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With No One as Witness

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Extract

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Prologue

Kimmo Thorne liked Dietrich best of all: the hair, the legs, the cigarette holder, the top hat and tails. She was what he called The Whole Blooming Package, and as far as he was concerned, she was second to none. Oh, he could do Garland if pressed. Minnelli was simple, and he was definitely getting better with Streisand. But given the choice – and he *was* generally given it, wasn't he? – he went with Dietrich. Sultry Marlene. His Number One girl. She could sing the crumbs out of a toaster, could Marlene, make no bloody mistake.

So he held the pose at the end of the song not because it was necessary to the act but because he loved the look of the thing. The finale to 'Falling in Love Again' faded and he just kept standing there like a Marlene statue with one high-heeled foot on the seat of the chair and his cigarette holder between his fingers. The last note disappeared into silence and he remained for a five count – exulting in Marlene and in himself because she was good and he was good, he was damn *damn* good when it came down to it – before he altered his position. He switched off the karaoke machine then. He doffed his top hat and fluttered his tails. He bowed deeply to his audience of two. And Aunt Sal and Gran – ever loyal, they were – reacted appropriately as he'd known they would. Aunt Sally cried, 'Brilliant! Brilliant, lad!' Gran said, 'Tha's our boy all over. A hunnert percent talent, our Kimmo. Wait'll I send some snaps to your mum and dad.'

That would certainly bring them running, Kimmo thought sardonically. But he put his high-heeled foot on the chair once more, knowing Gran meant well, even if she was something of a dim bulb when it came to what she believed about his parents.

Gran directed Aunt Sally to 'Move to the right. Get the boy's

best side,' and in a few minutes the pictures had been taken and the show was over.

'Where you off to tonight?' Aunt Sally asked as Kimmo headed for his bedroom. 'You seein' anyone special, our Kim?'

He wasn't, but she needn't know that. 'The Blink,' he told her blithely.

'Well, you lads keep yourselfs out of trouble, then.'

He winked at her and ducked into his doorway. 'Always, *always*, Auntie,' he lied. He eased the door shut behind him then and flicked its lock into place.

The care of the Marlene togs came first. Kimmo took them off and hung them up before turning to his dressing table. There, he examined his face and for a moment considered removing some of the make-up. But he finally shrugged the idea aside and rustled through the wardrobe for a change that would do. He chose a hooded sweatshirt, the leggings he liked, and his flat-soled, suede, ankle-high boots. He enjoyed the ambiguity of the ensemble. Male or female? an observer might ask. But only if Kimmo spoke would it actually show. For his voice had finally broken and when he opened his mouth now, the jig was up.

He drew the sweatshirt hood over his head and sauntered down the stairs. 'I'm off, then,' he called to his gran and his aunt, as he grabbed his jacket from a hook near the door.

'Bye, darlin' boy,' Gran replied.

'Keep yourself yourself, luv,' Aunt Sally added.

He kissed the air at them. They kissed the air in turn. 'Love you,' everyone said at once.

Outside, he zipped his jacket and unlocked his bicycle from the railing. He rolled it along to the lift and pressed the button there, and as he waited, he checked the bike's saddlebags to make sure that he had everything he'd need. He maintained a mental check-list on which he ticked items off: emergency hammer, gloves, screwdriver, jemmy, pocket torch, pillow case, one red rose. This last he liked to leave as his calling card. One really oughtn't to take without giving as well.

It was a cold night outside in the street, and Kimmo didn't look forward to the ride. He hated having to go by bike and he hated biking even more when the temperature hovered so close

to freezing. But as neither Gran nor Aunt Sally had a car and as he himself had no driving licence to flash at a copper along with his most appealing smile if he was stopped, he had no choice but to pedal it. Going by bus was more or less out of the question.

His route took him along Southwark Street to the heavier traffic of Blackfriars Road till, in a crisscrossing fashion, he reached the environs of Kennington Park. From there, traffic or not, it was more or less a bullet's path to Clapham Common and his destination: a conveniently detached red brick dwelling of three storeys, which he'd spent the last month carefully casing.

