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The Witness

Written by Simon Kernick

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Simon

Kernick

THE WITNESS



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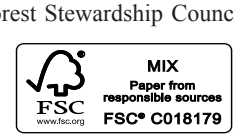
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Prologue

Now

The gunshot explodes in my ears, the bullet hitting the door only inches from my head, and, although I'm sitting on the floor, I actually jump, letting loose a terrified gasp.

I'm scared. Jesus, I'm scared.

'Tell me the truth or the next bullet takes you,' demands the gunman. He's standing barely two metres from me, the smoking pistol pointed at my head. His eyes are alive with hatred and anger and I know that he means what he says. He will kill me.

'It is the truth,' I tell him with more confidence than I'm feeling.

'Bullshit,' he snaps, his gun hand steady. 'Last chance. I will kill you without question.'

The room stinks of death. A man lies sprawled against a kitchen

unit opposite me, his face and body a mask of blood. He doesn't move. Nor does the woman lying on her side behind the gunman. A pool of thick dark blood is slowly forming round her head where a bullet from the very same gun now pointed at me blew a hole the size of a golf ball in it only a few minutes ago.

I open my mouth to speak, knowing I'm going to have to give this man the information he's looking for, even though it will cost me everything.

And then I hear it. The sound of the back door to the house being kicked open, followed by angry shouts of 'Armed police!' as they come running down the hall.

'I am a police officer,' a man calls out from just outside the door. 'There's no need for anyone to get hurt.'

'It's not what you think,' the gunman staring down at me calls back. 'I'm a police officer too.'

'Then we can sort this out,' says the other man.

The next second they're in the room, two men in plainclothes, their guns pointing at the gunman covering me.

'Put your weapon on the floor now,' says the one on the left. 'Nice and slowly.'

'It's not what you think,' the gunman repeats, his voice tight with tension, never taking his gun, or his gaze, from me.

'It doesn't matter what I think,' says the one on the left. 'You need to lower your weapon now.'

Nothing happens. I have my hands in the air, the expression on my face one of total fear. My heart is hammering away in my chest and I feel like I'm going to faint.

'Drop the weapon. Now.'

The gunman doesn't move.

The Witness

‘I said: drop the fucking weapon.’

The gunman’s finger tightens on the trigger. ‘If you shoot me, my last bullet takes her out,’ he says.

And that’s when I know I’m going to die.

Last Night

One

Jane Kinnear

I looked at the two police officers sitting next to my hospital bed and asked if I could possibly have a cigarette. ‘I know it’s not allowed, but I’m desperate for something just to calm the nerves and I can hardly go outside. Not after . . .’ I let my words trail off. It was obvious to all of us I didn’t need to finish the sentence.

The more senior of the two officers – an attractive black woman in her early thirties, dressed casually in a neat leather jacket and tight white T-shirt – looked like she was going to say no but then she turned to her colleague, a thin guy about the same age, with slicked-back receding hair. ‘Have you got any objection to this lady breaking the law, DC Jeffs?’

‘As long as I can have one as well,’ he said, throwing me a leery smile.

'I'm afraid I haven't got any,' I said.

'Here, have one of mine.'

DC Jeffs pulled a pack of Silk Cut from his jacket pocket and lit two, handing one to me. I took the cigarette with shaking hands and a murmured thank you, and sucked deep. It tasted good. I blew the smoke up towards the ceiling and took two more long puffs while they waited patiently, before tapping the ash into an empty plastic cup by my bed. Finally, feeling calm for the first time that night, I turned to the black detective, who'd introduced herself to me as DS Anji Abbott.

'Where do you want me to begin?' I asked.

She smiled, placing a tape recorder on the bedside table. 'At the beginning.'

I nodded slowly, steeling myself against what was to come and, with a deep breath, started talking.

'I first met Anil at a hardware shop of all places. I was buying industrial-strength drain cleaner, and he was buying – well, I can't actually remember what he was buying. I was more interested in him. He was a good-looking guy, a little on the short side, and a couple of pounds heavier than I'd normally go for, but he had well-defined features and the kind of face that smiles easily.

