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Without the Moon

Written by Cathi Unsworth

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CATHI UNSWORTH

WITHOUT THE MOON



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MOOD INDIGO

Friday, 19 December 1941

"What's it say, Duch?"

The Duchess could smell her before she even heard the soft footfall, felt the weight of hands on the back of her chair. The scent of soap and violets.

Lil's peroxide curls brushed against her companion's cheek as she leant down beside her. The table was set for afternoon tea, in all the Duchess's finery – a silver pot engraved with an Oriental dragon, matching sugar bowl and tongs, hand-painted Japanese cups of exquisite delicacy – all throwbacks to an era long departed, a way of life neither of these two women would ever know.

Beside them, today's copy of the *Daily Herald* screamed headlines of German retreat from Moscow and Leningrad. But these had been folded beneath an advertisement, ringed around in pencil, reminding readers that the paper's most celebrated journalist, Mr Hannen Swaffer, would be lecturing tonight at the Christian Spiritualist Greater World Association, Notting Hill Gate. A gas lamp of similar vintage to the crockery, shaded in engraved pink glass, emitted a rose glow across the blacked-out parlour. Al Bowlly, by

now a ghost himself, crooned on from beyond through the radiogram.

Outside the windows, the traffic of Praed Street rumbled along as the dim remains of the afternoon shaded into evening. The heels of commuters scuffled and clacked their way towards Paddington, guided by the thin beams of torches and the shouts of newspaper vendors at the station gates. Just around the corner, in their rooms at the top of the mews, Duch and Lil were cocooned from all that; the rest of the world passed by as if it might have been a dream.

Duch's lashes flickered as she inhaled Lil's scent, the calling card of a profession that linked them to the time when their tableware was new. It was the first thing Duch had ever noticed about Lil, before she even turned to see her face – that beautiful, aquiline profile and those dark brown eyes that made her think of an Egyptian queen, and the shining silvery sea of curls that foamed around her shoulders – what had attracted her in an instant. Duch considered it her fate to protect this girl, young enough to be her daughter, as well as serve her. Even if the tea leaves kept telling her otherwise.

"Will he be all right?" As usual, Lil was not thinking of herself.

Duch's eyes rested on the speckled whorls while her gaze reached beyond, summoning instead the features of the man she knew resided in Lil's mind's eye.

He was handsome, all right. So handsome he could have been in the pictures, one of those dark-haired, chisel-jawed men who wore his trilby at an angle and his mac folded over his arm, shrouded in the smoke of cigarettes and his own intensity as he chased the likes of Jimmy Cagney across the big screen. This one wasn't quite a private eye though. He was

a journalist, on the *Evening Sentinel* – or a *crime reporter*, as he liked to put it. His byline read Frank Power, but he wanted you to call him Tom. A man who liked to live two lives, Duch thought, and this was what unnerved her.

They'd first met him in a club in Archer Street, the sort of place where all the Little Caesars of London, the bogeys from the Yard who pursued them, and the inky-fingered hacks who took it all down, rubbed up together of an evening. He'd lit Lil's cigarette for her, stared into her eyes, breathed in the scent of violets and completed the trajectory of his doubles in the cinema – fallen hard for the wrong sort of dame.

Duch couldn't really blame Lil – there'd been times she'd been no better herself for keeping the wrong sort of company. But there was this strange sort of innocence about the girl, despite the number of men who, on any other day, would have been steaming through this parlour and into the boudoir beyond, faster than the punters at Paddington rushing for their trains. Or maybe it was because of it. Lil went at her work like it was a vocation – Duch had never met a girl before who was so popular, so good at making most every kind of man feel happy – except for him, of course.

"Vocation" was a word Tom Power might have used himself, being as he was a Roman, but he couldn't understand that part of Lil. He kept on wanting to save her, and Duch had been worried, for as long as the affair had been going on, that he might just end up succeeding.

Then he'd got his call-up papers. He was being shipped out tomorrow, his regiment posted all the way to Africa. For all Lil knew, this night could be their last, and her anxiousness transmitted itself as she rested her hand on Duch's elbow, as palpable as an electric current running between them.

Duch exhaled slowly, trying not to take the tension into herself. She knew what she said next must be spun with the utmost care. Lil put a lot of store in what the tea leaves, the tarot and Mr Hannen Swaffer said – and the skill with which her red-haired maid with the green gypsy eyes relayed it to her. All Duch had to do was soothe her friend, repeat how the lines entwined in tiny flecks on the china represented two lives that could not be parted, that this was only a separation and not an ending. Make it sound convincing, keep Lil happy for as long as she pined for her Fleet Street player, while at the same time hoping that for all their sakes this wouldn't really come true, that Lil would soon get bored with waiting and Tom Power would not be back this way again.