At this point he knew the comings and goings of the family inside so thoroughly that he might as well have lived there himself. He knew they had two children. Mum got her exercise riding a bike to work while Dad went by train from Clapham Station. They had an *au pair* with a regularly scheduled two-nights-a-week off and on one of those nights – always the same one – Mum, Dad, and the kids left as a family and went to . . . Kimmo didn't know. He assumed it was Gran's for dinner, but it just as easily could have been a lengthy church service, a session with a counsellor, or Yoga lessons. Point was, they were gone for the evening, till *late* in the evening, and when they arrived home, they invariably had to lug the little ones into the house because they'd fallen asleep in the car. As for the *au pair*, she took her nights off with two other birds who were similarly employed. They'd leave together chatting away in Bulgarian or whatever it was, and *if* they returned before dawn, it was still long after midnight.

The signs were propitious for this particular house. The car they drove was the largest of the Range Rovers. A gardener visited them once a week. They had a cleaning service as well, and their sheets and pillow cases were laundered, ironed, and returned by a professional. This particular house, Kimmo had concluded, was ripe and waiting.

What made it all so nice was the house next door and the lovely To Let sign dangling forlornly from a post near the street. What made it all so perfect was the easy access from the rear: a brick wall running along a stretch of wasteland.

Kimmo pedalled to this point after coasting by the front of the house to make sure the family were being true to their rigid schedule. Then he bumped his way across the wasteland and propped his bike against the wall. Using the pillow case to carry his tools and the rose, he hopped up on the saddle of the bike and, with no trouble, lifted himself over the wall.

The back garden was blacker than the devil's tongue, but Kimmo had peered over the wall before and he knew what lay before him. Directly beneath was a compost heap beyond which a little zigzagging orchard of fruit trees decorated a nicely clipped lawn. To either side of this, wide flowerbeds made herbaceous borders. One of them curved round a gazebo. The other decorated the vicinity of a garden shed. Last in the distance just before the house were a patio of uneven bricks where rainwater pooled after a storm and then an overhang from the roof of which the security lights were hung.

They clicked on automatically as Kimmo approached. He gave them a nod of thanks. Security lights, he'd long ago decided, had to be the ironic inspiration of a housebreaker since whenever they switched on, everyone appeared to assume a mere cat was passing through the garden. He'd yet to hear of a neighbour giving the cops a bell because of some lights going on. On the other hand, he'd heard plenty of stories from fellow housebreakers about how much easier those lights had made access to the rear of a property.

In this case, the lights meant nothing. The uncurtained dark windows along with the To Let sign told him that no one resided in the house to his right while the house to his left had no windows on this side of it and no dog to set up a spate of barking in the nighttime cold. He was, as far as he could tell, in the clear.

French windows opened onto the patio, and Kimmo made for these. There, a quick tap with his emergency hammer – suitable for breaking a car window in a crisis – was quite sufficient to gain him access to the handle on the door. He opened this and stepped inside. The burglar alarm hooted like an air raid siren.

The sound was ear-splitting, but Kimmo ignored it. He had

five minutes – perhaps more – till the phone would ring with the security company on the line, hoping to discover that the alarm had been tripped accidentally. When they went unsatisfied, they would phone the contact numbers they'd been given. When *that* didn't suffice to bring an end to the incessant screeching of the siren, they might phone the police who in turn might or might not show up to check matters out. But in any case, that eventuality was a good twenty minutes away which in itself was ten minutes longer than Kimmo needed to score what he was looking for in the building.

He was a specialist in this particular field. Leave to others the computers, the laptops, the CD and DVD players, the televisions, the jewellery, the digital cameras, the palm pilots, and the video players. He was looking for only one kind of item in the houses he visited, and the benefit of this item he sought was that it would always be in plain sight and generally in the public rooms of a house.

Kimmo shone his pocket torch round. He was in a dining room, and there was nothing here to take. But in the sitting room, he could already see four prizes glittering on top of a piano. He went to fetch them: silver frames that he divested of their photographs – one always wanted to be thoughtful about *some* things – before depositing them carefully into his pillow case. He found another on one of the side tables and he scored this as well before moving to the front of the house where, near the door, a half-moon table with a mirror above it displayed two others along with a porcelain box and a flower arrangement, both of which he left where they were.

