

*Also by Val McDermid*

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Killing the Shadows  
The Grave Tattoo  
Trick of the Dark  
The Vanishing Point

ALLIE BURNS NOVELS

1979

1989

LINDSAY GORDON NOVELS

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Common Murder  
Final Edition  
Union Jack  
Booked for Murder  
Hostage to Murder

KAREN PIRIE NOVELS

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A Darker Domain  
The Skeleton Road  
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Broken Ground  
Still Life

TONY HILL/CAROL JORDAN NOVELS

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The Last Temptation  
The Torment of Others  
Beneath the Bleeding  
Fever of the Bone  
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Val  
McDermid

PAST  
LYING



SPHERE

S P H E R E

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For McDermid Ladies FC:  
every one a hero.

**Gambit (n):** an act or remark that is calculated to gain an advantage, especially at the outset of a situation.

*Oxford English Dictionary*

While the Scotch Game can be one of the slower games and can lead to very unexciting matches, the Scotch Gambit takes it to the other extreme as both sides have the opportunity to give up material early on in exchange for a non-material, yet crucial, advantage.

If you play this opening it's always important to know how to respond to your opponent's moves because one misstep and you will find yourself very behind.

The Chess Website

The perfect detective story cannot be written.

'Twelve Notes on the Mystery Story'

RAYMOND CHANDLER

## Prologue

He really believed it was a madcap game. A joke. A dare, played out between old friends. Why would anyone imagine otherwise? Writing twisted scenarios didn't mean he believed they happened in the real world. *Strangers on a Train* had the brilliant premise of two unconnected people swapping murders, but he didn't believe anybody would be daft enough to try it for real. Not even a card-carrying psychopath like the character in Highsmith's novel.

It had genuinely never crossed his mind that his best friend would actually commit a murder solely to demonstrate that the perfect crime was possible, and that he was capable of committing it. Not until he had to deal with the revelation that there was now a dead body in his garage.

**April 2020**

**D**etective Chief Inspector Karen Pirie tucked her hands into the pockets of her down jacket. Even silk-lined leather gloves weren't enough to keep out a night wind that was whipping straight across from the Urals to this Edinburgh rooftop. It had been three weeks since lockdown began, but the novelty of street stillness hadn't worn off. Looking down across the New Town and beyond from this height, nothing was stirring. It was like the zombie apocalypse without the zombies.

Light and movement caught the corner of her eye, and she turned her head in time to spot a liveried police car slowing for a set of lights. Down by Canonmills, she reckoned. She checked her phone. Three minutes after midnight. It was officially tomorrow. Technically, she could go for her daily walk now.

She let herself back into the sunroom. She didn't want to think about how a previous owner had managed to obtain planning permission for the roof garden in a conservation area of Georgian buildings. It wasn't her problem; this wasn't her flat. Its owner, her – what was he? Karen baulked at

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thinking of Hamish Mackenzie as her boyfriend. You didn't have boyfriends in your thirties. 'Lover' always sounded wrong to her. It suggested the only thing that mattered was the sex, and while there was no denying she enjoyed that, their relationship encompassed much more. To a cop, 'partner' had a whole different set of resonances. And even if she stripped that out of the equation, 'partner' implied a much more serious commitment than Karen believed she'd made to Hamish. And 'significant other' was downright embarrassing. There simply wasn't a word for what Hamish was to her.

Except that right now, she supposed he was technically her landlord, even though she wasn't paying him rent. When the COVID-19 lockdown had been announced, he'd persuaded Karen to move into his flat. 'I need you to take care of the place,' he'd said, after announcing he was heading back to his working croft in the Highlands. One of his two shepherds had decided to move to Lairg to spend lockdown with his girlfriend, leaving the croft perilously shorthanded. And no sooner had Hamish returned than he'd bought Duggie Brewster's struggling gin still and started making hand sanitiser, committing himself even further to Wester Ross.

He'd turned on the charm. 'You'd be doing me a favour – forwarding the post and making the place look occupied. I can't help being anxious about being burgled. It's not like your flat, where the whole block's festooned with CCTV.' There was no denying his place was more spacious than her waterside apartment in Leith, and closer to her Historic Cases Unit office in Gayfield Square. What had clinched the deal was Detective Sergeant Daisy Mortimer's swift acceptance of Karen's impetuous suggestion they could lock down together. That would never have worked in the confines of



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her own flat. But Hamish's place was a different story. They wouldn't be living on top of each other, thanks to two bedrooms, a study, a living room big enough to house a dining table as well as a sofa and armchairs, a spacious kitchen, two bathrooms and a roof terrace, complete with a garden room.

