THE HOBBY

A NOVEL BY

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CHAPTER 1

There was a heat wave in Hackney and the air on the council estate was so close it felt as though it had been recycled several times before smothering Amber Mason's kitchen. Michelle Mason was sitting under the Formica table humming tunelessly. She was six years old and bored. She wanted to go out and play, but all her friends were away. She wanted to go away too, but asking about it made her mum angry. A lot of things made her mum angry these days. It was no use winding her up directly, for instance by asking her anything about her dad. But she could drive her crazy by humming *Postman Pat* until she was allowed back out into the courtyard.

Since Tracy upstairs was away and couldn't come round hers, Michelle might at least spend her time doing handstands. By the time the others got back with their peeling noses, and sticks of pink and yellow rock, and buckets of shells and souvenirs, Michelle would be the Handstand Queen of the courtyard. Her mum was being a pain these days trying to keep her in because of the old bloke across the way who kept staring at her. Well, Michelle didn't care. She wanted the whole world to see how long she could stay upside down with

her feet together and her legs completely straight like the girls on the telly.

The heat was getting to Amber. She'd lost her appetite and got the idea that she and Michelle would get sick from the germs from all the flies, so she had taken to washing the dishes over and over again. It was while standing at the sink, watching Michelle doing handstands, that Amber noticed there was something funny about the man across the way. Funny peculiar. Every time her little girl's legs went up and her frock flopped down over her blonde head, he'd be there, half-hiding behind his grimy curtain, staring so hard at Michelle's knickers that he couldn't even see Amber shooing him away. She'd been noticing him for days now. She shouldn't have let Michelle out. But Boy George was coming up on the radio and she wanted to sing along; and how could she over *Postman Pat*, and Michelle asking and asking to go back out?

After dancing to *Karma Chameleon*, giving the chorus the full benefit of the voice that had led the hymns at the Hackney Central Baptist Sunday School and got all the solos, Amber felt better. She opened a tin of spaghetti hoops and glanced back through her open window to the closed one opposite framing the creepy old man transfixed on Michelle.

'Michi, baby, come in,' she called, and heard her own voice sounding tight and small.

Without the normal gradual escalation of her homing calls, Amber felt a protective rage rising and shouted, 'Michelle, come right now! And don't make me come and get you!'

Michelle came into the kitchen, puzzled by her mum's anger, and started crying. And Amber, who had never called the police in her life and who wouldn't normally trust a policeman if he hid behind a biscuit, and who dreaded getting busted for her discreet but illegal stash of marijuana, suddenly stopped swatting flies off their food and dialled 999.



Later that afternoon, two police constables were standing outside Alfred Marchman's front door. PC Carey, the taller of the two, rang

the bell. He had rivulets of sweat running from under his elaborate helmet down the side of his face and then dripping onto his shirt. The Metropolitan Police had reacted to the unaccustomed heat wave by foregoing the heavy uniform jackets and issuing short-sleeved cotton shirts. But it was 4 p.m. and still too hot for comfort. No self-respecting Londoner was used to such heat.

'It's not normal,' PC Carey pronounced as slippered feet shuffled to the front door, which opened on a chain. An unusually short old man stared up nervously at Carey's perspiring face and the dark swathe of sweat circling his blue shirt at shoulder level.

'What?' The old man asked as his eyes flickered from one policeman to the next with mounting anxiety.

'Are you Alfred Marchman, the occupier of this flat?'

The old man swallowed. His Adam's apple wobbled inside folds of turkey skin and beads of sweat formed on the white stubble on his upper lip. He stared up at the policemen silently with undisguised fear.

'May we come in, Mr Marchman? I take it you are Mr Alfred Marchman?'

'You what?' the old man whispered, holding onto the lock and chain of his front door as though for strength.

The second policeman stepped forward. He was shorter than his colleague but more compact and forceful. There was nothing gentle about him.

'Afternoon, sir. Please tell us your name and open the door. We are investigating a complaint from one of your neighbours and we don't intend to stand out here for the rest of the afternoon.'

Alfred Marchman's freckled, claw-like hand was shaking on the door chain, rattling it but making no move to open the door. Intuitively, PC Carey sensed that here was a man who only obeyed orders.