'I'll be straight. I was attracted to him. He had nice hands too, which is something I always check out in a man. So I made sure I caught his eye, gave him a big smile, and that was it. We started chatting, exchanged phone numbers, and within forty-eight hours we were out on a date.

'That was two weeks ago. We'd had one more date before

tonight, a dinner at a local restaurant, which ended with a kiss on the pavement outside, and which might have gone further if I hadn't stopped myself, remembering my cardinal dating rule: never sleep with a man before date three. If he can't wait until then he's just a player and best avoided.

'Anyway, date three was tonight. I don't drive so we arranged for Anil to pick me up from home in Watford and take me to his place in a little village a few miles from me, where he was going to cook. I think we both knew that we were going to be sleeping together and to be honest I was a little nervous. I've always been a very sexual person. That doesn't mean I'm a maneater, far from it, just that it's important to me that a man knows what he's doing in the bedroom. I've had more than my fair share of sexual disasters and, because I liked Anil, I was really hoping sparks would fly while simultaneously fearing that they wouldn't, if you can understand that?

'The moment he turned up at my house, though, I knew something was wrong. He was tense and distracted, a complete contrast to the other times I'd seen him, and it was clear something was on his mind. I even gave him the opportunity to leave the date for another night, and by God I wish he had, but he told me that no, he was OK, he'd just had a hard day at work. That was another thing about Anil. He was very vague about what he did for a living. Apparently he was a partner in a small family-run business importing boutique furnishings from India but that was about as far as I ever got with it, and it was clear he wasn't that interested in elaborating. But it obviously paid OK because he lived in a pretty detached cottage at the end of a winding country lane backing on to fields. It

all seemed very different to the suburb in Watford that I called home.

'"So what culinary delights have you got in store for me tonight?" I asked him as we got out of the car and headed for the front door.

'"Ah, well, there's a bit of a problem there," he said. "It's been a really hectic day with work and I haven't had a chance to do the dish I wanted, but I know a great Thai place that'll deliver for us." He gave me a smile that looked far too forced as he unlocked the door and we went inside.

'It wasn't exactly the most auspicious start to the evening but at least his house was warm and it turned out he had a decent supply of high-quality white wine, which is always a good way of improving things. We shared a crisp bottle of Chablis on his sofa and I think it did the trick for both of us because as he visibly began to relax, so did I. One thing led to another, a second bottle got opened, and we started kissing. I forgot that I was hungry, enjoying the light-headedness that the alcohol provided, and before I really knew it – at least that's what I told myself – he was leading me upstairs to the bedroom.

'I wouldn't say the sex was spectacular but then it rarely is the first time with someone, especially when you've both been drinking. But Anil certainly gave a good account of himself and, as we lay there afterwards chatting about this and that, I remember thinking that the evening was shaping up to be a good one.

'And that was pretty much when it all started to go wrong because the next second I heard the front door opening and a woman calling out Anil's name.

'I knew immediately from her cheery, confident tone that this

was either Anil's girlfriend or wife, and the look of utter shock on his face as he shot up in bed just confirmed it. Credit to him though, he knew how to think on his feet.

'"I'm up in the bedroom, babe," he called out, sounding just as cheery. "Be down in a mo." Then he turned to me. "I can explain everything," he whispered, "but please help me and get under the bed."

'"What?" I demanded, flabbergasted by his complete cheek.

'"She's volatile. I'm serious. If she finds you here, she'll kill us both."

'He grabbed me and pushed me off the bed, jumping off himself and flinging the wine glasses and the bottle under it. He kicked his clothes under there after them, making remarkably little noise, as if he'd done this sort of thing before, which I suspect he probably had.