She'd made the uncharacteristic offer of sharing her space at the end of their first case together. Daisy had been seconded to the HCU from the Major Incident Team in Fife; they'd worked well together and Karen had persuaded her boss to expand the HCU to include her. Daisy had been living alone in a cramped flat in Glenrothes, isolated on the other side of the Forth; in the moment, Karen had thought being in lockdown together was a good idea. It would, she thought, make working together much easier and it'd prevent the two of them from slipping into bad ways. When it came to junk food and eating chocolate ice cream straight from the tub, they could keep each other honest. Or keep each other company.

Three weeks in, she wasn't so sure it had been one of her better ideas.

She made her way down the spiral staircase into the flat. Daisy was curled up in a comfortable tweed armchair, headphones on, absorbed in yet another bloody Netflix box set. She glanced away from the screen and hit pause on the remote. 'You OK?' she asked, peeling off one headphone. 'Get you anything?'

Karen shook her head. 'I'm away out. I'm going to walk down to my flat. Just to check everything's OK.'

Daisy frowned. 'Will that not take you more than an hour? To walk there and back?'

'Yeah. Technically, I should stay there till after midnight before I come back.'

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Daisy's frown deepened. 'I bet nobody would notice if you walked back during daylight hours today.'

'Maybe not, but I am a polis. I'd know I was breaking the rules. More to the point, you'd know and you're a polis.' Karen grinned. 'One hour's outdoor exercise a day, that's the limit. I'm not about to give you blackmail material. I'll see you in about twenty-five hours.'

It was the absence of noise that she found most unsettling. Even in this side street sandwiched between Leith Walk and Broughton Street, the perpetual sound of traffic had been the background hum to her night walks. Now, the silence was only broken every ten minutes or so by the engine of a car or bus. Then the quiet descended again like a suffocating blanket. It unnerved her, so she'd taken to self-improvement. Headphones in, she was learning Gaelic. Not out of a sentimental nationalism but because some of the locals living near Hamish's croft spoke it among themselves and she hated to miss out on anything. Besides, she wanted to know what they really thought of her.

Karen cut through a narrow vennel and emerged on Leith Walk. Not another human in sight. A grey cat materialised from a basement, sinuously weaving through the railings. She made a soft clicking noise and the cat approached, rubbing against her leg. She'd never had much time for cats, but these days, contact with anything with a pulse felt obligatory.

Karen bent down and scratched the cat's head between its ears. It tired before she did and strolled nonchalantly into what would have been the path of a car or a van or a bus in what already felt like the olden days. She sighed and made off at a good pace down Leith Walk. Past the library, past the shuttered shops and deserted bars, not a creature stirring.

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She passed the side street where her wingman, DC Jason 'The Mint' Murray, was locked down with his hairdresser fiancée. She wondered how they were doing. Jason would be playing FIFA on his games console; she was less certain how Eilidh would pass the long days.

Another fifteen minutes and Karen was on Western Harbour Breakwater, repeating, '*Is toil leam buntàta agus sgadan,*' under her breath, wondering whether she'd ever have to insist she liked potatoes and herring. She let herself into her flat, pulled out her earphones and felt her shoulders settle. This was her domain. It wasn't that Daisy or Hamish were difficult to be around. It was simply that, like the cat on Leith Walk, she liked company on her terms. She crossed the living room and opened the patio doors leading to the balcony. The night wind made her cheeks tingle in seconds.

In the years she'd been living on the edge of the Firth of Forth, she'd grown accustomed to the night-time light show. Ribbons of red from tail lights and pools of white from headlamps mapping the road network on both sides of the wide estuary. Dots of yellow appearing and disappearing as people moved around their houses on the way to bed, or off to a night shift. Now, three weeks into lockdown, the only constants were the warning beacons on the three bridges that spanned the narrows between North and South Queensferry.

There were still the lighthouses, of course, sending their messages to the boats that weren't there. A childhood rhyme ran round her head:

*Inchgarvie, Mickery, Colm, Inchkeith,  
Cramond, Fidra, Lamb, Craigleith;*

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*Then round the Bass to Isle of May,  
And past the Carr to St Andrew's Bay.*

Back when she'd learned that, there hadn't been the brilliant orange flare of the Mossmorran gas cracking plant, an occasional warning of a different kind, its glow sometimes so bright that people miles away called the emergency services to report Fife on fire. But tonight, Mossmorran was nothing more than a tall smudge obliterating a column of stars.

