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With OneAs Vitness

With No One As Witness

ELIZABETH GEORGE

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With No One As Witness

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... and if you gaze for long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

-NIETZSCHE

With No One As Witness

kimmo thorne liked dietrich best of all: the hair, the legs, the cigarette holder, the top hat and tails. She was what he called the Whole Blooming Package, and as far as he was concerned, she was second to none. Oh, he could do Garland if pressed. Minnelli was simple, and he was definitely getting better with Streisand. But given his choice—and he was generally given it, wasn't he?—he went with Dietrich. Sultry Marlene. His number one girl. She could sing the crumbs out of a toaster, could Marlene, make no bloody mistake about it.

So he held the pose at the end of the song not because it was necessary to the act but because he loved the look of the thing. The finale to "Falling in Love Again" faded and he just kept standing there like a Marlene statue with one high-heeled foot on the seat of the chair and his cigarette holder between his fingers. The last note disappeared into silence and he remained for a five count—exulting in Marlene and in himself because she was good and he was good, he was damn damn good when it came down to it—before he altered his position. He switched off the karaoke machine then. He doffed his top hat and fluttered his tails. He bowed deeply to his audience of two. And Aunt Sal and Gran—ever loyal, they were—reacted appropriately, as he'd known they would. Aunt Sally cried, "Brilliant! Brilliant, lad!" Gran said, "Tha's our boy all over. A hunnert percent talent, our Kimmo. Wait'll I send some snaps to your mum and dad."

That would certainly bring them running, Kimmo thought sardon-

ically. But he put his high-heeled foot on the chair once more, knowing Gran meant well, even if she was something of a dim bulb when it came to what she believed about his parents.

Gran directed Aunt Sally to "Move to the right. Get the boy's best side," and in a few minutes the pictures had been taken and the show was over for the evening.

"Where you off to tonight?" Aunt Sally asked as Kimmo headed for his bedroom. "You seein' anyone special, our Kim?"

He wasn't, but she needn't know that. "The Blink," he told her blithely.

"Well, you lads keep yourselfs out of trouble, then."

He winked at her and ducked into his doorway. "Always, *always*, Auntie," he lied. He eased the door shut behind him then and flicked its lock into place.

The care of the Marlene togs came first. Kimmo took them off and hung them up before turning to his dressing table. There, he examined his face and for a moment considered removing some of the makeup. But he finally shrugged the idea aside and rustled through the clothes cupboard for a change that would do. He chose a hooded sweatshirt, the leggings he liked, and his flat-soled, suede, ankle-high boots. He enjoyed the ambiguity of the ensemble. Male or female? an observer might ask. But only if Kimmo spoke would it actually show. For his voice had finally broken and when he opened his mouth now, the jig was up.

He drew the sweatshirt hood over his head and sauntered down the stairs. "I'm off, then," he called to his gran and his aunt as he grabbed his jacket from a hook near the door.

"'Bye, darlin' boy," Gran replied.

"Keep yourself, luv," Aunt Sally added.

He kissed the air at them. They kissed the air in turn. "Love you," everyone said at once.

Outside, he zipped his jacket and unlocked his bicycle from the railing. He rolled it along to the lift and pressed the button there, and as he waited, he checked the bike's saddlebags to make sure that he had everything he'd need. He maintained a mental checklist on which he ticked items off: emergency hammer, gloves, screwdriver, jemmy, pocket torch, pillowcase, one red rose. This last he liked to leave as his calling card. One really oughtn't to take without giving as well.

It was a cold night outside in the street, and Kimmo didn't look forward to the ride. He hated having to go by bike, and he hated biking even more when the temperature hovered so close to freezing. But as neither Gran nor Aunt Sally had a car, and as he himself had no driving licence to flash at a copper, along with his most appealing smile if he was stopped, he had no other choice but to pedal it. Going by bus was more or less out of the question.

His route took him along Southwark Street to the heavier traffic of Blackfriars Road till, in a crisscrossing fashion, he reached the environs of Kennington Park. From there, traffic or not, it was more or less a bullet's path to Clapham Common and his destination: a conveniently detached redbrick dwelling of three storeys, which he'd spent the last month carefully casing.

At this point, he knew the comings and goings of the family inside so thoroughly that he might as well have lived there himself. He knew they had two children. Mum got her exercise riding a bike to work, while Dad went by train from Clapham Station. They had an au pair with a regularly scheduled two nights each week off, and on one of those nights—always the same one—Mum, Dad, and the kids left as a family and went to . . . Kimmo didn't know. He assumed it was Gran's for dinner, but it just as easily could have been a lengthy church service, a session with a counselor, or lessons in yoga. Point was, they were gone for the evening, till *late* in the evening, and when they arrived home, they invariably had to lug the little ones into the house because they'd fallen asleep in the car. As for the au pair, she took her nights off with two other birds who were similarly employed. They'd leave together chatting away in Bulgarian or whatever it was, and *if* they returned before dawn, it was still long after midnight.