Experience told him that chances were good he'd find the rest of what he wanted in the master bedroom, so he quickly mounted the stairs as the burglar alarm continued to blare. The room he sought was on the top floor at the back overlooking the garden, and he'd just clicked on his torch to check out its contents when the shrieking of the alarm ceased abruptly just as the telephone started to ring.

Kimmo stopped short, one hand on his torch and the other halfway to a picture frame in which a couple in wedding gear kissed beneath a bough of flowers. In a moment, the phone

stopped just as abruptly as the alarm, and from below a light went on and someone said, 'Hullo?' and then 'No. We've only just walked in . . . Yes. Yes. It was going off, but I haven't had a chance to— Jesus Christ! Gail, get away from that glass.'

That was enough to tell Kimmo that matters had taken an unexpected turn. He didn't pause to wonder what the hell the family were doing home when they were still supposed to be at Gran's at church at Yoga at counselling or *wherever* the hell they went when they went. Instead, he dived for the window to the left of the bed as below a woman cried, 'Ronald, someone's in the house!'

Kimmo didn't need to hear Ronald come tearing up the stairs or Gail shouting, 'No! Stop!' to understand he had to be out of there pronto. He fumbled with the lock on the window, threw up the sash, and heaved himself and his pillow case out just as Ronald barrelled into the room armed with what looked like a fork for turning meat on a barbecue.

Kimmo dropped with an enormous thump and a gasp onto the overhang some eight feet below, cursing the fact that there had been no convenient wisteria vine down which he could Tarzan his way to freedom. He heard Gail shouting, 'He's here! He's here!' and Ronald cursing from the window above. Just before he scarpered for the rear wall of the property, he turned back to the house, giving a grin and a saucy salute to the woman who stood in the dining room with an awestruck sleepy child in her arms and another hanging onto her trousers.

Then he was off, the pillow case bouncing against his back and laughter bubbling up inside him, only sorry he hadn't been able to leave behind the rose. As he reached the wall, he heard Ronald come roaring out of the dining-room door but by the time the poor bloke reached the first of the trees, Kimmo was up, over, and heading across the wasteland. When the cops finally arrived – which could be anywhere from an hour to midday tomorrow – he'd be long gone, a faint memory in the mind of the missus: a painted face beneath a sweatshirt hood.

God, this was living! This was the best! If the haul proved to be sterling stuff, he'd be a few hundred quid richer come Friday morning. Did it get better than this? *Did* it? Kimmo

didn't think so. So *what* that he'd said he'd go straight for a while. He couldn't throw away the time he'd already spent putting this job together. He'd be thick to do that, and the one thing Kimmo Thorne was not was thick.

He was pedalling along perhaps a mile from his break-in when he became aware of being followed. There was other traffic about on the streets – when wasn't there traffic in London? – and several cars had honked as they'd passed him. He first thought they were honking at him the way vehicles do to a cyclist they wish to get out of their way, but he soon realised that they were honking at a slow-moving vehicle close behind him, one that refused to pass him by.

He felt a little unnerved at this, wondering if Ronald had somehow managed to get it together and track him down. He turned down a side street to make sure he wasn't mistaken in his belief in being tailed, and sure enough the headlights directly behind him turned as well. He was about to shoot off in a fury of pedalling when he heard the rumble of an engine coming up next to him and then his name spoken in a friendly voice.

'Kimmo? That you? What're you doing in this part of town?'

Kimmo coasted. He slowed. He turned to see who was speaking to him. He smiled when he realised who the driver was, and he said, 'Never mind me. What're *you* doing here?'

The other smiled back. 'Looks like I'm cruising round for you. Need a lift somewhere?'

It would be convenient, Kimmo thought, if Ronald had seen him take off on the bike and if the cops were quicker to respond than they normally were. He didn't really want to be out on the street. He still had a couple more miles to go, and it was cold as Antarctica, anyway. He said, 'I got the bike with me, though.'

The other chuckled. 'Well, that's no problem if you don't want it to be.'