Karen stood in the teeth of the wind for as long as she could bear it, then went back inside. Ten minutes later she was tucked up in bed, reading an old Marian Keyes novel. It was a struggle to grow tired enough to sleep. She missed her work. Running the Historic Cases Unit had always been demanding. That and her night walks, when the rhythm of her feet helped her thoughts to surface, were usually enough to wear her down. But right now, both of these occupations were beyond her reach. There was no active cold case to occupy them; they'd cleared two complicated investigations just before lockdown had started and they'd not had time to develop a new one. All they had were boxes of files of potential cases waiting for them to dig deep and find a loose thread to pull. And it hadn't yet occurred to anyone in senior management to draft them in to one of the thankless lockdown roles. Or maybe it had, and they'd decided the HCU team weren't the best option when it came to breaking up illicit gatherings. Either way, right now she was languishing for the lack of something meaningful to investigate, and it didn't suit her. Was she really one of those people who had no life outside the job?

It was a thought that shamed her.

## 2

The stadium erupted in cheers as Barcelona's star striker slotted home another cracking goal. Jason Murray, La Liga's leading scorer, ran back to the centre spot, bouncing up and down on the sofa every step of the way. 'Yaaas,' he shouted, punching the air with the hand that held the game controller.

His fiancée barely glanced up from her phone screen. Jason scoring yet another virtual goal was infinitely less interesting than her Instagram feed. It was good to have the time to keep abreast of what the stylists she rated were posting in lockdown, but frustrating not to be able to try out their recommendations in the salon. There was a limit to what she could do with her own hair, never mind Jason's. His ginger hair had a lovely texture, it was true, but there just wasn't enough of it for the exercise of true creativity.

Jason paused the game and leaned into Eilidh. 'Fancy a brew?'

'You drink too much coffee.'

'That's what comes from working with KP.' He stood up, tossing the controller to one side. 'Anyway, I've only had one this morning so far. You sure I can't tempt you?'

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Eilidh looked up and gave him an adoring smile. 'Not with a cup of coffee.'

He chuckled and made for the tiny kitchenette. A penetrating chirping stopped him in his tracks. He frowned. 'Who's that?' He stretched across the back of the sofa for his vibrating phone.

'You're the detective, Jase. Only one way to find out,' Eilidh said.

Jason frowned. 'Unknown number' usually meant somebody trying to scam him or sell him something he didn't want. But Karen had drummed into him that, as a polis, he should always answer his phone. 'You never know when that unknown caller could be the one that breaks a case.' So far, that had never happened. But this might be the day. 'Hello?'

Never give anything away to the unknown caller. Another lesson from the boss.

'Is that Jason Murray? DC Murray?' It was a woman's voice. Vaguely familiar but he couldn't put a name to it.

'Aye, that's right. Who is this?'

'It's Meera Reddy. From the National Library?'

At once, Jason was alert. Thanks to the boss, he'd learned the library's extensive resources could be invaluable in cold case investigations. Along the way, he'd found an unexpected ally in Meera, whose fondness for true crime podcasts had made her happy to forge a bond with a real live polis. She never seemed to mind how much she had to explain to Jason, who was grateful for her indulgence. He knew he was slow off the mark, but not so slow that he didn't pick up on the exasperation he often provoked. 'Hey, Meera. Great to hear from you. How are you doing?'

'Ach, you know? Stuck at home by myself and talking to the telly. How about you?'

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‘Not so bad. I’m in the flat with my fiancée, Eilidh, so at least I’ve got company.’ He hesitated. ‘Is there something I can do for you?’

‘I don’t know. Are you still on the Historic Cases Unit?’

‘I am. Not that we’re getting much done right now. With lockdown, and all that. The boss says we better not go into the office in case they get us putting on uniforms and chasing down folk breaking the lockdown rules,’ he scoffed.

‘I-I’m maybe wasting your time, I don’t know.’

‘That’s one thing nobody’s short of right now. What’s the matter?’

‘Well ...’ Meera’s voice tailed off. ‘It’s something from work. I’m probably getting it all out of proportion.’

‘Are you going in to work, then?’

‘No, no. This was something I stumbled on before we were sent home for lockdown. It’s been playing on my mind. I tried to convince myself I was imagining things, but the more I’ve thought about it since, the more it’s got me worried.’

