoxious rich bastards holding forth about the iniquities of whoever they thought stood between them and their next million.

But now she had nothing but leftover time. The career she'd defined herself by was over. At moments like this, she had to remind herself that had been her own choice. She could have been Detective Chief Inspector Jordan yet. But she had chosen to be plain Carol Jordan; just another incomer to a rural Yorkshire valley that had been remorselessly invaded by people who had no relationship to the landscape that

surrounded them except that they liked it better than the suburbia they'd left behind.

Her host, George Nicholas, was an exception. His family had built the big Georgian manor at the head of the valley and lived in it continuously for a shade over two hundred years. His was the sort of background of comfortable privilege Carol was inclined to despise. On their first meeting, she'd taken one look at his scrubbed pink skin, his patrician profile and an outfit that could have come straight from a catalogue featuring country gentlemen's apparel and determined to distrust and dislike him. But she'd eventually been disarmed by the unflappable charm that met her hostility head on and chose to ignore it. That and the bloody dogs.

Later, she'd discovered the reason he believed he'd be the last of his line to inhabit the manor. He'd been widowed three years before when his wife had died in a road accident. He wore his grief lightly but for someone as well schooled in trauma as Carol, it was a clear and present pain.

Carol cleared her throat and pushed back from the table. 'I had better be going, George,' she said. Not a slur or a hesitation to betray the amount she'd had to drink.

The laughter lines round his eyes disappeared along with the smile the woman next to him had provoked with an ironic aside Carol had only half-heard. 'Must you?' He sounded disappointed. She couldn't blame him. He'd been trying for weeks to persuade her to come over for a meal. And here she was, bailing out at the first opportunity. 'We've not even had coffee yet.'

Carol aimed for rueful. 'Flash is still a bit young to be left on her own for too long.'

He mirrored her regret with a downward twist of his mouth. 'Hoist by my own petard.'

'Who's Flash?' The question came from an older man further down the table whose meaty red face and several chins

made him look like one of the cheerier illustrations from Dickens.

'Carol kindly took on one of Jess's pups,' George said, the genial host again. 'One that's scared of sheep.'

'Scared of sheep?' The Pickwickian questioner looked as incredulous as he sounded.

'It happens from time to time,' George said mildly. 'All a ewe has to do is bleat and Flash puts her tail between her legs and runs. Carol saved the dog from redundancy.'

'And she's a great companion,' Carol said. 'But she's not much more than a pup. And like all collies, she doesn't like being on her own for great chunks of time. So I ought to get back.'

The man she wanted to punch snorted. 'Your dog sounds more tyrannical than our babysitter. And that's saying something.'

'Not at all, Charlie,' George said. 'Carol's quite right. You treat a pup reasonably and you end up with the best kind of dog.' He smiled, his dark eyes genial. 'I'll get Jackie to run you home. You can pick your car up when you're out with Flash in the morning.'

Carol frowned. So he had been paying attention to how much she'd put away. The thought angered her. What she drank was her business. Nobody could be expected to endure what she had without some sort of support system. She knew she was in control of the drink, not the other way round, in spite of what anyone else might think. Or any one person in particular.

She pushed that thought away and forced a casual tone into her voice. 'No need. Jackie's got enough to do in the kitchen. I'm fine to drive.'

The man on her left made a faintly derisive noise. 'I'll get my driver to take you,' he said with a condescending pat to her hand.

Carol stood up, perfectly steady. 'That's very kind, but there's no need. It's only a couple of miles down the road. It's quiet as the grave at this time of night.' She spoke with the authority of a woman who has grown accustomed to being deferred to.

George hastily got to his feet, lips pursed. 'I'll see you to your car,' he said with his invariable politeness.

'Lovely to meet you all,' Carol lied, smiling her way round the table with its late-night chaos of crystal and silver, china and cheeseboard. Eight people she'd never have to see again, if she was lucky. Eight people probably breathing a sigh of relief that the square peg was leaving the round hole. George opened the dining room door and stood back to let her precede him into the stone-flagged hall. The subtle lighting made the elderly rugs glow; or perhaps that was the wine, Carol thought as she walked to the broad front door.

