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Opening extract from **Thinner Than Water**

Written by
Sue Hampton

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CHAPTER ONE

From the time she could kick a ball, Kim Braddock knew the score. And in the long mirror where nine-year-old Kim practised her impressions, Mourinho and Wenger soon agreed. Her father, Kris, was bottom of the league and asking for relegation. Not from her life, because he played no part in that. He deserved to be booted off planet Earth – up to some airless ball of rock where he could do less damage.

One night she looked up at a full moon, stuck her thumb on her nose and waggled her fingers.

‘Have fun,’ she muttered, and as she grinned at the darkness, Kim felt tough.

She told people who asked that she’d never met her dad, but this wasn’t true. Even though they’d never had a conversation, Baby Kim must have recognised some kind of blob or smell. Walking Talking Kim was glad she’d forgotten. Her mum Jeanette had stories, told and retold as she grew, but Kris was only in one of them. He’d propped her up in a high chair, and tried to feed her something disgusting from a little jar without bothering to heat it first. So Kim had snatched the loaded spoon and thrown it right back.

All the other stories were about Jeanette’s own childhood in Barbados, and the school friends she’d left behind. She’d never bothered to mention meeting Kris in

Southend, where he was playing guitar in a band. Kim had only learned that much from her gramps when he was drunk at a wedding, with Caribbean flowers on his head. But her Auntie Lianna had shushed him and dragged her off to dance.

Kim got the message. Jeanette didn't want to explain Kris any more than she wanted to talk about the anti-depressants she took each day. And Kim didn't want to hear. But that didn't mean she never wondered. On the team, most of the others had dads who cared – at least enough to shout from the touchlines a few matches a season – and Kim often wished she could swap. But she wouldn't wish Kris on her worst enemy, which in any case was him.

Kim collected accents, smiles and hand gestures. Her repertoire was growing. But Kris Braddock gave her nothing to work on. There wasn't a single photograph in the flat, and no footage on YouTube of the wannabe rock star; she'd checked. Kim knew she must have heard his voice (probably protesting, '*Oi! Watch my shirt!*' as pureed chicken flew his way) but that was with ears the size of butterbeans. She'd need a lot more material if her Kris Braddock impression was going to be dead-on, like her Joker, Darth Vader and Voldemort. And sometimes she wished he was just plain dead. End of.

For a while the anger settled. Like the dust under her bed, she left it alone – until the child maintenance stopped.

It was late November. Kim would be fifteen at Christmas and the timing was as terrible as the weather. There was talk of the library closing or being run by volunteers for nothing. Braided hair and jangling jewellery made Jeanette Braddock a wild kind of librarian, but they

didn't mean her mood was bright. Not at home, anyway.

'Jeanette!' Kim cried, but still her mum stared down into her mug. 'Fight him!'

Jeanette sat at the kitchen table, looking like she'd shatter into pieces if the phone rang or a siren blared down the street.

'It's the law,' Kim told her. 'You've got rights. Make them hunt him down.'

But by her fifteenth birthday, all the law had done was send more letters. Her mum said they were complicated. Money was getting tighter than Jeanette's tops so it wasn't likely to stretch as far as a ticket for an Orient home game. Kris Braddock might not be there in Kim's life, but now he was back to ruin her birthday by remote control.

'Sorry, hon,' said Jeanette, handing her a parcel much too DVD-shaped for the football boots she'd counted on. Now they'd shot right out of Jeanette's price range. The old pair would have to keep on kicking into another year – with a wobbly stud, a worn toe and a stink to scare off a bin lorry.

'Not the same, is it?' asked Jeanette next day at Christmas dinner, after the first mouthful of budget pudding and fake cream.

Kim's face invaded her mother's space for her own good. 'You don't be sorry,' she told her, like a Tarantino heavy, 'all right?'

Jeanette smiled softly. Kim knew the impression had been too good, without being funny. There was only one person to blame. Thanks to him it was getting harder to make the home audience laugh.

Kim supposed her father must be lying low, like a bug under rotten wood. But some mornings on her way to

school, she found herself eyeing every good-looking white man who passed by. *Is it you?* And if any one of them were to shoot her a look of guilt or fear, she'd make a citizen's arrest. If he ran, she'd tackle him. He'd find out the hard way why they called her 'The Crab'.

She didn't upset her mother with the abuse she'd like to throw at Kris. Instead she worked on her impressions, letting the celebrities in her mirror deliver it. The filthiest language was a lot funnier coming from Her Majesty the Queen.

Months later, when Jeanette said she had to give a DNA sample, she used phrases like 'formality' and 'the maintenance business' but Kim guessed why. It was Kris Braddock's latest tactic and he had no idea about fair play. But she didn't want to poke about in her mother's wound and have to mop up blood. So for a couple of days she held back, until they were sitting in a hospital corridor.

'He's saying he's not my father?'

'It's a theory he's had for a while,' said Jeanette.

Jeanette was speaking to the wall when Kim would rather kick it. Was this the limit now? Could she feel any angrier?

'He's sick,' she muttered. 'Not theory. Fact.'