'Open the door!' he snapped.

Marchman removed the chain and opened the door onto a mini hallway leading into a drab and dusty living room. It was dominated by a large TV, a Betamax and a VHS video player and several stacks of tapes on a table. The advance of the two policemen was momentarily slowed by the impact of the stale smell of old age and unwashed skin, clothes and dishes. PC Carey planted his size twelve, black

regulation shoe firmly inside the door while he recovered from the wave of stale air. He braced himself and tried to ignore the stench. If he could identify and name a smell, he usually found it easier to deal with. Marchman's flat smelled of dandruff soap laced with . . . ? Old socks, definitely; and fear, maybe.

Propped up wherever something could prop, were photos. Some were of a young soldier in North Africa, but most were old family snapshots: dozens and dozens of snapshots of a pretty blonde child. The policemen visually swept the room and wondered, 'a niece or a granddaughter?' Carey picked up a photo of a very small soldier with a very big pyramid for a backdrop.

'You?'

Marchman straightened up, unconsciously standing to attention. His trembling eased a little and he mustered whatever dignity an unkempt seventy-four-year-old man in a dirty cardigan, stained trousers and bedroom slippers can have when two policemen invade his den and tower over him.

'Yes, sir.'

Finding his voice seemed to help calm Marchman. Carey watched him, intrigued, following his trapped rabbit gaze as his colleague picked over the other photos. Why was the old man so afraid? He'd been caught out as a Peeping Tom; and nasty as the habit was, he hadn't actually touched the little girl across the way or propositioned her or exposed himself to her. If he had no priors, he'd get a warning; and if that wasn't enough, he'd get a court order to keep away from that window.

He looked across at the old soldier and noticed a trickle of piss down the side of his trousers puddling on the floor and seeping up into the threadbare tartan slippers. Carey cleared his throat to draw his colleague's attention to it discreetly. This old-aged pensioner was so doddery he couldn't hurt a fly: so why the fear? It might be worth taking a bit of a peek at the other rooms.

'Would you mind if I take a little look around, Mr Marchman?' he asked, announcing his intention rather than asking for permission as he strode into the squalid kitchen. The pervading smell of dandruff was instantly swamped by one of rotting food.

PC Carey thought of his own grandfather, a widowed pensioner struggling and often failing to make ends meet, and he felt a twinge of pity for this Marchman and all old-aged pensioners forced to live and cope alone. Now was not the time to get on his high horse about it, but what was the Government doing abandoning its old folks like this? And when was the last time he'd visited his granddad? Too long ago, he mused as he turned to a mess of maggots in tins congealed to the filthy counter. He whistled almost silently and thought, 'It's like a weirdo shrine to the baked bean tin. Like that Warhol geezer in America who makes millions off it.'

Wading through piles of empty baked bean tins, Carey noticed the photos, even in the kitchen. Photos of a little blonde girl who, on closer inspection, was not one but a series of girls, all blonde, all aged between five and ten-years-old, and all different but all disturbingly reminiscent of little Michelle Mason across the way.

Carey had been a copper since he was twenty-four. Eight years on the Force and nothing much to show for his pains really except the satisfaction of knowing he was pretty good at his job and recognising that he had got that way from following his gut feelings, meticulously gathering facts, and using his common sense. Now his gut was telling him he had stumbled on a crime that had something to do with the little girls. It was hot and it would be easier to go back to the Station and have a mug of tea and knock off for the day, but there was something strange about this Marchman. Strange enough for PC Carey to want to go after him.

As he returned to the fetid living room, a clock ticked somewhere else, and a blue bottle buzzed on a windowsill. The odour of old age was so overwhelming that Carey stepped past Marchman and opened a window. Across the grass yard, he saw Amber Mason standing in her kitchen, but she had her back to the window and she didn't see him. He let the grey net curtain fall back down. It didn't stir. There wasn't a breath of air.

Carey's partner was making 'Let's go' signs. Carey stood in the middle of the room, swaddled in his sweaty shirt, surrounded by a gallery of little girls and wondered what to do. Then he made up his mind: he'd get a search warrant as fast as he could and be back for the

videos and the photos, and he'd sift them a bit, and if it still wasn't clear what was going on, he'd hand them over to the new unit at New Scotland Yard, the paedophile buffs, and see what they made of it.