'I could hear the girlfriend/wife coming up the stairs and knew I had to make a decision fast. She hadn't sounded very volatile when she'd called out from the front door, and maybe I should have just stood there and fronted it out, explained who I was while I got my clothes on, before walking out with my head held high. But, naked and in a strange house, and with only a few seconds to make my decision, I went for the easy option and, yanking on my blouse and jeans, I grabbed the rest of my clothes and wriggled under the bed. There was a good foot of space beneath the frame, which was covered by a frilly valance, so it wasn't too difficult to manage.

'"How are you, darling?" he said. "I was just getting ready for bed. I'm absolutely shattered. How come you're back tonight?"

'Jesus, I thought, lying there half naked with my nose almost touching the bed frame. Why are some men such complete and utter bastards?

'And that was the really sad part about it all. The poor woman didn't suspect a thing.

'"I couldn't stick the idea of another night in a hotel," she said, "so I grabbed an earlier flight. I was going to call but I thought I'd surprise you."

'She laughed, and I could hear the crumple of clothes as he hugged her. I wondered if she suspected he was a bit of a philanderer and was just taking the opportunity to check up on him.

'Either way, it didn't seem to worry Anil too much. "It's good to have you back, honey," he said without a hint of fear in his voice.

'God, I wanted to slide out from underneath the bed then and say "No it isn't", but somehow I kept my cool, wondering how long I was going to be trapped for, especially as Anil had announced that he was getting ready for bed.

'It didn't take long for me to get my answer. "Ooh," I heard her say playfully. "You're not *that* tired then . . ."

'Oh no, I thought. Surely not. He's only just done it with me.

'Thankfully I was saved. "Come on, it's far too early to go to bed," she said. "Get dressed and let's grab a drink at the pub. Have you eaten?"

'Anil said he hadn't.

'"No, me neither. And I'm hungry."

'The two of them made small talk while Anil got dressed. He asked her about her trip; she asked what he'd been doing. They sounded just like any other ordinary couple and a part of me

was jealous at the casual rapport they had with each other, because I didn't have anything like that, and hadn't for a long time. But I reminded myself that the relationship couldn't be that good if Anil saw the need to be unfaithful, and his wife, who was called Sharon, couldn't spot it.

'Sharon kept walking round the bed as she chatted and I experienced an almost childish frisson of excitement at the fact that I was only inches away from her and yet she had no idea I was there. She was wearing pretty open-toed heels and she had nice feet – dainty and golden, with well-kept, plum-coloured nail polish. For some reason, the sight of them made me feel sorry for her. Here was a woman who looked after herself, who thought she was in a relationship with a decent guy, and who was being betrayed day in and day out, because he wasn't decent at all. He was a piece of shit. I felt a real surge of anger. I wasn't going to skulk away from this any longer. I was going to come out from under the bed and tell her what her boyfriend was really like. I was going to tell her how I met him, how he wooed me over dinner, how I'd had no idea he was in a relationship otherwise I wouldn't have touched him with a bargepole, because I'm not that kind of girl, how—

'"What's that noise?" said Sharon.

'"What noise?" said Anil, opening a wardrobe door.

'But Sharon never got a chance to answer because the next second the bedroom door opened and she let loose a single, surprised gasp. There was a sound like a champagne cork being popped and, after a very short pause, she fell heavily to the floor, landing on her back next to the bed. As I watched dumbstruck, she rolled over on to her side so she was looking straight at me.

She was a pretty olive-skinned woman who looked at least part-South Asian and she was wearing a white dress underneath a black coat. She was clutching her stomach with both hands and I could see the dress staining red with blood. Her dark brown eyes were wide and pleading, and it took all my self-control not to cry out.

'Anil did, though. A terrified "Please, don't shoot".

'There was another sound, like a crackle of live electricity, and I could feel Anil fall back against the bed, the impact banging my nose. The intruder – whoever he was – grabbed a chair from the corner of the room and put it next to where Sharon lay writhing in agony and making low groaning sounds.

'He manhandled Anil into the chair, and used what sounded like duct tape to secure him.

'From the angle I had, I could only see the killer's black boots, although at one point his hand drifted down to wrap duct tape around Anil's bare ankles, and I saw he was wearing a long-sleeved dark top and gloves.

