

Face Value

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*Be not deceived with the
first appearance of things,
for show is not substance.*

Old English Proverb

1

Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire

It wasn't the prettiest place to die. But then again, where is? She was taking a shortcut through unfamiliar territory. He was running an illegal errand on ground he called his own. Neither would have wanted the street, with its vandalised lights and graffiti-covered hoardings, to be their final view of life. But we don't often get what we want.

She saw him first. The lone surviving streetlamp dropped a pool of weak yellow light that was just enough to reveal him rounding the corner, fifty yards away on the opposite side of the road. Despite the mild July night he was hunched over, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his green nylon bomber jacket. Strands of straggly blond hair shielded a thin, cratered face. The Doc Marten boots, visible under too-short jeans, made no noise against the uneven, fractured footpath. Save for the lack of a skinhead haircut, he looked like he had stepped out of a documentary on right-wing hooliganism.

In the moment she thought to turn around and go a different way, he looked up, alerted by the click of her stiletto heels. As their eyes met he smiled and sneered simultaneously, his

features distorting like a grotesque skull. She knew that turning away was no longer an option.

He took his hands out of his pockets. She could see the left was empty, but the right seemed to be concealing something. Steadying her pace, she shifted the chain-link strap of her clutch bag from across her body, so that it rested on her left shoulder.

He quickened his step and crossed the street. She moved into the middle of the footpath and kept walking, watching. He was a couple of inches taller than her and as he came closer, she could see he was thin and sinewy. Not a bodybuilder by any means, but he looked strong, agile, quick. Like an urban fox, thinner than it should be but capable, furtive, vicious.

When he was a few yards away, she grasped her clutch bag, letting the chain fall from her shoulder and moved to her right to avoid him. He blocked her. She stopped walking and stepped left, placing herself back in the middle of the path. He stepped to his right, directly in front of her again. She stood still and tried to be polite.

“I’m sorry. Please, after you,” she said and extended her left arm to indicate where he should step.

He ignored her and stepped forward. “I don’t fink so.” His accent was rough-edged London. His lips were cracked and looked dry, yet as he spoke, spittle flew from his mouth. It hit her face. She didn’t reach to wipe it away.

He smelt of cigarettes and body odour laced with an underlying stench of stale beer. Pale skin, almost vampiric was stretched over sunken cheeks that cowered under narrowed, dulled eyes. Pock marks had joined to form craters, valleys and crevices etched into his face.

He stepped closer. “I’m gonna enjoy this. Fancy a fuck?” His speed of movement surprised her. His right hand came up and elaborately flicked a butterfly knife open. Its four-inch blade shone briefly in the dim light. He held it just inches from her chest whilst his left hand thrust forward and caught her by the throat. She gagged at the force of his grip and began to feel him applying upward pressure. He was trying to lift her off the

ground. She heard a voice from long ago.

'Kara Wright! How many times do I have to tell you? The first time you should see an attacker's knife is when it's exiting from your body. If you see it before then, you know it's all for show. They're full of piss and bravado.'

Kara gave a wry smile as the words of her first instructor rang out in her head. She swung her right arm up and over her attacker's left and plunged the side of her fist down into the bend of his elbow. The downward force ripped his hand away from her throat and she gasped at the release. Simultaneously, she flicked her left hand and arced the short chain of the bag around his right wrist. As she pulled down, his knife hand was drawn away and his whole body turned slightly, forcing his right leg forward. She planted her left foot solidly on the pavement and extended her right foot in a vicious front snap kick.

The four-inch stiletto heel she was wearing punctured the inner side of his right knee. Kara visualised the passage of it as it tore through the medial collateral ligament, sliced between the medial meniscus and passed behind the patella. She held the kick's form until the tip of her heel came to rest embedded in his anterior cruciate ligament. Her brain ticked off the damage in the time it took to happen.

Her attacker simply fell sideways to his right. The knowledge of the anatomical destruction done to him and the noise of the knife clattering onto the ground were lost in his screams.

'And remember Miss Wright, when we start, we finish.'

Kara snapped her right foot back, leaving her shoe impaled in the ruptured knee joint. She planted the ball of her bare right foot firmly, stepped slightly back on her left and executed a spinning hook kick. As her body pivoted around, she extended her left heel and met the head of her collapsing attacker in mid-air. The stiletto punctured the soft hollow that marked the pterion of his skull and the screaming stopped. His falling deadweight removed the shoe from her left foot.