Even if the tea leaves kept telling her otherwise.

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Under the clouds that blotted out the moon, across the rooftops where the fire-watchers waited, around Piccadilly Circus and into a narrow thoroughfare just behind, was the club where Lil had met Tom.

Entre Nous, read a small brass plaque by the side of the front door.

Leaning against the bar, Detective Chief Inspector Edward Greenaway wore a frown. In the bevelled mirror behind the optics he could see an assortment of familiar faces milling in the opposite corner of the room: men in handmade suits and women swathed in mink, all dressed as if for Ascot on a Friday night in Soho. By his side, Scotland Yard Chief Commander Peter Beverley studied the form of this little parade with a benign smile, matching memorised descriptions of stolen property to the coats, stoles and

jewellery currently on display, and planning forthcoming pinches like chess moves. It was a ritual that the two of them would have followed up on together until recently, Greenaway being Beverley's former second-in-command. But the pained expression worn by the newly promoted DCI was not caused by the conspicuous consumption of the Archer Street clientele. It was the racket emanating from the piano, where a tall, gaunt man with a shock of white hair was loudly revisiting his youth.

"*Live for tonight!*" bellowed Hannen Swaffer, long fingers attacking the ivories. "*And scorn the morning's care/Are not the wine-flasks full, the women fair?*"

Greenaway caught the barman's eye, asked for a large Scotch.

"*Evening's for drinking and for making love*," Fleet Street's finest continued, his mind back in the Roaring Twenties and the music halls where he had once performed. "*And not for asking How and wond'ring Where.*"

"Cheers," Greenaway handed his change across the bar, picked up the glass and said to Beverley: "Think this might shut him up?"

Beverley chuckled. "You can try," he said.

Greenaway crossed the small dance floor, plonked the whisky down on top of the piano as Swaffer trilled out a triumphant arpeggio.

"Dear boy!" the journalist greeted him.

"Swaff," nodded Greenaway, offering his cigarette case in a further attempt to distract attention. The flare of a Ronson lit up cadaverous features, the face of a Victorian undertaker. By contrast, Greenaway's own countenance was that of a sleepy boxer, his heavy lidded brown eyes camouflaging the restless

intelligence that sparked behind them. The two men studied each other briefly. Swaffer spoke first.

"How goes life on the Murder Squad?" he asked. "Got used to it yet? Or are you still longing for the great outdoors?" His grey eyes sparked like flints in the candlelit gloom of their basement surrounds.

Greenaway flicked a glance to the swells in the corner, the remnants of one of the racetrack gangs that had recently been interned for their Italian heritage. Throughout the Thirties, Greenaway had pursued the London triumvirate of Elephant Boys, Sabinis and Yiddishers across the nation's turf, a sporting life that had suited him just fine. But the war had changed all that. The Elephant Boys and the Sabinis had dispersed, their leaders respectively fleeing to America or locked up on the Isle of Man. The Yiddishers, with whom Greenaway went back furthest, had found the privations of war limited their gaming endeavours, so had turned their skills to bank robbery. But the spectacular backfiring of a daylight heist had brought their leader Sammy Lehmann to book and since then, with so many younger officers volunteering, Greenaway's superiors had decided his talents would be better spent investigating murders. He missed the Flying Squad.

"I don't need your help with the Ouija board yet," he said.

"Ah," Swaffer touched the side of his nose conspiratorially. "But you're still not comfortable with it, are you, confined to barracks on Tottenham Court Road?" His fingers danced across the keyboard, nicotine-stained dabs plucking out the first few notes of "The Camptown Races". The occupants of the club began to dance, the women twirling their stoles, the men mimicking the actions of jockeys on their horses, all smiling and gesticulating in Greenaway's direction.

"You got me," said Greenaway, wanting to put an end to that number before it went any further. But Swaffer stopped of his own accord.

"Tell me," he said, modifying the volume of his plummy tones, "one of your former colleagues from those halcyon days, a certain Ross Spooner – I gather he's been seconded to the Ministry?"

Greenaway shrugged. "I know they had him up the Scrubs, going through files of enemy infiltrators, at one point." He raised his pint to his lips. "Things could be worse than the Murder Squad, I s'pose."

"A little bird told me," said Swaffer, "he's got a comfortable berth for himself, under the wing of the Chief. Bright boy, is he?"