Some things about Marchman didn't add up. For example, since when did a pensioner like this one get a Betamax *and* a VHS player? They'd only just got a VHS player down at the Station. They were expensive, and luxury goods in such a dump didn't make sense.

Back in the living room, using a biro to turn the pages, Carey began to examine a stamp album that had been gathering dust by the TV.

'Do you mind if I take a look, sir? I'm partial to stamps.'

Marchman shrugged and looked away. Carey knew better than to take much advantage of such permission. Without a warrant, nothing he found would stand up in court. Most of the stamps seemed to be pre-1960 and the album looked as though it hadn't been opened for years. On a dresser, he found two open shoe boxes full of photos and papers.

'May I?' he asked the trembling Marchman.

The old man flinched while Carey gingerly leafed through the contents. Mixed in with more photos there were memorabilia from 'The Violet Trellis Fan Club'. At one end of the shoe box, nests of tiny violet paper flags, violet visiting cards, violet invitations and violet stationary were neatly arranged. The name 'Violet Trellis' seemed to pop up all over the box. For a few minutes, the policeman flicked through the two boxes; then he paused and asked,

'Who's Violet Trellis?'

Fear gave way to astonishment on Marchman's face.

'Violet Trellis,' he said, savouring the name. 'She was Britain's Shirley Temple, the most famous child star we ever 'ad.'

Marchman's eyes filled with tears. He looked away while he fought down a mixed bag of emotions. He felt proud of Violet and protective of her, and he was disgusted that these young oafs had never heard of her. And he loved Violet Trellis, the little girl who had made it okay to worship little girls, the one whose photo a soldier was allowed to stick on his kit bag and locker without being called a 'perv'. Violet . . .

PC Carey looked more closely at the photos of the child star. In some of the later ones she looked like a right Little Miss, but his

intuition also told him that she was innocent. He separated out the Violet Trellis Fan Club memorabilia from the other photos with relief: some things had to stay pure. Even this old perv had some decent feelings. He mused, 'Funny how fame comes and goes.' Violet Trellis: the name didn't ring a single bell. He wondered if in thirty more years' time that was how it would be for current stars like Boy George and Linda Hamilton.



By five o'clock, the policemen had gone and Marchman flopped back in his armchair and stared at the nearest photos on the wall. The coppers had gone but the worry hadn't. He thought of the little Hasselblad camera that had given him so much pleasure over the years and silently cursed it for betraying him now. He'd had it since he was a boy. It was the only thing his father ever gave him. And perhaps because it was also the only proof that he actually had a father, the camera felt like family to him. And like family, he had forced himself to learn all its sneaky ways. He hadn't known anything about photography until he was given the Hasselblad. But once he got the hang of it, he'd been able to take photos, hundreds of them. Hundreds of memories captured and pinned like beautiful little butterflies to his wall. Except that they weren't pinned, they were stuck with cow gum, but the idea was there. And the pictures were there.

Marchman groaned and moved his right hand from his damp trousers to cradle his face. His disfigured fingers smelled of piss. It was nearly teatime, but he hadn't the energy to grill a slice of Mother's Pride, spread it with marge and tip a half tin of hot beans over it.

He thought of Michelle, or Michelle Mason as he had just learned she was called. He pulled a loose thread in his cardigan, and watched with a mixture of fascination and dismay as he kept pulling and a growing hole took shape above his right-hand pocket. By the time he stopped, the cardigan was ruined, and he had a pile of wool on his lap like a giant cobweb. He pushed it away, as though it was his own past he had unravelled, and it was abhorrent to him.

Was he going gaga? Was this the end? Why was he wearing a

cardigan in a heat wave? Why was he unravelling it? Why had he wet himself? Why hadn't he changed his trousers? Why had he been so careless as to get caught? Why?

He sank further back into the big armchair. He was a small man, not more than five-foot-four. He'd been a batman in the Army, a military servant. Before the War, he'd been a school janitor for a year; and before that . . .