The signs were propitious for this particular house. The car they drove was the largest of the Range Rovers. A gardener visited them once a week. They had a cleaning service as well, and their sheets and pillowcases were laundered, ironed, and returned by a professional. This particular house, Kimmo had concluded, was ripe, and waiting.

What made it all so nice was the house next door and the lovely "To Let" sign dangling forlornly from a post near the street. What made it all so perfect was the easy access from the rear: a brick wall running along a stretch of wasteland.

Kimmo pedaled to this point after coasting by the front of the

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house to make sure the family were being true to their rigid schedule. Then he bumped his way across the wasteland and propped his bike against the wall. Using the pillowcase to carry his tools and the rose, he hopped up on the saddle of the bike and, with no trouble, lifted himself over the wall.

The back garden was blacker than the devil's tongue, but Kimmo had peered over the wall before and he knew what lay before him. Directly beneath was a compost heap beyond which a little zigzagging orchard of fruit trees decorated a nicely clipped lawn. To either side of this, wide flower beds made herbaceous borders. One of them curved round a gazebo. The other graced the vicinity of a garden shed. Last in the distance just before the house were a patio of uneven bricks where rainwater pooled after a storm and then a roof overhang, from which the security lights were hung.

They clicked on automatically as Kimmo approached. He gave them a nod of thanks. Security lights, he'd long ago decided, had to be the ironic inspiration of a housebreaker, since whenever they switched on, everyone appeared to assume a mere cat was passing through the garden. He'd yet to hear of a neighbour giving the cops a bell because of some lights going on. On the other hand, he'd heard plenty of stories from fellow housebreakers about how much easier those lights had made access to the rear of a property.

In this case, the lights meant nothing. The uncurtained dark windows along with the "To Let" sign told him that no one resided in the house to his right, while the house to his left had no windows on this side of it and no dog to set up a spate of barking in the nighttime cold. He was, as far as he could tell, in the clear.

French windows opened onto the patio, and Kimmo made for these. There, a quick tap with his emergency hammer—suitable in a crisis for breaking a car window—was quite sufficient to gain him access to the handle on the door. He opened this and stepped inside. The burglar alarm hooted like an air-raid siren.

The sound was earsplitting, but Kimmo ignored it. He had five minutes—perhaps more—till the phone would ring, with the security company on the line, hoping to discover that the alarm had been tripped accidentally. When they went unsatisfied, they would phone the contact numbers they'd been given. When that didn't suffice to bring an end to the incessant screeching of the siren, they might phone

the police, who in turn might or might not show up to check matters out. But in any case, that eventuality was a good twenty minutes away, which in itself was ten minutes longer than Kimmo needed to score what he was looking for in the building.

He was a specialist in this particular field. Leave to others the computers, the laptops, the CD and DVD players, the televisions, the jewellery, the digital cameras, the Palm Pilots, and the video players. He was looking for only one kind of item in the houses he visited, and the benefit of this item he sought was that it would always be in plain sight and generally in the public rooms of a house.

Kimmo shone his pocket torch round. He was in a dining room, and there was nothing here to take. But in the sitting room, he could already see four prizes glittering on the top of a piano. He went to fetch them: silver frames that he divested of their photographs—one always wanted to be thoughtful about *some* things—before depositing them carefully in his pillowcase. He found another on one of the side tables, and he scored this as well before moving to the front of the house where, near the door, a half-moon table with a mirror above it displayed two others along with a porcelain box and a flower arrangement, both of which he left where they were.

Experience told him that chances were good he'd find the rest of what he wanted in the master bedroom, so he quickly mounted the stairs as the burglar alarm continued to blare against his eardrums. The room he sought was on the top floor, in the back, overlooking the garden, and he'd just clicked on his torch to check out its contents when the shrieking of the alarm ceased abruptly just as the telephone started to ring.

Kimmo stopped short, one hand on his torch and the other halfway to a picture frame in which a couple in wedding gear kissed beneath a bough of flowers. In a moment, the phone stopped just as abruptly as the alarm, and from below a light went on and someone said, "Hullo?," and then, "No. We've only just walked in . . . Yes. Yes. It was going off, but I haven't had a chance to—Jesus Christ! Gail, get away from that glass."