Greenaway summoned Spooner's face to mind, a pale oval, dominated by wire-rimmed spectacles, fringed with unruly red hair. Unlike himself, Spooner was not a man of action. He was the type that went through files and phonebooks with a magnifying glass, joining the dots to make a case watertight. The type that was just right for MI5. He wondered where this was going and who Swaff's informant might be. The old devil always hinted at powerful sources within the establishment, from Churchill himself to his former employer, the deceased Lord Northcliffe, with whom he still claimed to be in constant communication.

"Apparently there's some funny business going on down in Plymouth," Swaffer went on. "The Chief's on his way down there now. Have you heard anything about it? I wondered if he'd taken young Spooner with him?"

Greenaway frowned, shook his head. "How d'you reckon I'd know a thing like that, Swaff?" he said. "Spooner ain't really a close pal of mine, you know."

"Ah but—" said Swaffer, plonking out another few notes, "Honeysuckle Rose" this time, "you do go back a way with his guv'nor, if memory serves. Two years back, to be precise – those premises on Dover Street?" Swaffer's eyebrows rose and fell.

Greenaway laughed, shook his head. "What, you mean *The Vault of Vice*, as your firm so poetically put it? If you remember rightly, them premises was empty when I raided them. Apart from the lovely Carmen, of course."

"Carmen Rose! Six-foot tall in her thigh-high boots," said Swaffer, recalling his copy with relish, "and wearing nothing else."

"Nothing else," echoed Greenaway. "But no, Swaff, you're barking up the wrong tree here. If Spooner's boss was one of Carmen's clients, then it's news to me. You better tap up some of your higher-class snouts. I'm just a Murder Squad plod these days, ain't I?"

Swaffer smiled like he knew otherwise, put the lid down over the ivories and stood up. He placed his empty glass on top of the piano and lifted up a frock coat and a battered old stovepipe hat that looked as if it was going rusty round the edges.

"Well," he said, "should any information from Plymouth happen to come your way, I'd be much obliged to hear it. And now, you must excuse me. I'm due at Miss Moyes's circle in Notting Hill Gate." He tipped the hat at Greenaway before clamping it over his long, snowy locks, and gave a theatrical bow. "Adieu, dear fellow, adieu."

Greenaway made his way back to Beverley at the bar, sank the dregs of his stout and ordered them both another.

"How'd you make our friend Swaff?" he asked his old boss. "How much of it's real, how much is a put-on?"

"Good question," replied Beverley, staring into the foam at the top of his glass. "But I'll tell you this for nothing. If he ever invites you over to his gaff, don't take him up on it. He'll have you up all night talking to his Red Indian spirit guide."

"Right," said Greenaway. "It's funny though. Every time I talk to him, he reminds me of something I'd forgot. He was going on about the knocking shop on Dover Street, remember that? Old Carmen Rose and her leather boots . . ."

"Really?" said Beverley. "The dirty old sod. Mind, I don't see how you could have forgotten that one, Ted."

"You got me," Greenaway admitted. But it wasn't the Jamaican madam he was thinking of, impressive though she had been. It was her green-eyed, red-haired maid.

"Funny business down in Plymouth," he said, batting her image away. "You heard anything about that?"

2

BLUES IN THE NIGHT

Sunday, 8 February 1942

Miss Evelyn Bourne stood in the hallway of Mrs Payne's boarding house, inhaling the aroma of the first and last meal she had managed to avoid eating there. A medley of liver, onions and mashed swede by the smell of it, and by the fact that there had been scarcely any variation to the menu in the three long months since she had taken up lodgings.

The grandmother clock chimed a sonorous six times as her eyes took final stock of the gloomy interior. Mrs Payne kept one oil lamp lit on the hall table, which emitted enough of a glow to illuminate the brass gong she used to summon her inmates for feeding, a green baize letter rack criss-crossed with black tape, and a typed and framed list of rules about blackouts, meal times and the dire consequences of guests being found in lodgers' rooms.

Miss Bourne tried to leave her gaze there, picking out the various misspellings she had detected in this treatise during her stay, which had given her a kind of bitter comfort against the pretensions of her hostess. But, as if some agent of mischief was controlling them, her eyes rolled across to the other side of the hall, to a thing that had always made her wince – a

cartoon that hung next to the lounge door, of a little girl sitting on her father's shoulders with a speech bubble coming out of her mouth uttering the words: "I'se bigger than 'oo!"