George paused in the porch, gauging the coats hanging from the guest pegs. He extended a hand towards a long black cashmere, then stopped, casting a smile over his shoulder towards her. 'The Barbour, yes?'

Carol felt a stab of embarrassment. She'd deliberately chosen her dog-walking jacket, stubbornly refusing to completely dress up for something she didn't want to do. And now it felt like a deliberate insult to a man who had only ever shown her kindness and a friendly face. 'It matches the Land Rover rather than the dress,' she said, gesturing at the black silk jersey sheath that fitted her better than it used to. She was a different shape from the woman who had bought it; hard physical work had broadened her shoulders and reconfigured her hips and thighs.

He handed her into the waxed coat. 'I rather like the contrast,' he said. She couldn't see his face but she could hear the smile in his voice. 'Thank you for coming, Carol. I hope it

wasn't too much of an ordeal. Next time, I promise you a more relaxed evening. A quiet kitchen supper, perhaps?'

'I'm amazed at your persistence.' She turned to face him, her grey eyes meeting his. 'I'd have given up on me long before this.'

'Secret of my success, persistence. I was never the brightest or the best in my cohort but I learned that if I stuck with things, the outcome was generally acceptable. It's how I got Diana to marry me.' He opened the door and a shiver of chill air crept over them. 'And speaking of persistence – are you determined to drive? It's no problem at all to have Jackie drop you off.'

'I'm fine, George. Really.' She stepped on to the frosted gravel and crunched her way across, grateful for the closeness of his arm when her unfamiliar high heels unsteadied her a couple of yards from the vehicle. 'God, it's been so long since I wore these shoes,' she said with a forced laugh.

'One of the many reasons I'm grateful for being a bloke.' George took a step backwards as she opened the Land Rover door and swung herself up into the high seat. 'Do be careful. Maybe see you on the hill tomorrow?'

'Probably. Thanks again for a lovely dinner.' She slammed the heavy door closed and gunned the noisy diesel into life. There was a faint blur of frost on the windscreen but a couple of swipes of the wipers took care of it. With the fan on full to keep the windscreen clear, Carol eased the gearstick out of neutral and set off down the drive. George's mention of his late wife – killed in an accident involving a drunk driver – felt like a reproach for her decision to get behind the wheel after a few glasses of wine. But she felt absolutely fine, in complete control of her reactions and responses. Besides, it was less than three miles. And she was desperate to escape.

God, what a night. If they hadn't been such a bunch of tossers, she'd have been ashamed of being such a crap guest.

As it was, she was dismayed at how poorly she'd repaid George's generosity. She'd lost the knack of being with people. Once upon a time, she'd been close enough to one man to tease him constantly about his lack of his social graces. Now she'd turned into him.

She swung out of the drive on to the narrow ribbon of road that stretched between George Nicholas's manor house and the stone barn she'd spent the past months stripping to its bare bones and rebuilding according to her own distinct vision. She'd peeled away everything that might provoke memories, but its history haunted her nevertheless.

The headlights bleached the hedgerows of colour and she felt relief as she recognised the markers that told her she was closing in on home. The crooked stump of the dead oak; the stile and the fingerpost for the footpath; the dirty yellow plastic grit bin, there to make up for the fact that the council were never going to grit a road so insignificant it didn't even have a white line up the middle.

Then, all at once, a different kind of marker. The kind that's never good news. In her rear-view mirror, a disco wash of blue lights.

3

Chief Constable James Blake was not a naturally patient man. Over the years, as he'd clawed his way to the top job, he'd forced himself to cultivate the appearance of patience. He'd imagined that once he was running the show, he could push the pace to match his desire. To his chagrin it hadn't worked out that way during his first command in the West Country. Trying to provoke a sense of urgency among his officers had been, as he often told his wife, like pushing clotted cream uphill. He'd put it down to the general sense that everything ran slower down there. So Blake determined to bite the bullet and take the first chance he had at a job somewhere they knew how to get out of second gear.