Kara stood still, her balance regained. Her core muscles

tense but not strained. She could hear acutely the efforts of the night breeze as it caught on the tatters of billboard posters and gently swayed the precariously hanging corrugated sheets lining the backs of abandoned industrial units. She saw, in extreme clarity, the details of her would-be attacker's face, caught in shock and frozen in a death mask. His mouth shaping a now silent scream. She stayed still and concentrated on herself. Her breathing deepened and the quickening of her heart began to relax and slow. She looked down at her bare feet and mentally ran a checklist of her body. She had no injuries, no damage at all. As her heartrate slowed further her mind geared up and began to assess the options open to her. Giving weight to each in turn, she dismissed them almost as soon as she thought of them. As her heartbeat fully normalised she chose her actions.

Stepping back she reached down and retrieved her bag. Pulling her smartphone she opened an app called '1984'. The phone displayed a map of all CCTV coverage within a one mile radius of her current position. A large number of small red dots appeared on the display but only two were near where she was. That didn't surprise her. There was nothing of value in what was little more than a back alley running through an industrial area. She waited for the phone to synchronise with the cloud-based data. After a short time the two nearest dots adjusted their positions as the GPS fully resolved itself. They showed cameras at the front of a small car yard just behind her to the right. She walked back until she could see the rear of the yard and satisfied herself that there was no camera coverage in her direction. She zoomed in on a cluster of dots to her immediate north. The irony that she stood less than a quarter of a mile from the town's Police Station wasn't lost on her. However, she knew the line of sight to her position was blocked by a myriad of warehouses and industrial units. She zoomed the display out and checked to see where she would have last been observed on CCTV. The final coverage was when she had turned off Walden Road. Between there and here were at least ten cross streets and thoroughfares, with each one

having multiple intersections and turn offs. There was no chance of anyone being able to conclude that the blonde haired girl in the red heels had come this way. Unless of course they found some evidence.

Kara walked back to the body that lay half on the pavement, half on the road like a discarded mannequin. There was little blood to be seen as the wounds were small, neat and conveniently plugged by her stilettos. She reached back into her clutch and removed a pair of latex gloves and a wad of tissues. Donning the gloves she crouched down and checked the pockets that she could reach without rolling the corpse. There was a ten-pound note in the front left jeans pocket and a half empty pouch of tobacco in the left jacket pocket. In the pouch, on top of the tobacco, was a packet of Rizla papers and two small Ziploc bags. One held a quantity of off-white crystals and the other a small amount of white powder. Sticking the money and the Ziplocs in her bag she set the tobacco pouch to one side.

Reaching a few tissues, she very slowly pulled the shoe out of the knee joint. When almost clear she gently twisted it to make sure the complete heel, including the metal tip came out. Wrapping the tissues tightly to stop any blood drops escaping she set the shoe on the ground. Repeating the process she removed the other shoe from the skull wound.

Kara stood up and paused. She settled her breathing, turned a complete circle and listened for any approaching people or vehicles. When she was certain there was nothing and no one nearby she retrieved the butterfly knife from the road.

With a final look around, she crouched and inserted the blade into the knee wound and twisted a half turn. Given the relative dimensions she hoped it would mask the original stiletto puncture. Extracting the weapon from the knee she positioned the tip carefully against the hole in the skull. Pushing slowly forward with her full weight she implanted the knife into the wound and gave it a final sharp tap so the hilt contacted the side of the head. Then, with her arm at full

stretch and her body leaning as far away as possible she withdrew the knife in a quick ripping motion. A small yet vibrant spray of blood and tiny fragments of bone rose and fell in the night. She stood up and reaching as high as she could dropped the knife, point first, onto the broken concrete footpath.

Picking up the tobacco pouch she threw it on top of the body and the light breeze teased at the open flap, helping to spread the fine brown threads like macabre confetti. Removing her gloves, she made a tight ball of them in the last of the tissues and popped it into her bag.

After a quick check of the '1984' app to plan a surveillance free route to her car, Kara gathered up her belongings. Pausing in the shadows she removed the blonde wig and wrapped the tissue-bound heels in it.