'In those moments, I was the most terrified I've ever been in my life. I was holding my breath as much as possible, snatching some air only when the killer was making a noise, knowing that if he discovered me there he would almost certainly kill me. That was the worst part. Knowing that at any moment my life could be over. I'd once had a brief fling with a detective who'd worked murders, and he used to tell me that murderers were almost invariably hapless fools acting on the spur of the moment, who didn't usually mean to do it and never planned their crimes, so consequently were usually caught very quickly. But this person wasn't like that at all. He – and even though I couldn't see him

I could tell it was a he – was methodical and unhurried, as if he knew exactly what he was doing. He was like something out of a nightmare, and he was barely three feet away from me.

'The fear almost overwhelmed me then and I had to use every ounce of available willpower to hold it in check, knowing that for me it was, quite literally, the difference between life and death.

'Anil was coming round now, making tired moaning noises.

'"What's going on?" he said groggily.

'His question was met with a long silence.

'Then the intruder said, "If you answer my questions truthfully, you die quickly. If you lie, it'll be slow. Do you understand?"

'It was, as I'd suspected, a man. It was difficult to pinpoint where the accent came from – it was quite a neutral sound – and I wasn't really paying that much attention, but I'm fairly sure he was English.

'"Please. My wife . . . she's hurt."

'"If you answer my questions, she'll live."

'I didn't hear Anil's response, but the killer then asked him how many mobile phones he owned.

'"Just one," said Anil, sounding a lot less groggy now.

'The attacker made a sudden movement and Anil cried out in pain and shock, his body shaking in the chair. Any anger I'd felt for him disappeared in that moment.

'"I'm going to cut you to pieces if I have to," continued the killer calmly, "or even burn you alive. But you *are* going to answer my questions."

'"My face," wailed Anil softly as large drops of blood splashed on to the carpet in front of the chair.

'"How many phones?"

‘“Two,” he said quickly, his voice tight. “One in my jeans. The other in the drawer behind me.”

‘The killer located the two phones and there was a short delay while I guess he checked them.

‘“Next question,” he said at last. “What do you know about the proposed attack?”

‘“Please. I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.”

‘“Anil, be realistic. I’m here because I know all about you and your secret life, so there’s really no point in this charade. Now, are you going to cooperate or do you want me to carve open your other cheek?”

‘There was a short pause before Anil spoke, a resigned tone to his voice: “I know the attack’s imminent.”

‘“Who told you that?”

‘“Karim.”

‘“Tell me the details of the attack.”

‘“I don’t know, I promise. I just know that it’s going to be a major operation and that it’s going to happen very soon. That’s all Karim told me. I tried to find out more but he wouldn’t say. I’m not even sure he knows the details himself.”

‘The killer didn’t say anything and I heard him turn and exit the room, followed by footfalls on the stairs, leaving a heavy, cold silence behind. All I could hear was Anil’s laboured breathing and the continual dripping of his blood on the carpet. It struck me then that Anil might try to get me to free him and I prayed he wouldn’t say anything because I knew the killer hadn’t left for long.

‘“Are you OK?” I heard him say, and I felt a sudden flush of fear. “Sharon, honey, are you OK?”

‘Sharon rolled over on to her back. The blood had completely drenched her dress now and her face was pale from blood loss. “Hurt . . .” she managed to whisper, the effort of speaking almost too much for her.

‘A minute passed. Or it might have been two. It was hard to tell because time seemed to be moving painfully slowly, and I was terrified that Anil would speak to me and the killer would hear him. But then I heard the footsteps on the stairs again and the killer was back in the room.

‘“Please, I’ve told you everything I know,” said Anil desperately. “And I haven’t seen your face. I won’t tell a soul about any of this, I swear.”

‘I heard a container being opened, saw the killer’s boots again right next to the bed, and then a clear liquid was being poured all over Sharon. It only took me a moment to work out that it was petrol. She coughed and spluttered, trying in vain to wriggle out of the way. Anil was crying and begging now and I could feel my own panic setting in as I realized that I too could be burned alive up there. I almost rolled out from under the bed and made a break for it then, I was that scared, but somehow managed to stop myself, knowing that there was no way I’d make it.