I

Detective Constable Barbara Havers considered herself one lucky bird: the drive was empty. She'd elected to do her weekly shop by car rather than on foot, and this was always a risky business in an area of town where anyone fortunate enough to find a parking space near their home clung to it with the devotion of the newly redeemed to the source of his redemption. But knowing she had much to purchase and shuddering at the thought of trudging in the cold back from the local supermarket, she'd opted for transport and hoped for the best. So when she pulled up in front of the yellow Edwardian house behind which her tiny bungalow stood, she took the space in the drive without compunction. She listened to the coughing and gagging of her Mini's engine as she turned it off, and she made her fifteenth mental note of the month to have the car looked at by a mechanic who – one prayed – would not ask an arm, a leg, and one's first-born child to repair whatever was causing it to belch like a dyspeptic pensioner.

She climbed out and flipped the seat forward to gather up the first of the plastic carrier bags. She'd linked four of them over her arms and was dragging them out of the car when she heard her name called.

Someone sang it out. 'Barbara! Barbara! Look what I've found in the cupboard.'

Barbara straightened and glanced in the direction from which the voice had chimed. She saw the young daughter of her neighbour sitting on the weathered wooden bench in front of the ground-floor flat of the old converted building. She'd removed her shoes and she was in the process of struggling into a pair of inline skates. Far too large by the look of them, Barbara

thought. Hadiyyah was only eight years old and the skates were clearly meant for an adult.

'These're Mummy's,' Hadiyyah informed her, as if reading her mind. 'I found them in a cupboard, like I said. I've never skated on them before. I expect they're going to be big on me but I've stuffed them with kitchen towels. Dad doesn't know.'

'About the kitchen towels?'

Hadiyyah giggled. 'Not *that*! He doesn't know that I've found them.'

'Perhaps you're not meant to be using them.'

'Oh, they weren't *hidden*. Just put away. Till Mummy gets home, I expect. She's in—'

'Canada. Right,' Barbara nodded. 'Well, you take care with those. Your dad's not going to be chuffed if you fall and break your head. D'you have a helmet or something?'

Hadiyyah looked down at her feet – one skated and one socked – and thought about this. 'Am I meant to?'

'Safety precaution,' Barbara told her. 'A consideration for the street sweepers, as well. Keeps people's brains off the pavement.'

Hadiyyah rolled her eyes. 'I know you're joking.'

Barbara crossed her heart. 'God's truth. Where's your dad, anyway? Are you alone today?' She kicked open the picket gate that fronted a path to the house, and she considered whether she ought to talk to Taymullah Azhar once again about leaving his daughter on her own. While it was true that he did it rarely enough, Barbara had told him that she would be pleased to look after Hadiyyah in her own time off if he had students to meet or lab work to supervise at the university. Hadiyyah was remarkably self-sufficient for an eight-year-old, but at the end of the day she was still that: an eight-year-old, and more innocent than her fellows, in part because of a culture that kept her protected and in part because of the desertion of her English mother who had now been 'in Canada' for nearly a year.

'He's gone to buy me a surprise,' Hadiyyah informed her matter-of-factly. 'He thinks I don't know, he thinks *I* think he's running an errand, but I know what he's really doing. It's 'cause he feels bad and he thinks *I* feel bad, which I don't but he wants

to help me feel better anyway. So *he* said "I've an errand to run, *kushi,*" and I'm meant to think it's not about me. Have you done your shopping? C'n I help you, Barbara?'

'More bags in the car if you want to fetch them,' Barbara told her.

Hadiyyah slipped off the bench and – one skate on and one skate off – she hopped over to the Mini and pulled out the rest of the bags. Barbara waited at the corner of the house. When Hadiyyah joined her, bobbing up and down on her one skate, Barbara said, 'What's the occasion, then?'

Hadiyyah followed her to the bottom of the property where, under a false acacia tree, Barbara's bungalow – looking much like a garden shed with delusions of grandeur – snowed flakes of green paint onto a narrow flowerbed in need of planting. 'Hmm?' Hadiyyah asked. Close up now, Barbara could see that the little girl wore the headphones of a CD player round her neck and the player itself attached to the waistband of her blue jeans. Some unidentifiable music was issuing tinnily from it in a feminine register. Hadiyyah appeared not to notice this.

'The surprise,' Barbara said as she opened the front door of her digs. 'You said your dad was out fetching you a surprise.'

'Oh, *that*.' Hadiyyah clumped into the bungalow and deposited her burdens on the dining table where several days' post mingled with four copies of the *Evening Standard*, a basket of dirty laundry, and an empty bag of custard cremes. It all made an unappealing jumble at which the habitually neat little girl frowned meaningfully. 'You haven't sorted out your belongings,' she chided.

