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THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN COMPASS

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Prologue

CHANGE.

As the owner of a vineyard, Harry Simms understood the imperatives of change. Spring was underway, the great British countryside awakening from its winter slumber. Sap was rising. And not only in Harry's vines.

Vines were self-fruitful, pollinating without the assistance of bees or wind.

Harry, too, had always been self-fruitful. Sounded rude, but Harry knew what he meant. He'd tried working for others, but it tended to end badly, usually with someone face down in a ditch.

But that was the past. Life was all about change, after all.

Harry pulled his Range Rover Sport into the deserted car park, switched off the radio, got out and looked around. The nature reserve's visitor centre made a ghostly shape in the darkness. Trees leaned in on all sides. Strange hoots and slithers. The scent of rain in the air.

Christ, what a stupid place to meet.

Still, no chance of being disturbed. Probably for the best.

He checked his gold Rolex. He was early. The watch caught the pale moonlight in a pleasing way. His wife, Samantha, had

complained at the expense, but a man had to keep up appearances. You couldn't run a boutique vineyard dressed like a tramp.

Very understanding woman, Sam. In light of recent revelations. Of course, there was a lot his wife still didn't know . . .

Harry had overdressed for the meeting. A former boss had once told him: a good suit makes you bulletproof. The man had been shot dead a week later, proving that no one could be right all the time.

He heard the car before it arrived, stepped aside as it turned into the car park, beams lancing into the dark.

The woman was immaculately dressed, projecting urbane, with a side order of prim. Jet-black hair. Probably dyed, he thought. Or a wig. Designer glasses.

Her shoes – thick boots, he saw – crunched across the soil. 'Thank you for meeting me,' she said.

'You didn't really give me a choice.'

'Unavoidable, I'm afraid. Given the importance of the matter at hand.'

'Important to you,' said Harry. 'I don't respond well to threats.'

'Yet here you are.' The woman stepped closer. 'We want to know where it is, Mr Simms.'

'"It"?'

'Don't be coy.'

Harry considered a denial. But what was the point? What could this old bag do to him anyway. 'I came here out of courtesy, to put the matter to bed—'

'You came here because if you hadn't I would have ended up at your home.'

Harry had had enough. 'I'm done. I don't have what you want. Don't contact me again.' He turned on his heel, headed back to the Range Rover.

'I wouldn't go anywhere, Mr Simms.' He heard the soft click of a handgun's safety being taken off. He'd heard the sound many times in his life, never in pleasant circumstances.

The woman looked at him with eyes as cold as marble. 'Get in the car.' She indicated her own vehicle.

Harry stared at her, then burst out laughing. 'You can't be serious.'

The gun's retort was deafening in the silence. Harry heard something running away in the woods.

'Jesus Christ! Have you lost your mind?'

She gestured again with the gun. 'Now, please.'

Harry cursed himself. How had he let a *woman* get the jump on him?

Seemingly resigning himself to the situation, he trudged towards the car. And then, at the last instant, he pretended to stumble . . . and leaped at her. They grappled, fell to the floor . . . The gun went off.

A ringing silence, then the woman heaved Harry's body away and scrambled to her feet. She looked down at the prone man, a dark stain spreading across his shirt. 'Damn.'

Moments later, she was back in her car and pulling onto the darkened country lane.

1

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR.

The lyrics of the old Michael Jackson song ran around Q's head as he twisted the knot on his tie. He had opted for a Prince Albert, a little bulkier than he preferred, but the knot went well with his cutaway collar and the tie's fish scale patterning.

Q – aka Major Boothroyd – had checked his outfit several times before leaving home. A two-button suit in sage green herringbone, paired with dark brown Oxfords by John Lobb. He had decided against a waistcoat. He wanted to be approachable, a man you could trust. A man you would want to employ.

His fifty-year-old face looked anxiously back at him from the mirror above the sink. A clean-shaven, handsome face. Handsome adjacent, at any rate. Sandy hair, greying at the temples. Grey eyes that had seen more than most.

It had been a long time since he had last had a job interview. That had been for the role of head of Q Branch, the division of MI6 – Britain's Secret Intelligence Service – dedicated to producing specialised weaponry and field equipment for its Double O agents. Where had the time gone?

During that tenure, he had dealt with prime ministers and

megalomaniacs. Sometimes, they came in the same package. And now here he was, standing in the ground-floor toilets of the Wickstone-on-Water police station, sweaty palmed, dreading an interview that should have been no more than a rubber stamp.

Walking through the cobbled centre of town, through the medieval market square, with its bronze statue of the Unknown Knight astride his warhorse, the old guildhall and corn exchange, the little post office with its waterfalls of Boston ivy and bougainvillea – all the markers of his childhood – his anxiety had steadily climbed until it now felt like a hand around his throat. If only he had James Bond's supreme self-confidence!

But he wasn't Bond. He was Q, a man of science and logic. A man who solved problems by means of his intellect. And the occasional rocket launcher. Though he was rarely the one wielding it.

Following his recent reinvestigation into the death of his childhood friend, quantum computer scientist Peter Napier, Q had been invited to interview for the role of civilian investigator with the local police force, specifically to look into the slaying of one Lawrence Noble, fifty-seven-year-old tech entrepreneur-turned-antique dealer. Noble had made his fortune in the world of online computer gaming before moving to Wickstone and buying a stately home, living there pretty much as a recluse until his gruesome murder almost a year earlier. Despite a thorough investigation, the case remained unsolved.

The problem wasn't the case. The problem was who was doing the asking.

DCI Kathy Burnham.

Q's ex-fiancée.

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'Tricky thing, exes.' Chief Superintendent Rory Burns tipped back in his chair. 'Take mine. Classic bunny boiler. Slashed the tyres on my BMW, then called up my mum and told her I was a bad lover. She's eighty-eight and lives in a care home. My mum, not my ex,' he clarified.