Jeanette gave her a sad smile, and opened a poetry book by women of the world. So they still didn't talk about why Kris had chosen this particular moment to test his stupid suspicions. As Kim checked Facebook she thought of a follow-up question, an obvious one. But she didn't ask it, because the answer was even more obvious. Jeanette was a very moral mother.

'I remember visiting you here with Auntie Lianna when I was about seven,' said Kim. 'What op did you have?'

Jeanette said she'd had a hysterectomy and explained, as if Kim was still seven, that she couldn't have any more babies with no uterus. It might be difficult without a boyfriend too, thought Kim. She couldn't remember any, but she had an idea there might have been one, long ago. She'd found a fair hair on the sofa and fag ends in the bin.

But that might be another wound. Looking at Jeanette, Kim could see she shouldn't have reminded her about losing her womb.

'Were you gutted?' asked Kim. She pulled a face. 'That wasn't meant to be a joke.'

'I was,' said her mum. 'Yes, I was. But I've got you.'

Jeanette's eyes were even cloudier now, so Kim patted her hand and looked back to her phone.

But she didn't suspect just how wrong things really were, not until the first day of the Easter holidays, when she opened the door to find Nelle, her only grandmother, with a suitcase. Her face was shiny, and beaded hair sprang out from under a purple felt hat. A pink flower hung by a thread; dangling from the hat, it looked as if it was wilting, but her gran was full of tense, determined energy. This wasn't the happy, hip-swaying gran who taught her to dribble and tackle on the sand. The line of her mouth was grim.

Normally Jeanette spent the days before Nelle arrived on a frenzied makeover for the flat. This time she hadn't said a word, hadn't cleared out the fridge, hadn't warned Kim at all.

'I got the first flight,' said her gran, kissing both Kim's cheeks but stepping past her before she'd had a chance to make room.

‘What’s the emergency?’ asked Kim.

From upstairs Jeanette cried, ‘Mother! I told you there was no need!’

When Nelle kissed them on both cheeks, she seemed braced-up, with no sign of jet lag. Kim supposed the emergency was the child support that had dried up. But unless Nelle had brought a shotgun to fire at Kris Braddock’s butt, she couldn’t see what she planned to do about it. Better to stay on the other island and post them what she’d saved on the flight. Kim’s impression of her little, feisty gran was one of the best in her repertoire, but the real thing gave her a headache. After a week of the brass-band voice, she always wanted to pull the plug.

As soon as she could, Kim slipped away to her room and watched a movie. She felt uneasy but she didn’t suspect a crisis with a capital C. Even that night, when she woke in the early hours feeling thirsty, the snatch of conversation she overheard from the kitchen seemed like a puzzle, an annoying one she couldn’t work out. Not an earthquake.

‘I told you, Mother! It’s wrong. I should know.’

‘So you say,’ said Nelle. Her voice, as it carried up the stairs, was flat and crisp as the tablecloths she spread in Barbados for a family occasion. ‘But you don’t argue with evidence like that.’

‘It’s a muddle! It has to be.’

Kim stumbled in for a glass of water. ‘What muddle? What evidence?’

Silence thudded down faster than the vertical drop of a theme park ride. After a long pause Nelle said she was talking about Kim’s cousin in Barbados.

‘He’s facing a court case,’ she added. No details.

‘Right,’ said Kim, sarcastically. She showed them her back while she filled her glass.

‘It’s a long story,’ said Nelle, but she didn’t get on with it.

Kim ignored them both when they said goodnight. In bed she put down the glass and reran the words. She did the two voices, volume down but the same tones: hurt and accusing.

There was only one explanation, wasn’t there? Evidence meant DNA. The results had come back at last, and Kris Braddock’s theory was right. He wasn’t her dad after all. So he could be drinking coffee outside a café on a Spanish street, or sunning himself on a beach, and nobody, not the police or ‘The Crab’ herself, could arrest him and make him pay child support. Not if she was someone else’s daughter. He’d had the test done to prove it because he didn’t want her. But who cared? She didn’t want him either.

Ha! Kim wanted to laugh out loud. She went to the window and winked at the moon.

That night she dreamed a different father. He was cheering her on from the touchlines. If they needed a sub, he looked fit enough to join in the game. It was Kim’s fault the team lost, because her foul gave away a penalty, and she didn’t want to look at her dad in case his head was down. But afterwards he put his arm round her and told her not to feel bad because the tackle was borderline – and anyway, the other girl took a dive. He was a tough dad, but not a hard one. He didn’t run on the pitch and badmouth the ref. He took her out for a hot chocolate because he loved her.

When Kim woke, she was sad for a while that the dream dad wasn’t downstairs. But whoever her real father really

was, he hadn't left her. He just didn't know she existed. So when he did, he might care – more than Kris, anyway.

Kim went to text her friends, but she soon deleted the messages, unsent. This was private and personal, and in any case she didn't know the facts. It was impossible to celebrate without them. Lying on her bed, she began to feel a sense of outrage. She had a right to know.

That lunchtime, she came downstairs to find Jeanette prodding her food as if she had a grudge against it. Nelle sat opposite her, stiff as a skewer.