'Astute observation,' Barbara murmured. 'And the surprise? I know it's not your birthday.'

Hadiyyah tapped her skate-shod foot against the floor and looked suddenly uncomfortable, a reaction entirely unusual for her. She had, Barbara noted, plaited her own dark hair today. Her parting made a series of zigzags while the red bows at the end of her plaits were lopsided, with one tied a good inch higher than the other. 'Well,' she said as Barbara began emptying the first of the carrier bags onto the work top of the kitchen area, 'he didn't exactly say, but I expect it's 'cause Mrs Thompson phoned him.'

Barbara recognised the name of Hadiyyah's teacher. She looked over her shoulder at the little girl and raised a questioning eyebrow.

'See, there was a tea,' Hadiyyah informed her. 'Well, not really a tea, but that's what they called it because if they called it what it *really* was, everyone would've been too embarrassed and no one would've gone. And they did want everyone to go.'

'Why? What was it really?'

Hadiyyah turned away and began unloading the carrier bags she'd brought from the Mini. It was, she informed Barbara, more of an *event* than a tea, or really more of a *meeting* than an event. Mrs Thompson had a lady come to talk to them about their *bodies*, you see, and all the girls in the class and all their mums came to listen and afterwards they could ask questions and after *that* they had orange squash and biscuits and cakes. So Mrs Thompson called it a tea although no one actually *drank* tea. Hadiyyah, having no mum to take along, had eschewed attending the event altogether. Hence the phone call from Mrs Thompson to her father because, like she said, everyone was really meant to go.

'Dad said he would've gone,' Hadiyyah said. 'But that would've been *excruciating*. 'Sides, Meagan Dobson told me what it was all about anyway. Girl stuff. Babies. Boys. *Periods*.' She pulled a shuddering face. 'You know.'

'Ah. Got it.' Barbara could understand how Azhar must have reacted to the phone call from the teacher. No one she had ever met had as much pride as the Pakistani professor who was her neighbour. 'Well, kiddo, if you ever need a gal pal to act as a substitute for your mother,' she told Hadiyyah, 'I'm happy to oblige.'

'How lovely!' Hadiyyah exclaimed. For a moment Barbara thought she was referring to her offer as maternal surrogate, but she saw that her little friend was bringing forth a package from within the bag of groceries: Chocotastic Pop Tarts. 'Is this for your breakfast?' Hadiyyah sighed.

'Perfect nutrition for the professional woman on the go,' Barbara told her. 'Let it be our little secret, okay? One of many.'

'And what're *these*?' Hadiyyah asked as if she hadn't spoken.

'Oh, *wonderful*. Clotted cream ice cream bars! If I was a grown-up, I'd eat just like you.'

'I do like to touch on all the basic food groups,' Barbara told her. 'Chocolate, sugar, fat, and tobacco. Have you come across the Players, by the way?'

'You mustn't keep smoking,' Hadiyyah told her, rustling in one of the bags and bringing out a carton of the cigarettes. 'Dad's trying to stop. Did I tell you? Mummy'll be so pleased. She asked him and *asked* him to stop. "Hari, it'll make your lungs all nasty if you don't quit" is what she says. *I* don't smoke.'

'I should hope not,' Barbara said.

'Some of the boys do, actually. They stand round down the street from school. These're the older boys. *And* they take their shirt tails out of their trousers, Barbara. I expect they think it makes them look cool, but *I* think it makes them look . . .' She frowned, thoughtful. '. . . beastly,' she settled on. 'Perfectly beastly.'

'Peacocks and their plumes,' Barbara acknowledged.

'Hmm?'

'The male of the species, attracting the female. Otherwise, she'd have nothing to do with him. Interesting, no? Men should be the ones wearing make-up.'

Hadiyyah giggled at this, saying, 'Dad would look a sight wearing lipstick, wouldn't he?'

'He'd be fighting them off with a broomstick.'

'Mummy wouldn't like *that*,' Hadiyyah noted. She scooped up four tins of All Day Breakfast – Barbara's preferred dinner at a pinch after a longer than usual day at work – and carried them over to the cupboard above the sink.