Detective Chief Inspector Kathy Burnham regarded her boss. Rory 'Third Degree' Burns had been her commanding officer at force HQ before her move back to Wickstone. As old school as they came. When coppers were coppers and men were men. And suspects accidentally fell down stairs or bashed their faces against their own cell doors.

They were sitting in Kathy's office at the Wickstone police station. Burns had taken her seat. He was twiddling the snow globe on her desk, the one her mother had given her three Christmases ago before emigrating to Australia following the death of Kathy's father. She wished her mother was here now. Some things only a mother could understand.

'It wasn't my idea to contract him as a civilian investigator. Sir.'

'No. But you have to admit the man did well on the Napier

investigation. Made you look a right tit. If you can call a woman that these days without Human Resources blowing a gasket.'

Kathy felt heat rising to her cheeks. While it was true that Q's personal reinvestigation into the death of Peter Napier had caused her a certain degree of embarrassment, she had managed to set that to one side. She had gone as far as she was able to on the Napier case with the limited resources she had been given. Which was part of the problem and the reason Burns was here today.

The crime rate in Wickstone was on the rise. An established county lines drug operation, together with a recent influx of wealthy refugees from London, had attracted unsavoury elements to the once halcyon village. Kathy had been shifted across to operate a small local police unit, understaffed and underfunded. With the recent loss of her detective sergeant, she was now left with a handful of uniformed officers and a single, recently graduated detective constable, who was so wet it was a wonder he wasn't curled up under his desk sucking his thumb.

Which meant that the higher-ups had decided that calling upon the services of a man like Q made practical sense.

Which would still have been fine by Kathy had Q not dumped her at the altar some thirty years earlier.

Her phone rang. Kathy set it to her ear, then stood up. 'He's here.'

Q returned to the station's reception area to find Kathy waiting for him.

Each time he saw her, his heart gave a frisky little bounce. Perhaps it was always this way with childhood sweethearts? You never really rid yourself of the hooks they placed inside you. It didn't help that he and Kathy had once been engaged. That, following the death of his mother, he had broken things off just as they were finalising wedding plans. And then left town, cut her off completely and not spoken to her again for three decades.

Women tended not to forget that sort of thing.

And when he *had* returned, just a month earlier, he had reopened a case Kathy had closed, before solving it in a way that made her original investigation look incompetent.

'How do you feel?' Kathy asked.

'Fine,' Q lied. And then: 'Kathy . . . are you sure about this?'

Kathy said nothing. Q searched her face. The combination of dark hair, green eyes and olive skin . . . At fifty, Kathy remained a beautiful woman . . . Cupid kicked Q's ankle.

Focus.

He watched her turn to a security door, tap in a combination on the keypad. They walked up a flight of steps, along a white-washed corridor, through another door, across an open-plan office housing a solitary individual – a tawny-headed young man in a lilac shirt and mustard tie – the colours clashed so violently Q was tempted to stop and dispense a dose of sartorial first aid – and to an office at the back of the space.

Inside, Q was greeted by a portly man in a senior policeman's uniform, modelling a ducktail hairdo paired with a wedge-shaped chin and twinkling eyes.

'Chief Superintendent Burns,' said the man, presenting a meaty hand.

'Major Boothroyd.' They shook, then Burns sat down, indicating that Q should do the same. Kathy took a seat to his left.

'Coffee?' said Burns.

'I'm fine, thank you.'

'We can dispense with the intros. Presumably, Kathy has filled you in. The fact is we're currently horrendously understaffed here in Wickstone. A backlog of cases as long as my arm. I am, as we speak, interviewing for a new detective sergeant. But, until said appointment is made, Kathy here is up to her neck in it. And so, certain parties back at HQ thought it might be a bright idea to employ civilian contractors to help us out. Your sterling work on the Napier investigation has put you top of the list.'

He leaned back, the seat beneath him groaning in protest. 'I take it you've been given some basic information about the Lawrence Noble case?'

'I have.'

'Terrible crime. What's the world coming to when multi-millionaires are tortured and murdered in their own castles?'

'Stately home,' said Q.

'Come again?'

'He lived in a stately home, not a castle.'

Burns pursed his lips. 'Your assignment, should you choose to accept it' – a small smile – 'is to take the lead in reinvestigating Noble's killing. You'll be supervised by Kathy, but the DCI has other fish to fry, so, for the most part, she'll leave you to it.'

'Fine by me.'

'Splendid.' He slapped the desk with a palm. 'We have standard terms for civilian investigators. Kathy will sort out the paperwork. Which leaves only one thing to discuss . . . I understand there's history here. Between you and Kathy. Will that be a problem?'

'No.'

'Kathy?'

'Water under the bridge as far as I'm concerned.'

Q thought it wasn't so much water under the bridge as the bridge having been blown up. With everyone on it. 'I have a request.'

'A request?'

'Yes. I'd like an assistant. A young man by the name of Zak Youssef.'

Burns looked at Kathy, who was staring at Q. 'Did you know about this?'

'No.' She explained Zak's role in the recent Peter Napier investigation.

'So let me get this straight,' said Burns, turning back to Q. 'You want me to employ a criminal to help you solve Noble's murder?'

'He's not a criminal. He hasn't been convicted of anything. He's a seventeen-year-old boy who lost his way and is now looking for a chance to redeem himself. We can give him that. He has a unique skillset. And he understands the gaming world. Noble's world.'

'Why don't we just hire Pablo Escobar to run our pharmacies?' Burns rumbled, then: 'He'll have to be vetted.'

'Of course.'

'Let me think about it.' Burns stood up, stuck out his hand again. 'Welcome to the team.'