That was enough to tell Kimmo that matters had taken an unexpected turn. He didn't pause to wonder what the hell the family were doing home when they were still supposed to be at Gran's at church at yoga at counseling or *wherever* the hell they went when they went. In-

stead, he dived for the window to the left of the bed as below, a woman cried, "Ronald, someone's in the house!"

Kimmo didn't need to hear Ronald come tearing up the stairs or Gail shouting, "No! Stop!" to understand that he had to be out of there pronto. He fumbled with the lock on the window, threw up the sash, and heaved himself and his pillowcase out just as Ronald barreled into the room armed with what looked like a fork for turning meat on a barbecue.

Kimmo dropped with an enormous thump and a gasp onto the overhang some eight feet below, cursing the fact that there had been no convenient wisteria vine down which he could Tarzan his way to freedom. He heard Gail shouting, "He's here! He's here!," and Ronald cursing from the window above. Just before he scarpered for the rear wall of the property, he turned back to the house, giving a grin and a saucy salute to the woman who stood in the dining room with an awestruck sleepy child in her arms and another hanging on to her trousers.

Then he was off, the pillowcase bouncing against his back and laughter bubbling up inside him, only sorry he hadn't been able to leave behind the rose. As he reached the wall, he heard Ronald come roaring out of the dining-room door, but by the time the poor bloke reached the first of the trees, Kimmo was up, over, and heading across the wasteland. When the cops finally arrived—which could be anywhere from an hour to midday tomorrow—he'd be long gone, a faint memory in the mind of the missus: a painted face beneath a sweatshirt hood.

God, this was living! This was the best! If the haul proved to be sterling stuff, he'd be a few hundred quid richer come Friday morning. Did it get better than this? Did it? Kimmo didn't think so. So what that he'd said he'd go straight for a while. He couldn't throw away the time he'd already spent putting this job together. He'd be thick to do that, and the one thing Kimmo Thorne was not was thick. Not a bit of that. No way, Hoe-say.

He was pedaling along perhaps a mile from his break-in when he became aware of being followed. There was other traffic about on the streets—when wasn't there traffic in London?—and several cars had honked as they'd passed him. He first thought they were honking at him the way vehicles do to a cyclist they wish to get out of their way,

but he soon came to realise that they were honking at a slow-moving vehicle close behind him, one that refused to pass him by.

He felt a little unnerved by this, wondering if Ronald had somehow managed to get it together and track him down. He turned down a side street to make sure he wasn't mistaken in his belief in being tailed, and sure enough, the headlights directly behind him turned as well. He was about to shoot off in a fury of pedaling when he heard the rumble of an engine coming up next to him and then his name spoken in a friendly voice.

"Kimmo? That you? What're you doing in this part of town?"

Kimmo coasted. He slowed. He turned to see who was speaking to him. He smiled when he realised who the driver was, and he said, "Never mind me. What're you doing here?"

The other smiled back. "Looks like I'm cruising round for you. Need a lift somewhere?"

It would be convenient, Kimmo thought, if Ronald had seen him take off on the bike and if the cops were quicker to respond than they normally were. He didn't really want to be out on the street. He still had a couple more miles to go, and it was cold as Antarctica, anyway. He said, "I got the bike with me, though."

The other chuckled. "Well, that's no problem if you don't want it to be."

CHAPTER ONE

DETECTIVE CONSTABLE BARBARA HAVERS CONSIDERED HERSELF one lucky bird: The drive was empty. She'd elected to do her weekly shop by car rather than on foot, and this was always a risky business in an area of town where anyone fortunate enough to find a parking space near their home clung to it with the devotion of the newly redeemed to the source of his redemption. But knowing she had much to purchase and shuddering at the thought of trudging in the cold back from the local grocery, she'd opted for transport and hoped for the best. So when she pulled up in front of the yellow Edwardian house behind which her tiny bungalow stood, she took the space in the drive without compunction. She listened to the coughing and gagging of her Mini's engine as she turned it off, and she made her fifteenth mental note of the month to have the car looked at by a mechanic who—one prayed—would not ask an arm, a leg, and one's firstborn child to repair whatever was causing it to belch like a dyspeptic pensioner.

She climbed out and flipped the seat forward to gather up the first of the plastic carrier bags. She'd linked four of them over her arms and was dragging them out of the car when she heard her name called.

Someone sang it out. "Barbara! Barbara! Look what I've found in the cupboard."

Barbara straightened and glanced in the direction from which the voice had chimed. She saw the young daughter of her neighbour sitting on the weathered wooden bench in front of the ground-floor flat of the old converted building. She'd removed her shoes and was in the