‘“Who have you told about the attack?” demanded the killer.

‘“MI5 know.”

‘“What do they know?”

‘“Just that there’s going to be an attack soon, but they don’t know when, where, or who’s going to be doing it.’

‘“So how have they left it with you?”

‘“They’ve told me to keep pumping Karim for information. To find out everything I can.”

‘“Have they bugged his house?”

‘“Yes.”

‘“And is he under surveillance?”

‘“Yes.”

‘“Right now?”

‘“I don’t know, but I would think almost certainly. Look . . .” Anil hesitated. “Please don’t hurt my wife. I’ve told you everything I know.”

‘The killer made another sudden movement and once again Anil cried out in animal pain.

‘“Tell me the details of the attack.”

‘“I’ve told you all I know, I swear it.”

‘The killer took a step forward. His boots were no more than two feet from my body as he stood directly in front of Anil.

‘Anil kept insisting that he’d told him everything he knew but the killer kept repeating the same question anyway, his demeanour completely calm, as if he was used to doing this sort of thing; and then I heard the sound of more duct tape being ripped off the roll and Anil’s words became nothing more than muffled grunts.

‘I heard the sound of cutting, and Anil shook violently in the chair. I don’t know how long it lasted – thankfully I don’t think it was more than a few seconds – but eventually Anil’s gasps subsided and the killer took a step back, ripping the tape away from his mouth. This time Anil didn’t make a sound and the room was suddenly very quiet.

‘The killer cleared his throat. “So, Anil, let’s start again. What do you know about the attack? Tell me everything. There are still other bits I can remove.”

‘But the only response was Anil’s ragged breathing.

‘I heard the sound of something else being cut, and Anil seemed to shiver in the chair for a moment before becoming still.

‘More blood was now dripping on to the floor and the killer let go of the chair. I thought he’d go then but I felt a surge of terror as he started rifling through drawers and cupboards, knowing he was bound to look under the bed, and then . . .

‘I froze. My entire body tensed up. I didn’t dare look anywhere but upwards, hoping that if he found me then he’d at least make it quick. I thought of my two sons then, far away across separate oceans, and wondered if I’d ever see them again, and how torn up they’d be if they lost their mother in circumstances like these. That was the thing about the boys. They were both so caring and it would prey on their minds that my last moments were so terrifying.

‘And so I waited. And waited. Wondering how much longer I had left. Because the thing about this killer was he didn’t seem to be in any hurry. Beside me, Sharon lay on her side, thankfully facing the other way, moaning faintly, the blood from her wound staining the carpet around her.

‘I heard a cupboard door shut and the intruder’s boots approached the bed.

‘He was going to look under. Jesus, he was going to look.

‘But he didn’t. Instead he strode round the bed, stopped in front of Sharon and shot her twice in the face.

‘Her body arched once, her hands falling to her sides, and then she was still.

‘I heard the killer walk into the en suite, leaving the door

open. He put the gun down on one of the tops before unzipping himself and starting to pee.

'I had a simple choice. Stay there and almost certainly be discovered, or get up and run.

'I've always been impulsive. It's how I ended up married and pregnant at nineteen, so it hasn't always served me well, but I knew I only had a split second to make my decision.

'I rolled out from under the bed on the opposite side to the en suite and jumped to my feet. And then as I turned to run – I couldn't help it – I glanced across at the en suite, barely registering the sight of Anil sitting, head slumped, in the chair. The killer had been wearing some kind of mask but he'd pulled it up over his head so his face was visible. Our eyes met. He stared at me in surprise and, before he could go for the gun, which was sitting on the toilet cistern, I bolted out of the bedroom door, slamming it behind me, ran over to the top of the staircase and took the stairs three and four at a time, so desperate was I to get out of there.

'But he was fast. I could hear his heavy footfalls as he ran through the bedroom, and as I reached the ground floor I could hear him coming through the bedroom door after me.