It was just the sort of thing her mother would have found amusing. Miss Bourne forced her head away just as Mrs Payne, in her customary matching pinafore and headscarf, finally emerged from the boxroom she called her office, smelling strongly of L'heure Bleue and holding a piece of headed paper.

"I trust this puts everything in order, Miss Bourne," she said, as if challenging her to find otherwise. Mrs Payne was a thickset woman in her late forties, who faced the encroachment of time with a full armoury of face powder, corsetry, setting lotion and an accent adapted from the BBC. Before the war, her premises had been a tearoom, which she had enterprisingly adapted to circumstance. With beady attention to economics, including the strict adherence to her frugal menu and a coal ration that matched the temperature of the household to that of a mausoleum, she turned enough of a profit to allow such little luxuries as black-market French perfume.

"Thank you, Mrs Payne," said Miss Bourne, giving the settlement of her account the briefest of scans before folding it up and consigning it to the depths of her handbag.

Mrs Payne gave what she thought was a magnanimous smile. Miss Bourne had always been a mystery to her. Her appearance she found somewhat severe, those tight buns and old-fashioned cloche hats, the shapeless clothes that hung off her twig of a figure. Her unwillingness to spend each evening in the lounge chatting with the other guests had been read as a sign that she considered herself above the rest of them. But there was little else to fault: Miss Bourne had been tidy to the point that, apart from her bed linen, her room never

needed cleaning, was always punctual with her payments and her mealtimes and had never once come home in company.

On paper, Mrs Payne realised, Miss Bourne had been an ideal lodger. Perhaps it was a shame that she was moving on.

"Well, good luck, dear," the landlady said. "Where was it you said you was going to?"

"Grimsby." Miss Bourne scowled as she said it. Perhaps, as the forbidding name would seem to imply, that place was beneath her, too.

"Nice there, is it?" said Mrs Payne. Her smile revealed a dash of coral pink lipstick stuck to her front teeth.

"It's a job," was all Miss Bourne could find to say about it. "Much like any other one, I expect. Well," she extended her hand, "I must be going now if I'm to catch the train to London tonight. I'll have someone come for my luggage directly as I've booked the ticket."

"Yes, all right, dear." On paper be damned, Mrs Payne decided, she had been right all along. There was something queer about Miss Bourne. She opened the front door, watched the woman pick up her one small travelling case and prepared to dismiss her from her mind.

Outside on the pavement, Miss Bourne hurried up the residential avenue towards the High Street and the train station. Hornchurch – she couldn't wait to see the back of it.

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The clock on the station wall read twenty minutes past seven as Miss Bourne at last arrived there. If Mrs Payne had found her ex-lodger self-possessed and aloof, the booking clerk with whom she made her arrangements formulated an altogether different picture of her.

Having spent a career observing people on the move, the clerk had frequently seen women like this: leaving in a hurry, puffy around their red-rimmed eyes and working their hands together in a state of agitation. More of them than ever since the Blitz began. He felt a stab of pity for the woman in the camel-coloured coat, hiding her face under a round, knitted green hat. She stood so upright, as if she was wearing a metal corset, yet anxiety oozed out through her strained vocal cords.

"I'm sorry, madam. Could you repeat that for me?" he asked her. "Did you say that was Miss or Mrs?"

He knew it would be the former even as she choked the word out. There was something vaguely familiar about her.

"Are you quite all right, Miss?" he asked. He remembered now where he had seen her before, working behind the counter at the chemist's on the High Street, the one that had closed for business this past Friday. He wondered if the loss of her job was the cause of her distress, or whether it had resulted from a parting of a more difficult kind, if there was someone she was leaving behind here, too.

The kindness in his voice was almost more than Miss Bourne could bear.

"I'm just fed up, that's all," she said. "Fed up with all this moving about. All I want to do is spend the rest of my days in peace."

The clerk nodded sympathetically. "That's all we can hope for, isn't it?" he said, turning the form around for her to sign. "To get through all of this in one piece."

"Yes." Miss Bourne pulled herself together with a monumental act of will. It was no use having a nervous breakdown in front of this poor man. That could wait until she was on the train to London, chugging through the dark and the cold

alone, with nothing else to do except reflect upon her failures. This one, and the rest.

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By the time she had reached Paddington, some two and a half hours of blizzards and frozen points later, Miss Bourne had managed to rally herself. Perhaps, she thought, despite the abrupt ending of the telephone call that had sent her into the snug bar of the Railway Tavern for an hour longer than she had anticipated earlier this evening, if she just turned up at Gloucester Place, they would have to let her in. Where else was she supposed to go so late of an evening in a city she barely knew? Surely they would show some pity, tonight of all nights?