'No. I don't expect she would,' Barbara agreed. 'Hadiyyah, what *is* that bloody awful screeching going on round your neck?' She took the tins from the little girl and nodded at her headphones from which some sort of questionable pop music was continuing to issue.

'Nobanzi,' Hadiyyah said obscurely.

'No-whatie?'

'Nobanzi. They're brilliant. Look.' From out of her jacket pocket she brought the plastic cover of a CD. On it, three

anorexic twentysomethings posed in crop tops the size of Scrooge's generosity and blue jeans so tight that the only thing left to imagine was how they'd managed to cram themselves into them.

'Ah,' Barbara said. 'Role models for our young. Give that over, then. Let's have a listen.'

Hadiyyah willingly handed over the earphones, which Barbara set on her head. She absently reached for a packet of Players and shook one out, despite Hadiyyah's moue of disapproval. She lit one as what sounded like the chorus to a song – if it could be called that – assailed her eardrums. The Vandellas Nobanzi definitely was not, with or without Martha, Barbara decided. There was a chorus of unintelligible words. Lots of orgasmic groaning in the background appeared to take the place of both the bassline and the drums.

Barbara removed the headphones, and handed them over. She drew in on her fag and speculatively cocked her head at Hadiyyah.

Hadiyyah said, 'Aren't they *brilliant*?' She took the CD cover and pointed to the girl in the middle, who had dual-coloured dreadlocks and a smoking pistol tattooed on her right breast. 'This's Juno. She's my favourite. She's got a baby called Nefertiti. Isn't she lovely?'

'The very word I'd use.' Barbara screwed up the emptied carrier bags and shoved them in the cupboard beneath the sink. She opened her cutlery drawer and found at the back of it a pad of sticky notes that she generally used to remind herself of important upcoming events like Think About Plucking Eyebrows Tomorrow or Clean This Disgusting Toilet. This time, however, she scribbled three words and said to her little friend, 'Come with me. It's time to see to your education,' before grabbing up her shoulder bag and leading her back to the front of the house where Hadiyyah's shoes lay beneath the bench in the flagstoned area just outside the door to the ground-floor flat. Barbara told her to put on her shoes while she herself posted the sticky note on the door.

When Hadiyyah was ready, Barbara said, 'Follow me. I've let your dad know,' and she headed off the property and in the direction of Chalk Farm Road.

'Where're we going?' Hadiyyah asked. 'Are we having an adventure?'

Barbara said, 'Let me ask you a question. Nod if any of these names are familiar. Buddy Holly. No? Ritchie Valens. No? The Big Bopper. No? Elvis. Well, of course. Who wouldn't know Elvis, but that hardly counts. What about Chuck Berry? Little Richard? Jerry Lee Lewis? "Great Balls of Fire." Ring any bells? No? Bloody hell, what're they teaching you at school?'

'You shouldn't swear,' Hadiyyah said.

On Chalk Farm Road, it was not an overlong walk to their destination: the Virgin Megastore in Camden High Street. To get there, though, they had to negotiate the shopping district, which, as far as Barbara had ever been able to ascertain, was unlike any shopping precinct in the city: packed shopfront-to-street with young people of every colour, persuasion, and manner of bodily adornment; flooded by a blaring cacophony of music from every direction; scented with everything from patchouli oil to fish and chips. Here shops had mascots crawling up the front of them in the form of super huge cats, the gigantic bottom of a torso wearing blue jeans, enormous boots, an aeroplane nose down . . . Only vaguely did the mascots have anything to do with the wares within the individual shops since most of these were given over to anything black and many things leather. Black leather. Black faux leather. Black faux fur on black faux leather.

Hadiyyah, Barbara saw, was taking everything in with the expression of a novice, the first indication Barbara had that the little girl had never before been to Camden High Street, despite its proximity to their respective homes. Hadiyyah followed along, eyes the size of hub caps, lips parted, face rapt. Barbara had to steer her in and out of the crowd, one hand on her shoulder, to make sure they didn't become separated in the crush.

'Brilliant, *brilliant*,' Hadiyyah breathed, hands clasped to her chest. 'Oh, Barbara, this is so much *better* than a surprise.'

'Glad you like it,' Barbara said.

'Will we go into the shops?'

'When I've seen to your education.'