'I ran through the open-plan lounge to the front door, which I tried to yank open. But it wouldn't budge.

'The killer was coming down the stairs now and any second I was going to be in his line of sight. I knew he was a steady shot too, after seeing the way he'd calmly put two bullets in Sharon's face, so he was going to have no problem putting one in the back of my head.

'Trying not to panic, I saw that the door had been bolted from

the inside. Not daring to look behind me in case he was there taking aim, I threw back the bolt, opened the door and then I was outside, a cold bite of fresh air hitting my face.

'I slammed the door behind me to give myself an extra second and kept running, screaming at the top of my lungs. Despite being so close to London, it was countryside out there and there was a field directly opposite, across the road. But it didn't look like it would provide any effective cover so I turned an immediate left where a clump of trees rose in the darkness next to Anil's house.

'Twenty yards of dirt track separated me from their embrace and I ran that distance with a speed I don't think I've ever mustered before, ignoring the sharp tearing of the stones and grit beneath my bare feet, knowing that at any moment I could be brought down by a bullet.

'I hit the tree line at pace and kept going, driven by adrenalin. Through the trees I could see the lights of a house no more than thirty yards away. I couldn't hear the killer behind me but that didn't mean he wasn't there. I had to think fast. Anil's place was in a remote spot. I couldn't even hear any traffic noise. It was highly likely that no one had heard my scream for help. So, if the killer was as cool under pressure as he appeared to be, he still had time on his side, and might well pursue me into any house where I took shelter. Because the problem was, I'd seen his face. It had only been for a split second but that was enough. I could ID him. I could place him at the scene of a double murder. I was a threat.

'I had to hide somewhere. I forced myself to look back over my shoulder but all I could see were trees. Turning sharp right

away from the house and keeping low, I ran for another ten yards or so before diving under a tangle of brambles and facing back in the general direction I'd come from. I lay as still as possible, trying to keep my breathing as silent as the trees around me.

'Ten seconds passed. Then twenty. I heard the sound of someone creeping through the undergrowth. It was him. It had to be.

'I pushed myself hard against the ground, seriously relieved that I'd decided to dress in dark clothing for the date, and held my breath.

'He was getting closer but I couldn't see him because I was keeping my face against the dirt so that its paleness didn't stand out in the gloom.

'A twig cracked underfoot no more than five yards away and, as I listened, I could hear his slow, steady breathing. He was hunting me. Slowly and methodically. As if he had all the time in the world.

'"I know you're in there somewhere," he called out in an easy sing-song voice, as if this was a game he was playing with a group of children. "I'm going to find you, and when I do . . ."

'He was close. Jesus, he was close, and the desire to jump to my feet and bolt was almost overwhelming, but I didn't move. Still I held my breath. When I was a young girl back in South Africa I'd been a very strong swimmer and I was used to holding my breath for a long time. Once, aged twelve, I'd even managed two and a half minutes. I'd lost some of that ability with age but I was still able to last a lot longer than most people, which was no bad thing because I heard more footfalls in the dirt and realized he was getting even closer.

‘Had he seen me lying there? Was he just toying with me?

‘My body tensed. Waiting.

‘Another footstep. He was almost on top of me. My lungs felt like they were burning up.

‘And then I heard it, somewhere in the distance. The plaintive wail of a siren. It was hard to tell whether or not it was getting closer but that didn’t matter because I heard the killer curse under his breath and then he was running back through the woods, away from me.

‘I allowed myself to breathe but I didn’t move until I heard a car engine starting a couple of minutes later. Then I slowly reached into the back pocket of my jeans and pulled out my mobile. I only had a single bar of signal and, as I dialled 999, still keeping all my wits about me even though I could hear the car driving away, I hoped it was enough.

‘It was. The number rang twice and a female operator picked up. I felt a surge of pure relief.

‘“Which emergency service do you require?”

‘“Police,” I whispered, praying that my nightmare was over. “I want to report a murder.”’