'By the way,' said Kim, 'I know when two and two make four. I'm not a child. I can deal with it. Assuming my dad wasn't an axe murderer, a perv or a Tory, it's got to be an improvement. It's the best news of my entire life, whatever. Whoever.'

Jeanette looked shocked. 'That's not it, Kim! Not unless I've got dementia at thirty-seven!'

'Then what is it?' Jeanette turned to Nelle. 'See what you've done, Mother!'

Nelle said something about fifteen years being a long time, and that no one should overlook the power of alcohol, but Kim wasn't waiting for them to start again. She left the flat still hungry. Thank God for football training and a ball to kick. But however hard she ran, she couldn't get any closer to making any kind of sense out of things. She must be missing something more than a father.

She arrived home to an almost matching pair of smiles, and Nelle's reassurance that one way or another, things would soon be sorted. Kim didn't know whether to roll her eyes, go back out again or jump around all evening to the loudest hip hop she could find. But her gran offered to buy

fish and chips: 'Your favourite, Kimberlie!' Soon she found herself leaning on the wall outside the chippy, eating supper out of the paper.

'It's common,' said Jeanette, who wanted to take it home.

'It's one of this country's proudest traditions!' scoffed Nelle, examining for bones.

Kim ate with her eyes on the food, until she heard a low male voice behind her.

'Are you feeding your brain or your belly?'

It was her favourite male, Brad Pandya, who lived virtually next door, except that he was at university now, most of the time.

'My brain's a healthy weight,' she told him, wiping the salt from her top lip.

Brad smiled and pushed back his super-black hair, which never encountered gel, a stylist or anything else that might tame it – even a comb. His mum was a hairdresser, but she wasn't around to cut it any more. Kim had never asked what happened because she hated being questioned about that kind of thing herself. It made her feel like the fish her gran was pulling apart with her plastic fork.

Now Brad was charming Jeanette and Nelle with a white-teethed smile. 'Ladies!' he cried.

'You not studying, Brad?' asked Jeanette, offering him a chip.

'I've just got home for Easter, Mrs Braddock,' he told her. 'But of course,' he added, deadpan, 'I'm studying hard.'

Nelle asked about his subject, which was Politics. Since he'd started the course, Kim had been watching more of the news and practising her impressions of the Cabinet. Brad was a good audience. He had a funny laugh that sounded

as if it was stuck to the back of his throat and trying to pull free.

Kim's friends couldn't understand that she didn't fancy him, and wouldn't either, even if he was straight. She only wanted a brother, and he'd be a very strong candidate – the best. Partly because he was a fantastic listener, and he was proving it now, asking Nelle about Barbados, nodding, responding, posing questions she couldn't wait to answer.

'He's got studying to get home to, Gran,' Kim told her.

But Nelle was playing to her new audience, eyes bright, volume rising. There was only one way to stop her. A fat, salty chip lay stranded on the end of her gran's fork. Snatching the handle, Kim put it out of its misery with a 'Yum.'

'Hey!' said Jeanette.

Nelle raised a pointed finger and narrowed her eyes.

'See you guys, then,' said Brad.

'Suppose it can't be helped,' said Kim.

Watching Brad wave to an old white guy with a stick, Kim realised that now there was someone she could talk to about the big mystery and the DNA. The only person who really knew what she felt about Kris. Or rather, the whole range of things she'd felt, and wanted to feel, and didn't dare feel in case she had to voice them and own up. Kim believed in owning up, even though it had earned her a few detentions. She didn't lie, because it broke the connections between people.

Then she realised something else: she had nothing solid to tell Brad. She was no closer to the truth, the whole truth. And she'd waited long enough.

Jeanette went to bed early and Nelle ran a hot bath. Kim

listened until the clunking pipes told her the taps were finally off. Then she knocked once on Jeanette's bedroom door. She found her mum sitting on the side of the bed. In her long lacy nightie, with a box of tissues on her lap, she looked battered all over like the cod, but on the inside.

'Talk to me? Please?'

Kim sat down next to her. Her mother covered her mouth with both hands. Kim supposed that was a no.

'Jeanette! It's a kind of lying. It's worse!'

'Oh, Kim.' Jeanette put her hand on top of Kim's. 'There's not a lot I can say at the moment, hon, until this mess gets cleared up. But you do have faith in me, don't you?'

'Yes, course!' It was the only option, but what did it mean?

'As soon as I understand myself, I'll explain, I swear to God. I promise, hon. From the start, everything.'

Kim sighed. 'All right.'

What choice did she have?

Sliding into bed, she repeated the last word in her head, just as Jeanette had said it. 'Everything?' When was 'the start'? It was like having a flat pack without the widgets. Or widgets with nothing to join.

It was true that Jeanette always asked Kim whether she'd seen her lock the front door (as soon as they reached the bus stop or tube). But she wouldn't forget a thing like that! When it came to the lyrics of love songs, or every mean, smart-mouthed, outburst Kim had ever come out with, Jeanette's memory was amazing. In any case, even though she wasn't great at saying no, it was hard to imagine her ever being the kind of girl who didn't know how to say

it to boys.

But that 'faith' Kim had claimed was a problem. If the results were really a mistake, then Kris was her father after all, and she might have to break his legs.