Bradfield Metropolitan Police, he reckoned, would have to be up to speed to cope with policing a modern urban environment. It would be absolutely his sort of place. An edgy Northern city with a decent slice of serious and organised crime, perfect for him to make a lasting impression. One that would guarantee a fistful of executive directorships when he came to hang up the uniform. He'd convinced the interview

panel, persuaded his family they'd love big-city life, and sailed into Bradfield, certain that he'd have things running with speed and efficiency in no time at all.

It didn't help that he'd arrived simultaneously with government funding cuts. In his eyes that was no excuse for the dogged stubbornness he encountered at every level as he battled to run the force more effectively and efficiently. It never occurred to him that the reason most of his officers had so little respect for him was his lack of experience at the sharp end of the kind of policing that Bradfield demanded. Instead Blake blamed it on their urban Northern prejudices – he must be a clueless bumpkin because he'd come from the West Country. He was disappointed and, he had to admit at times, discouraged. Which was why he had come to this meeting filled with anticipation. A working dinner with a junior Home Office minister, a pair of his civil servants and a special advisor. That wasn't something to be taken lightly, even if the special advisor was the retired chief constable who had preceded him at Bradfield. Blake didn't reckon much to John Brandon – if he'd done his job properly, Blake's task would have been a lot more straightforward.

Whatever they had in mind for him, nobody was in any hurry to get to the point. They'd been shut away in their private dining room for almost two hours, making their way through amuse-bouche, starter, sorbet, main course and dessert. The food had been abundant; luxurious, even. The wine, rather more sparing though no less good. The conversation had ranged widely around policing and politics, laced with entertaining anecdotes and a couple of mildly diverting indiscretions, but Blake remained no wiser as to why they were all there. His impatience ate away at him, as aggravating as indigestion.

Finally, the waiters delivered a lavish cheeseboard, fruit bowl and biscuit basket then retired, leaving the five men

alone with no further interruption scheduled. It was, apparently, time to get down to business.

Christopher Carver, the junior minister, leaned forward and helped himself to an oozing wedge of Époisses. Judging by the beginnings of a paunch straining his shirt buttons, it wasn't the first time he'd indulged his appetite at the taxpayers' expense. He glanced up at Blake and gave a mischievous smile. 'You're probably wondering what all this is in aid of, James.'

As the evening had worn on, Blake had become convinced he was about to be catapulted into the professional stratosphere. A dinner on this scale, guests at this level; it wasn't simply a pat on the back because he'd worked wonders within his budget at BMP. 'It had crossed my mind, Minister.'

'You'll recall that we talked earlier about the principle of sharing the back office load among several forces,' Carver said. His face was flushed from over-indulgence, but his eyes were clear and focused on Blake.

Blake nodded. 'It makes sense. It's harder to manage with units as big as BMP, but we've had some success with merging crime scene management.'

'Some of us think there are more radical steps that we can take. Not only in terms of cost effectiveness, but also in terms of improving police response to major crime. John, would you like to explain our thinking to James here?'

Unlike Blake, John Brandon's career had all been at the sharp end. Nobody ever questioned his pronouncements when it came to operational strategies, which Blake thought was taking respect a little too far. Nobody was perfect, after all. But he smiled and gave Brandon a deferential nod as he sipped from his water glass then cleared his throat. The older he got, the more Brandon resembled a bloodhound, Blake thought. Long face, pendulous jowls, folds of flesh under his eyes.

'Murder,' Brandon said, his Northern accent dragging out the syllables. 'In spite of all those cop shows on the telly, we don't get that much of it outside the big cities. And what we do get is mostly domestic. Figuring them out wouldn't tax your average manicurist, never mind detectives. But every now and again, something comes along that isn't your run-of-the-mill homicide. You get a dismembered torso in the woods. Or an abducted child turns up strangled on a bit of waste ground. Or some lass doesn't make it home from a night's clubbing and a dog walker finds her mutilated corpse by the canal. Difficult, complex cases. Because they exist and because it's our job to solve them, every force identifies its best investigators and designates them a major incident team. Agreed?'

'Of course. You have to have specialist officers who are trained to deal with those difficult, complex cases. We have a duty to the public. But we also have to make maximum use of our personnel. We can't simply have them sitting around waiting for the next murder,' Blake said, trying not to sound defensive. 'Plus a reorganisation like Bradfield's means that, when we need it, we can pull together a very specific team to meet the needs of particular incidents.'