And she did sound worried. ‘OK,’ Jason said slowly. ‘Why don’t you run it past me? I’m in no hurry. Take your time, and start from the beginning.’

‘Are you sure? I don’t want to waste your time.’

‘You’ve helped me out often enough. And what else would I be doing?’ He caught Eilidh’s eye-roll in his peripheral vision and pulled a face at her. He reached up to the top shelf for his notebook and pen and sat down at the dining table in the window. ‘Fire away.’

‘I’ve moved jobs since the last time we spoke,’ Meera began. ‘I’m working in the archives now. It’s a bit different.’

‘How? What do you do there?’

‘I’m in the section that deals with new acquisitions.’

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Basically, when important people either die or decide it's time to sort out their paperwork, they box it up and send it to us. So if you're a writer, or a politician or a scientist or anybody that might have done something interesting to researchers in the future, we get sent it.'

'That's a thing?' Already Jason felt out of his depth. 'What? They leave you their letters and that? Their private stuff?'

'It varies. Like, some writers just donate their early drafts. But some folk? It's like a massive info dump. Electricity bills, VAT receipts, bank statements, invoices from their plumbers, love letters to other people's wives . . . You name it, we get it.'

'Why?'

'Because somebody in the future might want to write about them. A biography or a PhD or something.'

'Jeez.' Sometimes Jason felt overwhelmed by the burden of what he didn't know. 'So what do you do with all this stuff?'

'My job is to catalogue it. I go through the boxes and list what's in them. Then one of the trained archivists sorts them out. Arranges them, matches up items that go together. Tries to make sense of them, I suppose.'

Jason scratched his head with the end of his pen. 'You must have to work your way through some right crap.'

'Actually, what I've had so far has been pretty interesting. I've mostly avoided the shopping-list level of stuff.' She hesitated, then, in a rush, 'Have you ever heard of a writer called Jake Stein?'

The name sounded familiar but Jason had never been much of a reader. He had a vague notion that he'd seen his mum reading one of Jake Stein's books. Which gave him a clue. 'Is he a crime writer?'



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That perked Meera up. 'Yeah, that's right. One of the pioneers of the so-called Tartan Noir school. He was a best-seller for years and then there was some sort of scandal. I don't know the details – for obvious reasons he didn't keep any of the newspaper clippings about that. Anyway, his career took a real dip, then last year he died very suddenly from a cerebral haemorrhage. And we got the papers.' She stopped abruptly.

'And what? You think there was something suspicious about the way he died?'

'No, no, I don't know anything about that. No, this is something completely different. It's an unpublished manuscript. Well, the start of one anyway. It's only eleven chapters and a synopsis. It's called *The Vanishing of Laurel Oliver*.' She paused.

He wondered if that was supposed to mean something to him. Only, it didn't. 'OK. And something about this bothered you?'

A nervous laugh. 'Honestly, Jason, the more I tell you, the more stupid I feel.'

'Meera, you're one of the least stupid people I've ever met.' He cast a quick glance at Eilidh, who was looking more interested now. 'If you're feeling bothered, I'm guessing there's something to be bothered about.'

She cleared her throat. 'Does the name Lara Hardie mean anything to you?'

Now they were firmly on Jason's territory. There were very few cases of unsolved homicides in Scotland. Sometimes as few as one a year. The Historic Cases Unit reviewed them all regularly, alongside serious sexual assaults and disappearances in suspicious circumstances where there was no concrete evidence of foul play. So Lara

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Hardie's name was firmly on Jason's radar. An Edinburgh University student, she had vanished into thin air a year before. There were no grounds for suspecting she'd committed suicide, nothing to suggest she'd chosen to disappear. She'd simply been there one day and gone the next. There had been a week-long manhunt around the street where she lived. Every rubbish skip, every bit of shrubbery, every garden shed, every obscure wee vennel had been combed by police and volunteers. Her parents and her sister had done a TV appeal where everybody cried. All the other students on her university course had faced questioning by police and interrogation by social media. Ill-informed speculation had ranged from Lara drowning in Duddingston Loch, the best part of three miles away, to having been abducted by aliens. 'I know who you're talking about,' he said. He had a strange feeling in his stomach.

'This book – it's full of echoes of Lara Hardie's story. Plus the victim's got the same medical condition. It's really creepy. But this is a crime novel. And even though it's unfinished, it's got a kind of solution.'