2

Saturday Morning. Camden, London

“So, how’d it go?” Tien asked as she swivelled her chair away from the banks of computer screens and hard drive racks that formed her workspace.

“Yep, all good. Easy in fact,” Kara said as she offered Tien one of the two coffees from the cardboard takeaway tray she had brought with her.

“Oh thanks, is it the good stuff or...,” Tien hesitated.

“Nah, it was the short Italian guy. I tried to wait for Ravi but there was a queue. Sorry.” Kara flopped down in the spare chair.

“Ah don’t worry. I still don’t get how the Italian dude can barely make a drinkable coffee and the Sri Lankan is a master. Doesn’t seem right.” Despite her forebodings Tien took a long sip from the plastic-capped cup.

“Yeah, but be fair,” Kara said, “Ravi’s as much Sri Lankan as you are Vietnamese.”

Tien giggled, “I know and look how far we’ve come. Both born in Hackney and both living the dream in Camden,” she paused and Kara noticed the slight frown on her friend’s brow. She knew Tien was going to switch back to business.

“So, last night, no problems?”

Kara answered smoothly and without hesitation, “No, in fact it’s so much simpler than it used to be.” She fished the smartphone from her pocket and handed it over. The younger woman took it and looked quizzical.

“Simpler?”

Kara nodded, “Yeah simpler. Much simpler. Imagine trying to follow someone into a nightclub armed with a clunky old camera. Wouldn’t be exactly subtle. You’d have to get as close to them as possible without being seen and try to take shots without them noticing you pointing a ruddy great lens at them. Or the great big flash going off. Even if you managed it, you’d have to wait until the pictures were developed to discover if you had anything useable. It wouldn’t even have been worth trying. All of that replaced by taking a false selfie.”

“A what?” Tien asked.

“A pretend selfie. You just strike a bit of a pose so that it looks like you’re taking your own photo, but you make sure the back camera of the phone is on and not the front. Looks completely normal nowadays and no one even gives you a second glance. It’s easy and you can instantly check the result. How’d you think I did it?”

“I’m not sure I really thought about it. You know me, I just do what I do and let you do all the glamour stuff,” Tien quipped.

“Yep, glamorous, that’s what it is. I’m like a paparazzi ninja. Anyway, there’s about ten shots on there, all in focus, well-lit and quite artistic if I say so myself,” Kara smiled and poked her tongue out at her friend.

Tien laughed but looked back at the phone and sighed, “So it’s true then? The client was right?”

“Afraid so.”

“No doubt?”

“Nope. Not unless she was giving him mouth to mouth and I just misinterpreted. Anyway, she’d gone to a pub on her own. Picked this guy up, went clubbing and eventually left with him and didn’t go back to her hotel. They just went straight to what

I presume was his house. I've copied the location onto the map." Kara nodded toward the phone, "You can get an identity for me?"

"Yeah, easy. Did you get more footage there?"

"Nah, not a thing. Mind you, I couldn't have picked a better spot. Could've stopped there all night. The house backed on to a cemetery but there wasn't much point. Upstairs light went on, blinds came down, curtains drawn across and that was that." Kara tried to give her best 'we all know what happened next' expression but Tien didn't laugh. Instead she just set the phone down and stared at it.

"I wonder what'll upset her most, knowing that her partner is screwing around or knowing that she's screwing around with a man?"

"Ah well, thankfully that isn't one for me to have to work out. It really shouldn't be a shock though. I mean as soon as we had same-sex marriage it was a cert we'd get same-sex divorce. Anyway, I'll write up the report and get it round to her by this afternoon. Can you get the images enhanced and printed by say," Kara checked her watch and saw that it was coming up to eleven o'clock. She hadn't got home until almost six and had only managed a couple of hours of fitful sleep before getting up and making her way into the early morning Camden Markets. She had made one purchase for cash and returned home. A half hour later she had walked the five minutes round to see Tien. "Two? Does that give you enough time?"

"Yep, no problem. You going home or working from here?" Tien nodded down toward the floor and meant the ground level office that sat under her apartment. Once a nail manicure shop owned by her parents it was now Kara's office.

"From here. Right, I'll go and get started." Kara pushed herself up from the chair and turned to the door, but Tien stretched out her left arm and stopped her. Kara felt the firmness of her friend's prosthetic hand against her leg.