Brandon gave a weary smile. 'Nobody's criticising you for disbanding your MIT, James. We might not agree with the decision, but we understand the motivation.'

The minister pushed his floppy silver fringe back from his forehead and said, 'In fact, James, it was the boldness of your decision to scatter your specialists throughout the CID as a whole that made us reconsider our general policy in this area. If a force like BMP felt it was possible to manage without a standing MIT, what might make sense for other forces?' He waved a pudgy hand towards Brandon. 'So I asked John to think outside the box. Tell James what you came up with.'

Brandon began breaking an oatcake into crumbs with one

hand. 'The drawback with pulling together an ad hoc team for major incidents is that it can damage the ongoing investigations those detectives were already knee-deep in. Not to mention the fact that you've got no idea what the personal dynamics of that rag, tag and bobtail bunch are going to be. Because that's what it is. Rag, tag and bobtail. It's not a team. Not like the cohesive unit you get when people work together over a period of time. When they've shed the dead weight or the awkward bastard or the sexist pig who pisses off the women on the squad. That's a team and that's policing at its most effective.'

'And its most expensive,' said the younger of the civil servants, his face screwed up in distaste.

'So I had to figure out how to square the circle,' Brandon continued, unperturbed. 'And I thought, if forces can share back room ops, why not share front of house as well? Why not create an MIT that operates like a flying squad? The ghostbusters of complex homicide, if you like. One team that stands outside any particular force and goes where it's needed, when it's needed.'

Blake realised his mouth had fallen open during the silence that followed Brandon's words. They were all staring at him, waiting for his response. His brain was racing to process the implications. They were going to ask him to mastermind this radical proposal. It sounded like madness. It sounded like the kind of thing you wouldn't want to touch with a bargepole. But on the other hand, if it worked . . . The sky would be the limit for the man who changed the face of British policing and made it happen. He clutched at something sensible to say. 'What if more than one complex homicide happens within a few days of each other?' It wasn't a stupid question, he told himself.

'They don't.' The younger civil servant pulled out his smartphone and fiddled with it, then turned the screen so

Blake could see it in all its meaninglessness. 'We analysed the figures for the past five years. On only one occasion has there been sufficient proximity to give us grounds for concern.'

'And John has looked closely at that conjunction of events,' the minister chipped in.

'That's right. And it seemed to me there were no insurmountable issues,' Brandon said. 'There are ways to extend resources in a digital world that didn't exist even a couple of years ago.'

'And so,' said Carver, 'we're going ahead with a pilot.' He attacked the cheeseboard again, this time slicing off a chunk of Ossau-Iraty and spearing two dates with the point of the cheese knife.

Blake felt the warmth of satisfaction rising through his body. One in the eye for everyone who'd ever said he lacked vision. 'That sounds like a tremendous challenge,' he said heartily.

Carver's smile was as sharp as the knife. 'Indeed. And that's why it's so important that we have the right person at the helm. That's why we asked you here tonight, to help us come to the right decision.'

Blake was so taken up with delight at the way he saw the evening going that he didn't quite absorb the nuances of what the minister had said. 'Absolutely,' he gushed. 'I'm ready to take on whatever you demand of me.'

Carver's eyebrows rose, to Blake's confusion. Why was he looking surprised? 'I'm glad to hear it. We're very clear about the person we have in mind for this role. But John was most insistent we shouldn't rely on his word alone when it came to appointing the new regional MIT chief. And so we turned to you as the last person to have worked directly with our first-choice officer.'

Blake heard a faint ringing in his ears, like a brass bell struck a long way off. What the hell was Carver talking about? Who

could he be thinking of? There was nobody in his Bradfield command who was up to a job like this, he'd have put money on it. 'I'm sorry? I'm not sure what you mean,' he stammered, his composure wobbling.

Brandon put his forearms on the table and leaned towards Blake, a smile bracketing his mouth with wrinkles. 'He means Carol Jordan. The minister wants to know what you think of Carol Jordan.'