He frowned. Was he losing his memory? Then he remembered that his memory had never been good: it came and went like a torch flashing on and off. He had heard somewhere that if you got hit around the head a lot as a kid it did things to your memory. Maybe that was it, because his had never been good. That was why the photos were such a comfort: he could go from one to the next and piece together his entire life. They were his memory, his stepping stones. Trying to remember their names was like counting sheep. Little fair curls like lambs. Little girls . . .

He closed his eyes and fell asleep oblivious to the radio blaring across the way again.

'That was the fabulous Boy George's *Karma Chameleon*, not yet a Golden Oldie and still as popular as ever on this summer evening on Rá-aydio London.'



Three days later, the ringing of his doorbell woke Marchman up. His bones ached and he felt confused: he shouldn't have slept all night in the armchair again. And after the coppers were there, he should have covered his tracks: got rid of some photos and tapes. He didn't want to answer the door, but he knew he had to because he sensed it was the police again. Who else would it be? The meter men had been round in April and the Council inspector wasn't due till November.

They had a search warrant. There were four of them, including a woman who made him a cup of tea and some beans on toast. It was the ones from before with the woman and a toff. They took some of his photos away and all his videos. They tried to take all his memories away, but the big policeman left him Violet. They made him sign for

the other things. They couldn't know it, but he liked signing for all those little girls like he owned them, like they were his to sign away. Without their photos, though, he couldn't remember them properly.

Even after all these years, Violet had been her dear self again: protecting and shielding. All the stuff from the Fan Club had been picked out and left for him. They even found the signed photo from the 1945 gala performance the day the Fan Club opened. It had fallen down behind the kitchen dresser years ago and he'd kept meaning to retrieve it.

Now all his other pictures were down at the nick, and God knew what would happen. What could they find from them? What else was there? They had taken two of his shoe boxes away: the ones with the photos and letters. Why hadn't he got rid of them before? Why had he kept all those souvenirs? What was he thinking of? The problem was that he wasn't thinking. That was what Major Endleigh used to say,

'Private Marchman, it must be there somewhere: that grey matter. You can't be the only complete idiot in this regiment. Think, man! Think! You cluster fuck-up! Your problem is that sometimes you don't think at all.'

Considering how many times the Major had knocked him about to help him locate that grey matter, Marchman reckoned that he should have found the nonce to cover his tracks.

The only other photos the coppers had left behind were the ones of himself in the Army. Glancing at them on the wall between the wireless and the television, he almost felt he was back in Cairo as the Major's batman. Good times, those were, he thought fondly. And actually, the Major was just being extra cautious because that was the kind of bloke he was. But Marchman *had* covered the Major's tracks all right out there.

It had been easy enough, really, in Cairo in the middle of a war, but it had still taken some ingenuity and cunning to cover quite so many tracks as working for the Major required: and Marchman had been the man to do it. Yes, and he'd done it bloody well! Well enough to get rehired in Civvy Street by the Major. Well enough for them all to grow old at home. Yes! Galvanised by pride in his past handiwork, Marchman found the peace of mind to momentarily forget his concern.

It felt as hot as it had been in Cairo: maybe even hotter. Hot as the balls on a brass monkey, as they used to say back then. Or was that what they said when it was cold? He used to have a pint at the Servicemen's Club when his work was done, and if he didn't drink it quickly it would be as warm as bathwater. 'Mud in your eye!' he mouthed.

And then drifting back to those happier times, he fell asleep in his armchair, and could have seemed not to have moved from it all day but for the grease-stained photo of Violet Trellis he was clutching against his chest with his bony right hand on which three fingers curled stubbornly in towards his palm.

Her blonde ringlets framed her face like a plump cherub's. She had dimples and pale wide eyes. She was smiling as she curtseyed in a frock with puffed sleeves and a frilly skirt like a ballet tutu. Across the signed photo there was a violet wash, a hand-painted mezzotint with 'To Alfred, 28th August 1945' written across it.

Marchman was chewing water in his sleep. Outside, a cat yowled and the pensioner's claw instinctively tightened on the photo. He slept fitfully. Everyone did these days: there was a heat wave in Hackney and every breath of air was heavy and stale.