"So, you had no dramas last night?" Tien asked with a slight tremor in her voice.

Kara breathed deeply but unobtrusively before turning to face her friend, “No, none. Why, what’s up?”

Tien swung back round to the multiple consoles arrayed on her desk and opened up a browser window. She spoke whilst looking at the screen, “Have you seen any news this morning?”

“Only the BBC website, why, what’s happened?” Kara asked as she leaned over to look.

“Did you just look at the headlines?”

“Yeah. Nothing much caught my interest other than the next round of defence cuts. I expect more of our old friends will be looking for work soon. What is it Tien? What’d I miss?”

Tien opened up the BBC’s regional news page for Cambridgeshire. The short story was filed under a single stock image of an out-of-focus Police car and some Police Do Not Cross tape.

‘Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire – (Reuters). A man was killed in a stabbing in Huntingdon overnight, authorities said.

The victim, thought to be in his late 30’s and whose identity is not immediately available, was found dead in an alley in the Light Industrial Estate bounded by Brampton Road and Edison Bell Way about 6am when Police Officers attended a call from a member of the public, said a Cambridgeshire Police spokesman.

No one is in custody and detectives from the Bedfordshire/Cambridgeshire/Hertfordshire combined Major Crimes Unit are investigating. Police have asked anyone with information about the incident to contact the unit on 101.’

Kara straightened back up and spoke to the back of Tien’s head, “That’s terrible. Poor fella.”

Tien spun round slowly and looked up at her, “So you never saw or heard anything?”

“No Tien, not a thing. Sorry. I’d let you know if I did and I’d let the cops know too. But no. Nothing. I just ended the

surveillance and went back to my car. Drove home, slept and here I am now. Anyway, let me know when you get the photos and the ID done. I'll go and start on the report."

Kara turned away but Tien called her back, "Hey, you'll need this." Tien opened a drawer, took a new smartphone from it and threw it over to Kara.

"Thanks pet." Kara turned away from the monitors and Tien's watchful gaze. Breathing gently she walked unhurriedly from the room. She knew that whatever happened she would protect her best friend from her actions. If it ever came to it, she would not bring Tien down with her.

As the door closed behind Kara, Tien turned back to her consoles and pulled up a screen she had minimised just as Kara had first come in. It showed the master log from the '1984' app. Tien not only wrote each of the specialist apps that Kara needed for her field work but she maintained all the user data and app history. The screen showed the GPS read out for when and where the app was accessed and the CCTV locations it identified. Tien used it for correlation and enhancement purposes but because Kara would have called the development work, 'just all ones and noughts' Tien had never really told her about the level of monitoring that was possible. There was no need to. Kara did what she did and Tien did this.

The data revealed that the app had been accessed at 03:20 in the light industrial unit bounded by Brampton Road and Edison Bell Way in Huntingdon. The GPS track showed the movement of Kara's burner phone and Tien knew that Kara had been at the scene of the killing.

She shut the display down and unlocked the hard drive rack that was mounted on the wall to her right. Each separate drive stored the user data and history of each individual app she had ever developed. Each drive was, in turn, rotated for each operation she supported Kara on. That, coupled with the new burner smartphone she would furnish for each operation, made Tien's data records completely compartmentalised. The phones, preloaded with Kara's contacts and cloned down to the

layout of the icons meant Kara always had her 'own' phone yet never carried a traceable mobile for more than a week at a time. Tien transferred the photos and the map location of the target address from the previous night's surveillance onto her PC. She would work on them later as Kara requested. Getting up from her desk she took the phone and the drive with the '1984' location trace into the small workshop set behind her kitchen. She placed both into the compact industrial kiln that sat against the rear wall and turned it on. Theoretically she knew there might be some algorithms that could erase data completely but she didn't trust that forensic computer squads couldn't get something back. She relied on more kinetically proven methods. A few hours inside the kiln and all that would be left would be a molten mound of plastic and metal. Once cooled it would make a great doorstop or large paperweight. It made equally good landfill.

Tien didn't reflect on what her best friend had done in the early hours of the morning. She knew Kara had lied to protect her. What she could do in return was remove any evidence of Kara at a crime scene. She knew that whatever happened she would protect her best friend from her actions. If it ever came to it, she would not bring Kara down with her.