Catching sight of a porter, she walked briskly towards him. "Excuse me," she said, "could you help me to find a taxi, please?"

The porter raised his eyes gloomily up to the station clock. "I'll try, Madam," he said, "but you'll be lucky, this time of night."

However, when they came out of the station, there was a cab just pulling up. It lifted Miss Bourne's spirits: this had to be a sign that she had taken the right course of action after all. She gratefully slipped a shilling into the porter's hand as he stowed her bag in the boot and informed the driver of her destination.

But the cabbie drove so slowly through the unlit streets that her agitation began to stir again. She couldn't shut the image of Mrs Payne's stupid framed cartoon out of her mind. That and the memories that came with it, of her mother's drab little Tyneside parlour, of confinement in a world she didn't

want or understand – and which wanted and understood her still less. The brief moments of respite between then and now – other worlds opening suddenly in bright shafts of brilliance: intellectual discourse and political fire, the possibilities of minds meeting, of love being a hair's breadth away – only to cast her back to grey reality again each time. Each time making it harder to swallow, knowing that it could have been so different, but for her own timidity, her own stupidity. The manacles she had forged all by herself.

"This is it, love," the driver's voice broke through her tormented reverie.

Miss Bourne blinked, looked out on the terraced crescent. It had started to snow. "Could you just wait here a moment, please?" she asked. Like the booking clerk at Hornchurch station, the cabbie caught the tremor in her voice.

He watched her pick her way down the street by the thin flicker of her torch beam, go up the steps to the front door and ring the bell. A maid opened it with a disdainful look on her face. She didn't usher his passenger in, but instead just stood there, shaking her head solemnly. As his fare began to wave her arms in argument, the maid simply shut the door in the woman's face.

She stood there for a moment, shouting at the door as flurries of snow swirled around her. Then her shoulders slumped in defeat and she slowly turned and came back to him, her brow puckered and her eyes darting from side to side.

She got back in the taxi. "They must put me up somewhere," she said, more to herself than to him, the cabbie thought. "I've got the money to pay."

"Where you headed, love?" he asked. "Can we find you a room nearer to where you want to get to, d'you think?"

She shook her head. "I've got to be in King's Cross in the morning to catch a train to Grimsby. But I don't want to stay anywhere around there." She looked back towards the house that had just ejected her, desperation in her eyes.

Then, just when he thought she was going to start crying, her head snapped back round. "I know," she said, her expression suddenly quite calm. "The Three Arts Club, just a bit further down the street here. I've stayed there before. Could you take me there instead, please?"

He turned the cab around towards Regent's Park and this time her doorstep enquiry was a success. He carried Miss Bourne's small case to the door for her and got a shilling's tip for it on top of his fare. But he was relieved to see the back of her. The cabbie had seen his share of strangeness during these days of fire and chaos, but there was something proper disconcerting about this one. He thought she was going mad.

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Mrs Carolyn Jones, manageress of the Three Arts Club, showed Miss Bourne up to her room as the clock chimed the half hour past ten. Miss Bourne managed to keep the smile glued to her face until she was alone, and by holding her breath until she heard footsteps receding back down the stairs, she kept the sob from her throat.

Ten minutes later she was splashing cold water onto her face. She stopped when she caught sight of herself in the little square of mirror above the sink.

"Stop it now, stop it," she whispered to herself. Her eyes darted away from her reflection to that of the room behind her. It was small and beige and it seemed to Miss Bourne just then that it was starting to shrink still further. For a brief,

mad second, she wondered if, like Alice, she had taken something that was making her grow. She laughed, and the sound snapped her out of this thought, brought her gaze back to her mirror image.

"You haven't eaten again, have you?" she asked herself, in the tone of voice her mother would have used. "Now you're so hungry you're starting to see things. You need to eat, my girl . . . Eat something now."

She lifted her coat from where she had flung it across the bed, put it back on. Smoothed her hair back into shape and carefully arranged her hat over the top of it. For a few seconds more, she scrutinised herself in the mirror, until she was certain that she looked quite calm.

Then she went back downstairs and asked Mrs Jones where she might find somewhere open to eat at this time of night. The manageress suggested the Lyons Corner House at Marble Arch. It was a bit of a walk, but Miss Bourne said she was sure she could manage it. She gave a brief, grateful smile as she closed the front door behind her.

Then she stepped out into the snow.